Peacemaking: Conflict Resolution Using Cool Clues for Elementary Students

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ABSTRACT

It is recommended that violence prevention interventions start early for students and include conflict resolution education and social-emotional skills training components. Although school-based programs have shown some promise, community-based or out-of-school time programs require more study. A social-emotional learning-focused conflict resolution intervention using role-play and puppetry was implemented in a small afterschool program as an exploratory study. Student participants' conflict resolution knowledge and after-school teacher observation of their pro-social skill behaviors were assessed pre- and post- program. Although many participants scored high in conflict resolution knowledge pre-program, they appeared to gain some additional knowledge, specifically on disagreements between friends and empathy for other's feelings. After-school teachers, however, observed no significant overall differences in their pro-social behaviors pre- and post- program. All in all, as an exploratory study, the slight positive changes in knowledge provide data to suggest continuing the curriculum with more emphasis on the weakest topics as well as more role-play or puppet play about friendship and sharing behaviors.

Introduction

Interpersonal conflict, a natural and unavoidable part of elementary student interactions at school, occurs when goals or needs are not met and students become frustrated. When unable to resolve the didactic or group conflict, some students respond with aggressive behaviors. These unhealthy behavioral response patterns may continue from elementary into secondary school where peer group relations become more competitive. In some students, their inability to handle conflict and confrontation may lead to youth violence (Rutgers Center for Negotiation and Conflict Resolution, n.d.), the intentional use of physical force that can cause injury. In addition to physical harm, youth

violence leads to increased mental and physical health risks as well as poor academic and social health outcomes (World Health Organization, 2015). Because risk behaviors for youth violence can begin early, it has been suggested that prevention programs and interventions should start in childhood (World Health Organization, 2015).

Community-based violence prevention for elementary students
Community-based violence prevention interventions aimed toward all students at the elementary level have been studied, though they often result in mixed findings. In a recent review, general universal prevention interventions for children showed

very little or no effect on childhood aggression (Hendriks et al., 2018). Other, more specific, types of interventions have been attempted, as well. These interventions can be categorized as: (a) conflict resolution education programs, and (b) social emotional learning programs. Not only do students need to eliminate violent behavior, they also need to resolve conflicts non-violently and self-regulate their emotions and behaviors (Johns et al., 2005). Specifically, conflict resolution education instructs students how to negotiate non-violent solutions by identifying and dealing with the conflict in a safe and healthy manner (Rutgers Center for Negotiation and Conflict Resolution, n.d.). Conflict resolution processes can be taught as a process curriculum (a plan of learning using lessons and units) or intervention program where students can role-play non-violent responses to potential situations (Rutgers Center for Negotiation and Conflict Resolution, n.d.). A recent study on conflict resolution examined the skills instructors used when working with elementary school girls. The qualitative study noted that instruction in conflict resolution skills helped girls better collaborate (Fraser, 2017). In addition, physically aggressive behaviors of elementary students in another study were related to higher risk of substance abuse (Fite et al., 2016); relational aggression at the elementary level has been shown to be related to higher risk for substance abuse, mental health problems, emotional problems, and aggression and violence problems. Interventions focused on decreasing aggression and fighting at the elementary level may also be useful substance abuse prevention interventions (Fite et al., 2016).

School-based violence prevention for elementary students: Social-emotional learning
In an analysis and a review, school-based, universal cognitive-behavioral-focused interventions seemed to positively impact aggression in students (Barnes et al., 2014; Waschbusch et al., 2018). To meet increasing student need, teachers have conducted many of these mental health interventions over the years with mixed effectiveness. For example,

teacher-led universal prevention interventions seemed to positively affect internalizing behaviors [i.e., anxiety, depression, loneliness], especially for female students; however, they had no significant effect on externalizing behaviors [i.e., aggression, property destruction] (Franklin et al., 2017). For elementary student participants, higher quality interventions were associated with lower levels of victimization (Finkelhor et al., 2014).

