I Love Conflict in My Classroom:

Early Childhood Laboratory School Teachers' Conflict Management Throughout Their Careers

A thesis submitted by

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Abstract

This study examined how head teachers at Tufts University's early childhood laboratory schools manage conflict between children in their classrooms. As head teachers, they serve as mentors, create and implement developmentally appropriate and innovative curricula, and are key players in the laboratory school culture of ongoing learning. This qualitative inquiry included individual, semi-structured interviews with five head teachers, a group interview with three of the teachers, and observations in three classrooms. The study found a developmental change in the teachers' conceptualization of and response to children's conflicts. The findings include practices used by teachers in determining how and when to intervene in children's conflicts, as well as several areas in which the teachers still grapple with how to best support children's development through conflict resolution. Implications are discussed in terms of teacher training and further inquiry into best practices for conflict resolution in early childhood classrooms.

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It is easy to spot the toddlers on the playground. They can be found in the sandbox, on the climber, playing with a truck—near, but rarely with, other children. Enthralled in their own world, two-year olds are known to engage repeatedly in what experts call "parallel play." Within a year, most budding preschoolers will have developed a newfound interest in socializing with their peers. Along with this social blossoming of associative and cooperative play comes inevitable conflict.

For the purposes of this paper, conflict will be defined as *a fight, struggle, sharp disagreement or opposition* (Webster's Dictionary, Guralnik, 1980, p. 298). Typical situations that lead to conflicts between young children include: one child takes another's toy; a child knocks over someone else's building, either accidentally or on purpose; a child tells a classmate that she or he cannot join in play; a group of children disagree about the rules of a game they are co-constructing; and, the phrase that inspired the title of Betsy Evans' book about conflict resolution, one child tells another, "You can't come to my birthday party" (Evans, 2002).

Given young children's recent foray into the land of cooperative play, they necessarily lack experience in resolving conflicts. In addition, their executive functioning capabilities—impulse control, emotion regulation, and problem-

solving skills—are only beginning to emerge. At this crucial moment of social-emotional development, teachers can play a key role in aiding children's initial development of these skills. The question is, how?

How can early childhood teachers best support children's nascent conflict resolution skills? Many studies have measured the success of specific interventions, and numerous books market their conflict resolution protocols (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1992; Evans, 2002; Gartrell, 2004; Levin, 1994; Nelsen & Erwin, 2002), but what are the nuances of the processes that master teachers use in the classroom? What treasures might be mined from listening to their accounts of tools they have honed over many years of education, trial and error, and reflective practice? What questions are these teachers still grappling with as they work to scaffold young children's learning around conflict resolution?

These are some of the questions I hoped to answer in my research study about how head teachers at Tufts University's early childhood laboratory schools manage conflict in their classrooms. Laboratory schools play a vital role in the field of early childhood education in four major ways: (1) developing and explaining new and innovative practice, (2) preparing teachers through both education and work experience, (3) conducting child development and education research, and (4) providing services to the community through advocacy and teacher training (Harms & Tracy, 2006, p. 91). The head teachers at the Tufts University laboratory schools are actively engaged in developing innovative practice as leaders in ongoing staff inquiry processes in which they reflect upon the intersection of current research and classroom practices. They develop and

implement developmentally appropriate, play-based curricula, and are observed throughout the year by numerous researchers. The head teachers supervise and mentor both graduate level teaching assistants and undergraduate field work students. I chose the head teachers of a university's laboratory schools particularly for their expertise in the field, their mentor roles for new teachers, and their reflective practice as key players in the laboratory school culture of ongoing learning.

My own work with young children has evolved over the past fourteen years from teaching swimming lessons in California, to directing a children's choir and teaching an after school program in Paraguay, to teaching in NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) accredited early childhood classrooms in the United States. In Seattle, I was a toddler teacher at a day care center, and then a floating teacher at a Latino community center's bilingual preschool, whose curriculum centered around social justice and community involvement. In Cambridge, I co-taught a preschool class at a Reggio-inspired day care center, and I currently co-teach a mixed-age (preschool-kindergarten) afternoon class at the Eliot Pearson Children's School (EPCS), one of the Tufts laboratory schools involved in this study.

The EPCS school philosophy is "based on a socio-constructivist model of teaching and learning where children are actively engaged in the learning process and with a focus on social and collaborative dimensions of learning" ("Eliot-Pearson Children's School–Philosophy," 2013). Constructivist teaching is based on both the constructivist philosophy of education and epistemological theory that

children learn by constructing knowledge, and social constructivism additionally asserts that knowledge is socially constructed (Kamii, 2007). My development as a socio-constructivist educator has been multi-faceted, from teaching at schools that encouraged an emergent curriculum (particularly the Reggio-inspired day care center and EPCS), as well as through professional development workshops, graduate coursework in Early Childhood Education at Lesley University, and in pursuing my masters in Child Development from Tufts University.

Conflict resolution has long been one of my areas of greatest passion as an early childhood educator. In a socio-constructivist environment, this meant facilitating children's construction of conflict resolution together. I had learned—both through observation of other teachers and a smattering of reading on the subject—a commonly used process for conflict resolution with young children focused on encouraging them to express their feelings and to come up with solutions themselves. But last year I began to question and reflect upon the actual effectiveness of my use of the approach. I had a student who seemed to blow through the process, easily completing the steps, accurately anticipating the other child's feelings, but all in an apathetic and rote manner. The process with him seemed entirely ineffectual, and I began to wonder, why are we doing this?

I wanted to find out how other, more experienced and higher-educated teachers might approach the same situation. I was interested in learning much more than could be gleaned from a mere conversation with a mentor teacher, and so I embarked upon this path of in-depth inquiry as a teacher researcher. By engaging in teacher research, a systematic and intentional inquiry of teaching

practices (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990), I hoped to uncover the dynamic, nuanced workings of these teachers' approaches to support children's development around conflict resolution. My questions emerged from an insider perspective of the classroom, and as laboratory school teachers, the participants themselves were familiar with engaging in critical reflection at the crossroads where practice and theory meet (McBride et al., 2012).

This was a qualitative study utilizing naturalistic inquiry, a flexible design which unfolds naturally as field work progresses (Patton, 2002). I conducted individual semi-structured interviews with five teachers, and then allowed patterns to emerge from the data. A thematic analysis illuminated several common themes, which informed the topics then covered in the subsequent semi-structured group interview with three of the five teachers. Classroom observations of conflict situations in those three classrooms proffered additional insight into the concepts discussed by the teachers in the individual and group interviews. The age range of the early childhood classrooms in this study was from 3-6 years old, including preschool (age 3-4), pre-kindergarten (age 4-5), and kindergarten (age 5-6) classrooms.

Managing conflict between children is a common area of classroom management with which new teachers struggle. Although numerous versions of developmentally appropriate conflict resolution protocols are available to teachers, many of the nuances of how these approaches are practiced with children with diverse needs remain unexplained. Even experienced teachers, like myself, are grappling with how to best serve the needs of students who do not

respond to the prescribed protocols. Further inquiry is needed to illuminate nuanced practices, reflections, and questions of these processes.

Review of Literature

This literature review begins by providing a developmental context for the study's investigation of children ages three to six. Piaget's preoperational stage is discussed, as well as young children's perspective taking and theory of mind. The social complexity of peer interactions, friendships, and conflicts are described. It also includes an account of common types of aggression, antisocial and prosocial behaviors typical of these ages, as well as a discussion of impulse control and executive function. The theoretical foundation of the teacher's role in scaffolding learning is reported, followed by the description of a continuum of teacher interventions in children's conflicts. Several common protocols for conflict resolution in early childhood classrooms are delineated. A review of current research includes several recent studies measuring the effectiveness of particular curricula and teacher training programs related to conflict management, as well as qualitative studies that examine the role of play in children's management of conflict, and the context of an early childhood constructivist classroom.

Developmental Background

According to cognitive developmentalist, Jean Piaget (1896-1980), from about 2-6 years old, children are in a stage he called "preoperational." His stage theory, based on several decades of empirical research with children in Geneva, describes the preoperational child as able to utilize symbols in their representation and understanding of the world. Although young children have access to symbolic

functioning (such as words, gestures, drawing and numbers), they are not yet capable of "logical" thought, and are often misled by surface appearances, and confused about causal relationships (Gardner et al., 1996, p. 97-109).

In David Henry Feldman's revision of Piaget's stage theory, he suggests that a demarcation occurs halfway through the stage, at 4 years old, when the preoperational child shifts from the active construction of semiotic functions (age 2-4), to the active elaboration and exploration of that system (age 4-6). According to Feldman (2004), four-year olds temporarily pass through a phase of overconfidence, believing that they can understand all phenomena. Not only does Feldman's theory echo Piaget's assertion that preoperational children operate from their own logic, but they are also often disinterested in any explanations that differ from their own. Given these assessments, we might surmise that effective conflict resolution approaches used and directly taught in preschool or kindergarten classrooms probably would not presuppose children's logical thinking.

Perhaps the most important Piagetian attribute of preoperational children, as related to the current discussion, is egocentrism. According to Piaget's theory, it is systematically difficult for preschool children to take on someone else's point of view, which makes true cooperation nearly impossible (Richardson, 1998, p.114). The extent to which this blanket assertion can be made has been challenged by numerous empirical studies, such as Hart and Goldin-Meadow's (1984) demonstration that young children are, in fact, capable of being nonegocentric art critics. The degree to which children are able to understand

others' perspectives will inevitably impact their ability to resolve conflicts with their peers.

Although there is some disagreement about whether it begins at three or closer to four and a half, it is generally accepted that sometime between three and five years old, children typically acquire a first theory of mind–"they develop an understanding of mental states as representations, they become able to see action as caused by mental representational states like belief, and they come to see mental states such as belief to be informed by experiences with the world" (Wellman, 1990, p. 243). With this understanding of mental states comes the ability to understand that the feelings and behaviors of others might be based upon those mental states. By the age of four, most children are able to attribute mistaken beliefs to others in addition to themselves, as evidenced by their new skills at employing tricks, deception and jokes (Hughes & Leekam, 2004).

At the beginning of Piaget's preoperational stage, 2- and 3-year olds often prefer to be near adults, but by the age of 4, typical children's play becomes much more social. Mildred Parten's 1932 study led to her delineation of four tiers of social complexity in peer interactions: nonsocial activity, parallel play, associative play, and cooperative play. Later research showed that children whose play was more complex showed more prosocial behaviors and less aggression (Shaffer, 2005).

In early childhood, children tend to be more supportive of those they believe to be friends than of children with whom they are merely familiar. They are also more exclusive of others when playing with their friends as compared to

when playing with acquaintances. Although they tend to demonstrate more positive social behaviors with their friends, they also engage in more conflicts: both active hostility (assaults and threats) and reactive hostility (refusals and resistance) (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). It is believed that this is partly due to the increased amount of time that friends spend with one another. Research has found that the resolutions to conflicts between friends are qualitatively different than with others—that they are more likely to negotiate equal resolutions, rather than refusing to compromise or coming up with win/lose conclusions. Friends are also more likely than others to remain in close proximity and continue to engage after the conflict has ended (Rubin et al., 2006).

Aggression, Antisocial and Prosocial Behavior

Despite some discrepancy in labels, there are four main kinds of aggression that will be elucidated for the purposes of this study: (1) instrumental aggression, defined as hurtful behavior with the goal of obtaining something that someone else has; (2) reactive aggression, which is an impulsive retaliation for a hurt, and can be either physical or verbal; (3) relational aggression, including nonphysical acts aimed at hurting or alienating others socially; and (4) hostile aggression, which consists of aggressive acts with the goal of harming or injuring someone (Berger, 2009; Shaffer, 2005). Although these kinds of aggression are not solely dependent on developmental changes, the frequency of certain kinds of aggression in conflicts does tend to change over time, from toddlerhood, when conflicts tend to arise around toys and resources, to preschool, when conflicts are more often based on differences of opinion (Rubin et al., 2006), and can lead to

more of the latter three kinds of aggression mentioned above. Language plays an important role in this change, with physical aggression tending to increase as language skills decrease (Estrem, 2005; Adams, 1999).

