CHILDREN’S STORIES OF CONFLICT AT SCHOOL:
EXPLORING “REALITIES” OF RESOLUTION THROUGH NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

Through a narrative research design, six elementary school children identified by their teachers as having an above average ability to deal effectively with conflict situations were invited to share their own personal experience of conflict at school. The telling of these stories was intended to provide a series of snapshots capturing these children’s “realities” of conflict, including their perceptions of how a particular incident unfolded, as well as what factors they believed were responsible both for its occurrence and the manner in which it was handled. By encouraging these children to regard themselves as “experts” on the subject, this study also explored how the process of telling their stories was impacted by asking the children to speak from the authority of their experience. Through this recognition of the children’s expertise, it was hoped that a refreshing context would be created that facilitated certain insight less likely to be found in the advice-laden dialogues that characteristically occur between adults and children.

In response to the growing body of research supporting the implementation of school-wide peer mediation and conflict resolution training programs, this study explored the process of beginning first with children’s perspectives of conflict in their world in an effort to gain some sense of the meaning-making processes employed by young people in these situations. Careful attention was paid to the influence of “power” on the adult-child dialogues that facilitated the telling of these stories. Data was collected in the form of co-constructed narratives, field observations that focused on process, premise and content, and teacher’s reflections of the children. Findings are reported in the form of themes and interpretations based on the children’s stories, as well as profiles summarizing each child’s narrative journey. Implications of results and suggestions for further research are also discussed.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

AUTHORIZATION FORM ................................................................. ii
ABSTRACT .................................................................................. iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS ................................................................. iv
CHAPTER ONE: Introduction ............................................................. 1
   Conceptualizing the Problem of Conflict in School ........................................ 1
   Using a School-wide System to Address Problem Behaviour: Effective Behaviour Support (EBS) ...... 3
   Supplementing the EBS Approach to Problem Behaviour: Student-Based Conflict Resolution ........... 5
Purpose of this Study ......................................................................... 7
Delimitations .................................................................................. 8
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review ......................................................... 9
   Overview .................................................................................... 9
   Origins of Conflict Resolution Programs: Teaching Students to Be Peacemakers ......................... 10
   Other Approaches to Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation ......................................................... 14
   Measuring the Effectiveness of Conflict Resolution Programs: A Quantitative Approach ............. 17
   Taking a Qualitative Approach to Assessing Program Effectiveness ................................................. 20
   Rationale for Further Research ............................................................ 24
CHAPTER THREE: Method ................................................................. 28
   The Research Question .................................................................. 28
   Rationale for Research Design ............................................................ 29
   Limitations of this Research Design ......................................................... 30
   Participants and Screening .................................................................... 31
   Procedure .................................................................................... 32
   Investigative Steps ........................................................................ 33
### CHAPTER FOUR: Findings

**Janice - 11 years old**

- Teacher's Comments about Janice
- Janice's Story
- Themes from Janice's Story
- Janice and the Narrative Process

**Tammy - 11 years old**

- Teacher's Comments about Tammy
- Tammy's Story
- Themes from Tammy's Story
- Tammy and the Narrative Process

**Samantha - 11 years old**

- Teacher's Comments about Samantha
- Samantha's Story
- Themes from Samantha's Story
- Samantha and the Narrative Process

**Elena - 11 years old**

- Teacher's Comments about Elena
- Elena's Story
- Themes from Elena's Story
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Dispute-Resolution Procedure</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Informed Consent Form</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Interview Procedure</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Conflict-Related Themes from the Children’s Stories</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>References</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE
Introduction

Conceptualizing the Problem of Conflict in School

All children encounter some form of conflict at school. Although occurrences may vary in frequency and nature, and be experienced quite differently from one individual to the next, every student faces situations in which his or her own interests conflict with those of others. To a young person an adversary may take the form of a classmate or a group of older kids on the playground. It can be a teacher, principal, or some other person in a position of authority. Conflict may arise out of circumstances in the classroom, a particular seating arrangement, or the way in which special privileges are awarded. Even the education system itself, seemingly uncompromising in its recognition of certain abilities over others, can represent a source of conflict for young people.

When exploring the problem of conflict in school some consideration must be given to ways in which its various forms may be classified. Among several proposed models is Morton Deutsch’s (1973) conceptualization of conflict, seen as particularly well suited for distinguishing between the different types that commonly occur in school settings. In this model, conflict is simply defined in terms of opposing interests, occurrences when the actions of one or more individuals attempting to reach a particular goal, prevent, block, or interfere with the actions of other individuals attempting to reach a similar or unrelated goal. In this respect, conflicts are categorized as based on either, a) control over resources, b) differences in preferences, c) differences in values and beliefs, or d) differences in goals for a relationship. An important distinction is drawn between this ‘opposing interests’ model, and other conflict-related concepts such as aggression, dominance, competition, and influence, which Deutsch argues may produce, or result from conflict, but are not essential components of it.
It should be noted however, that it is these related concepts of aggression and dominance that are most responsible for the increasing attention that conflict in schools has received in the media, which too often sensationalizes the tragedies that occur when distraught youths resort to extreme measures as a means of coping with the problems they experience at school. Bullying, in particular, has come to be widely perceived as one of the most serious problems plaguing schools today, provoking harsh criticism of education systems for failing to provide children with a safe environment in which to learn. The relationship between bullying and conflict is a controversial one, with opinion divided between those who would attribute bullying to poorly-managed opposing interests (i.e., competition for popularity among peers, control over resources, differences in values and beliefs) and those who tend to perceive it more as a product of the power dynamics that are commonly played-out between individuals and groups.

In either case, school officials are under mounting pressure to find an effective mechanism for dealing with such issues, which appear to be commonly impacting a large percentage of students. Unfortunately, in the haste to address this issue, the distinction is not always made between conflict itself (the natural occurrence of opposing interests), and the inappropriate, aversive behaviour that many students resort to as a means of coping with it. As a result, the potential exists for the emphasis to be wrongly placed on reducing or eliminating conflict, rather than helping children to learn how to constructively resolve it.

Once this distinction is made and conflict is accepted as a simple reality of everyday life, attention can be more appropriately focused on understanding its nature in school settings, and determining a means through which young people can be equipped with the skills needed to successfully manage it. Critical to such a process is realizing that in every school there typically exist students who clearly possess a certain capacity to deal more successfully than
others with situations in which their own personal interests are at stake. Generally, these students appear better equipped to manage conflict without engaging in aversive behaviour or seeking adult intervention to resolve their problems. Do these young people possess higher-developed social skills that enable them to successfully deal with conflict, or navigate around it, and if so, how can these skills be taught to other children?

Using a School-wide System to Address Problem Behaviour: Effective Behaviour Support (EBS)

Increasingly popular are school-wide programs that involve teaching, practicing, and positively reinforcing pro-social behaviour as a means of supporting students who, because they lack certain social skills, are commonly regarded by their teachers and peers as having a behaviour problem. In this context, a student’s undesirable behaviour is perceived primarily as a failure to meet a specific expectation in a particular setting, rather than the aversive outcome of a poorly managed situation in which the interests of one individual conflict with those of another. Research has shown that teachers commonly respond to these “problem” students in a manner that results in interactions of a reciprocal-coercive nature, characterized by an overwhelming prevalence of negative comments used by the teacher to address the student’s aversive behaviour. Rather than discourage the child from further acting in this manner, these communication patterns often serve as reinforcement, leading to an increase in reciprocal-coercive exchanges that only further compromise the learning environment (Shores, Gunter & Jack, 1993).

In recent years, programs like Effective Behaviour Support (Lewis, Sugai & Colvin, 1998) have proposed a school-wide structure for replacing these coercive, reactive responses to problem behaviour with a system in which positive, pro-social behaviour is taught, practiced, and extrinsically reinforced. The success of EBS can be largely attributed to the fact
that it is school-wide in focus, emphasizes positive student-teacher interactions, and most importantly, provides children with clear examples of how to behave accordingly in the various settings they routinely encounter at school. In order to do this, a school staff collectively identifies specific problem areas on which to focus this training, agrees upon the pro-social behaviour desired in these situations, and then designs strategies for effectively teaching and reinforcing it. Specialized individual and small group training is provided for students with chronic and intense problem behaviour. As such, the program is structured around three levels of intervention. At the primary level, universal, classroom-based training is directed at the entire student body. Through this intervention, it is assumed that 85% of students will learn how to behave accordingly in the various designated settings. For the 5-15% of students who are generally at-risk of problem behaviour, this training is supplemented by a secondary level of intervention that involves teaching these children the required skills in a small-group setting. At the tertiary level, intensive, individual training is provided for the 1-7% of students who are identified as having chronic problem behaviour. The EBS program also requires that the staff adopt a uniform process for dealing with those students who continue to exhibit aversive behaviour after these social skills have been taught.

In this regard, EBS takes a top-down approach to promoting pro-social behaviour in young people, with teachers and administrators establishing the school codes and presenting themselves as the "experts" on how to behave in a variety of school settings. This expectation-based model for teaching positive, pro-social behaviour has produced impressive results in many of the schools where it has been piloted. Particularly effective is its approach to teaching all students targeted social skills that will enable them to successfully meet a specific expectation, and be positively reinforced for doing so. Students have typically shown a genuine enthusiasm for being "caught" demonstrating positive, pro-social behaviour in
identified settings. The reward system used by teachers to reinforce this behaviour varies somewhat from one school to the next, but typically involves the giving out of small prizes or "gotcha" tickets that later serve as coupons for a school-wide draw.

Supplementing the EBS Approach to Problem Behaviour: Student-Based Conflict Resolution

Conceptualizing problem behaviour as a student’s failure to meet an expectation in a particular setting has provided educators with a clear direction on how to positively support the many students who routinely behave in an adverse fashion in various school settings. It is interesting to note however, that these children are also the ones routinely identified as being least capable of successfully managing situations in which their interests conflict with those of other students or adults. Often overlooked is this relationship between problem behaviour and the inability to effectively manage conflict. Unfortunately, because the purpose or goal behind a student’s undesirable behaviour in the classroom or elsewhere is not always readily apparent, conflict resolution is seldom considered a viable vehicle for addressing problem behaviour. Furthermore, teachers and school officials tend to regard conflict in relation to the problems that emerge between children, while student opposition to their own particular interests (i.e., teaching a lesson, maintaining safe and orderly hallways) is more apt to be perceived as insubordination or behaviour that is simply inappropriate and therefore unacceptable.

An opportunity therefore exists to supplement the small-group and intensive, individual social skills training used at the secondary and tertiary levels of EBS, with a program that provides these students with the tools needed to successfully manage conflict situations. Increasingly, EBS schools are beginning to supplement their programs with conflict resolution or peer mediation training that provides students with a step-by-step protocol on how to mediate conflicts involving themselves and others. For the most part, this again
represents a top-down approach to addressing the problem with adults teaching the children specific strategies on how to manage conflict. Seemingly overlooked are a certain number of students in every school who appear quite capable of successfully managing these situations without adult intervention. These young people represent a valuable resource for teaching other students the skills needed to handle the kind of conflict that can occur when one individual’s personal interests are challenged by those of others. In addition to utilizing the expertise of those who are most aware of the interpersonal dynamics that exist within a school culture, an approach of this nature has the potential to serve as a powerful motivator for student collaboration in the establishment and maintenance of a safe school environment.

This is particularly salient since the resiliency of student motivation for programs like EBS has yet to be established. Much controversy surrounds the assertion that over time, external reinforcement alone will eventually result in young people becoming intrinsically motivated towards pro-social behaviour. Enabling children to assume the role of the “expert” in a program of this nature may serve to promote student initiative and innovation, and along with it, establish a powerful, more intrinsically-oriented, source of motivation (Larson, 2000). Additionally, enhancing student involvement in the interventions that comprise a program like EBS would help to balance its top-down approach, while effectively utilizing those who regularly demonstrate the pro-social behaviour that is instrumental to the successful resolution of conflict. This is particularly relevant for situations that develop in unsupervised settings, such as the hallways or playground, where students who lack social skills are especially vulnerable to reacting inappropriately to conflict by resorting to bullying, dominance, or other forms of aggression. Also important is the ability that many of these students have at finding a niche for themselves within the conflict-laden, social hierarchies that exists in every classroom and school. Generally, teachers have only a marginal understanding of these dynamics. In this
respect, it could be argued that the true experts on how to successfully resolve conflict in
schools are not the adults, but rather a select group of students who appear particularly skilled
at coping in these various environments.

**Purpose of this Study**

It would seem therefore that a school-wide program like EBS could be further
enhanced if students, in addition to learning and practicing positive, pro-social behaviour in a
variety of settings, were also provided opportunities to learn from each other how to
effectively manage the different types of conflict that regularly occur between themselves and
other students and staff during the course of an average day at school. Empowering young
people to take an active role in articulating the “secrets” to successfully managing conflict in
their world has the potential to serve as a powerful, intrinsic motivator for student commitment
to the establishment and maintenance of a safe school environment, while providing educators
with a unique opportunity to see conflict as it is experienced through the lenses of the children
who have developed the skills to successfully manage it.

The purpose of this study was to facilitate such an opportunity by giving “voice” to a
number of young people who had been specifically identified by their teacher as having the
capacity to either effectively deal with, or navigate around conflict situations. A narrative
research design was employed as a vehicle for enabling these students to tell their personal
stories of conflict at school, and reflect on the manner in which these situations were handled.
Additionally, these young people were asked to consider what influence, if any, this process of
being consulted as a conflict resolution expert had on them.
Delimitations

Exploring conflict from the perspective of those who experience it first hand provided a unique opportunity to gain valuable insight into the nature and dynamics of how certain children behave in order to cope with their surrounding environment. Because conflict resolution programs have historically taken a top-down approach in which adults presented themselves as the “experts” on how to manage conflict situations, certain important realities of a young person’s world may have been overlooked and consequently undermined the effectiveness of the strategies or steps taught to the children. By beginning first with the child’s experience of conflict, the opportunity for conceptualizing the problem within its natural context is greatly enhanced, and along with it the possibility of deriving effective strategies for helping children to successfully manage the situations they routinely encounter throughout the course of their school experience.
CHAPTER TWO
Literature Review

Overview

For more than three decades, researchers have been examining the effectiveness of teaching conflict resolution in schools. The vast majority of these studies have concentrated on initiatives that take a top-down approach to training children how to successfully manage or mediate situations in which conflicting interests exist (Garibaldi, Blanchard, & Brooks, 1996; Johnson, et al., 1996; Johnson & Johnson, 1995, 1996b, 2001; Lantieri, DeJong, & Dutrey, 1996). Typically, these are programs in which students learn a series of steps designed to help them deconstruct and successfully resolve conflict situations. Although numerous models have emerged over the years, most share common elements that include understanding the nature of the conflict, recognizing and controlling the emotions connected to it, accepting the notion that the conflict can be resolved in a manner that considers the interests of all parties involved, engaging in a process of brainstorming a possible resolution, and implementing it to the satisfaction of everyone.

As one might expect, the research on conflict resolution is extensive and broad-based. Considerable attention has been focused on determining which approaches are most effective for teaching conflict resolution to children at various age levels (Johnson & Johnson, 1995; Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, & Real, 1996), and whether or not they successfully employ these strategies across school settings (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). Equally important is the question of resiliency, specifically how long after the training will a young person continue to choose positive resolution alternatives over other aversive behaviours that disrupt school settings and create unsafe environments (Webster, 1993). Still other studies have concentrated on the ancillary benefits of conflict resolution training on such variables as academic performance...
and the development of integrative thinking (Dudley, Johnson, & Johnson, 1996; Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, & Laginski, 1996).

Critical to this study is an understanding of the process through which students are typically trained by adults to handle situations in which their own self interests conflict with those of others. In this chapter, attention will be given to factors such as the children’s age, gender, and socio-economic status, and what influence these variables may have on program effectiveness. It will include a review of the various methods that have been used to assess conflict resolution programs, with consideration given to what other approaches may yield additional, relevant information. Perhaps most significant will be the need to gain an overall sense of whether or not these programs do in fact contribute to the establishment and maintenance of a safe school environment. Specific attention will be focused on whether or not the strategies taught to children reflect an understanding of conflict relevant to their everyday world, and the unique interpersonal dynamics that are so pervasive throughout it. Finally, consideration will be given to an alternative approach that might more effectively facilitate conflict resolution among young people in their school settings.

Origins of Conflict Resolution Programs: Teaching Students to Be Peacemakers

It is important to note from the outset that in some of the research, a surprisingly limited amount of detail is provided on the actual strategies taught to the children. In some cases, only brief reference is made to the training itself, with the reader instead being referred to a particular manual published by a local authority on conflict resolution (Bell et al., 2000; Johnson et al., 1996). This is indicative of the outcome-based focus prevalently found in the literature on conflict resolution. A great deal of attention has been paid to the rates of successfully resolved conflicts that occurred in the playground subsequent to children
receiving training. Also apparent in much of the literature is an almost universal acceptance of certain principles of conflict resolution that have prevailed over the more than three decades that have passed since programs of this nature first originated.

There are a number of widely-used (and in some cases quite dated) conflict resolution programs that are pervasively found throughout the research. Although each is in someway unique in its presentation of conflict-related themes, most have adopted a dispute-resolution or peer mediation procedure similar to that which was first introduced in the *Teaching Students to be Peacemakers Program* (Johnson & Johnson, 1996b) that originated in the mid-1960s. A comprehensive look at this model would best facilitate a thorough understanding of the top-down approach employed by the majority of conflict resolution programs, and provide a sense of the practical and theoretical foundations on which they are based.

By combining Morton Deutsch's social interdependence theory (1949) with research on integrative negotiation and perspective-taking (Johnson, 1967), the Peacemakers Program was developed to inform children about the nature of conflict, and introduce to them a problem-solving negotiation procedure that they could use for mediating their own conflicts as well as those of others. The program was based in part on a philosophy that conflict, in and of itself, is not a problem, but an actual means through which two or more individuals come to terms with the natural disagreements that occur between them as a result of their own unique personal dynamics. In this respect, the Peacemakers Program was the first to teach children to regard conflict as a pervasive and inevitable reality of school life, and recognize that managing it constructively was not only possible, but fun! (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a).

The curriculum through which this program teaches children to become peacemakers consists of five implementation steps. By first establishing a school-wide commitment to emphasize cooperation over competition, a foundation is set in place on which is built a
mindset that great benefits come through working towards a collective goal, and that seeing oneself as part of a larger group in which both successes and setbacks are shared can bring with it tremendous satisfaction and reward. The significance of immersing students in this ‘culture of cooperation’ was later validated in a study that showed how middle school students who were trained in conflict resolution were more likely to choose an approach that maximized joint outcomes over individual ones in an activity that involved the buying and selling of token commodities (Dudley, Johnson & Johnson, 1996).

The second stage of the Peacemakers Program involves helping students to understand not only the nature of conflict but also its desirability. Breaking down the popular perception that conflict involves anger, hostility, and confrontation is seen as fundamental to motivating young people to manage it constructively, and recognize the value of attaining a successful resolution to the problems encountered by all of us in our daily lives. This stage of the Peacemakers Program involves simulating conflict situations in classroom settings where young people can experience the insight, learning and enjoyment that often accompany conflict resolution. It is important at this stage of the process that students begin to become more aware of their own natural responses to conflict. They must also learn strategies to help them both identify true conflict situations and determine at what point a successful resolution has been constructively attained (Johnson & Johnson, 1996b).

The third implementation step in the process involves the actual teaching of a problem-solving negotiation procedure. Here, the program facilitators emphasize the use of an integrative approach to reach an agreement that benefits all sides. Students are discouraged from settling for a “win-lose” or distributive resolution in which only one party makes concessions that benefit the other. The series of six steps (Appendix A) that make-up the negotiation procedure are designed to be broadly applied to a variety of conflict situations,
serving as a framework for disputants to constructively problem-solve their own conflicts. Identifying the nature of the problem and the feelings associated with it, understanding the conflict from all perspectives, and collaborating on a course of action that will benefit both sides, represents the essence of this approach.

In the fourth stage of the program, students are taught how to mediate conflict as a neutral third party who can be called upon whenever the two sides of a dispute are unable to reach an agreement on their own. An important distinction is drawn between peer mediation and an outside person arbitrating a final decision that is binding. In the Peacemakers Program, two students in each classroom are assigned each day to be the mediators. These positions are rotated so that all students are given an equal opportunity to serve in this capacity. Wearing official mediator t-shirts, the students patrol the hallways and playground at recess and lunch, and may be called upon at any time during the day to assist in conflict resolution. The mediation procedure consists of four steps: 1) end the hostilities by separating disputants for an adequate period of time to allow for 'cooling off,' 2) convince both sides to commit to the mediation process and agree to negotiate in good faith, 3) help the disputants constructively negotiate with each other by taking them through the six steps of the problem solving procedure, and 4) monitor the disputants’ compliance with the terms of the agreement (Johnson & Johnson, 1996b).

The Peacemakers Program is set-up so that whenever peer mediation fails to bring a resolution to the dispute, a teacher is called upon to act as mediator. If both sides still cannot reach an agreement, the principal serves as the neutral third party, attempting first to find a resolution through mediation, and if this fails, arbitrating a binding decision. In the final implementation step of this program emphasis is placed on reinforcing and upgrading these conflict resolution strategies by integrating them into the curriculum wherever possible.
Teachers are encouraged to consider ways of incorporating negotiation and problem solving into their academic lessons as well as the daily administration of their classroom.

Other Approaches to Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation

Among the other notable conflict resolution and peer mediation initiatives are several worth briefly mentioning since the curriculum they employ reflects a slightly different orientation to teaching children how to successfully resolve conflict. The Children’s Creative Response to Conflict, a project that originated in New York City in the early 1970s, concentrates on such concepts as justice, caring and personal integrity within a larger, overall context of non-violence (Johnson & Johnson, 1996a). In 1985, the Educators for Social Responsibility designed a comprehensive program called Resolving Conflict Creatively (RCCP), which focuses largely on inter-group relations and includes a ten-unit, K-12 classroom curriculum on cooperative learning and conflict resolution, as well as a 20-hour training program for peer mediators. RCCP places considerable emphasis on the importance of taking a community approach to conflict resolution by also including ongoing training for teachers, administrators, and parents. Much of the program is devoted to helping students better understand conflict while learning practical skills for finding creative ways to resolve it (Lantieri, DeJong, & Dutrey, 1996).