The most effective school-based conflict resolution programs teach social-emotional skills such as communication and problem solving to students to assist them in finding non-violent solutions to their disputes. Social-emotional skills are soft skills that allow individuals to regulate emotions, manage behaviors, and develop healthy interpersonal relationships (Johns et al., 2005). Providing conflict resolution focusing on social-emotional skills to students may help prevent and de-escalate conflict situations (Rutgers Center for Negotiation and Conflict Resolution, n.d.). Students with poor social-emotional skills respond to interpersonal situations and conflicts in anti-social ways (Johns et al., 2005). Though students with poor social-emotional skills respond to interpersonal situations and conflicts in anti-social ways, one promising strategy for developing social-emotional skills are interventions taught in schools (World Health Organization, 2015). Because peer relations become important in the elementary school years, social-emotional learning programs hope to improve student social skills such as emotional self-regulation, goal setting, and interpersonal relationships and communication. Social-emotional learning programs have also demonstrated long-term improvement in social-emotional skills in participants (Taylor et al., 2017).

Generally, social-emotional learning programs for elementary students have demonstrated some small, indirect positive effects on aggression outcomes (Jones et al., 2017). For elementary school students, a social-emotional learning intervention improved participants' pro-social behaviors and conflict resolution skills (Gol-Goven, 2017). Elementary

school students in Turkey also participated in a conflict resolution and social-emotional skills training program for 10 weeks. The program demonstrated positive effects on constructive conflict resolution behaviors, aggression, and pro-social skills (Akgun & Araz, 2014). In a longitudinal study, anger self-regulation, a skill commonly taught in social-emotional learning curricula, influenced levels of physical aggression in a large group of elementary students (Cooley & Fite, 2016). In summary, mismanaged or anti-social responses to interpersonal conflict can influence students' well-being, especially for those with poor social-emotional skills. It is imperative to find creative (and fun) solutions to teach conflict and violence prevention to students at an early age.

Study Purpose

Integrating conflict resolution in a community program implemented in a school setting is a novel approach, which may positively affect aggression outcomes in students. On the one hand, community-based aggression and violence prevention interventions were reviewed and did seem to somewhat decrease aggression, though more research was recommended (Farrington et al., 2017). On the other hand, school-based, teacher-instructed conflict and violence prevention has demonstrated mixed results (Franklin et al., 2017). Although there have been many types of violence and conflict resolution interventions implemented, a combination of conflict resolution education including social-emotional skills training has been viewed as a promising intervention (Rutgers Center for Negotiation and Conflict Resolution, n.d.). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine the effect of a social-emotional learning-focused conflict resolution intervention for elementary students. The study also examined the conflict resolution knowledge and pro-social behaviors of the students before and after a community-based program implemented in a school setting.

Methods

Sample

Three afterschool teachers working in a rural school district's afterschool program were asked to participate in the study, and 100% agreed to participate. All were white, two were female, and each was between the ages of 18-22 years old.

Twenty-seven elementary school students attending a small, rural, Missouri public school district's afterschool program were also asked to participate in the study. All received parent/guardian consent and gave assent to participate. The students were in kindergarten through second grade. Most (11/27; 41%) were in kindergarten, followed by second (9/27; 33%), and first (7/27; 26%) grade. The students included 13 girls (48%); almost all (25/27; 93%) were white.

Procedure

The public school district held its afterschool program for elementary students in a local recreation center from 3-6pm every weekday. The afterschool program included supervised physical activity time, nutritious snack time, study/tutoring time, arts/games time, and dedicated time for any special educational events provided by local community groups. During fall 2020, a local substance use prevention coalition provided the Peacemaking curriculum to students. The purpose of the curriculum was to assist students in learning conflict resolution knowledge and behaviors.

Training

Following health authority guidance due to the CoVid-19 pandemic, afterschool program student numbers were decreased by half, programs were held mostly outdoors, and students and staff were distanced and masked. The coalition chose the Peacemaking curriculum, including Cool Clues conflict resolution steps, because it combined social-emotional learning skills into its conflict resolution intervention. In addition, the coalition thought the use of a low-tech, puppet-based program would be fun, attention-grabbing, and calming for the students during this difficult time.