Antisocial behavior, similar to hostile aggression, can be described as "deliberate hurtfulness or destruction aimed at another person," while prosocial behavior is "helpfulness and kindness without any obvious benefit for oneself" (Berger, 2009, p. 294). By the age of 4 or 5, most children have the capacity to deliberately act prosocially or antisocially (Berger, 2009). Prosocial skills are positively correlated with academic and social-emotional skills, and preschoolers with high prosocial competence have been found to be more cognitively prepared for school (Hyson & Taylor, 2011). Although in later years continuous antisocial behavior may lead to diagnoses of psychopathology, diagnostic criteria may not be applied to preschoolers as it may for older children and adults because symptoms of a disorder are difficult to distinguish from age-appropriate manifestations of transient stress (Hughes, White, Sharpen, & Dunn, 2000).

Hughes, White, Sharpen, & Dunn (2000) found a significant negative correlation between antisocial behavior and executive control. They also found a close association between a child's lack of empathic or prosocial response to a friend's need and the child's own negative emotions. The authors suggested cognitive interventions that are specifically aimed at remediating problems of planning and inhibitory control, as well as emphasizing the long-term benefits of prosocial interactions (Hughes et al, 2000). Strayer and Roberts (2004) found very strong correlations between anger and aggression in a sample of five-year olds.

Behavioral scientist Fritz Redl (1952) explains that behavioral control is attainable only within a certain limit of complexity, "If circumstances pile up on a child, or if an unusual pressure of impulsivity hits a youngster at a certain time, or if a variety of other things go wrong in the picture, even the normal and most well-developed ego is not expected to manage the task of behavioral control *all by itself.* It is in need of support in order to accomplish its job" (Redl & Wineman, 1952, p. 27). He describes a four-tier technique for supporting children's behavioral control: (1) design of the environment; (2) activity and program structures; (3) instrumentology of techniques to handle surface behavior; and (4) the whole strategy of handling their own life experiences.

The Teacher's Role

Perhaps no theorist has been more instrumental in highlighting the importance of teachers' support of children's development than L. S. Vygotsky. In his social learning theory, he delineates a "Zone of Proximal Development"—an area of things too difficult for the learner to master on her own, but that she can learn with the skilled instruction of someone more knowledgeable than herself (Vygotsky, 1978). In early childhood, children do not yet possess the social experience or reflective awareness necessary to manage conflicts with ease (granted, this is a task that can prove difficult in adulthood as well). An experienced teacher, with an understanding of the developmental needs underlying young children's behavior and expertise in dialoguing with children of this age, can provide the appropriate scaffolding necessary for their learning.

Pam Oken-Wright (1992) adapted a continuum of teacher behavior aimed at guiding children toward resolving conflict. The continuum consists of five levels or strategies, from strategy one, in which the child is entirely in control, to strategy five, in which the teacher entirely controls the situation These stages are: (1) the teacher looking on; (2) the teacher gives a nondirective statement, e.g. *"James took the giraffe";* (3) the teacher asks a "what" question, e.g. *"What can you do to get your giraffe back?";* (4) the teacher makes a directive statement, *"Tell James to give your giraffe back,";* and (5) physical intervention by the teacher (p. 16).

Levels of teacher intervention are not only dependent upon a teacher's judgment of the situation, but also on his ideology and the cultural context. In Tobin's well-known study of preschools in three different cultures, the teachers at Komatsudani Hoikuen in Japan demonstrated little to no interventions into children's conflicts, and this method was endorsed by other Japanese teachers and administrators as effective. In contrast, teachers at St. Timothy's preschool in Hawaii intervened regularly to offer comparably extensive scaffolding to support the children's resolution of conflict, a practice validated by their colleagues as well (Tobin, 1989).

For several decades teachers of young children in the U.S. have been advised to follow a particular type of protocol in guiding children's conflict resolution (Carlsson-Paige, & Levin, 1992; Evans, 2002; Gartrell, 2004; Levin, 1994; Nelsen & Erwin, 2002). Recent books in the field, such as *The Power of Guidance* (Gartrell, 2004), *Positive Discipline for Child Care Providers* (Nelsen,

2002), and *You Can't Come to My Birthday Party* (Evans, 2002), offer similar suggestions for developmentally appropriate practice as were offered in the early 1990s by Nancy Carlsson-Paige and Diane Levin (1992).

In Levin's peaceable classroom approach (1994) teachers help children (1) define the problem as a shared one; (2) brainstorm possible solutions; (3) figure out how each possible solution might work in practice; (4) choose a solution (preferably win-win) everyone agrees to try; (5) put the solution into practice; and (6) evaluate how their solution worked, and how it might be improved.

Evans' (2002) specifically includes a step for acknowledging children's feelings. Her mediation approach directs teachers to (1) approach calmly, stopping any hurtful actions; (2) acknowledge children's feelings; (3) gather information; (4) restate the problem; (5) ask for ideas for solutions and choose one together; and (6) be prepared to give follow-up support.

Gartrell's (2004) method includes two kinds of talks with children, conflict mediation and guidance talks. In many cases the two are employed in conjunction with one another, but not necessarily. The conflict management approach includes the following steps: (1) time for the children to cool down; (2) the teacher helps the children identify the problem; (3) the children brainstorm solutions; (4) the children agree upon a solution; (4.b) when necessary, the teacher may have a "guidance talk" with one or both children; and (5) the teacher observes the children putting the solution into action. Guidance talks can occur during or after the last steps of the conflict management, or in lieu of the conflict management steps entirely. A guidance talk is a conversation between the teacher

and the child in which the teacher (1) discusses what happened and explains why the behavior was mistaken; (2) helps the child understand how others in the situation may have felt; (3) brainstorms with the child other acceptable behaviors they may use next time; and (4) asks how the child might help the other child feel better. One of the main goals of guidance talks between a child and her/his teacher is to build empathy by helping the child understand others' feelings in a given situation (Gartrell, 2004).

Recent Research on Early Childhood Teachers' Management of Conflict

There have been a number of studies that evaluate the effectiveness of particular problem solving curricula and teacher training programs. A study by Vestal and Jones (2004) demonstrated that preschoolers whose teacher had been trained in socio-emotional skills, conflict resolution skills, and peace education showed significant gains in their ability to resolve interpersonal conflicts. The teachers were trained in the *I Can Problem Solve* curriculum, which they then used in the classroom to explicitly teach children a problem solving vocabulary and problem solving skills, including alternative solutions, consequences, and solution-consequence pairs.

Aram and Shlak's (2008) study evaluated *Safe Kindergarten*, a social skills and communication program based on the principles of Imago marital and family counseling. The intervention group engaged in longer dialogues, had a greater awareness of other's inner worlds, a larger variety of conflict resolutions, and a higher degree of mutual choice in friends than the comparison group.

A study by Doppler-Bourassa, Harkins, and Mehta (2008) found that teachers who participated in a community-based intervention for violence prevention were more likely to ask children for their ideas about solutions, and to engage them in the conflict resolution process. Other articles described particular curricula and training programs that support young children's social-emotional competence and problem solving skills (Hoffman, Hutchinson, & Reiss, 2009; Rosenthal & Gatt, 2010; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004).

In contrast to the more numerous intervention studies described above, one qualitative study, consisting of multiple classroom observations, led one researcher to question the prominence and proliferation of particular conflict resolution programs. Broadhead (2009) strongly advocated an increase in the amount of child-initiated and child-directed play, arguing that young children have the potential to resolve their difficulties and engage in a community of learners. She points out that in play other children, not just adults, can be the "more skilled others" who provide scaffolding to their classmates, as described in Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. She urges a wider pedagogical shift, "Let us give play back to children rather than compensating them for its loss though intervention programmes" (Broadhead, 2009, p.115).

A search of the literature revealed a critical lack of qualitative studies examining the complexities of early childhood teachers' approaches to conflict management. Although no studies were found that focus on examining teachers' responses to children's conflict in play-based classrooms, a singular case study did follow one child's development of conflict resolution skills within a

constructivist classroom, finding a shift from a power assertion response to conflict, to a more sophisticated form of resolution later in the year (Arcaro-McPhee, Doppler, & Harkins, 2002). This singular case study highlights the need for more studies that explore early childhood laboratory school teachers' practices around conflict management and supporting young children's development of problem solving skills.

Method

Research Design

Qualitative methods were chosen for this study in order to gather information-rich cases that allowed for in-depth thematic analysis. With the goal of gaining insight into the nuances of teachers' experiences, both past and present, the qualitative design fostered both depth of inquiry as well as attention to detail and context without the constraints of predetermined variables or categories (Patton, 2002, p. 227). The design process was emergent, utilizing naturalistic inquiry. According to Patton (2002), a naturalistic design is flexible and unfolds organically as field work progresses (p. 44). The initial research question guiding the individual interviews was intentionally broad: How do early childhood head teachers at Tufts' laboratory schools manage peer conflicts in the classroom? This allowed the emerging data to guide the subsequent direction of the study. The initial flexibility in the study's design was part of the iterative process, which kept the methodology grounded in the actual data. Rather than entering the interview process with preconceived ideas of what the teachers would say, I allowed patterns to emerge from the individual interviews as they were collected and

coded. Based on what arose from the analysis of the individual interviews, I was able to further hone my research questions to guide the subsequent group interview and classroom observations. This second set of research questions was more focused: How has teachers' perception of and response to peer conflict in the classroom changed throughout their careers? And what are they still grappling with now?

The task of examining a construct as broad as conflict management necessarily led to examination via a variety of methods. The methodological triangulation of utilizing individual and group interviews, as well as classroom observations, strengthened the study by affording multiple perspectives into the classroom: listening to teachers' individual reflections and experiences, encouraging and capturing dialogue between colleagues, and observing the actual behaviors and dynamics of children and teachers in the classroom.

Participants

The study took place at Tufts University's two early childhood laboratory schools: the Eliot Pearson Children's School (EPCS) and the Tufts Educational Day Care Center (TEDCC), located in Medford and Somerville, Massachusetts. EPCS offers half-day classes, with some children attending an afternoon extended day program, while TEDCC provides full-day care. The schools' philosophies are similar in their commitment to including children with diverse needs, as well as providing curriculum that supports individual children's holistic (i.e., social-emotional, physical, cognitive, language, creative, and artistic) development. The EPCS philosophy also includes that the school "actively seeks student populations

that represent a wide variety of ability, racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, cultural, family and socio-economic backgrounds" ("Eliot-Pearson Children's School–Philosophy," 2013). As laboratory schools, in addition to the function of serving children and families, the school is also a place for experimentation and research, teacher education and curriculum development ("Eliot-Pearson Children's School–About the Lab School," 2013).

Two head teachers from TEDCC and three from EPCS participated in the individual interviews ($N = 5$): each of the participants has taught both in kindergarten and preschool and/or prekindergarten. Three of these five teachers (all from EPCS) participated in the group interview ($N = 3$), and observations took place in each of the three EPCS classrooms. These are discussed in detail below.

Four of the five teachers were female ($n = 4$) and one was male ($n = 1$). All five were Caucasian American ($n = 5$), and one grew up in a family that was mixed Filipino/Hawaiian and Caucasian ($n = 1$). Their teaching experience ranged from 5 to 27 years with a mean of 15 years, and their age ranged from mid-twenties to late forties. Head teachers are the lead teachers in their classrooms, responsible for teaching full time as well as supervising and mentoring teaching assistants. Given the high-profile setting of a research university's laboratory school, head teachers are hired with the expectation of managing high-quality classrooms with a diverse and inclusive student population. In addition to each having a master's degree in fields directly related to child development, they are also participants and leaders in ongoing staff inquiry processes in which teachers

and administrators grapple with the intersection of current research and classroom practices in order to best serve children's learning.

I chose the head teachers as a stratified purposeful sample, particularly for the teachers' expertise in the field. By including teachers from preschool (age 3-4), pre-kindergarten (age 4-5), and kindergarten (age 5-6) classrooms, the sample is stratified by students' age, providing a developmental lens into conflict management in a span of early childhood classrooms. The stratified sample allowed me to capture variations by age group, in addition to the commonalities found in the data (Patton, 2002).

