

Lesson 1

Conflict resolution

How can we deal with serious disagreements?

Learning objective	Introduction to a six-step approach to conflict resolution.
Student tasks	Analyse a conflict; find solutions.
Resources	Sheets of paper or copybooks and pens. Student handout 4.1.
Method	Whole class and optional pair work.

Conceptual learning

Conflicts are part of daily life. They need not be seen as negative events, but as clashes of interests between individuals or groups. In politics, conflicts are even an important part of the public discussion. Only through open conflict and the search for compromise do all the different social groups feel heard and integrated. Conflict resolution (looking for compromise) is a skill that can be learned. This lesson aims at contributing to this goal.

The following descriptions of a conflict resolution appear in this lesson and it is important that the teacher is aware of their meaning.

Win-win: this describes a situation in which both parties benefit in the same way from the agreed resolution to the conflict and feel that they have achieved what they wanted. This is seen as the most ideal conflict resolution situation, since it helps to ensure that the conflict does not re-appear.

Win-lose or lose-win: this describes a situation where the resolution of the conflict has meant that one party has lost and the other has won. This kind of situation often means that the conflict will re-appear, as there is little benefit to the loser.

Lose-lose: This describes the situation in which neither party gains anything from the resolution of the conflict. This situation often means that the conflict has only temporarily disappeared and is more than likely to resurface.

The lesson

The teacher starts the lesson by writing the word “CONFLICT” on the left side of the blackboard. The students are then asked to write down on a sheet of paper expressions and words associated with the word “conflict” which come into their minds.

The same is then done with the word “PEACE”, which the teacher writes on the right side of the blackboard. The teacher then asks about 10 students for their words. The results are brought together on the blackboard and the students then give their comments on the following questions:

- Are they surprised at any of the words chosen?
- Do all the words associated with conflict appear to be negative, whereas the ones associated with peace have a positive connotation?

The teacher then asks the students to give examples of conflicts that they themselves have experienced or that have occurred in their environment. He/she asks them to think whether these conflicts belong to the category of conflicts that could be resolved and that are the first step towards compromise, or to the category of conflicts that cannot be resolved. The teacher then introduces them to the idea that conflicts do not necessarily lead to violence and that more constructive approaches to conflicts are possible.

The teacher then introduces them to a concrete example of a conflict that can occur in a family.

“Katja, the 18-year-old daughter, wants to watch a video, which she recently received from a friend. Her brother Martin, 15 years old, would like to see his favourite television programme.”

The teacher gives each student a copy of student handout 4.1 and begins to analyse this conflict using the six-step approach described below.

Steps 1 and 2 are undertaken with the whole group, guided by the teacher, who insists on finding out the real “needs” of both parties, and in forming a clear definition of the conflict.

In step 1 it is important that the real needs of each of the parties are spelled out in a non-provocative way. Thought must be given to what the real needs behind the problem are, as these can differ from the needs expressed by the parties themselves. In step 2, the problem behind the conflict is formulated in a way that both parties can agree upon.

Step 3 consists of thinking of possible solutions. At this stage, the solutions should not be commented on or judged – all contributions should be welcomed. Step 3 could take place in pairs, followed by an exchange of views (or partners?). The teacher then introduces the concept of the “lose-lose”, “win-lose”, “lose-win” or “win-win” approaches in analysing the solutions, and then asks the pairs to evaluate their solutions using this concept (step 4).

If the students discover that none of their solutions results in a win-win situation, they are invited to think further. However, there will always be cases in which a win-win solution is not possible. After presenting their answers, the teacher invites the group to decide which solution is best (step 5). In a real conflict, where the parties are directly involved in this approach to conflict resolution, the parties must accept the solution. The teacher finishes by briefly presenting a possibility for step 6. The essential element of step 6 is that after a certain time (a number of minutes, hours, days or weeks, depending upon the nature of the conflict) the solution is evaluated and, where necessary, adapted.

In conclusion, the teacher supports a discussion about the question whether a tool such as the six-step method could work, in what type of situation, and what would be the consequences if such a tool were widely known about and used. This should be discussed in relation to different groups and contexts, such as the following:

- peer groups;
- family;
- class;
- school;
- state;
- war;
- sport.