Two weeks before the teaching the Peacemaking curriculum, six community substance use prevention members who volunteered to teach the lessons in the district afterschool program were trained by a Certified Health Education Specialist following the training component manual instructions (Mercer County Behavioral Health Commission, 2017). The six-hour training was conducted over three afternoons. The training involved: curricular overview/goals, presentation skills, introduction to puppetry skills and the puppet personalities, and lesson presentation practice. As noted in Lee et al.'s 2015 study, drama-based instructional strategies like those employed in this study affect academic achievement and social outcomes.

Lessons/Activities
One of four 45-minute long, manualized lessons [Lesson 1: 'The Swing '; Lesson 2: 'A New Home for Buddy'; Lesson 3 'Daisy's Picnic'; Lesson 4 'Let's All be Peacemakers'] was delivered by the coalition volunteers each week for four weeks to small groups of students divided according to grade level. The Cool Clues steps to conflict resolution were presented in each lesson using active learning techniques like role-play, games, and artwork. Coalition volunteers first introduced the purpose of the curriculum. Volunteers then explained the four steps of Peacemaking using the Cool Clues (I-statements, empathy, responsibility, and problem solving). Volunteers then explained the story setting as a large pond on a farmer's land, and described each of their puppets and their puppets' personalities who lived near the pond. Puppets included Arnold the farmer as narrator, Tad Pole as the youngest pond resident, Buddy Beaver as leader, Clay-Ton Crab with low self-esteem, Handy Gander as the handy goose, Daisy Duck as the loyal friend, Freddie Fish as the coolest character, Merry Mermaid as the gossip, and Bull Frog as the wisest of the group (see Figure 1). Puppet masters changed their voices to suit the characters and gestured with the puppets as they talked.

Figure 1: Peacemaking Puppeteers

The first lesson used a role-play and maze activity to introduce students to all four Cool Clues steps to conflict resolution. In this story, Merry pushes Clay-Ton off a swing because she could not wait her turn. Bull teaches the group about how to problem-solve during arguments and be a peacemaker. Bull says: "Clay-Ton and Merry, let's take a minute to cool off. I would like to tell you about the four steps or clues to becoming a peacemaker. I call them Cool Clues." He explains each of the clues and asks the group for help. The other puppets and students help Clay-Ton and Merry use I-statements, tell how each may be feeling, discuss what each did to contribute to the argument, and brainstorm ways to solve the problem. This story also teaches social-emotional skills of emotional self-regulation and interpersonal relationships.

The next lesson used brainstorming and a game to emphasize the Cool Clue of taking personal responsibility for actions. In this story, Handy and Buddy, best friends, disagree on how best to build a home by the pond, and unkind words are said. The disagreement escalates until Merry intervenes. Merry now takes the two friends (as well as the student participants) through the Cool Clues steps that she previously learned. Focused on the Cool Clue of responsibility, Handy states: "I guess Buddy was glad to get a helping hand from me, but when I started to complain about how he was building the house, he probably wished I would go away and leave him alone." At the end of the lesson, Handy and Buddy decide on a solution. Handy would drag the trees, and Buddy would pack the mud for the house. This story also teaches the social-emotional skills of responsibility and positive relationships.

The third lesson was skill practice using a game and a scenario. In this story, Daisy invites all to a peacemaking picnic where the puppets role-play difficult situations. During the picnic, Freddie is picking on Tad for how his shirt looks. Bull says: "Now, we know boys, that name-calling and punching would only make the problem worse.

If you don't mind, I'm going to invite everyone at the picnic to help suggest some other solutions to this problem." The puppet group and students discuss each of the Cool Clues conflict resolution steps during the scenario. This story teaches the social-emotional skills of interpersonal relationships and communication.

The final lesson used discussion and review to reinforce conflict resolution skills. In this story, Arnold and Daisy share with Bull how they used the Cool Clues during interactions with their families the previous night. Merry, Buddy, and Clay-Ton stop by, as well, to share how they applied the conflict resolution skills in their daily lives. Arnold summarizes by saying: "I think we all learned a lot from our friends today. Remember, you can be a peacemaker anywhere!" This story, like the previous three, teaches social-emotional skills of communication and positive relationships.