There are twenty children in the TEDCC preschool classroom (n = 20) with one part-time and three full-time teachers, and usually three teachers in the room (1:6.6 ratio). Seven percent (n = 3) of the students have diagnosed special needs and have an Individual Education Plan (IEP), and 25% (n = 5) of the children are dual language learners. The kindergarten classroom at TEDCC has twenty-five children (n = 25) with one part-time and three full-time teachers, and usually three teachers in the room (1:8.3 ratio). Six percent (n = 4) of the children have diagnosed special needs with an IEP, and 28% (n = 7) are dual language learners. Race and ethnicity demographical information for TEDCC is not available, as the school does not collect information about children's and families' ethnicities.

There are twelve children in the EPCS preschool classroom (n = 12) with two full-time teachers (1:6 ratio). Eight percent (n = 1) of the students have diagnosed special needs and have an Individual Education Plan (IEP), and 25% (n

= 3) of the children are dual language learners. One child receives need-based tuition aid. There are seventeen children in the EPCS prekindergarten classroom (n = 17) with three full-time teachers, and one full-time one-on-one instructional aide (1:5.3 ratio). Twenty-nine percent (n = 5) of the students have diagnosed special needs and have an Individual Education Plan (IEP), and 29% (n = 5) of the children are dual language learners. Four children receive need-based tuition aid. The kindergarten classroom at EPCS has 18 children (n = 18) with two full-time teachers (1:9 ratio). Seventeen percent (n = 3) of the children have diagnosed special needs with an IEP, and 28% (n = 5) are dual language learners. Two children receive need-based tuition aid. EPCS school-wide demographics for the 2011-2012 school year were: African-American (18%); Asian (27%); Latino (13%); Other minority (3%); Caucasian (39%).

Instruments

Individual interviews. I conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with each of the five head teachers at their schools. By asking the same core, open-ended questions, the semi-structured format allowed for a comparison of data, while remaining flexible to further explore related topics that were brought up by the teachers organically during the interview. The open-ended responses allowed me to better understand the experiences of the teachers from their own point of view without my predetermining how they might answer (Patton, 2002, p. 21). The interview guide (Appendix D) covered the following topics:

- The nature of typical conflicts in their classrooms
- A description, history and assessment of their approaches

- Identification of approaches they find problematic
- The goals underlying their approaches

The interview guide was revised prior to implementation to remove potentially leading questions in response to critical feedback from both my advisor, Martha Pott, and the teaching assistant from my research course, doctoral student, Kaylene Stevens. Internal validity was strengthened by covering the topic in depth with closely related questions that honed in on the essence of the teachers' approaches and conceptualization of their roles in conflict management in the classroom. Rather than trying to cover many different areas of their practice, the interview guide was designed to elicit teachers' reflections as they looked at approaches (theirs and others') from various angles.

Validity was additionally strengthened by member checks, in which each participant received the transcript of their interview and was invited to make amendments or additions to their responses. Two of the teachers contacted me after the interview, and the feedback was incorporated into the group interview. Upon analysis of the interview data, areas of interest for further discussion were identified, and a group interview was conducted, utilizing a group interview guide to allow for additional discussion and data collection.

Group interview. As part of the emergent, naturalistic design process, the group interview was added to the study design while the individual interview data were being collected. Certain topics arose during the individual interviews that could be further expounded upon in a group dialogue. After having collected and coded the five individual interviews, I designed the Group Interview Guide to

allow for further discussion of particular topics of interest. A group interview setting was chosen for its dynamic, interactive environment, allowing teachers to reflect on their own experiences and perceptions, while listening to and engaging with those of their colleagues (Krueger, Casey, 2000, p. 17; Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996, p. 18). The social context provided teachers the opportunity to move beyond what they had talked about individually in the previous interviews, and to make additional comments based on what others had to say (Patton, 2002, p.386). For example, one of the topics I wanted to cover in the group interview was how teachers were grappling with particular challenges around conflict management in the classroom. By including this in a group interview, I was able to capture the dynamic process of the teachers actively grappling together.

The group interview guide (Appendix H) covered the following topics:

- Teachers' reactions to conflicts when they first started teaching, and how their approaches have changed over the course of their careers;
- Challenging conflict management situations:
    - When particular children avoid conflicts;
    - Managing peer conflicts that include children with special needs;
    - Identifying other challenging conflict scenarios.
- What teachers believe the field could do to help address these issues

The group interview guide was designed by utilizing language used by the teachers in the individual interviews, and I incorporated feedback from my advisor. The semi-structured format allowed for follow-up and clarifying questions during the interview, which strengthened internal validity. Teachers were encouraged to contact me with any additional thoughts or commentary after the interview, and none was made.

Observations. Observations can provide several unique benefits, including firsthand experience of the context within which a phenomenon occurs, the opportunity to see things that may escape the people in the setting, the chance to learn things that people may not talk about in an interview, and to move beyond the selective perception of others (Patton, 2002, p. 263-264). In this study, the observations both illuminated what the teachers had described in the interviews and provided insight into nuances of teacher behavior that were not explicitly discussed in the interviews.

During the observations I took detailed episodic field notes, on site, of each peer conflict that occurred during the observation period. I then transferred the field notes to an observation template (Appendix K). The template included the following for each observed conflict:

- Description of context (activity, time of day, specific location, etc.);
- Description of players involved (physical description, sex, age);
- Description of observed conflict;
- Intervention, if any (Who intervened? After how long? What happened?);
- Resolution.

The majority of the observations took place inside the classroom from the observation booth, a small adjacent room separated from the classroom by a dark mesh, allowing observers to watch the classroom with minimal disruption to the class.

Internal validity was strengthened by making multiple observations in each of the three classrooms. By observing multiple days in each room, I had the opportunity to observe various situations, subjects, interventions, reactions and resolutions. Field notes included direct quotations and descriptions of the instances of conflict. In several instances I met with the teachers after school to ask follow up questions about particular situations that I had observed. This allowed me to better understand the historical context of the situation, the developmental context of the children involved, as well as gain insight into the teacher's perception, reaction, reasoning, and process behind the choices I had observed them make in the classroom.

The instrumental triangulation of this study provided cross-data validity checks, as the methodological weaknesses of interviews and observations differ (Patton, 2002, p. 248). While interviews can elicit biased responses, observations provide a distinct, supplementary perspective about what happens in the classroom. Conversely, observations are limited to information about external behaviors, while interviews can offer insight into teachers' internal processes, feelings, and reasoning. Together these approaches offered a deep insight into conflicts that occurred and how they were–or were not–managed by teachers and by the children themselves.

Procedure

The research proposal for this study was reviewed and approved by my thesis committee (Dr. Martha Pott, Dr. Christine McWayne, and Dr. Bruce Fraser) at Tufts University on November 20, 2013. I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the individual interviews on November 19, 2013 from the Boston University IRB (Appendix L). The individual interviews were conducted in conjunction with the Qualitative Research Methods course (RS652) in which I was enrolled through the Boston Area Graduate Consortium at the Boston University School of Education.

Research coordinators at TEDCC and EPCS were contacted after writing a letter to both directors (Appendix A). Teachers were selected by position (i.e., head teachers) and by the age of children that they teach (preschool, pre-kindergarten, and kindergarten). I recruited teachers for participation both in person, at EPCS, and via email at TEDCC (Appendix B). Teachers were informed of the purpose of the study throughout the research process, both verbally and in writing (see Appendices B, F, & I, Recruitment Emails; and Appendices C, G, & J, Informed Consent Forms). All participating teachers were offered an executive summary of the study's results upon its completion. I conducted the individual interviews in November and December 2013.

Data analysis of the individual interviews and the development of the group interview guide and observation template took place from December 2013 through February 2014. A copy of the BU IRB application and approval for the individual interviews was sent to the Tufts University Social, Behavioral and

Educational Research (SBER) IRB for their review in February 2014, along with an additional Tufts IRB application for the group interview and classroom observations. Approval was granted by the Tufts SBER IRB on February 20, 2014 (Appendix M). After receiving approval to proceed from the EPCS research coordinator, I recruited the preschool, prekindergarten, and kindergarten head teachers to participate in the group interview, which took place on March 10, 2014. Due to a delayed response of approval from TEDCC, I was unable to recruit teachers from TEDCC to participate in the group interview.

Observations took place in the EPCS preschool, prekindergarten, and kindergarten classrooms from March 4–March 13, 2014. I observed two to three mornings in each classroom, taking detailed, episodic field notes of each peer conflict. After the observations, I transferred the field notes into the observation template for later coding and analysis. To avoid misinterpreting observed interactions, in several cases I spoke with the head teachers after school to ask follow up questions about conflicts I had observed, and their approaches (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 30). Notes from these conversations were included in the observation templates.

Data Analysis

Given the emergent nature of naturalistic inquiry, analysis was a continuous process throughout the study (Patton, 2002, p. 436). I personally transcribed each interview verbatim, allowing me to become immersed in the data, and wrote data summary memos to capture analytic insights that emerged along the way (Patton, 2002, p. 441, Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data analysis was

guided by a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; LaRossa, 2005). The iterative process of open coding the individual interviews began with a first round of generative coding of the transcripts in Microsoft Word. I then conducted a second round of open coding, refining the codes, using the qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti (version 7.1.7). The codes developed during the open coding of the individual interviews were also used in open coding the group interview and observations in Atlas.ti, along with the addition of several codes necessary for capturing new concepts in the data. During open coding, the scheme was checked by my advisor, Martha Pott, research professor, Bruce Fraser, and teaching assistant, Kaylene Stevens. A codebook was developed once the codes were established (Appendix N).

The formulation of categories began during the stage of open coding, and led into the next step of linking subcategories to categories, and relating categories to one another (LaRossa, p. 847). A thematic story began to emerge and through selective coding, I identified time as a core variable (i.e., the change in teachers' conceptualization of and approach to conflict from early in their careers to now). I then developed a network display of the thematic findings (Miles & Huberman, 2013), with time selected as the core variable because of its "ability to pull the other categories together to form an explanatory whole" (LaRossa, p.851) (Appendix O).

Thematic findings were discussed with thesis committee members Dr. Pott and Dr. McWayne, and their questions and reflections helped to guide the discussion of the findings. Validation of the findings was pursued both by

comparing the explanatory scheme with the raw data, as well as communicating the story of the findings to participants and asking them to comment on goodness of fit with their experience (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 114). None of the teachers made corrective comments about the findings, and three of the teachers expressed their interest in the results.

Findings

This study revealed a perceived developmental trajectory throughout teachers' careers from discomfort with children's conflicts to a reconceptualization of conflict as a natural occurrence and a rich learning opportunity for young children. The findings below elucidate the many nuances currently involved in teachers' determination of how and when they intervene in children's conflicts. There were also several areas in which the teachers were still grappling with how to best support children's development through conflict resolution.

A note on language: In the following descriptions, the teachers will not be referred to with gender-specific pronouns, but instead with the singular "they". Given the small sample size, including one man, this has been done in order to best protect the participants' confidentiality.

Teachers' Reactions to Conflict at the Beginning of their Careers

Feelings and conceptualization of conflict. Four out of the five teachers recalled feeling some discomfort with conflict when they first started teaching. They described feeling concerned that they would lose control of the classroom, or worried that they were "doing it wrong." One teacher said, "It *is* scary when

you're a new teacher, 'Oh no! (*panicked voice*) The kids are fighting! They're screaming! They're gonna hit each other! What do I do?! What do I do?!' And you get that sort of deer in the headlights freeze and panic (*laughs*)." Another teacher in a separate interview described it similarly, "Starting out in the classroom, every time there's a problem I would get all tense, like, 'What are we going to do?!' (*laughs*)."

Another teacher, who taught elementary school prior to teaching preschool, said that conflict in their previous, elementary-age classroom was "something you just took care of and then moved on because the focus was so much on academics," and that when they began teaching preschool, it was "hard at first to make that shift from 'let's just deal with this and get it over with and move on' to [conflict as] part of the learning."

Approach at the beginning of their careers. Four of the teachers said that early in their careers, they rushed in quickly to intervene when students got into a conflict. Three teachers also talked about feeling that they needed to be the ones to solve the conflict. One teacher said, "I think my first year or two of teaching I was really concerned about resolving it quickly, containing the conflict. That I had this underlying fear that it could spin out of control if I didn't, you know, get in there and contain it and resolve it super fast."