When conceptualizing the nature and scope of initiatives like RCCP and the Peacemakers Program it is helpful to deconstruct their various components to identify which aspects are specifically designed to provide direct training of conflict resolution and peer mediation strategies to students. Both the problem-solving negotiating procedure and peer mediation process found in stages three and four of the Peacemakers Program are similar to that found in the comprehensive peer mediator training taught in the RCCP, in that both
provide students with a specific protocol that can be generalized to different conflict situations involving either themselves or their peers. In many cases, schools have implemented a formalized system in which all students take turns assuming the role of peer mediator in various school settings. Other programs rely on a select group of students who are specifically chosen to receive special training and serve in this capacity for the whole school (cadre approach).

In addition to curriculum-based conflict resolution programs and peer mediation training, there are other programs that are designed to be taught as an elective (more suited for the secondary school level) or classroom-based modules that are presented as individual units for teachers to adapt into their program as they see fit. Among the comparatively few studies that have explored these differences is one that compared the effectiveness of a curriculum-based peer mediation program with a classroom meeting approach (Harris, 1999). In this study, students in the third and fourth grade were randomly assigned to one of three groups. The Second Step Violence Prevention Curriculum was taught to one experimental group while the other engaged in class meetings. A third group served as a control and received no intervention. In both experimental groups, classroom teachers led instructional sessions in conflict resolution strategies over the course of one semester. Results were outcome-focused and based on a) test scores on both the student and teacher versions of the Matson’s Evaluation of Social Skills with Youngsters (MESSY), b) office referrals for conflict-related aversive behaviour, c) conflict report forms filled out by the students, and d) playground observations. The data was analyzed separately along grade levels after initial results indicated a significant difference based on this variable.

According to their scores on the MESSY, teachers perceived a significantly greater degree of growth among the third graders in the curricular group over their counterparts who
participated in class meetings. The reverse was found at the fourth grade level where teachers reported that the class meeting approach had yielded significantly better results than a curriculum-based method. Results from the student version of this test revealed a significant difference along gender lines with the third grade boys who took part in class meetings scoring significantly higher than their female counterparts, while in the curriculum group the third grade girls outperformed the boys.

The fact that none of the other analyses yielded results indicating a significant difference in the effectiveness of these two methods led researchers to voice support for an eclectic approach to conflict resolution training. The author suggests a combined program that involves a teacher-directed focus with younger children until the beginning of grade four, at which point a gradual shift to increasing student responsibility for learning and implementing the strategies should take place. While it appears that these results lend support to the notion of promoting greater student initiative in programs that are geared towards the intermediate grades or higher, they also encourage careful consideration of the impact that gender may have on this process.

Other research into how boys and girls differ in the strategies they use to resolve conflict prior to receiving peer mediation training further underscores this point. Typically, the ‘untrained’ student when facing a conflict situation with a peer will resort to a distributive or win-lose approach in which one side is forced to give in to the other. Research into the nature of this “force,” and how it may differ according to gender, has shown that the tendency to employ physical force is considerably higher among male students, while their female counterparts are more likely to resort to other forms of aggression such as verbal attacks (both direct and indirect), and peer exclusion (Kaufman, 1991, as cited in Carruthers et al., 1996). Although this might explain in part why boys and girls respond differently to the methods used
to teach conflict resolution and peer mediation, it does little to help determine which approaches best counter the different forms of aggression and dominance that boys and girls resort to as a means of dealing with conflict.

Measuring the Effectiveness of Conflict Resolution Programs: A Quantitative Approach

Among the countless studies that have assessed the effectiveness of conflict resolution training in schools is one that was conducted in the Omaha School District, in which forty-seven inner-city students in the third and fourth grade of a K-4 school were provided a day and a half of training in communication, assertiveness and mediation skills (Johnson et al., 1996). The participants in the study had volunteered to be Conflict Managers and received their training at a local YMCA camp immediately before the beginning of the school year. The basic communication skills that the children were taught involved the use of “I” messages, active listening, and reflection of feelings. The participants were trained in a mediation procedure and their assertiveness skills were developed. Students were then randomly paired up into teams of two and were assigned duty during the lunch hour. The conflict managers were required to fill out a form after each conflict, thus providing a recordable source of data with which to assess the program’s effectiveness. In total, 323 conflicts were handled by the conflict managers over the course of the school year, and in 98% of these cases the students were able to successfully mediate the conflict, most often (84%) by getting the parties to agree to stay away from each other. The researchers of this study were particularly impressed by the fact 85% of the conflicts mediated by the managers involved either verbal or physical force (42%), a success rate which they regarded as “remarkable.”
Based on the quantitative data collected from the conflict managers’ reports a number of valuable insights can be drawn. A content analysis of the nature of conflicts mediated revealed a startling prevalence of physical and verbal abuse used by young people (girls and boys) when engaged in conflict. Equally interesting is the fact that the source of these conflicts was most often relationship-based with control of resources placing a distant second. Given these two factors, it would seem difficult to accept that 84% of the conflicts were successfully mediated by simply persuading the parties to avoid one another. In fact, according to the Peacemaker model, an agreement of this nature would have only represented the first stage of resolution in which both sides are given some time to cool off before coming back together to resolve the issue at hand. It would also seem overly optimistic to assume that in most of these cases both sides of the conflict went away feeling that an integrative or “win-win” resolution had been achieved. Additional data collected from the conflicting parties would certainly have provided a clearer sense of whether or not a genuine resolution occurred, particularly in light of the fact that the majority of the problems were relationship-related. Yet, no indication was given as to whether or not these resolutions led to the restoring of friendship.

The age of the children involved is certainly an important factor to consider when determining whether or not a conflict has been successfully resolved. Vastly different are the social dynamics that routinely play out between children at the primary level in comparison to the pre-adolescent youths found in the older grades. Whereas young children may be more inclined to “forgive and forget” once a particular incident is over, students at the intermediate grades frequently demonstrate an extraordinary capacity to hold a grudge, sometimes continuing to punish their adversary in subtle and devious ways that may in fact serve to escalate the conflict. Consequently, the need for accurately determining whether or not the
issue at hand has been successfully resolved takes on added significance as the age of the student increases (Hartup, 1974).

In the Fayette County Schools in Tennessee, a more comprehensive study was recently conducted in which a conflict resolution program was implemented in a low-SES, 1-8 rural elementary school (Bell et al., 2000). Here, thirty students ranging from the sixth to eighth grade received extensive training in peer mediation using a program published by Conflict Resolution Unlimited. The researchers hoped to conduct a broad-based outcome evaluation of the program’s effectiveness based on several measures. Particularly significant was their desire to determine if children generalize the conflict resolution skills they learn beyond controlled settings. In this regard, a simple rate of successfully mediated conflicts was not sufficient. The study was designed to also measure whether the training influenced a behaviour change in individual conflict situations or a change in school-wide behavioural markers such as the number of office referrals, physical fights, and school suspensions. Three years of baseline data was utilized for trend analysis. The study also employed a pre- and post-test design to measure the mediation skill retention rates of those students who had been specifically trained in conflict resolution.

In addition to recording the successful mediation of 32 out of 34 conflicts over a six-week period, this study reported a marked decrease in the number of office referrals for students who received the training in comparison to those who did not. Furthermore, school suspensions decreased significantly during the intervention year. However, teacher reports on changes in classroom behaviour did not yield a statistically significant difference between pre- and post- implementation of the program. It should be noted that the documentation gathered on the resolved conflicts was considerably more thorough with resolution contracts requiring the signature of both the mediators and disputants. Each resolution was dependent upon the
fact that the parties involved reached an agreement and were not later referred to the office as a result of issues related to the conflict. Additionally, a two- and six-week follow-up was conducted in which the trainers reviewed each of their contracts for completeness (Bell et al., 2000).

What is of particular significance in this study is the distinction drawn between the notion of efficacy and effectiveness with respect to evaluating conflict resolution programs. According to its authors, sufficient evidence already exists in support of the fact that students trained in conflict resolution are able to mediate peer conflicts on the playground with high rates of success. However, yet to be determined was whether or not this training is effective in improving student behaviour across school settings. This is critical to the assertion that programs of this nature contribute to establishing and maintaining safe school environments. Although this study presents some support for this notion based on school-wide markers that indicate statistically significant decreases in noted areas, it leaves unexplored the students’ own impression of the program’s influence on their behaviour, indicating one area for further investigation.

**Taking a Qualitative Approach to Assessing Program Effectiveness**

Increasingly, researchers are recognizing the value of assessing the effectiveness of conflict resolution programs based on the perspective of the students themselves. In addition to gaining a sense of how children experience the training, studies of this nature provide a unique look at the interpersonal dynamics involved when students act as mediators in peer conflicts. Whereas much of quantitative research has established the efficacy of these programs, a great deal more is to be learned about the many variables that factor into each conflict and what influence they have on the manner in which it is resolved. Quantitative researchers are always
challenged by the need to classify each incident into a specific category. In many studies, the nature of each conflict is recorded based on both its content (i.e., physical aggression, insults/put-downs) and its theoretical foundation (i.e., control over resources, relationships). Although this data is critical to determining whether the efficacy of the intervention varies based on the nature of the conflict, another side of the story must also be considered.

In one study conducted at an elementary school located in a suburb of the Salt Lake City, 14 peer mediators (8 female, 6 male) from grades four through six provided considerable insight into the social dynamics of conflict resolution in school settings (Humphries, 1999). These mediators were selected by their classroom teachers based on perceived leadership potential. Of the 14 participants, 13 were of European American background, and one of Hispanic American heritage. Eight of the participating children were in the fourth grade, two were in the fifth grade, and the remaining four were in the sixth grade.

Although considerable insight may have been gained by exploring further the criteria used by individual teachers in making their selections, the researcher chose instead to maintain a focus on the perspective of the participants themselves. In the study, two data gathering instruments were employed: interviews and observations. Following the actual training, the mediators were “shadowed” by observers who used checklists to determine if each step of the resolution process was properly employed. 12 total hours of schoolyard observation data were collected. Details as to how soon after training these observations took place were not provided. After three months of service as a peer mediator, each of the participants was interviewed individually using a standard set of questions about the experience. The children were informed that there were no right or wrong answers, and that confidentiality was assured.

Based on the observations of playground mediations as well as the comments made by the participants during the interviews, the study found that the children were generally able to
carry out the trained mediation process. No further qualification of these results is provided. The researcher did note, however, that some children continually omitted a step in the training procedure when mediating actual problems, leading her to recommend that the children receive ongoing practice sessions to reinforce the original learning, and that they be permitted to carry an outline of the steps with them while on duty in the playground.

The interviews with the participants yielded a number of key points that the researcher felt were important to highlight. Despite believing that they played an important role in resolving disputes in the playground, as well as feeling a sense of pride for helping to improve the school climate, several of the students voiced considerable dissatisfaction with the social consequences of being a peer mediator. Issues such as missing free time at recess and being teased and picked on by peers were expressed by many of the participants. One child’s comment: “I only help a little bit because not many of the kids like me,” illustrated the influence of interpersonal dynamics on the effectiveness of a peer mediator. Twenty-one percent of the mediators complained of attempts made by disputants to engage them in a fight.

Based on the data compiled from the observations and interviews, a number of recommendations are made for improving the efficacy of peer mediation programs. It should be noted that these are based on a relatively limited amount of data collected on a small sample of participants. Many of them are based on concerns voiced by individual mediators during the interview and have specific relevancy to his or her ability to improve as a peer mediator.

Although valuable in providing what the author describes as a “glimpse” into the realities that children face as peer mediators, greater consideration must be given to possible factors that may have contributed to the observations recorded in the schoolyard, and the responses given by the participants during the interviews. In interpreting the results, the author makes no mention of the possible influence that gender, grade level, or ethnicity may have.
played during conflict situations, or what effect this may have had on how it was experienced by the mediator. Without any discussion regarding possible limitations to generalizing these results, the author encourages those who are designing and implementing peer mediation programs to give careful consideration to the insights provided by these participants, and the recommendations made in response to them. While the results of this study make a strong case for incorporating the opinions of the children themselves in any assessment of a program's effectiveness, greater caution must be exercised when generalizing findings of this nature beyond its particular setting.

In an effort to shed greater light on the issue of gender in peer mediation, a recent study carried out in-depth interviews with former elementary school mediators who had been paired up with a partner of the opposite gender (Spees, 2000). In addition to raising an awareness of how the peer mediation process can influence gender stereotypes, the research proved particularly effective at giving voice to the participants, and thereby capturing valuable "snapshots" of the interpersonal dynamics that exist between boys and girls with relation to their work as mediators. Although the results fell short of proving that mix-gender partnerships in peer mediation lead to a decrease in stereotypes, the study serves as a testimony to the importance of taking into consideration variables like gender when implementing a peer mediation program, as well as incorporating the participants' perspective into an evaluation of its effectiveness.

Other qualitative research has focused on the role of teachers, yielding additional insight into the way in which they respond to conflict in their classrooms, and whether or not resolution training has the capacity to positively influence their management ability. In an extensive study conducted in four New Orleans public schools, the influence of strategies taught in the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP) were measured primarily through
interviews with teachers and principals (Garibaldi, Blanchard & Brooks, 1996). Specifically, researchers were trying to determine whether teachers who were able to implement a classroom-based conflict resolution procedure would be less likely to refer students for suspensions or expulsions. Particularly valuable was the information that emerged from interviews with 63 teachers regarding the nature of conflict that typically occurs in their classrooms and the amount of time and energy they devote to dealing with it. Teachers and principals were also asked to consider how the RCCP program had influenced classroom management and discipline, particularly with respect to student suspensions.

From these reports, researchers were able to determine that student inability to manage anger or disagreement without resorting to fighting was primary among the obstacles to creating a safe and caring environment in their classrooms. Many of the teachers pointed to external factors as contributing largely to this issue, particularly the reinforcement of violence as an acceptable vehicle for resolving conflict within the school’s surrounding neighbourhood. Parents were also cited for playing a significant role in the problem by encouraging their children to stand up for themselves by “striking back” at anyone who hits them. With respect to the program’s efficacy, 57% of the teachers responded favourably when asked whether or not RCCP had improved their classroom management. Of these, many noted the importance of learning to shift the focus of problem-solving to the children and thereby reduce the need for teacher intervention.

Rationale for Further Research

This review of the literature on conflict resolution and peer mediation programs raised a number of significant questions that provided the rationale for further research. Primary among these is the influence of external factors on young people’s capacity to manage conflict
successfully. For example, the impact of a school’s neighbourhood is clearly one variable that must be taken into consideration when implementing a program designed to help young people deal with the issues that routinely emerge in the world that surrounds them. To a certain extent this calls into question the practicality of generalizing a standard problem-solving procedure across school settings. If in a young person’s world violence is universally accepted as a vehicle for dealing with disagreement, any approach to facilitating a change in this regard must ultimately begin with some acknowledgement of this reality.

Also important to consider is the large variability that exists between staff members in their approach to handling conflict both in and out of the classroom. Because a sizable discrepancy exists between teachers with regard to the number and nature of their disciplinary referrals to the office, one has to question whether some students might fashion their response to a conflict situation based largely on how they expect a certain teacher to react. Even more critical is the need to question to what extent a particular student’s profile within a school community may impact his or her likelihood to seek an integrative solution to a disagreement. Would a typical conflict resolution program take into consideration the social vulnerability that some students experience in conflict situations? Is it wise to encourage a socially-withdrawn student in an unsupervised setting to engage a high profile peer in a conflict resolution procedure recently taught by their teacher in class? Is a “win-win” situation likely to occur under these pretenses, or would the student be best to navigate around the conflict so as to reduce the chance of losing face in front of peers, or worse?

Issues such as these reflect the complex social dynamics pervasively found throughout school settings, and present an enduring challenge to those committed to reducing aversive behaviour among youths. Programs like conflict resolution seek to develop in children the skills they need to help them choose a pro-social alternative to dealing with situations in which
their own interests are at stake. Although the research convincingly supports the assertion that young people can be trained in a problem-solving procedure, and will successfully apply it to resolve certain conflict situations, what remains elusive is a means by which students can develop the “expertise” they need to correctly interpret the dynamics of a given social situation and respond to it accordingly without paying a social price. Not to be underestimated is the impact felt by a student who is teased or picked on by peers for assuming the role of mediator. Conflict resolution programs that teach a standardized procedure fail to take into account the influence of the social hierarchy found in every classroom and schoolyard. Add to any conflict scenario a number of observers who are socially aligned with one of the two parties involved in a disagreement and the likelihood of a “win-win” integrative resolution quickly diminishes.

Although educators and researchers are painfully aware of how resilient and anti-social these hierarchies can be, seldom do the strategies they teach students acknowledge their existence, let alone provide some direction as to how to operate pro-socially within them. This is due in part to the fact that adults have at best a marginal understanding of the social structure that exists within any group of young people, because it is not likely to take its natural form unless adults are entirely removed from the picture. Typically, as students reach the intermediate grades they consistently seek out unsupervised situations, physical spaces in the playground, hallways, or bathrooms where the dynamics of their interpersonal relationships can unfold free of adult interference. In part this reflects the common desire shared by most young people to work out their issues on their own. It is uncommon for adolescents to purposely disregard a certain approach to dealing with a problem for no other reason than the fact that it was suggested by a parent or teacher.

It is within this context that researchers must carefully consider the strategies they intend to instill in young people if they hope to help them deal successfully with the conflicts
they will routinely encounter in their everyday lives. This process must ultimately begin with
the acknowledgement that young people have a far better understanding of the interpersonal
realities that exist between peers in school settings than adults whose insights are based on
observations made from the periphery on occasions when their very presence drastically
changes these dynamics. By exploring conflict through the “expertise” of children who seem
particularly skilled at successfully managing it in various settings, the potential exists to see
through the lens of those who experience it first hand, the social realities that need to be
correctly interpreted if a child is to emerge from conflict with a sense of having dealt with it
successfully.
The Research Question

Unlike the vast majority of research conducted on conflict resolution in schools, the purpose of this study was to simply explore the process of inviting children to share their stories of conflict. A narrative research design was employed to give “voice” to several young people who had been specifically identified for their perceived capacity to deal successfully with conflict situations at school. By engaging these young people in a dialogue about their experiences, I had hoped to gain some sense of the “meaning-making” processes that these children employ while recounting the events of a particular conflict. In this regard, the telling of these stories was intended to provide a series of snapshots capturing several children’s “realities” of conflict, including their perceptions of how a particular incident unfolded, as well as what factors they believed were responsible both for its occurrence and the manner in which it was handled.

Of equal if not greater importance to this study was the purpose of exploring how this process is impacted when the children are encouraged to regard themselves as “experts” on the subject. In addition to gaining some insight into how young people respond when given the opportunity to speak from a position of authority, I had hoped that this might inform us on several levels about how the dynamics and influence of power in a dialogue can significantly impact the process of telling one’s story. It was my hope that by recognizing from the outset the children’s expertise on the subject, a refreshing context would be created that might facilitate certain insight less likely to be found in the advice-laden dialogues that characteristically occur between adults and children.

In this regard, two questions represent the launching point for this study: 1) How do children telling their stories of conflict inform us about their perceptions of it and the way in
which it is managed? And, 2) How does regarding the children as experts on this subject influence this process?

Rationale for Research Design

In her book Teaching to Transgress, bell hooks refers to the "authority of experience" and the integral role it plays in the process of gathering knowledge fully and inclusively (hooks, 1994). She speaks of the need to interrogate the location from which we educate, a notion that is of critical importance to any process whose aim is to teach others how to successfully operate in the world as they experience it. According to Hooks, this process must reflect a balance between the analytical and experiential in order to facilitate a richer "way of knowing," one that is far more apt to result in a formulation of theory that is pertinent and useful.

With respect to conflict in schools, any process intended to teach its effective management must invariably begin with the authority on that experience, in this case, the children who routinely encounter it everyday in various settings. As such, consideration must be given as to how best to engage these children in a process that will enable them to speak from this perspective. In Developing Critical Thinkers, Stephen Brookfield alerts us to the tremendous capacity that exists in fostering a reflective dialogue between teacher and student (Brookfield, 1987). By beginning first with a shared acceptance that a particular problem persists due to the fact that no adequate solution has yet been found, a climate of empowerment is cultivated by virtue of the respect that is afforded when each individual honours the personal "expertise" of the other. In this environment of mutual recognition, divergent thinking is more apt to be encouraged than repressed, as the assumption is made that the solution must lie somewhere beyond commonly explored parameters. This notion that
meaningful knowledge emerges through a process of hopeful inquiry is described by Paolo Freire (1970) as a shared pursuit rather than a “gift” bestowed by the enlightened on the ill-informed. He insists that authentic thinking is fostered through a dialogue between co-investigators engaged in problem-posing education, an approach that affirms the perpetual incompleteness of knowledge and celebrates the ongoing process of “becoming” for those committed to its endless pursuit. In addition to laying the foundation for transformative learning, this reflective process stimulates the questioning of existing assumptions and encourages a mindset that embraces the notion that a certain problem may never yield to a clearly-defined solution, but only further uncover new paths of inquiry.

Limitations of this Research Design

In this study, a narrative research design was employed as a mechanism for fostering this reflective process in relation to the problem of conflict in schools. The content of the stories themselves or their historical accuracy was of secondary importance. My attention instead was focused primarily on the dialogue that evolved as part of the delicate process of inviting these young people’s narratives. Critical to this approach was the creation of a “third space” in which the children and I engaged in a dialogue that facilitated the co-construction of their stories. Because this enterprise was clearly a collaborative one, I remained ever mindful of the impact that my interpretative forces brought to bear on both the process and its outcome. With every comment or question, the dialogue with each child took on a new reality, continually co-constructing the way in which these narratives unfolded.

For this reason, I accepted from the outset that none of the stories created through this process would represent or even approximate an objective truth or reality about a specific event. Their critical value was regarded in terms of the dialogue through which they evolved,
and my subjective impressions of this process. My intention was always to explore how the “telling” of these stories informed me of the ways in which children make meaning of conflict while recounting their experience of it to an adult. Of particular importance to this study was the influence of power on this process. To further explore this relationship, I actively encouraged the children to regard themselves as “experts” on the subject in an attempt to gain some sense of how this might impact the way in which they approached their stories.

Participants and Screening

Six students were purposively chosen from three sixth grade classes (two English, one French Immersion) in a K-7 elementary school in North Vancouver. Two months previous to participant selection, each of the three classroom teachers were asked to observe the children at this grade level and identify any student who they thought met the following criteria:

I) An above average capacity to mediate conflict situations involving themselves or others

II) An above average capacity to navigate around conflict situations involving themselves or others

III) An average or above capacity to verbally articulate with certain insight their experience of school

No specific direction was given regarding the number of students that should be identified. The adults were simply asked to make their decisions based on their past involvement with, or current observations of this age group.