Instruments
The Peacemaking Evaluation Activity (Mercer County Behavioral Health Commission, 2017), a 10-statement Yes/No quiz accompanying the Peacemaking curriculum, was used to assess student conflict resolution knowledge before and after the intervention program. The quiz contained items taken directly from curriculum content (Mercer County Behavioral Health Commission, 2017), including handling disagreements, problem-solving, and Cool Clues conflict resolution steps (I-statements, empathy, responsibility, problem solving). The scoring for the evaluation activity is based on the percentage of correct answers given by students.

Child Social Behavior Questionnaire/Teacher Version (CSBQ-T) (Warden et al., 2003), with good psychometrics (four factors accounted for 70% of the variance when instrument was previously validated), was used pre and post Peacemaking curriculum by the afterschool teachers. They observed and rated students on a 5-point Likert scale of Very Often to Never on five pro-social behaviors observed. Higher scores indicated higher levels of observed pro-social behaviors.

After Institutional Review Board approval in fall 2020, students completed and returned the confidential, written pre-quiz and post-quiz to the researcher. The quizzes were written immediately following the first and last Peacemaking lesson presentations, respectively. Afterschool teachers completed their confidential, written pre-CSBQ-T and post-CSBQ-T responses for each student in their group before the first Peacemaking lesson and after the last lesson, respectively. The responses were then returned to the researcher following their completion.

Analysis

Percentages were used to compare pre and post Peacemaking Evaluation Activity scores of students. Paired samples t-test statistics for pre-post-CSBQ-T subscale scores, recorded by the afterschool teachers for each of their students, were calculated.

Results

When pre and post Peacemaking Evaluation Activity scores for students were compared side-by-side for each question, the percentage of correct answers improved for each of the ten questions. However, some questions were 90% correct in the pre-program test including: "it's OK to call people unkind names" and "it's kind to apologize to others." The largest gains, though, were for the questions: "a Peacemaker is patient, kind, and forgiving," "it is OK for friends to disagree," "a Peacemaker hurts others' feelings," "it is important to think of my classmates' feelings," "a Peace-taker can hurt others' feelings," and "I can be a Peacemaker by using Cool Clues." See Table 1.

For pre and post CSBQ-T scores, a series of five paired samples t-tests were computed, one for each of the five subscales (Sharing, Befriending, Physically Hurting, Psychologically Hurting, Victim of Bullying). Of those five, there were no statistically significant differences found. See Table 2.

Table 1: Pre/Post Peacemaking Evaluation Activity

	Pre-test Correct (n=24)	% Correct	Post-Test Correct (n=22)	% Correct
Question 1: It's Ok to call people unkind names	22	91.67	22	100
Question 2: A Peacemaker is patient, kind, forgiving	18	75	21	95.45
Question 3: It's Ok for friends to disagree	16	66.67	21	95.45
Question 4: It's kind to apologize to others	22	91.67	22	100
Question 5: A Peacemaker hurts other's feelings	15	62.5	21	95.45
Question 6: Fighting can help solve problems	22	91.67	21	95.45
Question 7: It's important to think of my classmates' feelings	16	66.67	20	90.91
Question 8: A Peace-taker can hurt other's feelings	11	45.83	22	100
Question 9: It's helpful to talk about my feelings	20	83.33	22	100
Question 10: I can be a Peacemaker by using Cool Clues	14	58.33	22	100

Table 2: Paired Samples t-Test Results for the Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire Scales

Items	n	Pre Mean	Pre SD	Post Mean	Post SD	df	t	p
Sharing	27	1.78	0.85	1.93	0.87	26	-0.89	0.38
Befriending	27	1.81	0.92	1.67	0.73	26	1.00	0.33
Physically Hurting	27	4.78	0.51	4.56	0.75	26	1.65	0.11
Psychologically Hurting	27	4.96	0.91	4.78	0.58	26	1.55	0.13
Victim of Bullying	27	4.85	0.53	5.00	0.00	26	-1.44	0.16