Another teacher talked about the initial challenges of implementing a conflict resolution approach they had learned in professional development trainings, "It was hard at first. I just wanted to solve the problem. And the process with some kids felt a little awkward, a little forced." They went on to explain that

"when I first started, I was much more like, 'You have to go through each step (*laughs*) to make sure this feels like it's been completed.'" Early in their career, this teacher felt that the steps to that approach were rigid and necessarily had to be implemented as a fixed whole.

Context of early teaching experiences. During the group interview, upon hearing their colleague say, "I had a good amount of fear of it spinning out of my control," the one teacher who did not express discomfort with conflict early in their career asked, "Were you alone?" Upon hearing that their colleague had been the sole kindergarten teacher, they said, "Oh, I was preschool with three other teachers, so it was a team of us. It does make a big difference." Another teacher agreed, "I was alone and [conflict] was like… something to be avoided or something for the teacher to resolve." The effect of the student-teacher ratio will be discussed further in the section regarding teachers' current approaches.

Teachers' Reactions to Conflict Over Time

Reconceptualization of conflict as natural, important, and beneficial. As teachers gained experience teaching and practiced managing conflicts, they began to reconceptualize conflict between peers in the classroom. All five of the participants talked about how they now viewed conflict as a natural and inevitable occurrence in the classroom, and three additionally described it as messy and hard work. One teacher said,

> It took me a long time to just sort of realize that the expectation of putting 18 to 20 5-year olds in a room together and thinking it's going to go perfectly and smoothly *all day long* is ridiculous! …So *of course* there's going to be issues and conflict and it's not going to be pretty.

All five teachers discussed how important conflict was for young children's learning, and that it was, therefore, beneficial in the classroom. One preschool teacher said, in talking about their students' conflicts over materials,

> That's the work of 2- and 3- year olds, is to solve conflicts… I love conflict in my classroom (*laughs*) because that's when you start learning how to be with other people. If you don't have conflict then it's really hard. So it's *good* when …something goes awry because it creates those situations where you can *solve* them, figure out what to do! Build their skills, and abilities - interpersonal skills.

Another teacher described the shift in their reaction to conflict over time in their teaching career as related to their reconceptualization of peer conflict,

> I think your first year of teaching you get a little bit nervous every time [conflicts] happen. You're like, 'Am I gonna deal with this the right way? Am I going to say the right thing? What are the parents going to say?' But I think as you teach more and more you become, not relaxed, but just more comfortable in dealing with them. I mean, it's part of what you're doing. You figure out that's how children are learning, is through conflict, and there's all these wonderful opportunities for them as they begin to negotiate with each other and resolve these things.

One teacher offered the following advice to a hypothetical new teacher, "It's a learning opportunity, so not seeing it as…uncomfortable and as noisy and messy as it can be. To not avoid it. …To look at it as a really important part of what's happening in the life of a preschool classroom…and that the teaching that you are doing in that moment is just as important as the quote unquote academic skills." It was clear that from these teachers' perspectives, learning to deal with conflict was "part of the curriculum."

As one teacher cheerfully exclaimed, "This is why they're here! This is the work of school!"

Skill building for children. In addition to the teachers including conflict management as part of their curriculum, two of the teachers talked about making this explicit for the children as well. One described "trying to help them just sort of see that this is part of what we do. This is hard, but you can do it. It [gives them] a sense of accomplishment. I think it's really satisfying for kids when they can work through something."

Below is a list of skills the teachers named that young children built through their management of conflicts. The numbers indicate how many teachers mentioned that skill in their interviews, not the total number of times the skill was mentioned. One of the interviews was limited in time, therefore not all of the questions in the interview guide were covered, including explicitly discussing the specific skills children gain from managing conflict, therefore for this question $n = 4$.

- Listening to others (4)
- Speaking up; Expressing oneself (4)
- Taking ownership over working it out (4)
- Accountability for one's actions (3)
- Community responsibility (3)
- Perspective-taking (3)
- Empathy (3)
- Cooperation; Working well together (2)
- Self regulation (2)
- Compromise; Flexibility (1)

- Logic (1)

One preschool teacher started the list of skills by talking about children noticing their peers,

> That there are other people, that we're part of a community, and what that looks like. Listening to each other, responding, having a thought, sharing your thoughts. Those are sort of the big things. And some that we work on every day. Let's stop, let's listen, this person has something to say, they have a voice, they need to be heard. Everyone has a voice that needs to be heard.

This preschool teacher's description was basic and instructive, explicitly defining and explaining each step of the conversation. This was consistent with the foundational, explanatory instruction I witnessed during the observations in their classroom. While differences between the teachers' approaches in differently aged classrooms will be discussed in detail later in the findings, age differences were also evident in the way the teachers described the skills their children were building through conflict management.

One prekindergarten teacher included logic in their list of skills,

> Just helping kids recognize, 'Is what you're doing right now working? Is this solving the problem? Is you pulling on one end of this train track and you pulling on the other, is this going to solve our problem?' ...helping them see that, connect their actions to logic, which is really hard to do with four-year olds. But I do feel like, after time, they're like, 'Oh, this isn't really working for me.' (*laughs*)

One kindergarten teacher listed "to work out how to play cooperatively, which would then mean sharing their ideas, and if conflict comes up, resolving the conflict." They later added, "the bigger picture goal is that the children are learning to work well together and communicate with one another, and conflict's a part of that." For many kindergarteners there is a greater capacity for more

complex social play, therefore the skill building may be more advanced than the foundational pieces being explicitly fostered in preschool. Another teacher said that the skills the children were learning in preschool were similar to those in kindergarten, but that in the latter they were working on the next step - independence, to "be able to talk through a problem independently and have more awareness, …monitoring their behaviors so that the other person isn't having to feel mad. So you *know* that knocking over somebody's structure makes them feel sad or mad… [Teachers can] help them more with that regulatory behavior of being able to keep themselves from doing it."

While there were differences related to age in the classroom expectations and skills (more to be discussed under current approaches), teachers also noted the differences in goals for each child, based on their own individual needs. For example, one kindergarten teacher said that for some particular students "I really want [them] to just *stay* at the site of the conflict and engage in *any* kind of, even if it's just listening to other people talk about it, just stay there. And for other kids to just say no sometimes if they don't want to have a certain role or they don't want to be dragged around by their friend."

The role of the teacher as facilitator. As opposed to the active problem-solving that most of the teachers described as their approach early in their careers, they concurred that their current role was more of a facilitator, observer, listener, model, and coach. One teacher said, "I don't see myself as being the person to come in and solve the problem, but to… empower them to be able to take those steps."

In the preschool classrooms, the teachers seemed to take a more instructive role, while still empowering the children to actively participate in the process. One teacher explained that for many of their students, this was their first experience in school, and so they were explicitly teaching the foundations of how to work together. They described their role as a model for the children,

> Teaching the children how to interact with each other, how to ask for things. I think modeling is the biggest piece. Modeling for them what they could do, what the possibilities are. …[and] checking in, making sure that they're treating each other respectfully. Teaching them what the expectations are, and some of that's direct teaching when there isn't a conflict. Just sort of talking about something …so that they can hear it… and start to internalize it.

Another preschool teacher agreed, saying their role was "largely the model, being there to constantly provide the language so they're hearing it over and over and over again." Both of the preschool teachers talked about the importance of being "right there with them and giving them the words."

One prekindergarten teacher described their role as "recognizing what's happening and helping children voice what's happening. And coaching them through the whole problem solving process so that it becomes something they take ownership of and hopefully can transfer to other [situations]." They went on to explain, "I don't necessarily expect them to be able to vocalize everything, directly, in the midst of a conflict, but with teacher support, I do expect them to be able to do that." While in the prekindergarten class, the teacher did not view their role as providing the same amount of fundamental instruction about the basics of social interactions as the preschool teachers, they did see themselves as coaching the children through the process.

In the kindergarten classrooms, the teachers took less of an instructive role as the children were given ample opportunities to solve the problems more independently. While all of the participants talked about the importance of observation and reflecting back to the children, this seemed to be the central role of the kindergarten teachers, especially once the active instruction of classroom culture had occurred at the beginning of the school year. One kindergarten teacher told this story,

> An interesting piece about Lindsey and Maria is that they have really been in conflict around dramatic play because they're so much alike. A few weeks ago I said to them, '…[H]ere's what I predict is going to happen. Once you two decide that you want to start working together instead of fighting over all of this, you're actually going to become really good friends. I've seen this before in kindergarten, when there are two girls who have really strong opinions and strong ideas. And, once you start hearing each other…' And they've been really *trying*.

The same teacher made a comparison between their approach when they first started teaching, "I just gotta solve it!...They're fighting! Oh no!" and now, "Hmmm, they're fighting (*laughs*). Hopefully they can work it out. I'll just watch." They reported being much better at being able to sit back and let the situation unfold, affording the children the opportunity to solve the problem on their own. The similarities and differences between preschool, prekindergarten, and kindergarten teachers' approaches will be discussed in more detail below.

What Teachers Take Into Account when Managing Conflicts

In each case of peer conflict, the teachers seemed to make immediate assessments of several variables in order to ascertain the best way to approach the situation. Two kinds of variables were automatically assessed: those relating to

the children involved, and to the context of the situation. Based on this information, teachers then decided whether, when and how to intervene.

Variables related to the children. The teachers discussed three variables related to the children that factored into their approach: age, individual children's skills and needs, and speech and language skills. While all three of these factors are indisputably interrelated, each did seem to play a particular role in teachers' decisions of how to best support children's learning around conflicts.

Age. One preschool teacher pointed out that, "with the 3s and 4s I find that it's all just so new to them. They're just at the stage of having any type of awareness of somebody else, and what somebody else might be wanting or thinking." Another preschool teacher talked about teaching the youngest children about the distinction between an accident and a conflict. They described that when children bump into one another, some of them interpret it as intentional, "They're just assuming, 'Hey! Well you come over to me and just push me over!' They don't know. How are they supposed to know? It's sort of like Chicken Little… they're just walking along merrily and get knocked over." The teacher described how they might teach the children the distinction,

> 'Oh, you just bumped into them. Oh my. Ask them if they're okay. Are you okay? Oh, they just asked if you're okay. Well, be careful where you're walking. They weren't really watching where they were going, were they? No, they weren't.' …There's just a lot of that so that they can recognize what really is a conflict and what is just an accident or just bad timing or whatever…They can be upset about it, but I try to sort of bring out there is a difference.

In these situations with younger children, who did not have as much social experience to build upon, the teachers took into account what was

developmentally appropriate to expect them to understand, and what might necessitate explicit instruction. One of the preschool teachers also talked about supporting some of their students as they attempted to help their peers solve conflicts, "There's always children who like to step in and help resolve a conflict. …At this age, sometimes they can, but often they're in over their head…because they don't know that one child's nonverbal, they don't know the complexities of it. Or they might take sides, even though they're trying to be fair." The teacher talked about being right there to help fill in the gaps for the budding mediators.

One kindergarten teacher said that, rather than focusing so much on naming the feelings, as was more common with the younger ages, the children in their class "need help just taking the time to acknowledge the feelings. A lot of them can *say* what the feeling *is*, but… because they've become so reactive to it so quickly, …they need help just kind of backtracking to even remember what the feeling was."

During the group interview, an interesting conversation ensued about the value of spending time in mixed-age groups. The teachers agreed that these experiences help children build skills around conflict management, particularly because of the developmental differences in children's responses to conflict. "It's just fascinating to see how they play together. The older ones model [and] the younger ones learn from that. And then it's reinforced for the older ones." Another teacher chimed in, "My experience in mixed-age groups is that there's been less need for teacher intervention because …the older children have some skills that they can bring to the conflict that then the younger children learn. And

I'm not always being the older person with the higher skill set." One of the teachers described a scene in the preschool classroom during All School Choice (set times when all of the classrooms in the school – preschool through 1st/2nd grade – are open, and children may choose where and what they want to play),

> There were ten children in dramatic play…and maybe a third of them were first and second graders. If there were ten preschoolers in that space together I would certainly have to be there. But I just stepped back and observed. I didn't have to step in once. It was quite amazing…the younger children wanted to be something and the older ones helped them dress up, or told them to wait until the person's done with it. And it was like, Oh my gosh! They're listening to them more than to me! (*laughs*)

Individual children's skills and needs. In every interview, in response to any question about their approach, the teachers always began by saying that it depended on the children involved. Teachers particularly took this into account when deciding when to intervene,

> [T]here are some kids who I feel like you can give it some time and space and they'll usually be able to work it out. Or if they can't they'll find you. And it's not going to result in a huge… emotional blow-up or physical altercation. There are other kids I feel like if you don't step in right away, somebody's going to get hurt, either physically or emotionally, really quickly.