At the end of the observation period the three classroom teachers submitted their lists of students. In cases where more than one student had been identified, the adult was then asked to rank the children based on their perception of who best fit the criteria. Before contacting
home, I met briefly with eleven of the students who had been identified and presented them with a brief overview of the study, including the commitment it involved. The students were advised that their participation was completely voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Of the eleven students I met with, two declined the offer to participate. Five of the remaining nine students who expressed interest indicated that their families would be spending part of the summer away on vacation and that this might interfere with their availability. Two other students who had been identified by their classroom teachers were not present at school on this day.

The parents of the four remaining children who had expressed unqualified interest were contacted and verbal consent attained. The homes of two other students who were identified but not at the meeting with the other children were also contacted. These parents were specifically advised to first gauge their child's interest in taking part, and asked not to pressure their involvement. One of these two children had already heard from her classmates about the study and was eager to be included. The other child requested some time to consider it. After a week, I was contacted by the family and told that he too had agreed to participate. A series of information sessions were scheduled and at least one parent of each of the six participants attended. At that time, I described the study in detail before attaining signed informed consent (Appendix B).

Procedure

In choosing a research design for this study, I accepted from the outset that the process would be fluid and evolving rather than fixed and strictly adherent to a pre-determined series of steps. Although I began with a clear process in mind, I understood that with each successive meeting, my perspective would change according to this experience. New questions were
likely to emerge and replace others that no longer seemed relevant or appropriate. From a constructivist perspective, I anticipated an on-going need to assess the process through which these stories were formulating and make changes wherever necessary.

In this chapter, the procedures used to gather these narratives will be presented as they came to be in their final form. Details on the process of how the various revisions to the original design evolved will be described in more detail in the Findings Chapter, where they can be better understood in relation to the children who influenced these changes, and explored in terms of how they may inform us about the process of inviting children’s stories.

**Investigative Steps**

Before our first meeting, each of the participants was asked to think about a time at school when he or she was aware that a conflict was occurring. The students were told that they could choose an incident that may or may not have involved them directly. Several of the children asked for clarification on what I meant by “conflict.” In each case, the participant was told that it was more important that he or she decide what it meant, and that whatever choice was made would be acceptable. The decision to prompt the children in this way prior to our first meeting came after my initial discussion with the students about the study. At that time, I sensed their uneasiness about not having a clear idea of what we would be discussing during our meetings. Because the children’s ability to effectively convey their stories would likely be dependent on them feeling comfortable about the process, this approach seemed appropriate.

**First Session**

- Met individually with each participant and asked for his or her assistance in helping me better understand the kinds of conflict that commonly occur at the school. The child was
purposefully prompted in a manner designed to facilitate him or her assuming the role of 
an “expert” on this topic (Appendix C).

- Each participant was then “invited” to recount in detail a time at school when he or she 
was aware that a conflict was occurring. The conflict chosen may or may not have 
involved them directly.

- During and after the “telling” of each story, field notes were taken. These notes focused on 
three areas of reflection: content, process and premise.

- Whenever appropriate, specific, open-ended questions were asked that were intended to 
draw-out details of the child’s story and encourage him or her to consider certain factors 
that may not have been mentioned, but might be relevant to the telling of the story 
(Appendix C).

**Between First and Second Session**

- Transcribed audio tapes verbatim omitting all of my comments and questions and marking 
these places in the text with an ampersand.

**Second Session**

- Met individually with each participant and presented him or her with the unedited 
transcript.

- Each child was informed that the purpose of this second meeting was to review the 
transcript from the first session, and decide what needed to be added or taken out from the 
story. The child was asked to pay specific attention to places where the text was marked 
with an ampersand, and consider whether the information that followed was of any 
relevance to the story.
• The participant was also asked to give direction on how he or she thought the story should be structured.

**Between Second and Third Session**

• Based on these edited transcripts, the second session audio tapes, and field notes taken during and after the meetings, I wrote the first draft of each child’s narrative.

• The draft was sent as an attachment to the child’s e-mail account. Each participant was instructed to carefully read over the text, making any changes he or she thought were needed, and to e-mail me back the revised draft.

• Read interpretively through each of the six revised drafts from four different perspectives. Noted themes that emerged during these repeated readings. Referred back to earlier drafts, audio tapes and field notes whenever necessary (see Data Analysis section).

• For each narrative, I listed four or five of the most prominent themes that had emerged during my repeated readings of the text. For each theme, I recorded from the story the evidence on which it was based.

**Final Session**

• Met individually with each participant and explained that the purpose of this final meeting was to present the themes that emerged from their stories, and ask them to comment on the experience of sharing their expertise. I explained to each student that I had systematically read and re-read their story from a number of viewpoints in an attempt to better understand how they perceived conflict, and that from this process a number of themes had emerged.
• Each child was informed that he or she would be asked to rate the accuracy of each theme based on a 1 to 10 scale, with a “10” representing “100% perfectly accurate” and “1” meaning “100% absolutely false.” The participant was presented with a number scale indicating what each of the corresponding numbers between 1 and 10 represented.

• Each theme was then read to the student without any supporting evidence given. The child was asked to rate the accuracy of the statement, and then was read the evidence on which it was based. The participant was then invited to make any comments about the theme. Changes to their accuracy ratings were accepted.

• Each participant was then asked a number of questions pertaining in general to how they felt about the experience of sharing their expertise.

Following the Final Session

• All field notes, session audiotapes, narrative texts, and accuracy ratings were extensively reviewed to formulate process, premise and content reflections on how each participant responded to the narrative process.

Data Collection

As mentioned previously, the six narratives that evolved through this process were understood to be the co-construction of a dialogue carried out within in a relationship that was never entirely free of certain power dynamics. As a result, numerous factors had to be taken into consideration when deciding on what forms of data to collect. Since I accepted that power would inevitably play a role in the co-construction of these stories, it was necessary for me to establish from the outset a means of incorporating this into the data. I anticipated some difficulty being able to reflect on several different levels during the sessions. Although, it was
obviously important for me to accurately record the specific details of each child’s conflict story, I also knew that the process itself would yield a wealth of information that was particularly salient to the questions I was asking. Consequently, it was important to include data from a number of different sources.

**Audio Tapes**

After some consideration, I decided that all three meetings with the children would be audio taped and that this would provide a source to verify both content and process data. This freed up considerably the attention I needed to consistently observe and make notes on the various aspects of the process itself. Although I had not originally intended to do so, the audio tapes from all of the first sessions were transcribed verbatim after I became concerned about the extent to which I may have been influencing the process. This enabled me to take a more systematic approach with the children when it came time to edit their initial stories into a first written draft. The audio tapes also proved a great resource to refer back to whenever new questions emerged about a given child’s presentation.

**Teacher’s Comments about the Participants**

I felt that it was important to include in the findings observations from the classroom teachers based on their year long experience with the child. In some cases, specific reference is made in relation to why this child was singled out for the study. These comments provided additional information that sometimes proved significant to my understanding of how a particular child’s story unfolded.
Field Notes: Processes of Reflection

The field notes taken during and after the sessions were structured in such a way as to help me situate myself "alongside" the narrative in a manner that I hoped would prove least invasive. Essential to achieving this was the ability to dwell in a process of reflection that would diminish the influence of my perspective on the narrative's construction. Throughout the interviews, editing process, and analysis I concentrated my focus on three forms of reflection: process, content and premise as identified by Patricia Cranton in her book Transformative Learning (1994).

In order to effectively explore the two research questions set out in this study it was of critical importance that close attention be paid to the process through which the children shared their stories of conflict. Process reflection included all data related to how the children responded to the research circumstances. Careful observations were made concerning everything ranging from how the children sat in the designated "expert's chair, to their comfort level while rating the accuracy of the themes I presented them with in their final session. More often than not these process reflections took the form of questions, many of which ultimately went unanswered. Although inconclusive in nature, these process reflections represented what I felt was the highest state of awareness with respect to the dynamics at play in the various dialogues that occurred between the children and me. On at least one occasion, these observations even prompted me to consider the suitability of using this research design with this age group, and resulted in my making some changes to the procedures.

On another level, the process reflections encouraged me to search for the hidden message behind the manner in which the child was conveying his or her story. For example, one child's decision to purposively use a non-descript pronoun rather than acknowledge that she was the one who had been excluded from her peer group led to process reflections which
highlighted the sensitivities felt around this aspect of her story. In many instances, it was these reflections that directed my attention to information that I came to perceive as integral to the children's meaning-making processes.

Through \textit{premise reflection} I kept myself open to understanding conflict and its related concepts from the children's perspectives. My review of the literature on the subject had undoubtedly created a certain framework within which I formulated my own understanding of it. However, in so doing, I worried that my capacity to comprehend conflict on other levels was potentially restricted. Critical to this research was my ability to remain always aware that the way in which concepts such as conflict and resolution have come to be commonly regarded, as well as the assumptions on which they are based, may not lend themselves to the meaning a young person makes of these notions. Premise reflection forced me to ask questions that challenged certain fundamentals commonly found in conflict resolution and peer mediation programs. For example, "Is a 'win-win' integrative resolution to this particular conflict a high priority for this person? Or is the conflict's impact on this individual's social status of far greater significance?"

Through maintaining this awareness I also strove to gain a better sense of the underlying principles these young people held in relation to conflict, and where these might have originated. Many of the premise reflections led to questions about parents, peer, and school influences. They also tended to shape some of the notions I held about a particular child's personality.

The third focus for my reflections concentrated on the content of the stories themselves. For the most part, these surrounded the details related to the conflict described by the child. Among the data recorded in these \textit{content reflections} were apparent contradictions or the absence of what would seem to be relevant information. In some cases, these observations
even questioned whether the story told by the child was really the focus of the conflict since he or she provided far more information that seemed to relate to another matter. Some of the content reflections were used to guide the editing process if it seemed appropriate to present a certain observation to the child. It is important to acknowledge that sharing these reflections clearly had the potential to influence the narrative’s construction, but in some cases the child’s response provided further insight into the way he or she was making sense of the story told.

The Children’s Stories

Earlier in this chapter, I played down the notion of placing much value on the extent to which these narratives approximate certain truths or verisimilitude. Despite all measures that a researcher might diligently employ to filter out as much as humanly possible of his or her “presence” in the co-construction of the story, the end result would still never be regarded as a pure representation of one’s “true” story. Even if the researcher was totally removed from the process, the story would still at best reflect the subjective perspective of its narrator and whatever influences were involved at the time of his or her reflection. What becomes clearer when this line of thinking is followed through to its logical end is that the true value of the narrative lies well beyond any notion that it represents an accurate recounting of a past event.

The question then of what use to make of the narratives themselves needs to be addressed. I accept that as snapshots of a co-constructed “reality,” these stories inform us to some extent of how these children regard a given conflict situation and the manner in which it was handled. The challenge then is to determine which parts of each story most strongly resonate with its narrator. By establishing this, we gain a greater sense of what is truly important about this story to the child. Assuming that these represent the parts that are essential to how the child makes sense of his or her narrative, this content is most likely to
inform us on some level about their "reality" of the conflict. In order to do this effectively, a well structured process of reflexively and collaboratively exploring the text with the child must be employed. The method used in this study is presented in greater detail in the Data Analysis section.

In terms of the process followed in constructing these six narratives, it has been noted that changes to the procedures were specifically done in reaction to some of the reflections I made early on in the study that highlighted my concern that at least two of the participants had depended heavily on my questions and comments to guide them through the process of telling their story. As a result, I specifically revised the editing process to include a stage in which each child would review the transcribed text in its entirety. Purposefully, I removed all of my questions and comments, marking their place with an ampersand. The children were directed to pay particular attention to these places and decide on the value of the statement that corresponded to whatever I had said. It is important to note that this step was in no way intended to authenticate the story as exclusively theirs. Instead, I had hoped that this would represent one of several ways I could determine which parts of each narrative strongly resonated with the child based on how they responded to my request to either confirm or reject each statement's relevance.

Consequently, the content and process reflections made throughout this editing stage contributed significantly to the way in which I structured the first written draft. Once completed the text was then sent to each child via e-mail. This step was added to provide the participants one last opportunity to revise their stories by adding or removing whatever they felt was necessary. By requesting that the children do this on their own, I was hoping that the influence of my presence at this stage of the editing process would be minimized. Any changes made would yet again highlight aspects of the story that were of particular significance to the
child. As it turned out, only two of the participants made changes to these drafts and in both of these cases the clarifications reinforced observations that had already been noted in an earlier session.

Data Analysis

My approach to analyzing the data was based heavily on the premise that from a thematic standpoint, that which was of significance in terms of both process and content would emerge through a systematic and interpretive exploration of the field notes, the audio tape transcripts and the various drafts of the children’s narratives. Van Manen (1997) describes this process as one in which an attempt is made to freely see what “meaning” emerges from the data. Initially, I approached all of text in this manner, noting any information that I deemed significant. From this subjective interpretation of the data I formulated a series of tentative themes, which I then set aside until after I had completed a closer analysis of the data.

In her article, Putting the Heart back in Constructivist Research, Marla Arvay presents a model for collaboratively and interpretively reading narrative transcripts. Through this process, participant and researcher separately explore the text from four different perspectives: Reading for content, Reading for the self of the narrator, Reading for the research question, and Reading for relations of power and culture. After this is done, they come together to collaboratively and reflexively discuss these interpretations. Because this step is carried out prior to the writing of the actual story it represents a genuine recognition of the co-constructive forces at work throughout the narrative process.

Because I felt that the children in my study would likely find this process tedious and somewhat overwhelming, I chose instead to use this approach as a guide for my reading and interpreting the final drafts of the children’s stories. Because this falls well short of
representing a collaborative process, it was essential for me to incorporate a means for verifying with the children the interpretations I made based on these repeated readings. The accuracy ratings used in the final session with the children are discussed in the Rigour section.

Once I had completed reading all of the narratives from these four viewpoints, I cross-referenced these interpretations with the tentative themes that emerged from my initial, "free-minded" exploration of all the data. At this point, I subjectively separated what I deemed were interpretations connected to how the children had made meaning out of their conflict stories. I referred back to the text, and collected the evidence that supported these interpretations. These represented the "themes" that the students were presented with in their final sessions. The rest of the data was set aside until these sessions were completed.

The final analysis of the data involved cross-referencing the process, premise and content observations recorded in the field notes with the interpretations I had made based on my repeated readings of the text, as well as the teacher's comments about each student. Once this step was completed, I had a clearer picture of which observations were supported by other evidence. I once again subjectively explored all of this data from a thematic, "free-minded" perspective, in order to build a profile that reflected each participant's journey through the narrative process.

The twenty-five conflict-related themes that emerged from the analysis provided an additional source of data to examine comparatively across the six narratives. Since the participants were given the opportunity to rank the accuracy of these themes, one can assume that (power dynamics within each dialogue not withstanding) they represent opinions that are at the very minimum shared by the students. Throughout the process of collecting and analyzing the data I found myself consistently inclined to compare and contrast elements of process and content. On several occasions I noted in my reflections an observation or
statement that I connected to one or more of the other students in the study. These were explored as part of the analysis and several references are highlighted in the findings as they relate to each individual’s narrative process. In each of these cases, careful attention was given to what if any influence I may have had on the reoccurrence of a particular comment or reaction.

Similar to the approach used in analyzing both the reflections and narratives, the twenty-five conflict-related themes were separated into categories based on a thematic analysis that again involved freely “seeing” what meaning emerged from them. Once categorized, the themes were comparatively examined. Interpretations were made based on how each of the statements compared and contrasted to those taken from the other students’ narratives.

**Rigour**

An accuracy rating scale was used in the final session with the participants to provide a measure by which they could verify the themes taken from their stories. I felt that this would provide the students with a comfortable way to express any disagreement. In addition to assessing the accuracy of each individual theme, the students were also asked to give an overall assessment of how these interpretations collectively represented their beliefs about the conflicts they had described.

Two administrators at the school where the study was conducted, as well as one assigned to another school in the same district, were asked to review the narratives and their corresponding list of themes. All three were asked to share their impressions and comment in terms of whether or not this information resonated with them based on their experience of conflict at school, and if they felt these findings served any pragmatic value.
Janice - 11 years old

Teacher’s Comments about Janice

Janice is an 11-year-old grade 6 student. She is the eldest of two children, with a younger brother, Brooks, in grade 3. Academically, Janice is very capable, with a very advanced reading level. She does require close monitoring and reminders to hand in assignments, and is generally not inclined to invest much energy into academics. She seems unconcerned with grades.

Over the past year, I have been intrigued with Janice’s personality. She is an intelligent, pensive girl whose moods vary from one day to the next, but are rarely dramatic. She is generally quite quiet in class, and spends much of her time thinking or “daydreaming”. She was the first to come to mind when I was asked who I consider to have the capacity to deal with conflict. Janice is one of the most thoughtful students I have encountered, when it comes to the treatment of others. She rarely voices a preference to work with one student over another. Her demand for justice and fair treatment of every individual has been voiced numerous times this year. Janice “comes to the rescue” of others she feels are in need of assistance. One student, in particular, was defended by Janice repeatedly during the year, when his peers teased or laughed at him when he had emotional outbursts. She seems oblivious to the possible repercussions of defending an “unpopular” student, and does so with tenacity. She has actually stood up in a full classroom during lunch hour and chastised her friends and classmates for their unfair treatment of this student. At other times, especially during discussions / debates of current events issues, the perspective Janice presents is always most considerate of human rights. Additionally, Janice has been very devoted to a classmate with very special needs. She waits for him after school, and walks home with him, and often holds his hand or plays with him on the playground. She is tremendously sensitive to the needs of others.

Janice’s Story

I have this group of friends. There’s me, Karen, Trish, Mandy and Nicole. Mandy and Nicole are best friends, and me and Karen are best friends. Trish is sort of like friends with all of us. So there was this one time when someone in the group was feeling really bad about not being invited to a sleepover. There were four of us who got invited, and one who didn’t, and so she was feeling kind of upset about that. So, we sort of made this deal that we would never have a sleepover and let it get to the other people if they couldn’t be invited. Or, if one of us was having a sleepover, we would have to invite all of us if it was a more-than-two people sleep over.

Then, two or three months into this past school year, we were planning a sleepover, and they got the idea that I had said I wasn’t coming, So, Nicole told everyone: “Oh, it’s off.” And then she decided to tell everyone else but me that the sleepover was still on, because she just didn’t want to make me feel bad. But you see, I found out that they were still planning to have the sleepover, and that made me mad. She eventually ended up inviting me after because
she felt bad that I found out. So, we all said okay: "We’re going to go,” but then we find out that Mandy, Nicole’s best friend, got a phone call five minutes before she was supposed to come. Nicole had phoned her and said: “You can’t come because I can only have four people.” I didn’t realize that Mandy wasn’t coming until I got to the sleepover, so I’m sort of like: “Um.. okay, if you guys were not going to invite Mandy, I would have been fine with not coming. Mandy is your best friend, Nicole, so you should have invited her instead of me.” And then I realized that because I came, Mandy wasn’t able to come because Nicole’s Mom had said only four people not five. It should have been an open thing. They should have just told me because they thought I wasn’t coming anyhow, so it wouldn’t have mattered. And so that never got solved. It sort of took Mandy and Nicole’s friendship apart. Me and Karen are still best friends, but Nicole and Mandy aren’t exactly that great of friends anymore, Nicole is now more friends with Trish then she is with Mandy.

When it happened it felt like they didn’t want me to be there. It was like: “Oh well, I don’t want Janice to be there because she’d just mess everything up.” Me and Karen are sort of like that to Nicole sometimes because she can get really rambunctious. Nicole is really nice but she’s kind of wacko. She goes really crazy. If you’re upset at someone, she will bug you, and bug you, and bug you, until you’re mad at her too. And if you’re mad at her, she’ll just keep on bugging you like saying: “Oh, c’mon Janice, I know that you’re still my friend blahblahblahblahblah...” And it gets really, really annoying, when you could just be thinking this over and saying: “Okay this is fine, but..” She just makes things worse. If somebody gets hurt or something she can make them mad at her instead of just being hurt, and then it turns into a fight.

With the sleepover, Nicole didn’t even say: “Oh, I’m really sorry, Mandy.” She just said: “Oh, Mandy you can’t come because I’m only allowed four people.” She didn’t say: “I’m really sorry, Mandy, but I would kind of feel bad if Karen and Janice didn’t come blahblahblahblahblah, and so I thought you would understand, and so would it be okay if you didn’t come?” And I know that Mandy would understand that because she’s that kind of person. But you have to say that to her or else she’ll be like: “Okay this isn’t fair. You’re not even like saying: “I’m really sorry or anything.” You’re just being like: “Oh well, you know, you can’t do this because I’m only allowed to have four people.”

I think Mandy and Nicole’s friendship was at stake. Nicole and my friendship was also at stake, but we weren’t exactly the greatest friends when it started. I think that might have been why she didn’t invite me. Nicole just sort of gets on my nerves a lot of the time. She’s always bugging people when they are upset and they just want to be left alone. I don’t remember who I was mad at this one time or why, but I was just sort of thinking things out by myself at the end of the field, and while I was sitting there, Nicole came over and just started bugging me. And I was like: “Nicole, just go away, okay? I just want to be alone right now.” But she just kept bugging me and bugging me. So, I was sort of mad at her.

In Trish’s first year at Crestview, me and Mandy would sometimes have to drag Nicole away from her. Trish didn’t come to school a lot because her Grandpa died and he was a big part of her life. She was away for like two months worth of school the year he died. She was really close to her Grandpa, and so she was really upset about that. Sometimes, something would make her remember him and she couldn’t handle it. So, she’d be like: “I just want to be alone right now. I just want to think about my Grandpa.” Me and Mandy and a couple of other girls would have to drag Nicole away from Trish because she’d just make things worse. She was like: “Oh, why would you be so upset about your Grandpa dying? I mean I never even got to see my Grandpa blahblahblahblah...” and she’d compare herself to Trish. She’d say to us:
"Just leave me alone with Trish and everything will be fine." So, we were like: "Okay." And Trish would just end up feeling like: "Screw off, Nicole! I really don't want to talk to you." But Nicole would just keep on bugging her and bugging her. I think she tries to make things better but by doing so, she makes them worse. The same thing has happened to Mandy. She gets on Mandy’s nerves a lot too.