Note: Scores ranged from 1 (very often) to 5 (never)

Discussion/Conclusion

In school-based conflict resolution and anti-violence interventions for elementary students, it seems that results have had little or mixed effectiveness (Carroll et al., 2017; Gol-Goven, 2017; Barnes et al., 2014) regardless of student demographics (Waschbusch et al., 2018). In community-based interventions, results have also been mixed (Hendriks et al., 2018). In this study, a community-based intervention set in an afterschool environment, results demonstrated no significant differences in student knowledge or behaviors. It is possible that the school setting is more disciplined as opposed to the community recreation afterschool setting in this study. The afterschool setting included physical activity time, snack time, homework help, and added intervention. The community substance use prevention member volunteers were not the students' classroom teachers, and therefore students may not have listened as well to the instructional lessons and puppetry.

In addition, the small number of lessons, although appropriate for keeping this age group's attention, may not have been enough content to significantly improve knowledge scores. A similar study with similar methodology, set in a non-US city and included both private and public schools, was implemented for the whole school year with more positive effects on behaviors and skills than seen in the current study (Gol-Goven, 2017). Although conflict resolution and social-emotional learning were combined, perhaps some of the topics were not covered or not covered in-depth in the few lessons in our study. Although students did improve in some knowledge questions, improvements may have been due to increased familiarity with the Peacemaking curriculum's vocabulary.

As children with no parents or guardians at home when they return from school, the students in the study are at-risk for anti-social behaviors. Another study also seemed to show significantly better intervention outcomes for reduced teacher-rated aggressive behaviors than for those in this current study (Carroll et al., 2017) than for those in this current study. Students in this study may have possessed more protective factors such as self-esteem to counter their risk. Interventions that start early and focus on more than one risk factor, such as the one in the current study for elementary students that combined social-emotional learning into a conflict resolution program, should be at least somewhat effective. However, not only individual risk factors but also community factors must be considered. The intervention in this study attempted to include community coalition involvement and an afterschool program setting to act as protective factors to reduce violence risk but with very limited results.

Also, the school district in this study has just started an emphasis in the elementary level on social-emotional learning, and this intervention was used to supplement classroom instruction as best practices suggests (Johns et al., 2005). After learning in the classroom supplemented by the learning in the afterschool program, it would be expected that teacher-observed student behavior would have improved, but it did not. Higher scores on the behavior scale indicated more pro-social behaviors of students observed by the afterschool teachers. It seemed that students were already exhibiting pro-social behaviors by not physically or physiologically hurting or bullying each other before the intervention and continued to exhibit those behaviors after the intervention. This is good news, and the researchers hope these positive behaviors continue inside and outside of school. Practicing social emotional learning skills allows students to positively interact with their peers, build friendships, resolve conflict, and make appropriate decisions. On the other hand, sharing and befriending behaviors were not observed as much throughout the period. These social skills may be topics that would have to continue to be taught and reinforced both inside and outside of school to prevent and de-escalate any future potential conflict situations.

There were several limitations or biases for this study. Due to the limited statistical analysis options, only descriptive statistics could be used, and any significant differences in the knowledge data could not be determined. Another limitation of this study was the number of students involved. Including more students would have increased the power of the study; however, the number of students involved was limited by public health authorities due to the CoVid-19 pandemic that occurred over the study period. Fewer students did not allow for social interactions in larger groups, and teachers may not have observed typical social development and behaviors in the smaller groups due to the climate of the pandemic. Without a control group, generalizability of results is limited.

Also due to the pandemic and their work schedules, parents were picking up students at irregular times, therefore some students were missing on either pre- or post-test day and follow-up did not occur.

All in all, as an exploratory study, the slight positive changes in knowledge provide data to suggest continuing the curriculum with more emphasis on the weakest topics as well as more role-play or puppet play about friendship and sharing behaviors. Future research, post-pandemic, should expand the number of students and add a control group to help determine if effects were from the intervention, and not any outside factors. In addition, other out-of-school settings other than afterschool programs could be attempted such as camps or recreation and community center settings.

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