A similar comment by a kindergarten teacher highlights their awareness of timing, particularly in regards to children's emotional needs, "We have children who are really working on regulation and their tipping off point is a lot sooner than someone else's... and once they've reached that point, it's going to be really hard for them to resolve it." The teacher said that, being aware of that particular child's needs, they might step in sooner rather than later.

Another teacher talked about the range of abilities within their preschool class, and the subsequent difference in their approach,

> Some are really ready to go to the next level of talking something through, coming up with a resolution to it. And then others don't even want to talk. They don't even want to be there, they just know they took something and they want to RUN off. So with those children it's like, "No, let's just go see if they're okay. Let's ask them if they're okay. You can come and get some ice for them."

One kindergarten teacher said that it was their preference to allow the children to generate their own solutions, which usually led to more buy-in than if the teacher selected and enforced a solution. But in the case of one of their students, this was particularly difficult. "Because of her own emotional work, she really needs to have a lot of control over everything that affects her. And she *is* a powerful leader, she's often a positive leader, she's a really great dramatic player…but she's very rigid." The teacher described that conflict often arises for her in dramatic play when she demands to be the mom, assigns others roles, and tries to exclude some children. It rarely occurs that a peer would suggest something that she would agree to,

> Because she needs the control and she's going to fight to have it her way. So for *her*, what usually happens is that we listen to the possibilities and then I kind of tell her what the option's going to be, or maybe I'll give her a choice. At this point in the year I can say to her, 'So you can play it this way, or you can play it that way, or you can choose to play somewhere else.' And she doesn't want to play somewhere else, so then she'll pick something, and then I have to stay and monitor the play for a while, and make sure she does it. Because if I were to walk away *then*, she would immediately go back to, "No, but!"

Throughout the interviews, several teachers talked about the importance of getting to know their students' needs, "It really requires knowing the kids pretty well to be able to [manage conflict] effectively. And that takes time." And although it did take time to get to know all of the nuances of children's skills and needs, the observations began "from the get-go. It's pretty clear who has a

reeeeeeeeeally hard time sharing, who has a really hard time not being physical, who has a really hard time not getting super overly-emotional. Yeah, I mean you learn within the first week (*laughs*)." And whether it was providing physical support, or additional coaching through the steps, teachers' observations of their students guided their differentiated support around resolving conflict.

Speech and language skills. Although speech and language skills could be nested under individual children's needs and skills, this was the most commonly mentioned factor in teachers' discernment of how to intervene, particularly in the preschool and prekindergarten classes. In kindergarten it had manifested as an issue for dual language learners, while in the younger classes it was also a matter of children's ability to verbally express themselves. It is treated here as a separate category in order to highlight its unique impact on children's management of conflict, and how teachers chose to best support them.

In one preschool classroom, the teacher explained that the majority of the conflicts included either one or both children who were nonverbal, and markedly fewer conflicts between two very verbal children. "The nonverbal children need to be supported. They're not able to say, 'I was playing with that. I am not done,' so it's not fair to expect them to handle something like that on their own." Whereas in the case of a conflict between two highly verbal children, the teacher would say, "'Oh, there's a lot of ways you could solve that.' And I'll just wait to see if they stop themselves and some of them do, but I still like to be there because …I like to see how they are solving it and figuring out the problem." They went on to say, "some children can actually have a conversation about a

conflict, and others really simply don't have the language, or they might be dual language learners, so it really depends on individual children."

This dynamic was seen in multiple conflicts observed in the preschool classroom. In situations where the children were both verbal, the teachers observed the situation closely, but either did not intervene as the children verbally worked it out, or intervened only after the children had first tried to resolve the conflict on their own. In the latter cases, the intervention took the form of minimal coaching, and then observing closely as the children resolved the conflict themselves.

Another preschool teacher talked about how, although it was dependent on the child, in many cases physical retaliation did seem more common in preschool than in kindergarten, particularly because of language.

> The threes and fours, as they're still trying to find and sort of retrieve that language, they're not yet able to retrieve it fast enough (*laughs*). So they may push and *then* the language comes and they'll say, 'You knocked over my structure.' …So a lot of what we do is also trying to be there to catch the moment so we can help put the language in for them…so they can sort of get into that routine. …So we're often like, 'Wait! (*laughs – puts hands up with a smile*) Use your words!'

A prekindergarten teacher talked about their process of discerning how much to push a child with limited speech in addition to other special needs,

> There's still times when [I think], 'How much do I push this?' There are certain kids, like James, who just never uses the words. He'll say, 'I want you to say it.' And so I will, because that's the first step, like at least he's acknowledging it needs to be said, but at what point do you say, 'I need the words to come from you now.' You know, 'Are you okay?' or 'Can I have a turn with that?'

When I asked if that had happened for him yet, the teacher said that he had begun asking for materials, but had not yet with taking accountability for his actions,

"other than just to say, 'I want you to say it.' So that's still hard…it's tricky to figure out how soon to push that."

Variables related to the context. In addition to ascertaining the needs and skills of the children involved in a conflict, the teachers also took into account immediate issues of safety, what activities were going on in the classroom at the time and whether there were enough teachers to address the conflict and meet the needs of the class, as well as weighing the potential effect of the conflict/resolution on the class as a whole.

***Safety*.** For all of the teachers, regardless of the age of their class, safety was an immediate and primary consideration. When one teacher was asked about which factors went through their mind when thinking about whether it was time to intervene in a conflict, they responded, "I think the first thing that you consider is danger...is physical harm going to happen if you let this keep going? Is someone raising a block? Raising a fist? And then obviously…you have to jump in quickly." Another teacher talked about having explicit conversations with their class about how "everyone needs to feel safe at school." At TEDCC there were three laws that were universal throughout the school, while each classroom created examples for each as a part of their classroom agreement at the beginning of the year. The three laws were: Keeping bodies safe, keeping feelings safe, and keeping hard work safe. This language was used throughout the year both by teachers and by children as they worked through conflicts that arose.

One preschool teacher said, "Obviously, if there's an unsafe situation, you're not going to sit down and have (*laughs*) some conversation; there have to

be lines drawn. 'No…it looks like you are having a hard time playing with your friends over here, I'll help you find another place to play.'" That teacher went on to say that even if they needed to remove a child from a situation like that, they would try to go back to revisit the issue with the child later.

Class activity and student/teacher ratio. The time that most of the teachers named as inappropriate for an in-depth conflict resolution conversation was during transitions between activities. "There's just certainly times of the day when it's really hard and you just need to move on. It doesn't mean you're going to totally ignore it, but you might need to deal with it at a different time." The teacher explained a hypothetical situation in a prekindergarten class that usually has three teachers,

> So there's two teachers in the room and things are feeling pretty chaotic, and so if you're spending five minutes just focusing on this conflict, particularly if it's one where nobody's been really hurt, but it's just over who gets to use the sponge to clean the table, and you know, it doesn't work in the busy transition times. There are times when I think teachers just need to say, "This is how it's going to go." I think everything can't be processed. It's just too time consuming.

During an observation in a kindergarten classroom, there was a conflict while the children were cleaning up and transitioning from choice time to a class meeting. When three children left the snack table and disturbed another child's work on their way to meeting, the teacher immediately said, "Kids from snack, you should be going to get a book. This is Leah's work." Two of the children chose books and sat down for the meeting, while one remained by Leah's work. The teacher said to her, "The same way, Dina, if you were doing work you wouldn't want someone to do that." The teacher then invited her to work together

on cleaning up the meeting area. When I asked the teacher after school about their decision to intervene, they said, "I think at that point, it's such a big transition with so many moving parts – everyone in the room is moving somewhere. That's just not the time to process something. We need to get from point A to point B as safely as possible."

Potential effect on the class. While the previous two contextual factors, safety and timing, were common variables on all of the teachers' radars, two of the participants also talked about particular years when their class as a whole was powerfully affected by the quantity and/or intensity of interpersonal conflicts. One teacher coined it, "the domino energy effect"

> Often things start as a conflict between two children, and with this particular group of children, because of their emotional needs, it just escalates so fast. And then it also deregulates other people. And so something that could have started off as this very, very minor conflict or little miscommunication can turn into something that disrupts the entire classroom in fifteen to twenty seconds. And it's overwhelming for everyone, including the teachers. We're all just like, 'What's going on?!' And then it's hard to figure out what the priority is, so that I'm kind of figuring out. Do I try to de-escalate or probably separate because there is also this very passionate, energetic, like kids will get very face to face confrontational yelling, starting to use mean words, possibly using their bodies. So is my goal to go there? Where the initial conflict is? Is my goal to tone down the whole room? Separate?

While that happened in a kindergarten classroom, a similar "domino energy effect" had happened in a preschool class as well. The teacher described that the children were having a difficult time at the class meetings, and at first, nothing the teachers were trying seemed to help.

> And one thing that we're finding is when in the morning, when we're more in their play and able to be there, so that there's not a lot of up and down of problem-solution, problem-solution, and sort of like the rise and fall of the emotion that comes with that, that [the class is] more even keel

> throughout the rest of the day, and so our group times are getting better, too. …And we have a couple of children that, well, one in particular, that once he's had one difficult moment like that, it effects the whole rest of his day.

These teachers were actively grappling with striking the balance between facilitating learning opportunities for children to resolve conflicts, and also caring for the emotional and regulatory needs of their entire class.

Teachers' Current Approaches to Conflict Resolution

When asked where they learned their conflict resolution approaches, the teachers' answers varied. One named professional development workshops while teaching in Head Start (including reading articles by Nancy Carlsson-Paige), two of the teachers mentioned having worked with wonderful mentor teachers who provided excellent modeling of how to help children manage conflict, and two of the teachers had vague recollections of maybe having learned a little bit in a reading or a class in school. Several of the teachers expressed that they wished they had had more direct training about how to manage conflicts during their preparation to become teachers.

As seen above, many factors went into teachers' decisions about how to approach the conflict resolution conversation with children. One of the teachers, who felt they had to stick to a rigid script at the beginning of their teaching career, was now much more flexible,

> Being less... 'It has to be these certain steps: (*stern* voice) Step one, look at each other's faces and recognize the feelings; Step two, let each child speak.' And I think just being a little bit more adapting to what's happening in the moment and just making sure that both kids feel like…they've played a part in resolving the conflict and making sure that both kids' feelings have been validated. …I don't have to force each kid to say everything, [but I can] coach them through that.

This flexibility is the context within which the following approaches should be understood. The steps described below seemed more of a guideline, to be adapted to the situation as deemed necessary by the teacher, than a law to be followed uniformly.

Preschool. As one might expect, developmentally, in the preschool classrooms, the distinction between children who were verbal and children who were nonverbal seemed to be a strong factor in how a teacher might approach the resolution process. One teacher said that in cases of two children with limited verbal skills, they tried to keep it simple, and gave this example of how they might talk them through a conflict over a toy,

> [Teacher:] Were you playing with this?
> [Child A:] Yes.
> [Teacher to Child B:] Oh, they said they were playing with this. Did you want it?
> [Child B:] Yes.
> [Teacher to Child B:] Oh, you wanted it!
> [Teacher to Child A:] They just said they wanted this. Oh, well, when will you be done?
> *You know, that back and forth.*
> [Teacher to Child A:] Oh, you'll be done with it in five minutes? *or* Oh, you'll never be done? Oh my! That's a long time! (*laughs*) Well, when you're done give it to your friend, and they'll give it to you when they're done.

The teacher described this as "a lot of modeling back and forth" because for many of these children, this was their first experience in school and they needed instruction in the tools to manage these sorts of conflicts. In the case of two children who were highly verbal, the teacher said that there was more of a possibility for dialogue, and that they offered the tools and some coaching, but liked to see where the children might go. Both of the preschool teachers talked

about how they liked to be right there, either observing or directly in the play with the children, in order to be able to provide support immediately when needed.