Even if the problem with the sleepover was resolved successfully me and Nicole would probably still not be very good friends. There have been a lot of things that have made me mad at her since, so I don’t think it would have changed my relationship with Nicole much, but her and Mandy would probably still be pretty good friends. It probably would have been different if it had been someone else in Nicole’s place. It would depend on who it was. If it was Karen, she probably would have just invited everyone, and then everyone would have been happy because we could all be there. But if for some reason she couldn’t, she’d probably be like: “Okay, I’ll invite Trish, Janice and Mandy,” because she’s not exactly that close to Nicole anyway. She probably would have waited until after school and then phoned the three of us, and not discussed it with anyone at school. Then, if one of us couldn’t come, she probably would have been like: “Okay then, I’ll invite Nicole and that’s that.” But Nicole sort of discussed it and then said: “You know what? It’s not happening,” and then took everyone else aside and said: “Okay, it is on, but so and so is not coming, so we’ll just pretend that it’s still not on.”

I just would have phoned everyone after school and said: “Do you want to come over for a sleepover?,“ because then I wouldn’t have to invite everyone. And if they found out, I think they probably would be upset, but it just depends on who. If it was Nicole, she would have understood, because I didn’t invite her to my birthday party, and we had a sleepover and she found out. She understood because it was me, and I’m not exactly the greatest friend with her anymore. But if it was Karen who was excluded, she would have felt really, really bad because she’s the most popular girl in our little group. If Trish wasn’t invited, she would have just been like: “Hm.” Then, she probably would have gone off somewhere at recess or lunch and said that she was just sad about her grandfather, but really she would have thought about us not inviting her. And if it was Mandy who wasn’t invited, then she probably would have been like: “Okay, I’m kind of mad at you guys, but I’m just going to let this slip, and next time just make sure if you don’t invite me, I don’t find out!”

I don’t know, I guess you could call it “excluding.” It sometimes happens with other kids in our class as well. Like, if we’re all sitting together at lunch on the couches or on the floor, and all of a sudden you hear this: “Oh yeah, are you going to Playland with us, Peter?” And it’s Trish, Katie and Kim who are all pretty good friends. And then it ends up being like this big thing, and they’re like: “Oh yeah, and we’re going to invite Tyler and Cole, and oh yeah, these people are coming...” And so the rest of the class would be like thinking: “Why aren’t we coming?” or they think they’re invited because these people are just saying it in front of them, so then they’re like: “Okay, I didn’t know about this.,” but then they’re told: “Oh no, you’re not invited.”

The only person who ever said to me anything like: “You know what you should have done...” was my Dad and his advice was like: “Well, then maybe Mandy should have a sleepover and exclude Nicole” or something like that because my Dad just gives stupid advice like that. He does that all the time, like: “You know what? Blahblahblahblahblah..” And it makes absolutely no sense, and I’m like: “Okay, that would just be mean. No, I’m not going to do that.” Sometimes we’re told that we need to say how we’re feeling like: “This isn’t fair.. blahblahblahblahblah.” But everyone just makes a joke of that and they don’t really care, so it
doesn't help. It might work with younger kids. When Nicole is annoying me, I just say: "You know what, Nicole? I really don't want to talk to you right now." Going somewhere that she can't find me sometimes helps. Sometimes, you end up running from her because she chases you around.

If the adults had been more involved then we probably wouldn't have ended up having the sleepover at Nicole's house. We would have had it at someone else's house, like Karen's because her Mom's like: "Oh well, you can have as many people as you want for a sleepover, it just has to be the right night, and you have to have the downstairs cleaned. So we probably would have had it somewhere where we could have all stayed instead of having to exclude one person.

I don't think our Code of Conduct helps us with this kind of conflict. Half the kids in our class don't even know it. The Duty Aides could be stricter, it just depends in those situations. Lots of times kids swear at other people and then they tell on them and the Duty Aide just says: "Okay, that's okay, just don't do it again." And then nothing happens more than that. So, I think some of the other conflicts in the school would be solved if the Duty Aides were more imposing and if they were stricter. In our conflict, I don't think they could have helped because it mostly occurred after school.

**Themes from Janice's Story**

- Kids need to be able to read social situations like how other kids are feeling and whether they are being excluded from something. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- In general, adults (either at school or home) have not given worthwhile advice on how to handle the kind of conflicts you described in your story. (Accuracy rating: 8/10)

- A lot of what determines how a conflict unfolds depends on the personalities of the people involved. (Accuracy rating: 7/10)

- If a student is planning to exclude another student from an activity, he or she should either give that person a good explanation why, or not talk about it at all in front of that person. (Accuracy rating: 9/10)

**Overall accuracy rating: Not asked**

**Janice and the Narrative Process**

One of the earliest process reflections I recorded during my first session with Janice was in reference to the ease with which she embarked on telling her story. During the few minutes it took me at the beginning of the session to explain the purpose of our meeting and prompt her "expertise," Janice maintained a very flat demeanor that conveyed very little
emotion. For this reason, it was difficult to determine with any certainty whether or not she was impacted at all by the notion of being regarded as an expert on the subject.

As soon as I asked her to begin, Janice launched into her story at a pace that initially caught me off guard. I noted from her comfort level that she did not appear at all intimidated by the circumstances. Instead, I sensed that Janice appreciated the fact that I didn’t interrupt her while she was talking. Getting out the whole story seemed to be one of several key characteristics I connected to Janice’s process of story telling. For what seemed like a rather lengthy period of time, she recounted the details of a specific conflict that involved her personally. Very little prompting was required on my part. I characterized her story-telling style to be almost a stream of consciousness, with Janice rarely pausing to reorganize her thoughts. Yet, she seemed very capable of maintaining a focus that enabled her to continue connecting to points that she clearly felt were important to include in her story.

In terms of content, I noted a subtle awkwardness around certain details related to her being excluded from a sleepover by her friends. On two occasions, she shifted curiously to the use of a non-descript pronoun rather than stating specifically who had been left out of plans made by her peer group. In her original transcript she stated that at an earlier sleepover “there was like three of us, and the other two didn’t get invited, and so they were feeling kind of upset about that.” In her final revision of the story, Janice notes that there was in fact four of them who got invited and one who was left out. It’s interesting to note that Janice chose not to reveal the identity of the excluded child. At the time I wondered whether this was because Janice did not want to acknowledge her own part in previously excluding others, or if she herself had been left out on another occasion and was sensitive to being seen as someone rejected by her friends. This issue surfaces again in another place in Janice’s story where she avoids referring to herself as the one who is being excluded: “and then (she) took everyone
else aside and said: 'Okay, it is on, but so and so is not coming, so we’ll just pretend that it’s still not on.” The fact that Janice makes this subtle omission in spite of the fact that she had already acknowledged being excluded from the sleepover is an indication of how sensitive an issue this was for her.

From the content reflections, I clearly sensed that Janice continued to have strong feelings related to this incident, and one individual in particular. As I reflected back to her some of the comments she had made about Nicole, particularly in relation to her always “bugging” others, I wondered whether it was this relationship that represented the real conflict, and whether the event Janice described was merely a symptom. On more than one occasion, Janice stated in no uncertain terms that she and Nicole were not really friends. Nevertheless, it seemed apparent that they continued to share the same peer group and likely found themselves in each other’s company on frequent occasions.

I struggled to understand why it was that Janice seemed reluctant to shift the focus of her conflict to this relationship that clearly dominated her story. This led me to wonder whether children might be more likely to regard conflict in terms of specific events, and not recognize an ongoing personality clash as a conflict in and of itself. Rather than pointing this out to Janice, I noted it instead as a premise reflection, and continued to look out for evidence to support it. Throughout the rest of my meetings with Janice, as well as all of the other participants, the notion of conflict being understood as a clash of personality types was never clearly identified, despite the fact that several students made reference to how an individual’s personality might factor in to the way in which a conflict unfolds.

One noticeable feature of Janice’s story-telling process was the tone she often employed when referring to comments made by other people, including advice given by adults on how children should handle conflict situations. On some occasions, Janice seemed intent on
diminishing the significance of what other people had said by replacing their words with “blahblahblahblahblah.” At other times, she adopted what I perceived as a tone of contempt. She repeatedly chose to include in her story reference to her father giving “stupid advice.” I felt it necessary to check in with Janice about this in our final meeting. She assured me that this comment would in no way come as a surprise to her father since they frequently had discussions of this nature. As a premise reflection, I questioned whether Janice’s statement may have in some way been influenced by my initial prompt describing her as the “expert” on conflict, and acknowledging that teachers and parents have only a marginal understanding of these dynamics among young people. Later when I explored this further in my analysis of the data, I noted the considerable range in value that the various participants’ assigned to their parent’s advice on conflict.

In the third and final meeting I had with Janice we discussed some of the themes that had emerged from her narrative. Throughout our first two sessions, Janice had appeared quite comfortable correcting me when she felt I had misunderstood what she was saying. The same held true when it came time for her to rate the accuracy of the themes taken from her story. On presenting her with the second theme, Janice had initially thought I said that adults had given her worthwhile advice to deal with conflict situations. Immediately, she voiced strong disagreement, leading me to believe that this particular participant was well capable of giving me a “clean read” on whether or not she agreed with the presented themes.

After reading Janice’s story several times, it became evident that her overall relationship with one of the girls in her peer group was as much a conflict as was the specific sleepover incident she cited. Consequently, the themes that emerged from her text seemed consistently influenced by her strong feelings about this particular individual’s personality. So much so, that Janice at times appeared to have a double-standard. In one instance, she
suggested that the conflict would have been best handled by everyone simply being open about their feelings and the situation. At another time, she recommends making sure someone doesn’t find out if they are being excluded from something. In both of these cases, the underlying motivation seemed to be to illustrate Nicole’s shortcomings.

Yet, when I presented Janice with a theme that connected individual personalities to the way in which conflicts unfold she seemed somewhat under impressed, rating it only as a simply “agree” (7). I thought this quite unusual since Janice had made a point of describing in detail how each of her other friends would have handled this incident differently. What she did seem to think was of particular importance was the need for young people to be able to read social situations in order to be aware of how others might feel when they are being excluded (10).

More so than any of the other participants, Janice was quite forthcoming about her opinions on the various themes. In addition to agreeing strongly with the fact that adults don’t give worthwhile advice on how to handle conflict of this nature, Janice went on to describe how ineffective it was when parents or teachers require young people to apologize for something without checking in first to see whether or not they really mean it. Also interesting was the fact that Janice believed the whole process of telling her story had enabled her to make much more sense of it. She believed this to be of greater value than simply being told by an adult how a conflict could have been better handled after the fact when it no longer mattered. Janice was also quite candid about taking no pride whatsoever in the fact that her teacher had identified her as someone who had an above average capacity to solve conflict, stating matter-of-factly: “to kids skateboarding is important, problem solving is not.”
Tammy - 11 years old

Teacher’s Comments about Tammy

Tammy is very skilled in group conflict situations. She’ll suggest possible solutions, negotiate changes, or even subdue conflict between classmates. She has tried to navigate around problems by physically removing herself from certain situations. She is also willing to completely change a course of action as a possible solution. I have also seen her use a third party to help resolve conflict. Tammy is a very bright girl and I believe she should be able to reflect with a good deal of insight from various perspectives of the conflict. She is empathetic and not egocentric, and can therefore be fairly objective when resolving conflict. Tammy’s outlook is very positive but she is no pushover and will stand up to others to defend herself or her beliefs, even if there is no conflict involved. But I believe her sense of democracy and fairness will win over any kind of aggressive tactics.

Tammy’s Story

Near the end of the school year two of my friends, Corey and Steven, were talking about getting into a physical fight. We were on the playground at the basketball court, and there were a lot of Grade Sixes standing around. I was right there. Corey said something mean to Steven. It was like a put-down. I think he said: “Well, at least I have friends!” or something like that. I’m not sure what it was that made him say it. I think something that Steven did made him embarrassed. So, he said something to hurt him. And Steven was really insulted. He was like: “I do have friends!” Then Corey said: “Like who?” And so Steven started to name them. Some of the people who were there were telling them: “It’s okay guys, break it up.” But they didn’t really listen. They were like: “Go away!” Steven is a really good friend of mine. He’s really nice. Corey’s just my buddy. We’re not as close. He’s really shy.

So, later I was talking to Steven over the internet on MSN Messenger, and he’s like: “I’m going to beat-up Corey tomorrow.” And I was like: “No, you’re not. Why would you do that?” And then he said about what had happened on the basketball court. He didn’t really say much other than that. I really tried to convince him not to fight because I knew they were both going to get in trouble or get hurt. Then, Steven said something about wanting all of his best friends to talk him out of it, and then he wouldn’t.

No offense to Steven, but he’s sort of like that. Like, whenever you invite him somewhere, he’ll say: “Well, you don’t really want me to come.” And I’ll be like: “Well, why am I inviting you?” He really changes sometimes. I don’t know, he just gets into moods and he’s totally different. He’s always saying: “I don’t have enough friends,” and then when we’re all being really nice to him, he’s like: “I don’t want all these friends. I have too many friends!”

So I asked Steven how many people he wanted to talk him out of it. And then he listed all the people, so I was like: “Okay, I’ll do that for you.” Then Steven signed off, and Corey signed on. So, I started to talk to Corey about it, and he said: “I could beat-up Steven easily, you know.” And I was like: “Whoa! Don’t do that!” I think he was just trying to act tough. I don’t think he was scared about getting into trouble, but I think he might have been a bit scared about getting hurt.

The next day before school, we were in the hallway and I tried to get the people Steven wanted to talk him out of it, but one of them was away. So, I told Steven: “I’ll get the rest of them. I just can’t get him for you.” But he was like: “Well, that’s not all of them.” I think he
just didn’t want to make it easy, so I said: “Steven! Why do I have to get all your friends! Just don’t fight!” I think he really took what I said seriously, because he didn’t end up fighting. So then, I went to Corey and told him, and he was just like all laid back. He was like: “Oh, whatever.” There were other people there then so I think he was trying to act tough. I think it was solved because they didn’t fight, but it could have been better. I think they’re still mad at each other about it. Well, at least I know they’re not friends. I don’t think Corey ever apologized to Steven.

I guess this is about put-downs, and how it can almost lead to a fight. I’m not quite sure why cause a put-down is not like the biggest thing to fight about. I think this sort of thing happens at our school, but not that much. I know this past year it happened with the Grade Sevens. I’m not sure if it was Steven or Corey’s idea for the fight, but they didn’t really have to say that. They could have just left it where it was. I think that boys tend to want to fight physically more than girls. I think it mattered that there were other Grade Sixes there when it started, because if they weren’t there, nobody would have heard what they said and then told them not to fight. Probably, Steven and Corey would have had their fight.

I don’t really get into fights like that with my friends, but if that did happen I would probably say something but it wouldn’t be mean. I don’t think I would ever get into a physical fight with them. I would just leave them alone and like walk away to other people or something. When I was younger, I was always told like: “Tell an adult about that sort of thing,” and I guess I might tell someone I trust, but I don’t know, because the teachers would probably say something like: “Well, stay away from them.” I’ve noticed that if people insult you, and you don’t make it look like it hurts you, they won’t do it again. If you ignore them, they’ll go away. I was told that by my Mom when I was little, but now I really notice it. But I guess it depends on the person who did the insult, because some people would come back and insult you again. But others would be like: “Oh, she didn’t care. Leave it.”

I don’t think the Code of Conduct at our school has any influence on these kind of conflicts. I don’t think that Steven and Corey thought about it at all when they were calling each other names. I think they know the Code of Conduct, but I don’t think they paid any attention to it. Maybe if they tell us what it is and what it means, and they put up signs showing it, then kids would pay more attention to it. When they say it, they need to make it more interesting, and more fun to know it. I’m not sure how. But the way it is presented to us, is like: “This is it. Pay attention to it.”

Themes from Tammy’s Story

- Conflict can arise when students insult each other with put-downs. This can even lead to the possibility of a physical fight occurring, especially among boys who may try to act tough around their peers. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- A student’s personality can very much affect the way in which a conflict is handled. (Accuracy rating: 9/10)

- By getting involved, other students can stop a conflict from escalating to the point of a physical fight occurring. (Accuracy rating: 9/10) This can be done without involving adults. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)
• Ignoring a put-down or insult is one of the best ways to prevent a conflict from occurring because it shows the other person that you don’t really care, and so he or she will likely go away and just leave it. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

Overall accuracy rating: 10/10

Tammy and the Narrative Process

From the outset, it appeared that encouraging Tammy to assume the role of “expert” on the subject of conflict had little or no influence on the power dynamics in our relationship. I noted in the process reflections that I made early on in our first meeting that it seemed quite important to Tammy that she had been chosen for the study, and that she wanted to help out in any way possible. While making our way to the school library for our first session, Tammy asked a number of questions that led me to believe that she wanted to get things “right.” In this regard, I sensed from the very beginning that my role as the adult in our relationship would prove influential throughout our dialogue.

After prompting her to consider herself as the expert on this subject, I invited Tammy to recount with as much detail as possible a time when she was aware that a conflict was occurring. This was followed by a prolonged and awkward silence. At first, I wondered whether Tammy had actually heard anything I said. I noted that she appeared to still be processing this experience including the designated expert’s chair in which she now sat. I considered the possibility that the whole process of being identified by her teacher as someone successful at managing conflict, compounded with me referring to her as an “expert” on the subject may have in fact caused her enough anxiety to paralyze her ability to participate. Clearly, this was not at all what I had intended or expected to occur. At the time, I found myself frantically rethinking the entire rationale of what I had hoped to achieve in the study.
This fostered within me an anxiety that probably resembled what Tammy was experiencing at the very same moment.

Fortunately, an additional prompt by me set things into motion. Tammy told her story, which she managed to convey in its entirety in under one minute. She provided very few specific details about the incident, choosing instead to race through it as one might expect of a young person eager to get to the “good” part. Most of the emphasis was placed on the fact that a conflict had not escalated to the point of a physical fight because Tammy and her friends had gotten involved and discouraged it. In my process reflections I noted my own discomfort with the fact that Tammy’s story had been so brief. With almost an hour remaining in my scheduled interview time, I found myself wondering whether I had made a wise choice in deciding to use a narrative research design with this age group.

Conversely, Tammy seemed quite relieved that her part was finished, and not bothered in the least by the fact that her story had been so brief. She smiled and swung her legs playfully in the designated “expert’s” chair while I shifted somewhat uncomfortably on my own wooden one. When I reflected on these developments after our session, I realized with considerable regret that I had essentially “loaded” Tammy’s process with my own assumptions of length and detail, and notions of what a narrative should look like and the time it should take to explore one’s story.

Unfortunately, this realization did not come until after our meeting while I was reflecting back on the process. It occurred to me that I had stretched out our session by refocusing Tammy’s attention to certain aspects of her story and requesting more detail. Obviously, I had found it difficult to accept the way she had told her story. It was short and lacked specifics. But from Tammy’s perspective, she had given me all she thought I needed to know. To her the significance lay not in the details, but in the simple fact that she and her
friends had managed to talk the boys out of a physical fight. I had desperately missed this point!

From these reflections, I gained considerable insight about my own capacity to exert power on the relationship. I realized that after Tammy had told her story our session had taken on the air of an interview, and I now found myself worrying about the extent to which my presence had dominated this space. This led me to revise the original procedure I had proposed. Instead of using the second session to present a first draft of the story for review, I wanted Tammy and the other participants to have an opportunity to "edit" out any information that had been prompted by my questions, and decide on its relevance to their stories. Initially, I had intended to use the session audio tapes only as a vehicle for corroborating the notes I took during my meetings which were to serve as the primary source on which I would draft each narrative.

Based on the reflections I recorded after my session with Tammy, I reconsidered this approach and decided instead to transcribe verbatim what she had said in our first meeting. During our second session, I presented her with a transcript that contained only her words. Omitted were all of my questions and comments, and in their place the text was marked with an ampersand to indicate the omission. Before editing the text, I made her aware of my concern that my questions and comments may have shaped her story too much and that she needed to consider which things were important to include. I directed her to look carefully over the transcript and give added consideration to places where the text was marked with an ampersand and determine whether the information that followed belonged in her story. I also invited Tammy to give some thought to how the story should be drafted, including what parts should come in which order.
As we began this process, I sensed Tammy’s initial reluctance to freely express her opinions on what parts needed editing. I explained to her that she should feel entirely comfortable ordering me to either keep or take out whatever she saw fit. Sensing her hesitation, I offered to read each line of the text, checking in with her on each statement to confirm whether or not it should be included in the first draft. Tammy’s responses were at first quite passive, leading me to wonder whether my “presence” continued to dominate the process. I explained to her that a simple “I guess so” wouldn’t suffice because ultimately it was her decisions that would determine what was included in the story.

I noted in my reflections a point at which it seemed that Tammy shifted to embrace a more active role in this process. This was significant since it alerted me to the fact that the children might need time to get comfortable with “calling the shots,” and that the initial prompt at the beginning of the session may not prove enough to facilitate a shift from their more common experience of having an adult dominate a shared task. The fact that Tammy never appeared to entirely assume control of this process was something that I connected in part to the dynamics of our first meeting. Even though as we progressed through the text she appeared to become increasingly more comfortable with telling me to either “keep it” or “take it out,” I often had the sense that her decisions were based in part on the prompts I gave to help move her beyond her apparent reluctance. I noted on several occasions when Tammy turned to me for my input and seemed to “shut-down” when it was not forthcoming. The audio tape reveals long pauses where it seems evident that Tammy has the expectation that ultimately I should decide. For this reason, I felt it necessary to again revise the research method to include yet another opportunity for Tammy and the other participants to revise their stories with me entirely removed from the process. In this respect Tammy’s experience with the narrative process had the greatest impact on the study itself. I gained considerable insight into how the
relationship between adult and child might influence the degree to which the latter accepts responsibility for directing the process, particularly in the earlier stages when the foundation of that process is being established.

When in our final session, Tammy was presented with the themes that emerged from her narrative, she responded by rating all of them as interpretations that she either agreed very strongly with (9/10) or that she believed were 100% perfectly accurate (10/10). Although I had incorporated this rating scale to make it easier for students to disagree with my impressions, I felt an added sense of caution in Tammy's case because of the noted influence of power throughout our sessions together. Nevertheless, I noted that she responded to these themes in a manner that I felt indicated a genuine affirmation.

Based on the content of her narrative it appeared that put-downs, particularly when said in front of a peer group, have the potential to escalate a conflict even to the point of a physical fight. When I explored this further with Tammy, she indicated that this was more likely to occur among boys because of the added importance for them to be seen as tough around their friends. Given this context, it helps to explain why Tammy feels strongly that conflicts such as these are best mediated by peers, presumably because this takes away some of the potential for those involved to lose face if they voluntarily back-down or are instructed to do so by an adult.

Tammy's story also conveyed a strong sense that the personalities of the people involved can influence the way in which events unfold. She spoke at times in an almost omniscient tone about Steven, giving me a sense that I would only be able to marginally understand what it was that she was talking about. Tammy's insight into how situations like this are best resolved seemed to come from a blend of experience and authority. She credited her mother for having taught her to ignore insults and put-downs, but added that she herself
had come to realize that this works because it greatly diminishes any sense of power the other person may be seeking to acquire.

Samantha – 11 years old

Teacher’s Comments about Samantha

Samantha is unlike Tammy in many ways which should make for an interesting comparison. She is a very down-to-earth young lady and has a good sense of right and wrong. Samantha is sensitive all 'round and will mostly deal with conflict by avoiding any head-on confrontations. She is the epitome of 'nice' (not terribly opinionated) and I wonder if she would hold her ground if threatened. However, in group situations she does take the role of the pacifier and she's a “let's all get along shall we?” kind of person. Samantha will often go to a third party (i.e. me) to help with conflict, or try to get others to side with her until a solution is reached. In this respect, she is not terribly effective at solving problems using a direct approach, but is more effective in a classically passive sense.

Samantha’s Story

It was the middle of the school year. It was lunch hour and most of the kids had gone outside. Me and a couple of friends: Kelly, Christina, and Paula were hanging out in the classroom. Christina gave me a toy that was inside the Kinder Surprise she had just eaten. I really wanted to play with it, so I did. But my other friend, Kelly, well the toy was kind of bugging her, because I was playing with it so much. The toy had wheels so we were making a hill to roll it down, and I think Kelly may have even liked it, but she felt left out. I was paying so much attention to it, she got mad at me and flicked it away. I thought it got lost, and I felt really angry at Kelly. Paula and I searched around for it and found it behind the heater. I felt relieved, but gave it to Paula to hide because I wanted to show Kelly that she shouldn’t get all mad at me for playing with the toy, and that it hurt my feelings that she threw it away. I pretended that it was lost and blamed her for flicking it. I think she kind of felt bad for a little while. But then Paula told Christina that she had it, and she told Kelly. When Kelly realized that we had the toy, she got really, really mad at me because I was playing her. I could tell because she had this look in her eye. She went and talked to my other friends, and wouldn’t speak to me for the rest of the lunch hour. My friends tried to calm her down, but she was still mad at me for doing this to her. I felt kind of bad that I did it, so I had to try to get her to talk to me, so I could tell her why I did it. I talked to her for a little while and it actually made her less mad at me. We kind of started to even things out by making agreements like I wouldn’t do stuff like that, if she didn’t annoy me by throwing my toys away.

When this happened there wasn’t that many people around. If more people had have been there, it might have changed things a bit. Kelly would have still been mad at me, but she would have probably waited until it was just me and her, cause it’s kind of embarrassing when you get mad at a person in front of some other people. So, you want to keep it as a quiet fight. If other students find out, it spreads around that you are mad at each other, and it can spread to the teacher, which would mean that we’d just be getting the other person in trouble.
If our teacher had gotten involved, she probably would have told Kelly that she shouldn’t have done that. The teacher might have helped us look for it, and then sat me or Kelly down and told us to treat each other how we wanted to be treated. But then it probably wouldn’t have got resolved in the right way. We would have still been angry with each other, because friends don’t like to get each other in trouble. You always have to stand by your friends to make sure they don’t get in trouble, or else that would just make them more upset at you, and only make it worse.

Adults usually tell us: “Don’t touch other people’s stuff. Like, respect other people’s belongings and treat people how you want to be treated.” But kids still try to get revenge, if they don’t like it when other people do stuff. They try to show them in a weird way what they’ve done. I tried to show Kelly that I didn’t like it when she didn’t respect my belongings. I think that a lot of people have problems like that because sometimes people don’t like sharing. At school they try to teach you stuff like use “I” messages or something like that. Where, like you look people in the eye and tell them how you feel. I’ve never actually used that, but my friend Paula has seen people get into fights at Ridgewood, and that’s what they’re told, to say the “I” message. If I had used an “I” message with Kelly, like: “I don’t like it that you flicked it away. It was my personal belongings. Next time, could you please not do this?,” it probably would have cleared things up faster, cause I think she really would have understood how I felt right when she flicked it. Things would have probably been cleared up and we’d both have looked for it together. She might have understood better, and then I might not have told her that I didn’t find it. So, it probably would have prevented things from happening the way they did.

The situation might have been different if it were boys, because they think differently than girls do. They probably wouldn’t have gotten back at each other, like how I did to Kelly. I don’t know how they would have resolved it. They’d probably have just gotten angry at each other and then left it there, and moved on. It also depends on whose involved. Like, say it was Paula instead of Kelly. She’d probably help me look for it and then we’d probably just leave it at that, like we’d still be friends and stuff. It probably would have been different altogether cause I don’t think Paula would have flicked it away in the first place. I don't know it’s hard to explain it. There’s something different about Kelly. I’m not sure what it is about her personality that makes me want to get revenge, I just do. It’s like we have this little game, I want to get revenge on her, and she wants to get revenge on me. It’s like how everybody always has an enemy. She’s not my enemy, I just always want to get revenge on her. It’s like this little thing that we have.

Our school’s Code of Conduct doesn’t really work with conflicts like this one, because when you’re in the middle of a fight, you don't really stop and think in your memory: “Oh, what should I do?” Basically, you just do stuff on your own. I probably didn’t even think of the Code of Conduct at that moment. All I was paying attention to was that Kelly flicked away the toy, and that now she was mad at me. I guess if I had stopped and thought about it, I could have used it. Like when I get mad at my Mom, she kind of calms me down and tells me to think about it. I’m not sure what the school could do, maybe put up posters, and that way if students looked around then they might see it and think: “Oh, I should do that.” The posters could have the Code of Conduct printed in big letters, or maybe also tell you what you should do in different situations, like remind you to say an “I” message, or something like that. Maybe for each of the four different rules in the Code of Contact, the posters could tell you what to do in that specific situation.
Themes from Samantha’s Story

- Conflicts frequently occur when students do not show respect for each other’s belongings. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- Students try to get revenge on other kids as a way of showing them that they didn’t like something the other person did. This usually does not solve the conflict because the other person only ends up getting angry. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- A student’s personality can influence the way in which a conflict is handled. (Accuracy rating: 9/10)

- Some students prefer to fight out their conflict quietly because it can be embarrassing to fight in front of a group of people, (Accuracy rating: 9/10) and also because students don’t want the teacher to get involved and possibly get their friend in trouble. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- The School Code of Conduct isn’t helpful if a student is caught up in the emotion of a conflict. Often the person is only thinking about reacting based on how they’re feeling. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

Overall accuracy rating: 9/10

Samantha and the Narrative Process

While editing her transcript during our second meeting, I noted a request by Samantha that we not strip from the text every instance that she used the word “like” while telling her story. In her opinion, it was important that we include some of these if we were trying to show that this was the way a young person saw things. In my process reflections I noted this as a clear example of a student being aware of the “voice” I was trying to capture through these narratives. I found the editing process from this point onward quite enjoyable because I felt that Samantha could be trusted to guard her ownership of the text. I wondered at the time if this request was in any way connected to her assuming the role of the expert. On several occasions during our sessions, I sensed that Samantha was making an effort to get across to me how it really is “out there” in a young person’s world at school. The strongest way this came
across was through the use of her own language rather than the problem-solving terminology that many students have become familiar with through their school experience. In this respect, I found myself feeling oddly privileged by Samantha’s willingness to share her perspective, a sense that reassured me that at least in this instance we were on the right track. It was interesting to note that in our final session together, Samantha expressed some uncertainty about whether she would have been able to share her story in this way with a teacher. When I reflected on this later it seemed to me that Samantha’s presentation had been clearly influenced by the fact that I had regarded her from the outset as the “expert” on this subject.

It appeared to me that Samantha was quite comfortable being regarded as such. She willingly acknowledged her own capacity to mediate conflict, and seemed to take a certain pride in this fact. She described herself as being strong-minded and someone with a lot of experience dealing with conflict, which she attributed to the fact that she had two older brothers. The influence of siblings on a young person’s capacity to successfully manage conflict was a factor that I had not until this point given much consideration. When I later explored this variable while analyzing the data from all of the participants, there appeared to be considerable variance in terms of how much significance was attributed to it.

I thought it interesting that Samantha’s teacher described her as being down-to-earth, something I also noted in my interactions with her. Additionally, it was suggested that she would be more inclined to go about solving problems in an indirect fashion rather than confronting them head-on. Samantha herself acknowledged this in specific reference to the conflict she chose to discuss. Employing her friends to act as mediators between her and Kelly seemed to be the preferred approach rather than talking openly about her feelings to the other person. From this I sensed some fragility in Samantha’s interpersonal profile, and wondered where she might locate herself in terms of the social hierarchy within her class.
The whole process of reviewing with Samantha the themes I had extracted from her story turned out to be quite brief. By this point in the study, I had grown considerably more comfortable with the fact that children at this age level are not inclined to search for comments to make when they feel that nothing more need be said. I felt quite reassured by Samantha's responses that the themes taken from her narrative accurately represented her opinions regarding the conflict she had described. In fact, as she listened to each of them I sensed a certain surprise from her that she had managed to get across exactly how she felt about what had happened between her and Kelly on this particular occasion.

Of the themes taken from the content of Samantha's narrative, I found the notion of "revenge" and the role it plays in how students communicate to each other to be quite fascinating. Samantha was the only person I met, who acknowledged making an unwise choice in the way she handled the particular conflict she described. This was in relation to an action that she described as being motivated by a desire to "teach someone a lesson," which she later referred to as getting revenge. Samantha showed considerable insight by admitting that such an approach seldom yields the desired outcome. Rather then resolving the conflict in question, "teaching someone a lesson" has the potential to anger the other person further escalating the situation. I thought it quite remarkable that Samantha made little or no effort to defend her choice of actions with Kelly, instead acknowledging that "playing" her as she did only served to create more tension between them. The question of a young person's capacity to accept their own wrong-doing in a conflict situation increasingly became a factor that I found myself aware of while listening to the students' narratives. Connecting this to a young person's ability to mediate their own conflicts successfully is in my opinion, a worthwhile area for further consideration.
Additionally, Samantha’s story shed some additional light on the issue of personality which up to this point had been confirmed with some qualification by one student and only modestly accepted by another. In Sarah’s opinion, both her and Kelly’s personalities had played a significant role in how their conflict had unfolded, however she was reluctant to regard their relationship itself as the focus of the conflict. I found it interesting to note that as in the case with one of the other participants, Samantha felt it important to go through a list of her friends explaining how the others might have handled this situation differently.

In terms of the premise reflections I made while listening to Samantha it was her strong opposition to enlisting the help of an adult to solve a conflict with a friend that seemed to represent an important fundamental for her. Samantha was quite adamant about the fact that she felt this was simply a bad idea. To her, the potential of getting a friend in trouble far outweighed any of the benefits that might result from having a teacher help sort out the problem. She was also of the opinion that conflicts were best kept low-key because she found it quite embarrassing to fight with a friend in front of others.

My reason for regarding this as a premise related to the fact that Samantha placed far greater significance on the notion of protecting a friend from getting in trouble than she did on finding a successful resolution to a conflict. It seemed critical that I accept and understand this as Samantha’s way of being in her world, and that under emphasizing this point would risk misrepresenting the way she perceived conflict and the importance of its successful resolution. The issue of whether or not to involve adults will again surface when we look at Nicola’s and Elena’s stories.

Samantha’s narrative journey proved quite integral to the study. It was significant that she had followed Tammy in the order of participants since I had come away from those sessions with considerable reservations about the extent to which my influence on the narrative
dialogue might interfere with my ability to gain a sense of what conflict looked like through
the lens of a child. For reasons that I partly attributed to the manner in which Samantha
embraced her own expertise, the power dynamics within our relationship seemed significantly
less influential. When I considered the teachers’ comments about both of these children it was
interesting to note, that Tammy was regarded as the stronger of the two in terms of standing up
for herself in situations with her peers. I wondered if the same could be said of how these
children interacted with adults. In my experience with both of them, I perceived Tammy as
being far more inclined to adopt the role of “pleaser,” intent on being seen as helpful.
Samantha, however, appeared energized by the notion of being afforded the opportunity to get
across to an adult how things really play out in her world. This raised a number of questions
related to which personal characteristics might best serve a child who accepts the challenge of
mediating conflict situations between peers. This will be explored in further depth in the next
chapter.

Elena – 11 years old

Teacher’s Comments about Elena

   Elena, an eleven year-old, sixth grade student, is the younger of two children in her
family. Her elder brother, Dylan, is in high school. Academically, Elena is an average
student who is conscientious about her schoolwork, and independently gives her best effort at
all times.

   Elena is a student I believe has the capacity to deal with conflict, due, in my opinion, to
her general attitude. Elena’s approach to people and situations is very relaxed and positive.
She tends to see “The cup as half full”. Elena is a popular girl, who is often a member of a
group of girl friends in conflict. When one isn’t talking to another, or somebody is angry or
hurt, she never seems to get upset. She just talks it out if necessary, taking the approach of
“don’t worry about it”. It is my perception that Elena just doesn’t take things personally. She
looks for the best in others, and expends little energy reacting to negativity. When discussing
issues, Elena’s input gives the impression that she is less opinionated than many of her peers –
she prefers to remain neutral, but not in an attempt to win friends or please others – she just
seems to be able to see and accept both sides of an argument.
Elena’s Story

It was a couple of months into last year when I was in Grade Six. There was a whole bunch of students from my class playing RedAss by the big three stairs. It's a game where you throw the ball against the wall and have to catch it. If you miss you get a letter, and when you spell that word you're out. While I was watching the game, the Grade Sevens came and wanted to play there. But my friends didn’t want to leave because they were in the middle of a game. So, one of the Grade Sevens, Tyler, kept taking their ball and throwing it across the yard into the teacher’s parking lot. Eventually, the Grade Sevens managed to kick my friends off, and started to play their own game. Then Peter, one of the boys in Grade Six, went up and took the ball from Tyler and threw it away. Tyler reacted by punching Peter. Then a couple of Peter’s friends went and told the Duty Aide who came over and sent both of them to the Principal’s Office.

I was angry at the Grade Seven’s for taking over, and mad at Tyler for punching Peter cause there was no reason for doing that. Maybe Tyler just wanted to look cool in front of all his friends. If it was a smaller group, he wouldn’t take the chance of getting in trouble for it. I think Peter shouldn’t have gone and taken the ball and thrown it. At that point, he should have gone and told the Duty Aide, because then Tyler wouldn’t have punched him. But the Grade Sevens shouldn’t have kicked the Grade Sixes off in the first place.

I don’t really think this had anything to do with the game. It’s more about the Grade Sevens trying to overrule the Grade Sixes. Usually, if you’re in Grade Six, the Grade Sevens think they can push you off stuff. It’s mostly something that occurs outside on the playground, with basketball and RedAss, and stuff like that. I know a lot of people in Grade Six who played basketball last year. They would be playing, and the Grade Sevens would just come over and they’d be like: “Get off our court!” And really it’s not their court. But they’d just kick them off. I remember when I was playing basketball and that’s what happened. We were just having a game, and they’re like: “Oh, get off our court!” and we said: “No, we’re in the middle of a game.” But the Grade Sevens would just start playing, so we had to leave. I was kind of upset cause we just wanted to finish the game, and my team was actually winning. But they wouldn’t get off. I remember feeling angry and disappointed because I really wanted to figure out who would win.

The worst thing that can happen with this sort of thing is that it can start a physical fight. Also, if it keeps going on, then the Grade Sixes will start doing the same thing when they’re in Grade Seven. So, next year they’ll be like: “Oh, now we’re in Grade Seven, we can take over the Grade Sixes!” But I know how that feels to get kicked off, so I wouldn’t do it to other people.

Usually we’re told by the teachers or our parents that what we should do in this situation is go and tell an adult or something. But the Duty Aides really don’t do much. They’ll just go up to the Grade Sevens and say: “Don’t do it again!” But the Grade Sevens don’t listen and will keep doing what they were told not to do. Sometimes, if it’s a really bad case they’ll send someone to the principal’s office. That’s pretty much all they do. It doesn’t really help. If the problem was solved the Grade Seven’s wouldn’t be taking over the Grade Sixes anymore, and then probably next year it wouldn’t happen either.

I think Peter shouldn’t have taken the ball and thrown it. Instead, he should have gone and told a Duty Aide, and if she didn’t do anything about it, he could have gone inside and told one of the teachers. Maybe the teacher would’ve come outside and talked to Tyler, asking him why he even thought about punching Peter, and asked him why he took their ball in the first
place. The teacher would probably tell Tyler to handle it better next time or maybe send him to the principal’s office, and ask the Grade Sevens to get off the court so the Grade Sixes could finish their game. But that wouldn’t solve the problem either, because the rest of the Grade Sevens wouldn’t get sent to the office. You can’t send them all. So they’d probably do it next time.

I don’t know really what would solve that. Maybe they should have the Grade Sevens doing more things with the Grade Sixes, so it makes things less separate between them. If I were the teacher, I’d probably ask them to get off the court because the Grade Sixes were playing. Then, after recess I’d talk to all of the Grade Sevens. I’d go into their class and tell them: “You can’t take over the Grade Sixes just cause you’re older, and the top of the school!” Hopefully that would work.

If it were just the Grade Seven girls, I don’t think they would have punched someone. I don’t think the Grade Seven girls would do any violence, but maybe they’d talk about the other person behind their back. They probably wouldn’t have taken over in the first place, cause it’s mostly the guys who are doing it. The Grade Seven girls don’t really take over anything. They’ll either ask to play with us, or after the game, ask us if we can get off. But the Grade Seven guys would just come down and kick us off.

I don’t think a lot of people follow the school’s Code of Conduct. I think they kind of just ignore it. If somebody was showing respect for others, I don’t think respect would be punching another person. I don’t think students realize why we have it. I think they just say: “It’s just some words that the Principal stuck up on a piece of paper, and said: “That’s the Code of Conduct!”” There are some people who do follow the Code of Conduct but they wouldn’t punch anyone in the first place anyway. And then there are people who know that there’s a Code, but they go ahead and break it anyway. Last year, the Grade Sevens did some skits about the Code of Conduct in front of the whole school. I think that should be done every year, and the Grade Sevens should work more with the Grade Sixes and Grade Fives so they’re not so separated. Next year, when I’m in Grade Seven, I wouldn’t mind doing something like that, but not all the time or it would get annoying because there would be no time left to do things with students just from your own grade.

Themes from Elena’s Story

- On the playground, conflict often occurs as a result of Grade 7s (particularly, the boys) trying to exert power over kids in other grades. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- In these situations, students should not reciprocate or try to get revenge because it will probably only make the conflict worse, perhaps even leading to a physical fight. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- Teachers could play a role in helping resolve these kinds of conflicts by either being there to stop Grade Sevens from pushing others around (Accuracy rating: 9/10), asking students to explain their actions when they are not being respectful of others (Accuracy rating: 7/10), or talking to the Grade Sevens as a whole group to tell them that this behaviour is unacceptable. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)
• This problem might be prevented if Grade Sevens were more involved in activities that included students from other Grades, so that they wouldn’t consider themselves so separate. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

Overall accuracy rating: 9 or 10/10

Elena and the Narrative Process

There were several aspects of Elena’s presentation throughout our sessions that left me with a lasting impression. First and foremost was her apparent capacity to reflect back on her story with a considerable degree of objectivity. In the process reflections that I recorded during our three meetings I noted on several occasions that Elena made a point of considering how things may have appeared on both sides of the conflict. Despite the fact that the story she described involved a clear aggressor, Elena twice pointed out that the victim’s response was also unacceptable and may have been partially responsible for escalating the conflict to a physical altercation. In this regard, I grew to appreciate Elena’s broader “mindfulness” which I would best describe as an ability to see the larger picture, recognizing the interests of opposing forces and factoring in certain personalities.

From an adult perspective, these abilities alone would suggest that Elena is well suited to mediate conflict situations. However, her personality seems to communicate instead a preference to simply navigate around such incidents or at the very least keep herself “clear of the storm,” choosing instead to be available to either side should they request her advice. In this regard, Elena seemed inclined to take in events from a distance with an almost detached amusement. It came as little surprise to me when in our final session she pointed out that being able to make her friends laugh had on occasion proven a most effective way of helping them deal with an issue.
An even more unique feature of Elena's process is how she situates herself in terms of her narrative. Unlike all of the other participants, she chose to tell me a story in which she did not play a meaningful role, settling instead to be cast as someone who simply observed the events unfold. Except for one reference she makes to a similar experience she had on the basketball court, Elena is for the most part absent from her story. Despite her teacher's report that she is popular among her peers, Elena seems remarkably content to position herself on the periphery of her social group where she appears quite capable of keeping herself from getting entangled in interpersonal conflict.

For this reason, Elena's story-telling took on an added sense of authority. Her observations appeared to be in no way influenced by a desire to make herself appear more important in her narrative. Instead, she seemed quite skilled at striking the unusual balance needed to see a particular conflict from all asides. In our final interview, Elena recognized herself as someone who looks for the best in everyone. She felt that her tendency to keep an open mind while listening to both sides of an issue might have contributed in part to her teacher identifying her as someone who understands and is successful at resolving conflict. Elena also felt that her ability to make people laugh in these situations had proved helpful since it encouraged both sides not to take things too seriously. I felt that this aspect of Elena's presentation most clearly represented a premise on which she understood conflict. For the most part, it seemed that she felt that it was simply not worth the hassle. To Elena, the personal interests at the source of most conflict situations appeared to be seldom worthy of the problems one often encounters while confronting another to resolve it. This observation seemed to coincide closely with her teacher's impressions that Elena was inclined to encourage both herself and others to simply not "worry" about it.
Because Elena is a student who almost immediately comes across as being very respectful of adults, I had ongoing concern throughout our sessions about the power dynamics in our dialogue and the extent to which they might influence her reflections. Fortunately, Elena is also someone who is quite easy to talk openly with, which enabled me to make clear to her on several occasions that she needed to recognize that it was me who was trying to learn something from her rather than vice versa. After making her aware of this, I noticed on several occasions during the editing session that Elena caught herself politely referring a decision about her story back to me.