The other preschool teacher concurred about the importance of modeling, as well as using simple language and plenty of repetition. They also described steps that they used in helping children resolve conflicts: the teacher (1) stopped the action and brought silence so that they could start from square one, (2) evaluated the children's emotional state and encouraged them to take breaks in the classroom's sensory spot or take deep breaths together, (3) asked each child to share their perspective of what happened, (4) repeated back to them what they heard so the children's feelings were validated, (5) had the child who may have done some kind of harm "check in" and ask the other child if they were okay, (6) if that child said they were not okay, then the first child would ask them what would make them feel better, (7) help them follow through with the child's request. On the sixth step, when the children were asking what they could do to make their friend feel better, the teacher said they were working on helping the children be more specific and move beyond a simple, "don't do that again" response.

Prekindergarten. The steps that were a guiding framework in the prekindergarten class were similar to those described in the second preschool classroom described above. Similarly, the teacher (1) stopped the action, and sometimes needed to physically help a child (by putting their arm around them, removing toys/tools from their hands), (2) helped with calming down, breathing, or taking a break if necessary, (3) checked in with facial expressions and tuned

into feelings, (4) made sure that each child was listening to the other, (5) coached the children in expressing their feelings and what they wanted, (6) if a child was hurt physically or emotionally, then the teacher helped the other child take accountability and check in - the teacher provided coaching through the process as necessary, (7) helped figure out a solution. The teacher named the ideal scenario for the latter as the children coming up with the solution on their own. If they needed help with suggestions, the teacher would often ask children who were nearby for suggestions, or if necessary, would offer solutions themselves. Regarding the checking in process, the teacher said that it helped by "giving the perpetrator some chance to kind of feel like they've worked through this too."

Kindergarten. The two kindergarten classrooms had distinct, yet in some ways comparable approaches to resolving conflict. Given that the children were older and more capable of potentially resolving conflicts on their own, in one classroom the teacher stood back and observed, allowing the children more space than in the younger classrooms to discuss and resolve it independently. In cases where they sensed that the altercation was going to get physical or someone might get emotionally harmed, then the teacher would intervene. The steps were not unlike those described above, the teacher (1) neutralized the object and, when necessary, put their body in the middle to prevent physical fighting, (2) encouraged the children to articulate what happened, and when necessary, provided direction to talk one at a time, (3) repeated back what they heard the problem to be, and asked if that was accurate, in addition to sometimes needing to prompt children to go back further to find the initial hurt, (4) encouraged children

to talk about their emotions in order to clear the space to talk about the problem, (5) helped the children come up with solutions, or asked children nearby for help. The teacher talked about the ideal solutions being cooperative and collaborative, as opposed to simply deciding to taking turns, which was a common solution at the younger ages. In situations where someone was hurt, the teacher also had the children check in in a similar fashion as described above, where the child is held accountable by following up with the other's requested reparative action.

Regarding the second step above, when children explained what happened, the teacher said that there was often a lot of blaming. In those cases, the teacher would respond by saying they were not really interested in whose fault it was, but rather in figuring out what happened. I witnessed this multiple times in the classroom observation when children were having conflicts in the dramatic play area. The moment the teacher entered the space, children began tattling, 'He did this!' and 'He did that!' The teacher did not respond to the accusations, but rather reflected back to the children what they saw in the play, and then said, "Are you working on being a kind family to one another?" (see more about the earlier context of this scenario in the section titled "Prevention" below).

In the other kindergarten classroom, they used a problem solving loft as a space solely dedicated to children's resolution of conflict,

> There were a group of kindergartners [several years ago] that were really having a hard time figuring out problems together. The teachers brought it to them and said, 'What are we going to do about this?' Then they decided they needed …problem solving belts that had visuals of how they were feeling and different note pads that they could write it down…So then it evolved into that they needed a physical space to go when they had a problem so they used the loft.

In the loft, there were pieces of paper with an empty face on one side and the statement underneath, "I feel _____." The other side of the paper had room for the "Problem" and "Solution." The teacher explained that when children went up to the loft, taking the time to draw their facial expression and write down how they feel allowed them a moment to pause and cool down. There were visuals around the loft to help children reflect upon their feelings, and depending on their skill level, children might draw and/or write. The teacher said, "Once they've each filled out the whole thing, then their job is to talk to each other and share what they've written...and arrive at a solution together."

The teacher explained that at the beginning of the year, they began by introducing the concept at group time, then the children engaged in role plays, followed by teachers accompanying children up into the loft to help support the process, and finally the children began using the loft themselves. Each time the children finished the process in the loft, they came down and shared with a teacher about what they had decided.

Adaptations. Particularly in cases involving children with special rights[1], the teachers adapted the approaches to facilitate the children's participation in the process. As one teacher aptly explained, "I feel like the expectations for kids with varied needs aren't necessarily different. It's just the level of support they need to work through conflict varies." One example of this was during an observation in a

[1] While the Department of Education uses the term "children with disabilities," and others use "special needs," EPCS teachers used the term "special rights" to emphasize the unique qualities that each child brings to the classroom. This term was learned from studying the preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy ("Eliot Pearson Children's School–About the school", 2013).

prekindergarten class when two children with special rights were playing nearby one another on separate, neighboring projects in the block area. A teacher was playing with the children, helping to facilitate conversation and encouraging collaborative play. The two boys went back and forth between parallel play on their own structures, and intermittent ventures into short interactive play scenarios.

In one such case, Zack started making clawing motions and laughing, pretending to be a cat chasing Alejandro around the block area. At first Alejandro giggled and played along, "No, kitty!" as he escaped, driving his car over the blocks. The teacher, who had been trying to scaffold their cooperative play, said, "Nice pretend play, Zack," and remained nearby observing their play. After a few short moments, Alejandro turned with a scared look on his face and said, "Zack, stop following me!" Zack did not pick up on the facial cues and the shift in Alejandro's tone of voice (from "No, kitty!" as a playful invitation to keep playing chase, to "Zack, stop following me" as a serious request to stop playing.) The teacher, who was still right there, said to Alejandro, "So are you done playing that game?" to which he answered, "Yeah, I don't wanna play." The teacher then turned to Zack and said, "Oh, Zack, did you hear? Alejandro doesn't want to play that anymore." Zack then stopped chasing, and the teacher asked, "So what can we play together?" Alejandro suggested hide and seek, and they had a conversation in which each boy talked about what he wanted to do, while the teacher played a mediating role, bridging the gap (between a kitty and a dog, who

respectively liked waffles and hot dogs) so that they were both able to play the role they wanted in a game together.

The children were still given the opportunity to express themselves, but they needed a teacher to help make sure they were heard. Over the course of this particular observation, several potential conflicts were prevented by the teacher's continuous presence as translator for the children, repeatedly saying, "Oh, Zach, did you hear Alejandro?" and vice versa. The teacher knew both of the children well, and was also able to spend an extended period of time focused entirely on their play. This was only possible due to the low student/teacher ratio in the class, an intentional provision by the school to help support children's diverse needs.

Whole group approaches to conflict resolution. Solving problems as a whole-group activity came up in all of the interviews. In most classrooms, the teachers talked about using puppets or story books to address common conflicts that were occurring in the class, and in some of the classrooms, the teachers also talked about gathering together as a whole class to address conflicts.

Conflict resolution as a class. In addition to the kindergarten example of the inception of the problem solving loft, other teachers had also brought conflicts to the class for collective problem solving. In one preschool classroom, the children were having an inordinate amount of conflict in the block area, "So they had… a separate come together with a separate agreement about how they were going to help each other in the block area."

One teacher, whose family culture was part Pacific Islander, surmised that their familial experience might have influenced their whole group method, which

they later found out was a very Hawaiian way of resolving conflict. They started using this approach while teaching in public schools when their students would come back from lunch or recess upset from conflicts on the playground where there was minimal supervision from lunch monitor staff.

> If there's a conflict that's happening just over and over again…the conflict gets aired really publicly. You know, similar process, everybody shares what they saw or heard, not necessarily just the two kids involved, [but] whoever was there. …The then whole group talks about solutions. And then the two people, or however many people were directly involved in the conflict, can either, right there with the whole group, or they can go off on their own a little bit, decide which solution they're going to try and they come back and they report it to the whole group. And then the whole group sort of agrees to hold them accountable to it, or remind them what they agreed to.

The teacher said that this process could be helpful in reducing some of the more repetitive conflicts. They explained that it worked well if it was phrased in such a way that the assumption was that children were helping each other, not trying to punish or control one another. "I think it builds a stronger community when it's done that way because the kids are trying to help each other."

This same teacher also used group time to talk about how the whole class could support particular children in their own unique needs.

> At the kindergarten level, we have group conversations about that. If we know this person needs extra space, or whatever it is they need, and we know we all want to be safe at school, I try to work with the children to reach a group set of strategies, like 'Here's what we're going to try.' And we even check in with that child who's having a hard time around it. Because [the kids are] generally really empathetic, even if someone's hurting them or being really difficult with them. We have a couple of kids who just really fall apart if they can't have a first turn… and the other kids know that, and they get that, and they're able to bend with it or cheer them on, and they [say], 'Maybe you're going to get a turn!' and remind them, 'When you're ready she'll call on you.' But it is about building that classroom culture and community where everybody kind of has a sense of what everybody else needs and is working on and how to support them.

For this teacher, using group time to talk about interpersonal and individual conflicts helped to build a classroom culture of community accountability and care.

Stories. All of the preschool and prekindergarten teachers talked about the use of puppets, persona dolls, or stories to address common conflicts in the classroom. They talked about how it was often easier to recognize how the other person might be feeling when they were not experiencing the conflict personally, "In a moment of conflict, it's hard, but when they step back…and they're not personally involved in a conflict, yes." In addition to helping with perspective-taking, teachers also used the puppets to help draw out solutions to common conflicts. One prekindergarten teacher told me about how they used their "problem story people" – wooden blocks with magazine cut-out pictures pasted on them: two girls, two boys and a teacher, each with their own name,

> When we notice there's a common type of conflict happening in the classroom, we'll use these characters to present a similar problem. So it might be that… boys are excluding girls. So then we'll act out a scenario between Mark and Robert where Laura wants to enter the play (*moves the block people around as she explains*). And the boys say, 'You can't play with us, you're a girl!' or 'Girls can't be astronauts!' or whatever it is they're playing. And then while we're presenting the conflict, when the kids see a problem, they raise their hand and say 'Problem!' So right away when they recognize it, we'll ask them to explain the problem. And then we'll talk about how it can be solved. 'What do you think Laura's feeling?', 'What do you think is going on with Mark and Robert?' Because oftentimes they really focus on how they're the *bad guys*, the ones causing the problem, but they're also doing it for a reason. So then we'll talk about possible solutions.

A preschool teacher talked about how using puppet stories could help reinforce possible solutions such as finding a teacher, asking a friend for help, and asking

for a turn. They also talked about how it could help with labeling and affirming feelings. "'Oh, it feels awful when you want something that someone has and you have to wait for it' or 'Someone takes something from you, that's horrible!' or 'It feels really good to give, share something!' or 'To help someone, that feels good.'"

In another preschool class they read the book "When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry" (Bang, 1999) and used the opportunity to "see through the start to finish of a problem." The teacher described how they helped the children talk about possibilities for next steps, "When we read Sophie, she just kind of ran away in the story. So we had the children come up with some other things she could have done." Together, the children solved the problems, hypothetically, for the character in the book, offering suggestions such as asking her brother for a check in.

Preventing conflict. The teachers took certain steps to prepare for conflicts: from setting guidelines together as a class at the beginning of the year, to scanning the room and keeping their ears perked for potential conflicts. In addition, several of the teachers also talked about certain preventative measures they took to minimize conflict. In the group interview, the other teachers agreed when one said, "Even though it's good when it gets to the conflict stage, because that's where they learn, but you can't have that happening all day!"

A preschool teacher described a dancing activity where they purposefully held hands with a child who typically had a hard time containing their body, "Oh,

I'll help you out! Let's hold hands and dance!" They explained what that meant for the class,

> It also sends the message to the other children that they'll be safe. Because...they're savvy about...the social dynamic in the classroom. They may not be able to express it, but...when they're getting up to dance, they're looking around to see who's next to them.

The same teacher said that, "some things are just quietly done in the classroom and off the radar. ...Children are taken to do a job in the kitchen. They need a break from the classroom. It doesn't [always] get to the conflict stage."

In a kindergarten classroom observation, the teacher gave a particular group a pep talk before they started in the dramatic play area, so I asked the teacher about the talk after school. Knowing that this was a potentially volatile group, the teacher had decided to sit down and talk with them before they began playing,

> I said, 'This is a group where things could get unsafe.' And they all knew and nodded, so I asked, 'So what needs to happen?' and they answered, 'We have to take care of the toys' and 'We can't hit each other.' We reviewed the expectations. I asked what they'd be playing, and they said family. I asked, 'Who's going to be who in the family?' and they started claiming roles. They just started claiming them, no conflicts. Prior to that piece, I reminded them that if things got really unsafe, I'd ask them to make another choice.

The teacher described this as giving them a little reminder, a little sense of the consequence if it didn't go smoothly, and help in getting started with their roles. The teacher also said this was not necessarily something they could have done at the beginning of the school year, but that they could now. "You can teach something, and then it's just a reminder."

How teachers stay calm themselves. Several of the teachers acknowledged the importance of remaining calm themselves in order to best

support students in managing conflicts. One teacher told a story about helping a child calm their body down before resolving a conflict. The teacher, who was feeling annoyed with the situation that had taken place, took the opportunity to take a deep breath *with* the child to calm themselves down before helping facilitate the resolution. Another teacher talked about the struggle of keeping one's distance,

> Two children have a conflict between each other - it's *their* conflict. It's not your conflict. You're not a part of it. And that's *really, really* tough for some teachers. I think all teachers, at some point, will get annoyed with a child because they hit some really, you know, very friendly child who never does anything to anyone and is really pleasant. And I think it's just sort of human nature to have a reaction of like, "Oh! What?!" but really keeping that in check, because it isn't you.

Another teacher said it took practice to maintain that distance, "I think a lot of people who become teachers and social workers, we're all the folks that in our own personalities are really empathic, and so it's really easy to get hooked into the emotionality of a kid. And it takes *practice* and years to kind of learn to not get sucked into that." When I mentioned to that teacher that I had noticed that the tone of their voice in the classroom was always very calm, they explained that though it came naturally to them at this point in their career, that there were days when it was harder.

> I try really hard to be able to be fully present here, but if I'm sick or if there's something external that's making it hard for me to be...fully present, then it's work. Then I'm like, 'Okay. Take a deep breath. Go over. This is not [the person you just had a conflict with earlier], this is a five-year old. (*laughs*) Get a grip!'

The teacher talked about the importance of remaining calm, especially with certain children who are particularly sensitive, "This year, I feel like I kind of

double check myself on the way over, knowing that for Alan that makes all the difference. …If I can get calm enough, I can even restrain him in a way that doesn't get him completely flailing and fighting me. But I have to be really on top of this for him, in particular."

Although the teachers did not talk about tone of voice in the interviews, I noticed from the very beginning that when the teachers spoke as they would in the classroom in order to illustrate a point (Ex. "Oh, no, Javier was still using the paint brush, he just put it down so that he could get another piece of paper, but he's still using it."), their tone of voice slowed down and seemed more relaxed. For some of the teachers, their voice took on a slight lilt or sing-song quality as they hypothetically spoke to the children. I witnessed the same tones of voice during the classroom observations as well.

In addition to tone of voice and calm non-reactivity, a few teachers also pointed out the importance of following through on their word in order to build the children's trust. One preschool teacher talked about this as children were learning how to take turns,

> Turn taking is such a hard concept…They have to trust...the adult in the situation that they will get a turn. If you're a teacher who doesn't follow up, you're probably going to have more conflicts, or more resistance to actually follow through, because they don't trust you. And that creates quite a bit of problems.

Similarly, one kindergarten teacher said, "I do try to set kids up with their next opportunity, so if you don't get it, you'll get it in a few minutes, or I'll write your name and put it in the choice bin and you can start there tomorrow."

Approaches that make them cringe. There were several approaches to conflict management that the teachers actively did not use. All five of the teachers said they did not force children to apologize. They said that if it was not coming from the child, then no one really benefited from it. "If they don't mean it, it's not that valuable." Another teacher said, "I really don't think it's appropriate to label children's feelings for them, and especially when they might not be accurate. Even telling children that they have to feel sorry, cause I don't think children always do have to feel sorry. That's not always an emotion they're capable of." Additionally, another teacher explained,

> If that's a classroom norm, kids learn really quickly they can do anything (*laughs*) and then be like, 'Sorry (*nonchalantly*). I SAID SORRY!' …I don't see it as productive if kids don't genuinely feel sorry. Then it's just words to get me out of this situation.

During a preschool classroom observation, a girl was dancing on a step when a classmate walked over and pushed her down. A volunteer in the classroom rushed to the girl who had fallen and immediately gave her a hug. While holding her, the volunteer said, "Henry, please tell Ellie you're sorry. I'm sure it was an accident. It was an accident, right? You didn't mean it." When I spoke with the preschool teacher later that day about the volunteer's response, they said they always address those situations with the person at the end of the day.

> My experience is that people just don't know, so you fall back on whatever experience you may have had in the past. You're drawing on that or drawing on anything that might smooth it over, because no one wants conflict. It's easier to do that. I'll ask her what she thinks, what message that's sending to Henry *and* Ellie. What messages are they getting? …You think, 'Oh, I was in school. What did my teachers do?'

The next most common approach that four teachers mentioned made them cringe was when adults stepped in to remove the object of the conflict (Eg. "Well then no one's going to have the fire engine!). They pointed out that this was disempowering, totally adult dependent, removed a learning opportunity from the children, and probably came from the adult's own discomfort or aversion to dealing with the conflict. One teacher pointed out that this could take the form of an adult grabbing the contended item, but it could also be a situation in which the adult arbitrarily assigned roles without letting the children negotiate.

Two teachers talked about the importance of hearing both sides of each story, and that when adults only listen to one child, they were not allowing the other to feel heard, nor were they able to address both players' parts in the situation. One teacher cringed at others intervening too quickly, without allowing children to try to solve the problem on their own, and another mentioned adults processing way too much as a problematic approach. One teacher talked about adults screaming at children about not screaming, "'DON'T SCREAM AT YOUR BROTHER THAT WAY!' And they're modeling the screaming, and I'm like, '*Oh my gosh, do you hear the contradiction*?'"

One preschool teacher talked at length about the futility of time out and other punitive responses,

> The whole thing of time out…it's totally pointless in my mind because no child is sitting there thinking, 'Oh, I'm reflecting on what I did.' Please! And I often think, 'Don't you remember being a child?' (*laughs*). Anything that's punitive…just seems pointless to me because children aren't making those connections. Especially young children, they're not thinking 'Oh, I'd better not do this because I might get punished in some way...They're just going to do it! You're not thinking about the consequences of your actions, especially when you're two! ...You're

> living in the moment. 'I see shiny toy! I want it!' That's all you're thinking. They just don't know, they don't have the tools.

Instead, this teacher said it was important to be concrete, explaining the situation and the reasoning to the child,

> 'It's hard for you to play with your friends right now. You're taking their toys. Let's find something else to do.' They can see that. 'Oh, I'm not.' 'But you can play over here. …Let's try again...in this new space with a different set of peers.'

In addition to being concrete with young children, the teacher said adults should offer children opportunities to figure out what is being asked of them, rather than punishing them for not knowing or understanding.

Teachers Are Still Grappling

After years of experience, practice, and reflection, these mentor teachers had polished their multi-faceted approaches with the intention of best meeting the diverse needs of their students. But as reflective practitioners, they were also able to identify areas around conflict management where they were still grappling with how to best handle the situation. One teacher said, "I mean, it's not as though I have the answers for everything. I do go home sometimes and think about a child who I could help support." Two large themes emerged in the data: children who avoid conflict, and conflict management in an inclusive classroom with children with special rights.

The Non-conflict conflict. Four of the teachers talked about the complexities of supporting children who regularly avoid conflicts, or as one teacher called it, the non-conflict conflict. A prekindergarten teacher said "It's the kids that avoid conflict that I worry about the most because...there are so many

skills to be gained through working through it, putting yourself out there." A kindergarten teacher shared a similar concern,

> There's a handful of kids who don't really assert themselves and don't stand up for themselves. I don't know if it's an expectation or a hope, but for them, I really want them to…just say no sometimes if they don't want to have a certain role, or they don't want to be dragged around by their friend, or they don't want to give up something they're working with, to stand up for themselves a bit. And that's harder! …It's the non-conflict conflict. …Those are the kids I'm [thinking], 'Come ON! Get in a conflict for once! Stand up! Say no!'

The teacher went on to explain a hypothetical situation, and how they might respond,

> I think the place where I feel like I most want to intervene, and some of it's protective, is a kid who's been working somewhere for twenty minutes and someone else come in and destroys it or just takes over and starts demanding to play and they may say nothing, or they may leave. …Another goal of mine is also to have that child try to articulate how they're feeling because I also worry about kids who keep all their feelings closed up and inside and what that means. So I spend a lot of time talking with that child about, 'But you were working for twenty minutes, and I'm sure it can't feel that good to have someone come along, like, how did it feel to have that happen?' And hopefully I engage them in a conversation about their feelings. And then try to connect them with the other person and work out a resolution.

One participant said that sometimes, if the child was not identifying their feelings around the situation, the teacher might ask other children nearby, "How would you feel if someone came and knocked it down?"

One of the preschool teachers talked about how sometimes they themselves would start a pretend conflict to help the children practice on a teacher, which might feel more safe and predictable than confronting a peer,

> I'll come over to a space and say, 'I'm going to knock over your blocks!' just as like a provocation to see, because I think it's a lot safer for some children to manage that kind of conflict with an adult, and to practice that, than with peers, where it's less predictable, especially with young children.

They explained that, "I don't actually knock anything over…I just threaten. But that's also something I would only do later in the year when they know me (*laughs*), not at the beginning of the year." When I asked how the children typically responded, they said,

> Verbally, and then they also get up and protect the thing that they're building with their body. So it's really interesting to see. It's like, 'Oh, so you *can* do that! I thought you might have those skills.' It also gives you more information, what is it about the relationship with a peer that's so hard for them?

Another teacher said that when they used puppets to act out the problem with the whole group, "oftentimes those kids can very readily say there's a problem and this is what the kid should do. They know, intellectually they know, but [it's] moving from that to being able to sort of feel safe enough to do it."

A kindergarten teacher talked about the importance of close observation to accurately diagnose the issue,

> As you're doing assessments and writing reports…and you think, 'Wow, this child, they never get into problems.' You think a little more about that and then you observe the behaviors and you notice that someone says, 'I want a turn,' and they're busy playing, and they might just…let the other child have a turn…rather than go through the conflict and kind of face it head on. They're more likely to just go on their merry way. I think that when we deal with that, there's kind of a fine line because you want to respect who that child is, they could be just really easygoing and that's their personality, 'Oh, it's not a big deal.' But they also could be a child who might not have the confidence to do that. So I think it requires a lot of observation to figure out what that line is.

The teacher explained that, in addition to paying attention to who the child was, one had to also take into account each situation. They talked about noticing the child's reaction and facial expressions in order to ascertain whether the child was upset. If so, they suggested,

> interjecting yourself…and speaking what you're observing, saying, 'I notice that you look really sad. It didn't look like you were done with that toy yet. did you really want to give Jimmy a turn with that?' And kind of letting them know, 'You could say to him, 'You could have a turn in five minutes.'' And kind of giving them potential solutions for that. But also acknowledging that they could have a voice in that situation.

The teacher reiterated that the teacher's role was not to solve it for them, but "really just giving them the language and acknowledging something that they could do. And…maybe helping boost them a little bit in what they're capable of."