From the content that evolved out of Elena’s narrative process, there are several themes worth noting. She strongly affirmed the notion that conflict on the playground often results when students in grade seven, especially the boys, try to exert power over kids in younger grades. In these situations, Elena felt that reciprocating or trying to get revenge was likely to only further escalate the conflict, perhaps even to the point of a physical altercation. In terms of resolving this problem, Elena appeared somewhat undecided as to whether or not teacher involvement would prove helpful, acknowledging that it would be pointless to punish only a few individuals if others would only do it the next time. Instead she recommended talking to the Grade Sevens as a whole group about the inappropriateness of this behaviour, as well as facilitating activities that mixed students from various grades to break down some of these barriers.

Elena spoke more openly than the others about how the whole experience of being an “expert” had influenced her. She had found discussing conflict within this context rather fun, and believed that in the future she would be more willing to get involved in a situation if she felt it might help. During the final session, Elena expressed the opinion that students themselves should be the ones managing their conflicts, a position that seemed to conflict
somewhat with her earlier statements about teacher involvement. She acknowledged that some of her friends really have a hard time letting things go, and that this often poses the greatest obstacle to resolution.

Michael – 11 years old

Teacher’s Comments about Michael

Michael is an 11 year-old student in grade 6. He is the younger of two children. His older sister, Patricia, is in the eighth grade. Michael is designated gifted, and has actively participated in several enrichment programs offered through the district. He is an avid skier and sailor. His schedule is hectic, both in and out of school, but Michael handles this well. He independently maintains straight A’s in class, and is consistently pleasant and friendly.

I have known Michael for just over a year, during which time, he has consistently presented himself as very mature in his interaction with peers and adults. In class, Michael has a very relaxed, yet conscientious attitude, and is often the individual others choose to work with. He immediately comes to mind as a young person who deals well with conflict. Upon reflection, however, it seems more accurate to state that Michael rarely finds himself in conflict situations. Other students respect him, and perhaps due to his non-judgmental treatment of his classmates, it is not often necessary for him to practice personal problem solving. There have been a few occasions when Michael has come to the defense of another student, and his approach is always through logic. His argument is based on fact, and on his belief that others deserve just and fair treatment. When discussing issues, Michael voices strong convictions, but is also very open-minded and diplomatic. He could be described as a “good listener”.

Michael’s Story

There was this one time, actually it happened a few times, when Sam and some other kids in my class would take advantage of the teacher. Mostly it was Sam, but sometimes it was also Ross and Graham. Mrs. Delwood would always get carried away, but without going off-task with the educational side. She would make funny jokes, and then they would start to take advantage of her. The worst time I can remember Sam started to dance around her. He literally stood up on his desk making rude comments, and calling-back. Then, he started running around the room screaming. I guess that really upset Mrs. Delwood’s feelings. At first when he did it, it was quite funny and she was fine with it, but he always got carried away causing everyone to start laughing and then they would start talking, and she couldn’t stop them. That’s when she loses control.

Mrs. Delwood would always get disappointed. Sometimes, she’d go out in the hall and just stay there for awhile because she was upset. Normally, while she was out of the room, the kids would start to talk and giggle and stuff. Some of the kids would tell them to be quiet, but it never really worked. But that one time, everyone was quiet. After, we had to write a paper about how we were treating the teacher, and what we did wrong. But it never really stopped Sam. I talked to him once, and he kind of stopped for awhile, but I guess he’s just so deprived
of attention that he needs it. He started going again and again, and I figured that I couldn’t do much, so I just sat there and watched. It carried on for the whole year.

You kind of get tired of it. Well, I in particular did. And then I started to get annoyed, and so this one time I asked him if he would sit down. It was time for him to stop cause it was getting out-of-hand. I didn’t have any problems with going up and asking him, because everybody was up and out of their seats, so I didn’t have everyone’s direct attention on me. It was out of the way, so they couldn’t see me. If everybody were watching, I wouldn’t go up and confront him to be quiet. I might try to tell him in a humourous way, so I wouldn’t risk the kind of bad experience I had in Grade Two. That year, there was this one kid, David, in my class. He brought a millipede in and was passing it around the class. They were running around with it, and playing games while the teacher was out of the room. I went: “Shhhh!” really loud, and then I said: “Can you stop that!” They all stopped and just looked at me with dirty looks, because they didn’t like my comment. The next day I was teased and put-down. It wasn’t profane or anything like that, it was just that they were really upset with me. Some of the students including my friends would give me looks of disgust and turn their backs on me. Some kids would get really angry at me, or they’d mouth off. I felt kind of disappointed because I had made an effort to try and make the situation better.

Most of the students like to join in on what’s happening, but very few of them will stand-up or tell someone to stop, and I don’t really want to be the person who’s known for stopping it. I’m not always the one who stands up. I do it occasionally when I feel it really has to be done and no one else is doing anything. I just get this feeling like I should do something because it’s not the greatest thing happening. I don’t like it when these problems go on, and the teacher gets upset. I want it to end as soon as possible, so we can all be happy.

I don’t know what you’d call this kind of problem. I guess it’s students not really being under control, or the teacher not handling situations properly. Sam has tried the attention-seeking stuff with our other teacher, Mrs. Sivrey, and she’s never had any problems, so I guess it’s basically the way the teacher settles it. Mrs. Delwood was kind of a teacher on the weaker side, and once Sam saw that she would give-in, he took advantage of her and started getting more and more out of control. She was fairly new and she’s young. She hasn’t been teaching for very long. I guess it’s about experience. Mrs. Delwood has the power but the class takes it too far, not allowing her to resolve the problem. Then she can’t control it, and it’s almost impossible for her to stop the class unless Mrs. Sivrey would walk into the room or the Principal comes in and tells everyone to settle down. Mrs. Delwood doesn’t have a way of getting our attention. She’ll just wait there, and we don’t even know what she’s doing or if she wants us to stop talking. She doesn’t give us a signal or yell to us. My old teacher would flick the lights or sometimes whistle and that worked fine. Mrs. Delwood doesn’t do this. Our class has suggested many things at our meetings that she could try to get our attention. But she just sits and waits. Sam will sometimes respond if she yells at him. Then he’ll go quickly and sit down. I guess he gets pretty frightened, and then the rest of the class will eventually settle. Sometimes she gave us a really big lecture and we’d miss P.E. or it would go into our lunch hour, and so we’d be all disappointed and would try not to do it again. That would change things for a bit, but then it would happen again, and we’d get another big lecture. So, it became a cycle. She has to give us a sign or something. If this was handled successfully Sam would stop doing things. I figure that’s the core of what the problem was. Then everything would stay the same, and the teacher wouldn’t get all upset and no one would miss subjects because of lectures, and then we wouldn’t be behind in our studies.
Mostly I learned about ways to solve problems like this from my parents. Like the situation in Grade Two. I talked to my parents about it, and they helped me resolve it by teaching me to confront others. They’ve also given me other advice when conflicts come up. I can’t really think of anything right now, except maybe sayings like: “Treat others like you wish to be treated.” And also learning not to be a pain, so I don’t have to be talked to. Partially it’s advice. More of it is instinct. It’s just kind of a feeling. It just sort of forces me into doing stuff like that.

I guess the school’s Code of Conflict was used in the process of resolving the situation in the classroom. Sam used to end up going to the office and then I guess the way the Principal would talk to him would be using the Code of Conduct, but it wasn’t really used in class. Maybe they could set-up a little campaign, or have just a group of people who could come up with ideas to prevent this sort of thing from happening. I think the Code of Conduct is fine. The big ones are: “Care and Respect for Others,” and “Care and Respect for Learning.” Sometimes, I forget it, and I’ll look up on the wall and that’s how I remember it. Just seeing it somewhere and then I sort of think of it, and if I see something going on, then I’ll go over and investigate it.

Themes from Michael’s Story

- Conflict can occur in the classroom when a student who is attention-seeking takes advantage of a teacher who is unable to handle the situation properly. (Accuracy rating: 9/10)

- Most students like to join in when a class is taking advantage of the teacher. Very few are willing to stand-up and tell everyone to stop. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- If a person chooses to intervene in a situation when another student is taking advantage of the teacher, he or she should be careful to do it away from everybody’s attention. (Accuracy rating: 6/10) If this isn’t possible he or she should try to do it in a humourous manner. (Accuracy rating: 7/10)

- Advice from parents (Accuracy rating 6/10), and a certain instinct (Accuracy rating: 8/10) about not wanting to let a situation upset the teacher and interfere with studies, may encourage a student to intervene when the class is getting out of control.

Overall accuracy rating: 8.5/10

Michael and the Narrative Process

As the only male identified by teachers as meeting the selection criteria, Michael’s involvement in the study was of particular value. Unfortunately, he was unavailable for the initial meeting I held with the students at the school to gauge their interest. When I contacted
his home to discuss his involvement, it was obvious that his parents were strongly in favour of
Michael participating. They believed he would prove particularly insightful on this subject.
Since I had been unable to speak with Michael directly, I encouraged his parents not to
pressure his involvement but to simply present him with the offer. A week later, Michael
contacted me by phone to inform me that he would like to participate. This came as a bit of a
surprise as it was mid-summer and Michael’s wide array of interests kept him quite busy. His
father had informed me that because he was involved in sailing on a daily basis, the interviews
would need to be scheduled around this commitment. Sensing that his parents very much
wanted him to take part, I had some concern that he might have been pressured into accepting.
Consequently, I made a point of assuring Michael that the final decision rested with him and
that he should feel comfortable declining.

Early into our first session, it seemed apparent to me that Michael had given the study a
fair amount of consideration prior to coming in. The process reflections I recorded at this time
indicate my impression that Michael had taken the notion of being an expert on this subject
quite seriously. In telling his story, he recounted with considerable insight several occurrences
over the past year when a number of students in his class (one in particular) had in his opinion
taken advantage of the teacher. Remarkably, without any prompting from me, Michael
included in this story his own thoughts on what might have been a possible motivation behind
the behaviour of the key student involved, (“I guess he’s just so deprived of attention, he needs
it”) as well as certain insight into why the teacher failed to handle the situation successfully
(“She’s fairly new and... and young. I guess it’s about experience”).

My initial reaction was to wonder whether Michael was purposefully employing a
“voice” that he deemed appropriate for an expert. His tone and mannerisms contrasted so
sharply with the previous participant that I felt like I was attending a school-based resource
team meeting rather than getting the "skinny" from a kid on how things really go down at school. After our session ended, I recorded in my field notes that Michael’s narrative did not seem at all to reflect the “average” student’s perception of conflict. However, after some consideration I realized that all of the participants in the study were quite diverse in their presentation and that any notion of a universal student perspective would not likely hold up under close scrutiny.

As it turned out, both Michael’s story and his approach to the narrative process proved quite valuable as it forced me to once again re-examine some of the pre-conceived notions I held prior to the study. That students would automatically choose to bring me down to their level when recounting their stories of conflict was something I had pretty much taken for granted. In Michael’s case, I felt he conveyed his observations and general take on things in a manner that he thought best suited the circumstances, which was a conversation with an adult about conflict. To interfere with this choice of approach, I felt, would be no less distorting than requiring another participant to remove all reference to “like” from her text.

During Michael’s third and final session we reviewed my interpretations, a process that proved to be informative on several levels. As the only male participant in the study, I had hoped Michael would provide some insight not only with regard to his perceptions on conflict, but also on how the narrative process might be received differently according to gender. Although we must be careful not to generalize Michael’s experience to that of all boys, it is interesting to note certain differences that distinguished him from the other participants. While reviewing the themes with Michael I sensed a certain hesitancy from him, which I attributed to his discomfort with having me succinctly summarize his opinions on conflict into four simple statements. It should be noted from the outset that Michael is designated “gifted,” and presents as both exceptionally bright and articulate. Consequently, it’s difficult to determine whether
his distinctiveness in this respect is attributable to his giftedness, his gender, or some other factor that separated him from the other participants.

Yet, despite appearing somewhat reticent when presented with the themes from his narrative, Michael did strongly affirm two assertions that were taken from his story. That most students would prefer to join in when a class is mistreating the teacher rather than taking a stand against it was the issue central to the conflict Michael chose to share with me. After some consideration Michael assessed this to be 100% perfectly accurate. He also very strongly agreed with the notion that conflict often occurs when teachers are incapable of properly handling situations in which attention-seeking students try to take advantage of them. These two interpretations served the basis of a premise that I felt encapsulated Michael’s perspective of conflict and its resolution. The strong impression I took away from our journey was that Michael saw conflict in relation to the larger circumstances in which it unfolds. In the case of his narrative, he seemed to understand the conflict as being a classroom full of students playing along with the antics of an attention-seeker because the inexperienced teacher was incapable of responding effectively. As an afterthought, I wondered whether this was at all connected to Michael being less willing to affirm some of the other themes I took from his story. I questioned if he found the generalizing tone of these interpretations too simplistic since the circumstances would need always to be taken into consideration.

Michael was noticeably less enthusiastic about the notion that students who plan to intervene in such situations should do so carefully without attracting everyone’s attention, or if this is not possible, in a humorous manner. I refrained from exploring with Michael why he felt only marginal agreement with this statement in part because it related to a past experience in which he was aggressively bullied and teased by most of the class for taking a stand on the teacher’s behalf. When he spoke briefly of this incident in our first session, I had noted a slight
quiver in Michael's voice and suspected that this was still a rather sensitive issue for him.

Perhaps more significant than all of the themes that emerged from his narrative was the fact that this experience appeared to have left an indelible mark on Michael, one that I sensed he preferred not to go into in great detail.

Nicola – 11 years old

Teacher's Comments about Nicola

Nicola is an extremely focused and determined individual. In athletics and academics, she consistently strives to do her best. I feel these skills transfer into her social interactions as well. While she is not the "most popular" girl in her class, she holds a very solid and respected position within the social hierarchy. When she addresses an issue related to her world, she seeks to understand her challenges and overcome them to the best of her ability. For example, she always seeks clarification from an adult until she believes that she understands a concept. Similarly, when she finds herself in conflict with a peer, Nicola seeks the advice of others (usually her parents) and addresses the issue until she feels that it has been solved or addressed. As the result of very communicative and hands-on parenting, Nicola is quite comfortable discussing and analyzing her feelings/problems. She practices journal writing when she is unable to verbalize her emotions and issues. Consequentially, she has the vocabulary and skills necessary to solve social issues in a constructive and mature manner. More specifically, she speaks directly with the individual with whom she has an issue, and she presents her problem and sentiments to that individual. She does not usually resort to gossiping, tantrums or exclusion. Generally, her issues are discussed at length with her family. When she recognizes an incident or situation as being "unfair," or "dangerous," Nicola looks to her parents or teachers for advice and guidance. Athletics and religion are vital foundations in her family life. I feel that both contribute to Nicola's ability to solve problems, address her goals and maintain her confidence in all endeavours. She is an intrinsically social being. Nicola's huge advantage, however, is that she has been taught and given the chance to practice many pro-social behaviours and strategies.

Nicola's Story

Before Grade Four, I had never really been too popular. I had lots of friends, but I can't say I was really popular. I didn't have a best friend. Well, I guess I was best friends with Amy cause we were inseparable. We never played with anybody else. But I felt like I couldn't trust her cause she only wanted me. At that time, Melanie was the most popular girl in the whole class and I wanted to hang out with her for a bit to see why she was so popular, and what was so cool about her, but Amy wouldn't let me. And, so I was getting really upset. I talked about it with my parents, and they made me call her and tell her about how I was feeling. So, I called her and said something like: "Amy, I don't like the way you're treating me, and I think I've got
the right to be with Melanie, and if you don't want me to be with Melanie, than that doesn't really show how good of a friend you are.”

Then Paige came to our school. She was really popular, and the boys liked her. Everybody wanted to be with her. After a few months, me, Paige, Claire and Melanie started hanging out together and we became a strong clique. It was actually too much of a clique, like we only hung out with each other, which was really bad. We had so much in common. We were all athletic and just liked each other lots. There was just this sort of a connection. I was good friends with Claire and Melanie, but I became best friends with Paige. I liked her more. I was almost too attached to her, so that if someone else wanted to play with her, I would get all curious and confused, and want to know what they were doing. I was almost always curious about what Paige was thinking. It was a really big threat to me that I would lose Paige.

Claire and Melanie were my good friends too, so I didn’t really worry that much about them playing with Paige. But I knew that friends don’t always last for a really long time, and it would bother me if Paige played with somebody else. Like during the summer before Grade Five, I wasn’t seeing Paige too much, and we were supposed to get together for a sleepover or something, it had been organized for almost a week. But it got ruined when she ended up going to somebody else’s house. That sort of upset me, so I had a big talk with my parents about it, and they helped me realize what was happening to me. That I was too attached to Paige and that I had to make more friends than just her. That really helped me a lot.

When we began Grade Five in September, me and Paige were still best friends, but in the first week or two of school we had a small conflict. I asked her if she was free to go over to my house, or me go over to hers, and she said: “Oh, actually I’m walking home today with my Mom. I can’t really have a friend over.” I thought that was a bit weird cause I was thinking like: “Why can’t I walk with you?” But then after school I saw her mom walking one way, and Paige heading in another direction with Claire. So then I felt sort of betrayed. It wasn’t like in Grade Four when I was always curious about what Paige was doing, it was more about her not being able to tell me the truth. I felt like I couldn’t really trust her.

Then, Carleigh, another girl in my class, was sort of looking for a friend, and Paige was the one she really wanted. Carleigh had been best friends with Amy in Grade Four. They were like inseparable. But they sort of broke up. I think it happened over the summer. So, Carleigh really wanted to be with Paige, but only Paige and not anybody else who she was hanging out with. I can’t say she was pushy, but she really wanted to be with Paige a lot. It sort of bothered me and everybody else cause me and Paige were pretty popular. Like, if you were just standing next to Paige, Carleigh would just sort of push to get beside her. At recess she would just go up to Paige and ignore me. Not just me, but everybody else too. If I wanted to just talk to Paige, cause we were still best friends and we needed to talk sometimes, and if Carleigh came then it was like I really didn’t exist anymore. I started to feel like not only was Carleigh not my friend, but Paige too, because if she was my true friend, she would stick up for me. I felt ignored by both of them. And that got a bit annoying. Everybody was realizing it, even Paige. She had lots of problems with it because some of her close friends, and even other people she knew, were no longer hanging out with her at recess and lunch. They weren’t constantly avoiding her, but just not hanging out with her as much. Paige had a hard time trying to tell Carleigh to go away. Sometimes at lunch, if Paige and I were out on the field together and she saw Carleigh coming, Paige would want to run and hide. She told me that once she was actually crying cause she had too many “so-called” friends. My parents have told me that sometimes Paige gets a bit clueless about being a leader, and since I’m her best friend, she sometimes follows me to get the advice on how to be a leader.
Then one day when we had a class meeting, somebody had left a note in the box about this problem with Carleigh and Paige. I'm pretty sure it was Amy. I think she might have been suffering a bit, cause somebody wrote on the Girl's washroom stall: “Carleigh is a Paigeaholic.” I thought it was Amy's writing, but then it was crossed out. And so at the meeting, Amy started to talk about it, but she's sort of quiet when it comes to something like this. It was hard for her to tell Carleigh directly what was going on. I don't think Amy comes from a very open family, cause her parents work a lot. Her Dad works at the hospital and sometimes he comes home after a long time away, and then he's like: “Sorry, I have to go again. I got a page.” So, I don't think she communicates well with her family cause they're not always there for each other.

So at the class meeting, I was sitting beside her. And I'm not bragging, but I think it's not very hard for me to talk to someone. So, of course I took over for Amy, and had to explain to Carleigh what was happening. I just told her: “Carleigh, in the past few months you have been really attached to Paige, constantly wanting to be with her in sort of a bossy way, and it has been bothering me and other people in the class who want to be friends with Paige as well, and you have made it impossible for that to happen.” Then Carleigh told everybody that she had been trying her hardest, and that she was desperate for a friend, and that Paige seemed like someone who could be that.

I think Carleigh was a bit confused, herself. I don't think she really expected this much to happen. Sometimes, naturally just the way you express your feelings to try to make a friend, doesn't always turn out the way you want it to be. Like the way she was pushing makes people not want to be with her. And we talked about that at the class meeting, and she started crying, which was sort of weird cause it was Valentine's Day and it was all supposed to be perfect. I guess I felt that I would know how to put it in the right words, but I actually didn't because it didn't really matter to me personally as much as it seemed. It wasn't that big a deal for me since I had talked to my parents before about not becoming too attached to Paige. I had learned not to be too offended when it happened, even though it was still sort of hurtful. But the way I said it in the meeting sounded like it was mostly my point of view, when really it was more about everybody else, like the rest of our clique from Grade Four. Claire and Melanie and some other people.

So, I was upset as well. After the class meeting it was lunch and the Girl's washroom is always the place where you go to like cry and be alone, and we both ended up being there. I went there, and I was like sort of teary, and then Carleigh came in and said: “I'm sorry.” And like we both apologized to each other and said what was really going on. I explained to her that it wasn’t really bothering me as much as it was everybody else. She sort of rephrased what she’d said like: “I’m really sorry, but I’ve just been really desperate for a friend. And I said: “Well, if you want, you can try to make friends with everybody, instead of getting just one.” I told her that if she really needed a friend, she can tell us and we can try to make it happen for her. I offered her my friendship and everybody else’s, cause I wanted to be friends with Carleigh. She was like: “Okay, and thank-you!” We hugged and went back to class for lunch. So, we solved the problem in the washroom and that was that. I think Carleigh is a nice person. She’s learned not to do that anymore. Later in Grade Five, I sat beside her in class and we made lots of jokes and stuff. I no longer worry about these things now, cause I have lots of friends. I try to hang out with more people than Paige.

I guess you could call what happened between me, Carleigh and Paige a friendship conflict. I think it probably happens a lot with kids because at most schools, there is going to be a person who isn’t popular or who doesn’t have very many friends. And in almost every
grade, there is one popular person who everyone, including the unpopular people, want to be with. I think in Carleigh’s case, she was being a bit “exclusive” to anybody who also wanted to be with Paige. I don’t think she was handling her break-up with Amy very well, because she was her only friend, and when you hang out with only one person you don’t have any back-ups.

I always talk to my parents about my problems. I have a really good family. We talk about conflict and stuff. We know how to accept. It’s one good thing in our house. I don’t think most families accept conflict as well as we do in mine. My parents have told me that if there is a problem you just have to accept it, and talk about it, or it’s only going to get bigger and bigger. You need to talk it over with either the other person who is feeling the conflict, or somebody else who you trust, like maybe your parents or a teacher. You need to do this right away, otherwise it might affect you later on in life. Like, my parents sort of taught me that if you have a big problem and you haven’t solved it, you may also not be able to handle a smaller problem because your anger towards the bigger problem may become connected to the smaller one, and you’ll find yourself making a mountain out of a molehill.

It really helped that we had a class meeting. It’s good to have a teacher there because she’s someone we can trust. You know that she understands what’s going on because she’s lived this life before. If things get too overboard, then she can take over. Also everyone knows that they have to say it like it is. They can’t lie to the teacher. It’s kind of weird cause you are talking in front of people who aren’t even part of the problem. Some of them were from the older grade because we had a split, and they would give us their opinions on what to do. We didn’t necessarily need them to always solve our problems, but sometimes it was nice to have them there. But if it had only been like me, Carleigh, Paige and the teacher, it probably would have turned out the same way. It’s just good to have the teacher there for support, to listen.

Like the time Paige lied to me about walking home with her mom. I wanted to talk it over with her, but I felt that it needed to be with the teacher. Basically, I just wanted her to be there when we solved the problem, cause if I had tried to tell Paige by myself she might have just made up excuses. But if the teacher’s there, you have to tell the truth. When we met, the teacher just said: “I heard you guys are having a problem.” Then I just explained to Paige how I was feeling and the teacher asked her to apologize, and she did, and it was solved. I guess Mme. Lefroy knows what Grade Fives are like, cause she’s been teaching them for long enough. She might not do as good a job with say the Grade Threes. Their own teacher would probably do better, or maybe the counselor or principal.

I don’t think the Code of Conduct had any influence on our conflict, but it’s still nice to have one. If someone isn’t respecting another person, then you can say: “You have to follow the Code of Conduct.” It’s good to know that it’s there. I follow it. Sometimes it’s just natural for people to be that way. But it’s just nice to know that the school wants people to be like that. It’s like they really care.

Themes from Nicola’s Story

- Kids should not become too attached to one person. They should make friends with many people. (Accuracy rating: 9/10)

- Parents and teachers play an important role in helping their children deal successfully with problems/conflict. (Accuracy rating: 9/10)
• One student’s popularity influences the way friendships unfold/change, (Accuracy rating: 8/10) and conflict occurs. (Accuracy rating: 7/10)

• Talking with the person involved in the conflict and letting them know how you’re feeling is an effective way of dealing with it. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

Overall accuracy rating: 9/10

Nicola and the Narrative Process

Throughout the process of telling her story, Nicola seemed ever mindful of the impression she was giving of herself in relation to the events she described. She emphasized on several occasions that this conflict was not that significant to her personally because she had experienced similar situations in the past, and had learned with the help of her parents how to successfully manage them. Instead, Nicola strongly intimated at the beginning and repeatedly throughout our meetings that her involvement in this particular conflict came more from a willingness on her part to help other peers deal with a problem that she knew something about based on her previous experience.

I found it interesting that Nicola chose to begin her narrative by going back several years to recount in detail a number of occasions when she herself was involved in this type of conflict. Nicola showed a remarkable capacity to trace back events to Grade Four, highlighting points at which either she or other girls in her group were left feeling rejected or isolated. It seemed important to her to provide me with a context for understanding her perspective or “expertise”. In most of the other narratives, the children began by focusing first on the important events. Context was generally given as an afterthought, and in some cases, provided only after some prompting by me.

Throughout our sessions together I noted that my process reflections frequently returned to this point, as I tried to make sense of shifts in Nicola’s presentation. It seemed that
my understanding of her perspective moved back and forth between two profiles. On the one hand, I saw Nicola as someone who placed considerable importance on the fact that she had been identified by her teacher as an “expert,” and wanted her narrative to reflect this. It was clear that Nicola’s family played a significant role in terms of her self-image. She acknowledged in our final session together how important it was to her that her parents had been informed about her teacher’s perception that she was successful at resolving conflict. In this respect, it seemed that at times Nicola presented as someone quite detached from her narrative, viewing the process objectively through the lens of her expert focus.

Within this context, I understood Nicola’s involvement in the conflict to be motivated purely by her desire to support other kids in the class who were taking exception to no longer having as much access to a popular student because of one girl’s tendency to dominate her personal space. Nicola’s decision to confront this girl at a class meeting was presented as a gesture on behalf of another student who lacked the communication skills and insight to get her own point across. Although Nicola acknowledged that she too was close friends with the popular student, she made it clear that her own personal interests here were not at play.

However, on many occasions throughout our meetings it seemed obvious to me that Nicola’s story of conflict touched her on a much deeper level than she let on. I sensed that its impact was still felt in her life as she continued to question her own sense of “self” in relation to her peer group. Although Nicola appeared intent on presenting this particular conflict as a problem affecting other kids in her class, the fact that one of the key individuals she identified was the same popular student who had rejected her in previous years created a sense of personal involvement that consistently re-emerged throughout the telling of her story. On several occasions when this occurred, I noted a certain sensitivity on Nicola’s part, one that
was typically highlighted by her repeated insistence that the events she was recounting were of more significance to other kids in her class than to herself.

I came away from these observations with the feeling that I had gained some insight into the ongoing process Nicola appeared to be engaged in as a means of making sense of past social experiences about which she continued to feel emotionally sensitive. By her own admission, Nicola often sought out her parents’ advice about how best to deal with friendship dynamics that were upsetting her. Clearly, she had taken these suggestions to heart, so much so that she now regarded herself as someone capable of helping others deal with similar situations. However, despite learning from her parents the importance of not focusing all of her attention on one friend, it seemed that Nicola was still dealing on some level with the hurtful feelings caused by being passed over or rejected by a popular student.

In this regard, Nicola’s narrative journey informed me about the emotional process of dealing with conflict and how resolution must be considered beyond the stage of making cognitive sense of how the specific events unfolded. Clearly, in Nicola’s case, she had benefited greatly by gaining a better understanding cognitively of certain dynamics involved in interpersonal relationships:

“Sometimes, naturally just the way you express your feelings to try to make a friend, doesn’t always turn out the way you want it to be. Like the way she was pushing makes people not want to be with her.”

And further on in her story:

“When you hang out with only one person you don’t have any back-ups.”

The piece that Nicola appeared to still be working out during our meetings was how one deals effectively with the feelings connected to being rejected and isolated by others. It was interesting to note that throughout the first draft of her story she repeatedly used the phrase “too curious” to describe how she felt when the popular student chose to hang out with others.
The further we explored her narrative, the more inclined she became to use words like “threat” or “betrayed,” which I attributed to her process of becoming more conscious of the strong feelings that were connected to these events. From these reflections, there emerged the question of how the telling of Nicola’s story fostered this process of exploring the emotional ground of her experience.

However, Nicola’s frequent shifts away from this space also raised other questions about the approach I had taken. Specifically, I wondered whether Nicola’s repeated insistence that this issue no longer mattered to her was a way of protecting herself from fully confronting the rejection, or whether she did not want to diminish my perception of her as an “expert.” This prompted me to consider for the first time the possibility that fostering this notion of expertise may have in fact hindered the participant’s capacity to look openly and honestly at her thoughts and feelings related to the conflict, if she feared that doing so might in some way negatively impact this perception.

One important premise that seemed to consistently emerge from Nicola’s narrative process was the notion that parents play an important role in terms of helping their children deal with their problems. She spoke at length about her parents’ practice of talking openly about conflict, and involving the whole family in the process of resolving it. In our final meeting, Nicola made reference to her father’s spiritual influences including Buddhism, passages of which he often reads to both her and her sister. The fact that her parents had promised to always be truthful with her was something Nicola regarded as very significant. In understanding another classmate’s difficulty managing conflict, Nicola highlighted the fact that the young girl’s parents were not as available to talk about such things, drawing a direct correlation between the two. I understood these reflections to indicate that Nicola saw conflict
as something that people are taught how to manage, and that much of this learning can occur within the family.

Another related reflection that I felt represented a premise on which Nicola based her understanding of conflict at school involved the role of the teacher in facilitating resolution. Throughout her narrative, Nicola attached considerable importance to her own teacher’s ability to provide a setting in which students could work through the process of resolving their problems. She recognized the teacher’s presence alone as a factor that significantly changes the dynamics in which young people approach their issues, and attributes this largely to the fact that she believes young people are less likely to lie or make excuses in front of the teacher.

Reflections based on the content of Nicola’s narrative were strongly received. She very strongly agreed with three of the four main themes I had taken from her story. The hazards of becoming too attached to a single friend appeared to represent the key focus in Nicola’s story. Talking directly to the people involved in a conflict and sharing with them how one is feeling is in Nicola’s opinion, the most effective way of dealing with it. She confirmed her belief that adults can play an important role in this process just by virtue of their presence, which may encourage young people to be more honest about what has transpired. Although Nicola acknowledged that personality does indeed influence the way in which friendships unfold, she was somewhat reluctant to extend this connection to conflict. In addition to these themes, another interesting reflection that emerged from Nicola’s story was her perception of how one student’s popularity alone has the capacity to shift an entire peer group and the way in which everyone in it relates to each other.

The process through which Nicola unfolded her story left a lasting impression on me. Admittedly, I had often perceived children’s conflicts as being on a smaller scale than their adult counterparts. From my perspective, youth itself seemed to promote a world in which
such issues were fleeting in nature. I realized while listening to Nicola that I had wrongly assumed that within a relatively brief period of time, most kids let go of the everyday conflicts they experience shortly after some agreement has been reached about how to address the issues at hand. However, as this young person recounted specific incidents in which either her or her friends had found themselves isolated, it became clear to me that conflict itself was a term that did not adequately encapsulate the complexity and vastly varying degrees of disharmony that young people experience as part of their social journey through school.

Comparative Analysis of Conflict-Related Themes

Sources of Conflict

- Conflict can arise when students insult each other with put-downs. This can even lead to the possibility of a physical fight occurring, especially among boys who may try to act tough around their peers. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- Conflicts frequently occur when students do not show respect for each other’s belongings. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- On the playground, conflict often occurs as a result of Grade 7s (particularly, the boys) trying to exert power over kids in other grades. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- Conflict can occur in the classroom when a student who is attention-seeking takes advantage of a teacher who is unable to handle the situation properly. (Accuracy rating: 9/10)

- Most students like to join in when a class is taking advantage of the teacher. Very few are willing to stand-up and tell everyone to stop. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

As one might expect, each of the five sources of conflict listed in this category are in someway interpersonal in nature, and all share an element of disrespect. In the first three, the offending behaviour appears to be more blatant and intentional, whereas in the last two the nature of the disrespect is more indirect or passive. In terms of personal motivation, attention-seeking, a desire to exert power over another individual or group, and the need to feel included as part of
something, are all clearly identified in three of the sources of conflict, and could arguably apply to the other two. It is interesting to note that out of the five categories of conflict-related themes, ‘sources’ received the highest accuracy rating from the participants, suggesting that they are clearest with regard to their disputes’ origins.

Prevention

- Kids need to be able to read social situations like how other kids are feeling and whether they are being excluded from something. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- If a student is planning to exclude another student from an activity, he or she should either give that person a good explanation of why, or not talk about it at all in front of that person. (Accuracy rating: 9/10)

- Ignoring a put-down or insult is one of the best ways to prevent a conflict from occurring because it shows the other person that you don’t really care, and so he or she will likely go away and just leave it. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- Kids should not become too attached to one person. They should make friends with many people. (Accuracy rating: 9/10)

- This problem (Grade 7s trying to exert power over kids in other grades) might be prevented if Grade Sevens were more involved in activities that included students from other Grades, so that they wouldn’t consider themselves so separate. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

In terms of prevention, notions of power and personal feelings seem to predominate. This category can be divided into suggestions given for both potential “offenders” and the “offended.” Ignoring a put-down, showing that you don’t care when someone insults you and ensuring that you have many friends are seen as a few ways that an individual can prevent being victimized by conflict. Suggestions aimed at preventing one from provoking conflict include considering another’s feelings, particularly in relation to being excluded. Taking the time to explain to someone why he or she has been left out, or avoiding mention of it altogether are two suggested preventions that seem somewhat contradictory. Promoting
activities in which students of various ages take part is a suggestion that appears aimed at
school officials as a means of diminishing the power imbalance that can exist between grades.

**Adult Advice/Intervention**

- In general, adults (either at school or home) have not given worthwhile advice on how
to handle the kind of conflicts you described in your story. (Accuracy rating: 8/10)

- Teachers could play a role in helping resolve these kinds of conflicts by either being
there to stop Grade Sevens from pushing others around (Accuracy rating: 9/10), asking
students to explain their actions when they are not being respectful of others (Accuracy
rating: 7/10), or talking to the Grade Sevens as a whole group to tell them that this
behaviour is unacceptable. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- Advice from parents (Accuracy rating 6/10), and a certain instinct (Accuracy rating:
8/10) about not wanting to let a situation upset the teacher and interfere with studies,
may encourage a student to intervene when the class is getting out of control.

- Parents and teachers play an important role in helping their children deal successfully
with problems/conflict. (Accuracy rating: 9/10)

Themes related to the role that adults play, either in terms of giving advice or intervening in
conflict situations, ranged considerably from one participant to the next. With respect to
advice, students’ opinions ranged from being seen as not worthwhile ("stupid" was the actual
term used by one particular child) to important in encouraging a child to respond to conflict in
a certain manner. There was also considerable division over the role of teachers in getting
actively involved in the resolution of conflict. In three of the narratives, specific reference was
made to a teacher’s ability to help resolve a conflict either by getting directly involved or
facilitating a classroom discussion about the problem. However, two other students spoke out
against such intervention, one of whom indicated that young people were more likely to hide
the problem from the teacher for fear of getting a peer in trouble.
It's also worth noting that of the six conflicts described by the participants, all except one developed under circumstances in which no adult was immediately present. Whether it was on the playground, in the classroom or related to after-school activities, five of the narratives described dynamics that unfolded between young people without adults being aware of it. Furthermore, most of the students placed very little value on the school's Code of Conduct, which is designed in part to help guide student behaviour in unsupervised situations. The participants' opinions ranged from regarding it as having no influence, or being essentially meaningless and generally ignored ("just a piece of paper stuck on the wall") to a nice gesture that shows adults care even if it doesn't really help. One student noted that the Principal probably used it when dealing with problem behaviour, but in his classroom it didn't seem to serve any purpose.

**Personality**

- A lot of what determines how a conflict unfolds depends on the personalities of the people involved. (Accuracy rating: 7/10)

- A student's personality can very much affect the way in which a conflict is handled. (Accuracy rating: 9/10)

- A student's personality can influence the way in which a conflict is handled. (Accuracy rating: 9/10)

- One student's popularity influences the way friendships unfold/change, (Accuracy rating: 8/10) and conflict occurs. (Accuracy rating: 7/10)

In all but one of the narratives, participants devoted varying amounts of time to describing the personality of someone involved in their conflict. In some cases, greater attention was given to this aspect of the story than any other feature, further highlighting the critical significance that interpersonal dynamics play in relation to conflict. In addition to providing insight into why a certain individual might not be easy to get along with, several of the students also made
Curiously, accuracy ratings varied somewhat when students were presented themes related to personality, with the one student whose conflict had been most dominated by this feature ranking it the lowest at “7”.

Conflict Resolution/Management

- By getting involved, other students can stop a conflict from escalating to the point of a physical fight occurring. (Accuracy rating: 9/10) This can be done without involving adults (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- Students try to get revenge on other kids as a way of showing them that they didn’t like something the other person did. This usually does not solve the conflict because the other person only ends up getting angry. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- In these situations, students should not reciprocate or try to get revenge because it will probably only make the conflict worse, perhaps even leading to a physical fight. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- Some students prefer to fight out their conflict quietly because it can be embarrassing to fight in front of a group of people, (Accuracy rating: 9/10) and also because students don’t want the teacher to get involved and possibly get their friend in trouble. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- The School Code of Conduct isn’t helpful if a student is caught up in the emotion of a conflict. Often the person is only thinking about reacting based on how they’re feeling. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- If a person chooses to intervene in a situation when another student is taking advantage of the teacher, he or she should be careful to do it away from everybody’s attention. (Accuracy rating: 6/10) If this isn’t possible he or she should try to do it in a humorous manner. (Accuracy rating: 7/10)

- Talking with the person involved in the conflict and letting them know how you’re feeling is an effective way of dealing with it. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

Unlike adult advice or intervention, the participants seemed far more collectively optimistic about their own capacity to successfully resolve conflict situations. However, in some cases students had difficulty specifying how. Suggested interventions ranged from getting involved as a third party in stopping a conflict from escalating to a physical fight, to avoiding the
temptation to reciprocate or get revenge when one’s feelings are hurt by another. Two of the students made reference to the influence of observers when trying to resolve a conflict. In one case, the student felt that issues are best handled without the potential embarrassment of having others around. Another suggests quietly intervening so as to not draw public attention. In situations where one is intervening on behalf of a teacher, one student recommends using humour so that other children will be less likely to mock you for supporting the teacher.
CHAPTER FIVE
Discussion

Why Use Narratives to Explore Conflict Resolution with Children?

On any given day in an elementary school setting numerous incidents occur that represent what most adults would regard as examples of conflict. In many of these cases if the problem is not successfully resolved, one or more of the individuals involved will resort to aversive behaviour as a means of furthering their cause. Whether the dispute is relationship-based or specific to a material want, the potential for an aggressive, anti-social response exists as long as the children involved lack either the initiative or know-how to negotiate an agreement that will leave all sides satisfied.

At some point, an unresolved matter is likely to reach the attention of a teacher or other school official. It may come directly from the source, with one or both sides of the issue anxious to stake its claim and justify actions taken. It may come from an outside party, another student who has deemed it his or her responsibility to let an adult know that a problem exists. Occasionally, the information is passed from one staff member to another as a professional courtesy or 'heads-up' that a storm is brewing among the kids in his or her classroom. If circumstances warrant, a higher authority may be informed, a move up the chain of command to involve the principal, parents, or perhaps even local authorities.

Simply by virtue of the hectic nature common to a school environment, details about the incident may be sketchy at best. Information is often passed on in an informal and hurried fashion. Combatants are identified. Behaviour described. Blame implied. Gradually an incomplete picture is formed in the mind of the person receiving the information, and the process of deciding how best to respond begins. Certain questions are immediately raised. Has anyone's personal safety been compromised? Has the school's Code of Conduct been
breeched? Is there a perception that this incident requires serious attention? What would be an appropriate response? What might successful resolution look like?

More often than not, the children involved in a conflict warranting adult intervention will be given the opportunity to tell their side of the story. The extent to which this dialogue factors into how the conflict is ultimately dealt with may vary drastically from one situation to the next, but it is interesting to note that virtually all children throughout the course of their school experience will become familiar with a process that begins with: “Okay, tell me what happened.”

The opportunity to tell one’s side of the story has come to be regarded within school settings, if not society at large, as a sacred right. Even children willing to acknowledge their wrongdoing would likely take strong exception to any process that did not include the chance to say their piece. In this respect, schools may be regarded as a place where narratives flourish. From an early age, young people are routinely called on to recount events as part of the everyday functioning of their surroundings, making this one of the earliest skills developed in a school setting. For this reason alone there is sufficient rationale for exploring in greater depth the process through which students make sense of their world through the telling of their stories.

This study has merely scratched the surface in its attempt to shed light on the numerous and complex cognitive and emotional factors that come in to play when young people share their stories of conflict with an adult. At first glance, a student being called to the office after recess to explain why he punched another kid on the playground may seem far removed from the narrative process. However, instances in which a child must make meaning of conflict-related events through a dialogue that is heavily influenced by power dynamics is fairly commonplace in school settings. Exploring further the factors that determine how a child
responds to this approach may inform us as to how we can best foster a young person’s capacity to successfully resolve conflict.

**Addressing the Research Questions**

In Chapter Four, the “findings” are presented in such a way that no clear distinction is drawn between the data itself and the meaning derived from it. As co-constructions, the stories themselves and the process through which they evolved can be simultaneously regarded as both. Rather than choosing a point at which to stand back and begin objectively analyzing the data, the narrative researcher is bound instead to stay true to a process that recognizes his or her subjective influence on both the data and its analysis. This process in and of itself has the capacity to inform us in such a way as to address the research questions. However, the researcher must also be prepared to accept that in analyzing the data, new data is generated simply by virtue of being engaged in what Van Manen (1997) describes as freely “seeing” what meaning emerges from this process. In this respect, the cycle of data and analysis is a perpetual one that expands the scope of inquiry beyond the initial research focus, oftentimes forging new questions for the researcher to consider.

For this reason a critical appreciation needs to be given to what these research “findings” are and what they are not. The two questions proposed at the beginning of this study would be more accurately regarded as a launching point for exploratory inquiry rather than a rigid central focus defining the parameters for the research. Both questions must be understood in relation to the narrative approach employed to explore them. The active role of a co-participant (the researcher) is not only accepted but also seen as an essential element of the data. With this clearly in mind the question of how we are informed by a child’s “telling” of his or her own story can be addressed.
Looking back on the process through which each of these narratives evolved, one is immediately struck by the constant ebb and flow of interpersonal dynamics that fill the space between the storyteller and his or her listener. For this reason, much of the significant data found in this study resides in the ongoing reflections recorded about the process through which the stories unfolded in addition to their actual content. As researchers, our first inclination may be to try in vain to neutralize these dynamics in order to get a "clean" read on the content information being conveyed. However, what became apparent as this study progressed was that attention must also be paid to how these interpersonal forces impact the manner in which a child makes sense of a particular conflict through his or her "telling" of the story. The narrative relationship itself would appear to not only shape the way in which the story is recalled, but seemingly influence the motivation a child feels to consider how best to successfully resolve it.

In this respect the second of the two research questions takes on added relevancy. Since the narrative relationship appears to critically impact the manner in which children explore their stories of conflict, careful consideration needs to be given to how best to influence the power that defines this relationship. The findings from this study suggest that every child responded to being regarded as an expert on conflict in a slightly different fashion. For some of the participants this generated interesting reflections on how his or her perceptions of a certain conflict were potentially influenced by this premise. For others, its impact (if any) went essentially unnoticed. In this regard the findings are at best inconclusive, but do suggest an area for further exploration that will be discussed later in this chapter.
Implications of Findings

There exists a tremendous temptation to gather together the twenty-five themes that emerged from the narratives of these children and begin designing strategies to help other young people successfully deal with conflict situations like the ones described in these stories. Before doing so it would seem prudent to first present these themes to the larger student population in order to verify their accuracy. Consideration would need to be given to how students might respond differently according to such variables as gender, age, ethnicity or socio-economic status. A closer analysis might even reveal that how a child ranks within his or her surrounding social hierarchy influences the extent to which he or she regards these themes as accurate. Individual personality, relationship with parents, academic success, and a whole host of other distinguishing features may also represent factors that affect what value young people place on these themes.

It is these numerous and complex variables that make unique every individual’s school and life experience. In this respect, designing global strategies to help children successfully deal with conflict situations across settings would seem a doomed enterprise. Yet, the literature builds a strong case in support of initiatives that teach children conflict resolution procedures, at least in terms of their efficacy. Nevertheless, pressure continues to mount on school officials to address a widely-held perception that children are not safe in their learning environment and likely to be subjected to aggression, bullying or dominance at some point during their school experience. Although the link between these anti-social behaviours and poorly managed conflict is a controversial one, many schools have turned to these programs in an almost desperate measure to appear as though they are somehow addressing the problem. The question remains as to whether continued implementation of conflict resolution and peer mediation programs will over time create a safer school environment as students learn how to
manage situations in which their own personal interests conflict with others, or whether educators should begin looking elsewhere for solutions?

It is within the scope of telling their stories that the six children involved in this study may have provided some insight in relation to this seemingly insurmountable problem, not so much in the content of the stories they recounted, but rather in the dynamics of the dialogue through which they evolved. Typically, the power relationships between adult and children strongly influence the manner in which knowledge is acquired. Provider and recipient roles, although not always clearly defined, commonly form the structure of this process. Usually these interactions fall somewhere along a spectrum that ranges from one extreme in which the adult demonstratively educates the child on the way things are in the world, to the other in which a more didactic approach is employed with the young person being cleverly led to discover this knowledge on their own.

The narratives collected in this research are the product of a somewhat different approach to involving children in the acquisition of knowledge. Based on their “authority of experience,” these six young people were asked to assume the integral role of provider in the process of gathering knowledge. Admittedly, there remained throughout all the sessions varying degrees of adult “power” that invariably influenced each relationship. However, in some ways this fostered what bell hooks (1994) describes as the balance between the analytical and experiential ways of facilitating a richer “way of knowing.” True to this form, the children’s narratives would appear to strongly reinforce the notion that young people represent the best resource for providing the experiential piece of this puzzle. Because the cognitive development of children at this age level may factor in somewhat on the analytical side, the adult’s role was clearly more evident in this respect. However, through the use of open-ended
questions asked in a tone of genuine perplexity, the climate of empowerment was sustained by virtue of the respect afforded to the children through acknowledging their personal “expertise.”

Rather than inform us in a clear and concise manner as to how children should be taught to manage different conflict situations, this process invites educators and parents to re-think our approach to addressing these issues that significantly impact the lives of our young people. Reed Larson (2000) speaks of a critical link between initiative and motivation which he identifies as integral to positive youth development. In respect to conflict resolution, it would seem that providing students an opportunity to unlock “secrets” that have historically remained a mystery to the adult world might serve as a better motivator to “exploring” pro-social behaviour than teaching children to memorize a series of steps.

Stephen Brookfield (1987) argues that within this environment the kind of divergent thinking that is critical to affecting change is more apt to be encouraged than repressed. The adult acknowledgement that the solution must lie somewhere beyond commonly explored parameters presents the child with a challenge that he or she is not likely to experience through other teaching paradigms. Presumably, once engaged in this reflective process the foundation for transformative learning is established and alongside the development of critical thinking skills that are crucial to the process of resolving conflict.

Examples of these are not easily recognized in the narrative process until the researcher distances him or herself from the emerging text and listens to the child from another frame of mind. What might at first be dismissed as unhelpful or even a contradiction in terms of how best to handle a certain conflict can under closer examination yield considerable insight. Being available with an open mind when a child is recounting a given experience is a far more comprehensive process than most adults, parents and school officials alike, are typically willing to undertake. The need to strip oneself of pre-conceived notions about what or how the
young person makes sense of the conflict is in itself an onerous task requiring considerable
cognitive effort. However, based on some of the observations made in this study it would seem
that this integral step needs to be taken prior to implementing any program designed to teach
children how to manage their conflicts.

Limitations

By paying careful attention to how young people make meaning of their conflict
experiences within the context of this collaborative process called narrative, I had hoped to be
afforded the privilege of gaining a glimpse of these six children’s “realities” of conflict. I
acknowledge that on either side of the “lens” through which this was viewed my influence was
felt, both by the role I played in the co-construction of that reality, as well as the subjective and
interpretative manner by which I regarded it. For this reason, I am very much a part of this
research. The findings of this study include countless references to my thoughts, feelings and
impressions based on reflections I recorded while taking part in each child’s narrative journey.
They are not intended to represent “truths” that can be generalized across school settings, nor
do they imply that other children will explore their narratives of conflict in a similar way under
these conditions.

Areas for Further Research

During their final sessions two of the six participants in this study stated that they felt
the narrative process we had engaged in together helped them to better understand the conflict
they described. When asked how this experience differed from a typical conversation they
might have with a parent or teacher about a problem neither student was able to clearly
articulate a distinction. Presumably, discussions of this nature with other adults would afford
some opportunity for the young person to recount details related to the problem in question. However, one student insisted that there is always a point at which the adult provides the child with some wisdom as to how this situation could have been better handled, a gesture that this particular individual clearly resented.

With the increasing emphasis placed by educators on critical thinking in schools, particularly in relation to problem-solving, it is a wonder that this child continues to perceive her interactions with adults in this light. Based on my experience in these settings, I believe that young people commonly encounter teachers and administrators who refrain from overtly advising children on where they went wrong, leading them instead through a process of reconsidering the choices they made. Yet, the clear impression given by some of the students in this study was that they attributed very little value to their discussions about conflict with adults. It would be interesting to research further the nature of these child-adult dialogues around conflict to determine what meaning both sides took away from these interactions. This might shed some light on what it was about the adult’s approach that fostered the child’s resentment. Clearly, at least two of the participants in this study attached considerable significance to the advice or guidance they had received in the past from their parents or teachers. It would be valuable to note what it was in the way that these adults conveyed their “wisdom” that resulted in it being received in a much different manner.

Without a better understanding of this, some concern may be raised in relation to how a larger student body in a school might regard a program in which children are overtly trained by adults to adopt a dispute-resolution procedure to resolve their conflicts. Although sufficient evidence exists supporting the notion that young people successfully employ these procedures, some of the research has indicated that this may come at a social price. Also, the extent to which these resolutions are influenced by adult observation remains unclear. It should be noted
that five of the six conflicts described by the students in this study occurred when adults were either not present or unaware that a problem existed. To what extent this influences a child’s likelihood to incorporate strategies taught by an older person is also worth further examining.

The findings in this study reinforce the notion that “power” dynamics significantly impact the dialogues that occur between adults and students when stories of conflict are being recounted. Given that students are frequently called on by school officials to tell their side of a specific conflict, greater attention needs to be given to the impact of “power” on these dialogues and how it factors into a student’s capacity to rationally make sense of what’s happened. Further consideration should also be given to ways in which this power could be transferred to foster within young people the kind of initiative that would lead them to identify how best to resolve their own conflicts. Incorporating this into school-wide programs like EBS would provide a much needed balance to the top-down approach typically found in these expectation-based behaviour models.

Finally, there is of course the potential to examine further the value of the twenty-five conflict-related themes identified in this study (Appendix D) by presenting them to a larger school population for feedback. It would be interesting to measure whether or not the responses given would be influenced by whether or not the students were told that the themes originated from stories recounted by other children rather than adults intent on sharing their “wisdom” on conflict. Based on this feedback, providing a larger student population the opportunity to design resolution strategies structured around these themes would be a most exciting initiative to explore.
Implications for School Counselling

As educators increasingly turn to school-wide programs as a means of responding to the growing perception that our classrooms, hallways, and playgrounds are not always safe and caring environments, greater emphasis will invariably be placed on the prospect of conflict resolution programs and social skills development. Initiatives like EBS insist that particular attention must be paid to the percentage of students in every school who are “at-risk” of problem behaviour. Individual and small-group interventions designed to help these students meet the expectations set out for them in various school environments are increasingly being developed as part of the school’s counselling program. Recognizing that oftentimes there are greater forces at play other than a child simply not “knowing” how to properly behave in a particular situation, counselling is often employed as a vehicle for supplementing expectation-based models with dispute resolution or problem-solving components intended to help these children better manage conflict without resorting to aggressive, anti-social behaviour.

Quite often overlooked is the invaluable resource that many of the students in the school represent in terms of understanding the “secrets” to social success. Counsellors and other special educators commonly employ one or more of numerous resources available that are specifically designed to facilitate social skill development in “at-risk” children. Due to the universal nature of the strategies commonly presented in these programs, the unique, interpersonal dynamics that play a critical part of the culture found in every classroom and school are often left unexplored. Consequently, the context in which a given child understands a particular problem (frequently in terms of the personalities involved) cannot be adequately addressed from this perspective.

Of even greater significance to addressing this issue is the child’s own personal motivation for change, a concept fundamental to any counselling process. Adult-driven
initiatives aimed at influencing change in a child’s behaviour frequently feed into the kind of
struggles that result in a young person concentrating his or her energy on sustaining
undesirable or oppositional behaviour. As a result, new conflict emerges this time between the
child and the very individual whose initial purpose was to help teach the young person skills at
resolution.

As explored in this study, how a child is “situated” in terms of a dialogue with an adult
around the subject of conflict impacts considerably both the problem-solving capacity of the
young person, and more importantly, his or her motivation to engage it.

Both in terms of the children who have been identified as skilled at resolving or navigating
around conflict, as well as those who seem to consistently lack this ability, counselling
programs, rather than teaching resolution, may better serve their schools by promoting student
initiative and innovation to address the problem of conflict because of the potential this serves
to establish a powerful, more intrinsically-oriented, source of motivation for change both on an
individual and school-wide level.
POSTSCRIPT

Meta-Narrative Reflections on the Research Process

Prior to actually sitting down with the six young people involved in this study, I had not anticipated the initial sense of discomfort that seemed to characterize the first few moments in each of the introductory sessions with the participants. Although one-on-one discussions between adult and child are fairly commonplace within a school setting, I came to realize through this study that in my experience as a classroom teacher, encounters of this nature were almost exclusively the result of concerns related to either behaviour or learning. Hard pressed was I to remember an occasion in which I had engaged in a free and open dialogue with another student in a one-on-one setting. In trying to make sense of this, I was reminded of a former instructor’s advice to avoid meeting alone with students on the grounds that it left one vulnerable to accusations of inappropriate conduct! Although I felt fairly certain that this had not negatively impacted my willingness to engage in such dialogues, I found myself wondering on several occasions during the study why these types of discussions were not a natural part of my professional practice.

In the months that have passed since completing the study, I have noticed a significant change in my approach to “teaching.” In addition to taking issue with the term itself, I am much more aware of the complex and diverse relationships I share with the young people at my school. Far more inclined am I to discard my own way of making sense of developments around me in favour of gaining a young person’s take on a situation. I find myself listening in ways that I had not been previously aware existed. Rarely do I now engage in any discussion without giving added consideration to the interpersonal dynamics of the situation.

As a researcher (and a fairly new one at that) this study left me feeling an awkward mixture of exhaustion and exhilaration. I plunged into this research with clear intentions
backed by a rigid process designed to foster certain revelations specific to the topic of conflict in schools. After having explored the literature in this area, I was convinced that certain gaps were evident. I felt that my research questions were clear and well grounded and that the investigative procedure I designed would best ‘tap’ into an undiscovered wisdom related to the topic. I envisioned a clear and specific ending to the study, one characterized by a sense of completion with research questions confidently answered.

My journey has proven to be a quite different one. From the outset, I felt myself pulled away from the topic of conflict in schools by the fact that my attention seemed to be constantly drawn towards the complex and diverse human relationships involved. Each child’s narrative process was so immensely rich that I found myself consumed by questions about the individual, about myself, and how our different ways of being in the world influenced the telling of these stories. I wondered why something said in a particular session would dwell in my mind for hours later. Expectations I had about the way in which each individual would respond to the different stages of the study often proved ill-conceived. On some occasions, it would seem as though a different child had shown up for a session. Stories changed. Interest levels shifted drastically, susceptible to factors like a parent’s decision to play soccer with a sibling outside. Each time I came away from the session with notes that seemed somehow distant from my focus. At times, I found myself longing for a more disciplined and empirically-grounded approach.

It was not until I set myself to the task of analyzing the data that I was overwhelmed by the realization that the questions I had initially set out to answer had yielded a much wider scope of inquiry. As I worked through the process of freely seeing meaning in the extensive reflections I had collected, I became more aware of how the “telling” of these stories informed me of the role that interpersonal dynamics play in facilitating or hindering a young person’s
capacity to make sense of conflict in his or her world. This realization marked a significant
turning point in the study. Previously, I had regarded my reflections on each child's narrative
process as a means for determining which aspects of his or her story were of greatest personal
significance, and to what extent my presence in each narrative was felt. However, once it
became apparent that the narrative relationships themselves were of critical importance to the
process of making sense of these stories, the need to reconceptualize the nature and purpose of
my research became evident.
APPENDIX A

Dispute-Resolution Procedure

(Teaching Students To Be Peacemakers Program)¹

1) Describe what you want. Define the conflict as a small and mutual problem:
   "I want to play on the computer, but you are using it.

2) Describe how you feel. Explore your feelings and communicate them openly:
   "I feel angry because you seem to always get to the computer first, and I never get a turn to
   use it."

3) Describe the reasons behind your wants and feelings. Identify and express
   cooperative intentions, separate interest from positions, and differentiate interests
   before trying to integrate them:
   "I think it is only fair that everyone in the class be given an equal chance to use the computer. This
   includes you as well. It’s frustrating when it seems like some students have an unfair advantage
   to use things in the classroom that are supposed to be shared by everyone."

4) Summarize your understanding of what the other person wants, how he or she feels,
   and the reasons underlying both. Attempt to see the problem from both perspectives
   simultaneously:
   "I understand that you think whoever gets to the computer first should be allowed to play on it, and
   that this works well for you because your desk is closer to the computer than anybody else’s, but on the
   other hand, everyone should have a fair chance at using all of the activities in our classroom."

5) Propose three options for resolving the conflict that maximize joint benefits. Engage
   in creative thinking about ways to realize a win-win solution.
   "Maybe we can organize a system where people sign-up for the computer, as well as other
   activities that may be farther away from your desk. We could also both play on the computer
   together, and take turns choosing which games to play, or maybe you could play on it for the
   first half of free time and then it could be my turn."

6) Jointly choose one solution and formalize the agreement with a contract or
   handshake. Reach an agreement, either formally (written) or informally (verbal) that
   specifies how each disputant should act in the future and how the agreement will be
   reviewed and renegotiated if it does not work; respect the terms of the agreement.
   "Okay, let’s try sharing the computer. You can choose the first game, and then I’ll pick the
   next one. If this doesn’t work, we could ask the teacher if we could organize a sign-up system
   so that everyone can have a fair chance at using all of the activities in the class."

¹adapted from Johnson & Johnson, 1995a, 1995b.
Prior to beginning the study, all of the participants’ classroom teachers will be asked to provide a brief written summary outlining the reasons why they identified the student as appropriate for this study. These remarks will be included as part of the research data and analyzed alongside the child’s narrative. They will also be included in the final draft of the thesis as part of the student’s overall profile.

Confidentiality

Any information resulting from this research study will be kept strictly confidential. All identifying information will be deleted from the study and a pseudonym of the child’s choice will be used when reporting the findings. At no time will identifying information be available to anyone other than the researcher and his research supervisor. All paper files and password protected computer files will be kept in a locked filing cabinet to which only Vincent White holds the key, and will be destroyed 5 years following completion of the study. Refusal to participate or withdrawal from the study at any time will not jeopardize in anyway your child’s academic program or access to counselling services at his/her school.

Contact

This study is completely voluntary and you may decline your child’s participation or choose to withdraw him/her from the study at any time. If any aspect of the outlined procedure remains unclear or if you have any further questions or concerns, you are encouraged to talk with either Vincent White, or his research supervisor, Dr. Marla Arvay, in the Department of Counselling Psychology at UBC, at (604)822-5259.

If you have any concerns about your child’s rights or treatment as a research subject you are encourage to contact the Director of the UBC Office of Research Services and Administration, at (604)822-8598.

Consent

I understand that my child’s participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may refuse participation or withdraw him or her from the study at any time without repercussions.

I have received a copy of this consent form for my own records.

I consent to participate in this study.

Participant Signature ___________________________ Date ___________________________

Signature of Witness ___________________________ Date ___________________________

Page 2 of 2
APPENDIX C

Interview Procedure

Initial Prompt:
*Student's Name,* I'm hoping that by meeting with you and a few other students from your grade, that I might be able to gain a better understanding of the kind of conflicts that occur at your school, and how students commonly deal with them. Although adults often observe situations in which young people are engaged in conflict, it's sometimes hard for us to really understand what's going on. So, in many ways, you are very much the "expert" on this topic. I was wondering if you might help me learn a little more about conflict at your school based on your experiences.

I'd like to begin by asking you to remember an occasion at school when you were aware that a conflict was occurring. This may or may not have involved you personally. Tell me the whole story including as much detail as you can remember.

Questions to ask as the opportunity presents itself, and only if the student does not make specific reference to them during his/her story:

- If you had to describe what this particular conflict was over, what would you say?
- Do you think that many other students face this kind of conflict? (If Yes) What do you think are some of the reasons why that is?
- What were some of the feelings you had when this conflict was occurring?
- When you think back to this time, what was most at stake if this problem didn't get worked out successfully?
- Have you ever been told by a teacher or adult how to deal with a situation like this one? (If yes) What did they say you should do? Did/would that have helped you deal with this situation?
- If this conflict was handled successfully what would the outcome look like?
- How did you deal with this conflict?
- How would this conflict have been different if:
  A) Adults were present/absent?
  B) Genders were reversed?
  C) The other person was a different student?
  D) There were more/less people involved?
  E) Your school had/didn't have a Code of Conduct?
- Can you think of anyway that we could help other students deal successfully with a situation like the one you just described?
APPENDIX D

Conflict-Related Themes from the Children’s Stories

Sources of Conflict

- Conflict can arise when students insult each other with put-downs. This can even lead to the possibility of a physical fight occurring, especially among boys who may try to act tough around their peers. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- Conflicts frequently occur when students do not show respect for each other’s belongings. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- On the playground, conflict often occurs as a result of Grade 7s (particularly, the boys) trying to exert power over kids in other grades. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- Conflict can occur in the classroom when a student who is attention-seeking takes advantage of a teacher who is unable to handle the situation properly. (Accuracy rating: 9/10)

- Most students like to join in when a class is taking advantage of the teacher. Very few are willing to stand-up and tell everyone to stop. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

Prevention

- Kids need to be able to read social situations like how other kids are feelings and whether they are being excluded from something. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- If a student is planning to exclude another student from an activity, he or she should either give that person a good explanation of why, or not talk about it at all in front of that person. (Accuracy rating: 9/10)

- Ignoring a put-down or insult is one of the best ways to prevent a conflict from occurring because it shows the other person that you don’t really care, and so he or she will likely go away and just leave it. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- Kids should not become too attached to one person. They should make friends with many people. (Accuracy rating: 9/10)

- This problem (Grade 7s trying to exert power over kids in other grades) might be prevented if Grade Sevens were more involved in activities that included students from other Grades, so that they wouldn’t consider themselves so separate. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)
Conflict-Related Themes from the Children's Stories

Adult advice/intervention

- In general, adults (either at school or home) have not given worthwhile advice on how to handle the kind of conflicts you described in your story. (Accuracy rating: 8/10)

- Teachers could play a role in helping resolve these kinds of conflicts by either being there to stop Grade Sevens from pushing others around (Accuracy rating: 9/10), asking students to explain their actions when they are not being respectful of others (Accuracy rating: 7/10), or talking to the Grade Sevens as a whole group to tell them that this behaviour is unacceptable. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

- Advice from parents (Accuracy rating 6/10), and a certain instinct (Accuracy rating: 8/10) about not wanting to let a situation upset the teacher and interfere with studies, may encourage a student to intervene when the class is getting out of control.

- Parents and teachers play an important role in helping their children deal successfully with problems/conflict. (Accuracy rating: 9/10)

Personality

- A lot of what determines how a conflict unfolds depends on the personalities of the people involved. (Accuracy rating: 7/10)

- A student’s personality can very much affect the way in which a conflict is handled. (Accuracy rating: 9/10)

- A student’s personality can influence the way in which a conflict is handled. (Accuracy rating: 9/10)

- One student’s popularity influences the way friendships unfold/change, (Accuracy rating: 8/10) and conflict occurs. (Accuracy rating: 7/10)
APPENDIX D –Continued

Conflict-Related Themes from the Children’s Stories

Conflict Resolution/Management

• By getting involved, other students can stop a conflict from escalating to the point of a physical fight occurring. (Accuracy rating: 9/10) This can be done without involving adults (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

• Students try to get revenge on other kids as a way of showing them that they didn’t like something the other person did. This usually does not solve the conflict because the other person only ends up getting angry. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

• In these situations, students should not reciprocate or try to get revenge because it will probably only make the conflict worse, perhaps even leading to a physical fight. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

• Some students prefer to fight out their conflict quietly because it can be embarrassing to fight in front of a group of people, (Accuracy rating: 9/10) and also because students don’t want the teacher to get involved and possibly get their friend in trouble. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

• The School Code of Conduct isn’t helpful if a student is caught up in the emotion of a conflict. Often the person is only thinking about reacting based on how they’re feeling. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)

• If a person chooses to intervene in a situation when another student is taking advantage of the teacher, he or she should be careful to do it away from everybody’s attention. (Accuracy rating: 6/10) If this isn’t possible he or she should try to do it in a humourous manner. (Accuracy rating: 7/10)

• Talking with the person involved in the conflict and letting them know how you’re feeling is an effective way of dealing with it. (Accuracy rating: 10/10)
APPENDIX E

References