Conflict in an inclusive classroom. Several of the teachers talked about situations when it was "tricky" trying to figure out just how much to push individual children with special rights to the next level of participation in resolving a conflict. But that dilemma seemed to fit more into the daily rigors of discerning how much scaffolding to provide children in their learning. The grappling I will describe here is more about how teachers talked about conflict with their whole class when some of the children in the class had special rights. One preschool teacher talked about the particular challenges,

> What's really hard is when there's a child in the class who has special rights, a particular need, maybe a sensory need, and other children don't [understand], obviously, it's really hard at this age for them to understand why their friend is behaving in this certain way. And they get a lot of mixed signals. That's particularly hard, in supporting that child, and also the other children.

The teacher explained that although the children did not know about Down Syndrome or Autism, they did know that their friend was different from them, and often tried to make sense of the situation by saying, "Well, I'm older." It was hard for the children to understand why their friend might repeatedly knock over something they were building,

> They don't know that it feels really good to their friend's body to knock things over, or that maybe neurons get fired in their brain when everyone gets upset with them and they get stimulated in some way.

The teacher explained the difficulty in that, "you don't want the other children to label that child as quote-unquote *bad*." In those cases, the teacher used language intentionally,

> The language I use around that is usually like 'Well, they're still learning how to do x, y and z. Like you. You're still learning to do this or that!' And in that way, it does help them come to some understanding. Because they know that there are things that they're still working on. And when you identify it in that way, they are more accepting. But it certainly still is a difficult struggle, because they can't necessarily be expected to understand another child's developmental needs.

After explaining this reframing that they did regularly, they talked about how there were some children who had a strong sense of fairness or justice, and who may have felt really hurt when those things were violated, "Wow, that's just wrong! How could this person do this thing?" The teacher talked about how, in those cases, that could necessitate more discussion. Since the child who did the knocking over might not have been at the point of being able to have a long conversation, and the goal for them might have simply been to hear the other child's voice and then express themselves, for the child who was still upset, "those are side conversations that often happen one-on-one with a teacher so that that child doesn't start going around saying, 'Oh, well, I don't like so and so. They're bad.'"

In a way, the challenge of perception reached beyond just the children in the classroom, and out to families as well,

> So this little boy that's been hitting this girl, as much as I try to convince the parents that she's not being picked on, because Lorenzo [child with

> invisible special rights] hits everybody, her sort of coming home and reporting it, is that they're telling her to hit him back. But Finn [child with visible special rights] also hits her a lot and they don't tell her to hit Finn back. So it's this whole thing around the visible disability and it's clearly something hard for Finn…but I can't obviously get into details about Lorenzo's disability. And it's just interesting how there's that sort of what's visible and not visible in trying to explain to families, while maintaining confidentiality, that this is something that we're working on with this child for lots of reasons.

Another teacher talked about having had similar experiences, "I've seen that too, when there's someone with a visible disability, they tolerate it, and they teach their children to tolerate it, which is really fascinating." A third teacher pointed out "which sends a really interesting message." The teachers went on to talk about teaching children "to just sort of accept all conflicts as just something that happens. It happens! 'Oh, that person needs some help right now? Okay.'"

In the group interview, the teachers were talking about using language to normalize behavior (ex. "Oh, yeah, they like to dump things out sometimes. It's fun to do. But it's also fun to clean it up"), and that it became more difficult when the situation involved a threat to safety,

> I think when it's a safety issue, then it's a little trickier. If there's someone who's really physically aggressive, you know, there's kind of normalizing it and talking with kids about 'so and so's working on, whatever, containing their bodies,' but there's also, for me, there's this piece around AND we need to keep everyone safe. Everyone needs to feel safe at school.

As described earlier, in that kindergarten class the group had discussions about how to best support one another in what they were working on, and came up with group strategies of support.

Other challenging situations. Four additional situations that some of the teachers mentioned as difficult were (1) when families had different approaches

than those used at school, (2) when children came up with solutions that did not seem fair, (3) when some children seemed to thrive on the process of talking about emotions, and (4) the language of "checking in" did not necessarily transfer to other contexts.

Family approaches differ. Teachers talked about tuning families in about conflicts that were happening in the classroom, and also keeping communication open both ways: learning about tools that families used at home that might be useful at school, and also telling families about techniques being used at school. Four of the teachers talked about how families might not address conflict in the same way as teachers did at school,

> When families might not be on the same page as you…if a family is forcing a child to say 'I'm sorry' every single time, or isn't giving them the appropriate time to solve the problem, and you might not agree, how do you manage that is something [I grapple with]. Or if there's a cultural difference in terms of management where what a child typically experiences at home and how parents might help facilitate conflict resolution is different than what you're doing. How do you help rationalize that with the child? …Everyone's different and everyone has different approaches. And families come from different backgrounds, and you don't know what the children's experiences are, necessarily, before they come in and they join your classroom.

One teacher talked about having had students whose parents told them to always walk away if someone was bothering them, but "with a huge focus on behaving, listening to the teacher, being good," whereas the classroom culture encouraged children to express themselves, a far cry from being equated with behaving badly. As evidenced earlier, several teachers said they had had families tell their children to hit their classmates back. And in one family, it was culturally

acceptable to have loud debates in which each person aggressively lobbied their interests,

> It could be anything where they think they're right and the other child thinks they're wrong, and it just escalates, escalates louder and louder and …it's very hard, as even the teacher coming in, trying to mediate, it's very hard to kind of reach a middle ground. And it doesn't feel like a goal of either of these boys. They're not interested in reaching a middle ground, and I'm not sure their parents are interested in them reaching a middle ground either. So that's been kind of interesting.

Kids' unfair solutions. One kindergarten teacher said, "I feel like the work for me around [children solving conflicts independently] is that some of the solutions they come up with seem really unfair to me… It sometimes leaves me questioning, 'Is that okay? Do I [intervene]?'" They talked some more about what they did in those situations,

> Certainly the first few times I watch and if they come up with a solution that people seem to agree to, then, 'Okay (*tentative tone*).' But if I start seeing a pattern…then I do step in and [say], 'I'm not really sure that's fair. I've noticed this happening' and then I kind of feed it back to them. …And then the other kids are like, 'Oh! Yeah! Wait a minute, what's going on here?'

They said that for some children, this could clue them in, but for children with special rights, it might be somewhat different,

> Then it's not cluing them in necessarily, but it's more working with that other kid to say, 'You know, that's not really fair and it's not being a good friend, and I'm going to work with you or expect you to figure out a solution that is really fair.' Cause they know.

Immediately after describing these scenarios, the teacher paused for a moment, and then went on to muse aloud,

> But it's interesting, too, cause I think about…even how I grew up. I grew up in a neighborhood where every kid on our street was together as a group everyday after school from…three to six, or until dark. There were no adults, nobody supervising us or managing us. And you know, there's a

> lot to be said for that. There's a lot of research coming out right now about how if kids are having those experiences, and the older kids totally dominate and boss around the younger kids. And the kids learn a lot about society and culture that way, too. Or (*pause*) not? And where is that line? And it's pretty subjective, I think (*laughs*).

For this teacher, although they had a way in which they managed these situations, they were still actively grappling with whether theirs was necessarily the best response.

Kids thriving on the process. Three of the teachers talked about having experienced some children, girls in particular, who seemed to "thrive on the process, …and love the attention of sitting down and talking something through, [even] if it's something you've talked about a hundred times." One teacher said that they had put limits on the amount of time particular children could spend processing,

> I've had two years, one at this school and one at another school, of kindergarten girls who I am very convinced were stirring up conflict so then they could sit down and work through it and have space to talk about their feelings. And to the point where both years I had to give them time limits. I would say, 'So now you have three minutes to go talk about your conflict.' Because they could go on twenty minutes, half an hour. They're missing meetings, they're missing curriculum. …I'm like, 'Yup, you get five minutes and then you're back!'

"What do you mean, you want a check in?" A teacher told a mother's story who returned to the lab school to talk about her child's experience in a public kindergarten,

> A problem arose on the playground and this little boy said, 'Alright, I'm going to check in with this kid.' (*laughs*) And the kid didn't come from here and wasn't familiar with our culture and he was like, 'What are you trying to do? What do you mean, '*Are you okay*?'' And then our kid's like, 'You're supposed to answer, now you're supposed to say what will make you feel better.' And the other kid was like, 'Um, that's not happening,' and it turned into this physical altercation.

The teacher said they were now thinking about how to better prepare children as they transitioned out of the lab school, "I think it gives them a really good foundation for understanding, but what other tools can we give them as they move forward and face children that aren't familiar with our language and our culture?"

Discussion

The findings in this study provide a uniquely detailed perspective into the intricate workings of early childhood mentor teachers' multi-dimensional approaches to conflict management. As a naturalistic inquiry, the study began with the broad question of how these early childhood laboratory school teachers manage peer conflicts. The findings indicated an overall developmental trajectory in most of the teachers' own processes: from discomfort and teacher-directed problem solving, to an appreciation of conflict as an important learning opportunity and opportunity to empower children to become problem solvers. The teachers' change over time could be described as developmental in that the discernable, qualitative changes in their approaches were rooted in their internal reconceptualization of conflict: from an obstacle to be swiftly removed to an integral part of the curriculum. The developmental process continues as these mentor teachers actively grapple with questions that still arise for them in their classrooms.

The findings suggest that the teachers' current approaches to conflict management are developmental as well. Scarlett, Ponte, and Singh (2009) describe three indicators of developmental tasks—(1) take years to develop, (2) involve a shift in inner processes, and (3) affect qualitative change. Rather than

trying to influence children to "behave" immediately, in this study the teachers' aim is to foster children's development of long-term skills. Listening to others, expressing oneself, taking accountability for one's actions, and developing empathy are not exactly tasks one can learn overnight. When the teachers nurture children's confidence in their capability to resolve conflicts, it is precisely this kind of inner process that can affect long-term, qualitative change. The nurturance of these developmental skills is the essence of the "developmentally appropriate" practices outlined in the various classroom management handbooks (Honig, 2010; Scarlett et al., 2009; Gartrell, 2004; Evans, 2002; Bodine & Crawford, 1998; DeVries, 1994; Levin, 1994).

According to Piaget, interindividual conflict can promote intellectual and moral development as children begin to understand that others have perspectives and feelings different than their own (DeVries & Zan, 2012). Preschool, prekindergarten, and kindergarten children are precisely at the age when they are first acquiring a theory of mind (Hughes & Leekam, 2004; Wellman, 1990). When the head teachers encourage children to express themselves and listen to one another, to take into account each other's emotions and desires and then brainstorm and agree upon a resolution, they are giving children the opportunity to construct their interpersonal understanding and theory of mind. This developmental constructivist approach includes direct instruction when children are first beginning to learn new skills, and then the appropriate scaffolding to support children's growing independence (Scarlett, 1998).

Scaffolding is a dynamic process that includes repeated assessment in order to enable the teacher to provide less and less guidance as the student internalizes the skills and begins to use them independently (Bruner, 1986). The Russian term that Vygotsky used, *obuchenie*, which is often translated as simply *learning* or *instruction*, is more accurately defined as *teacher student instructional and learning interaction* (Wertsch & Sohmer, 1995). The teachers in this study described multiple ways that they make assessments of each individual player in each conflict situation before deciding how to most appropriately proceed. Different kinds and amounts of support are provided in accordance with teachers' assessments of children's language skills, sensory needs, emotions, state of regulation, and contextual understanding of the conflict situation. For example, children with limited language skills are more likely to become physically aggressive (Estrem, 2005) and less likely to effectively reconcile conflicts (Horowitz, Jansson, Ljungberg, & Hedenbro, 2005). The teachers in this study named language as a major factor in their discernment of how to best support children's participation in the resolution of conflict. According to Chen (2003), violence is likely to occur when children are unable to resolve conflicts independently and are at the same time not supported in their attempts to seek a resolution.

One of the unique contributions of this study is that the qualitative format allowed for an in-depth inquiry that captured many of the details of particular adaptations the head teachers used in their classrooms. The findings describe multiple situations in which teachers help to scaffold children's conflict resolution

conversations to meet their varied speech and language needs, whether it was asking questions and explaining others' perspectives, or repeating what children said to one another, to help support both expressive and receptive language. The restorative approach to conflict in schools is a form of mediation with its roots in restorative justice. Meredith and Sellman (2013) critique the approach for not addressing the particular needs of students with communication difficulties. Children with limited speech skills are caught in a catch 22 where they are more likely to get into conflicts with other children because they lack the language to effectively communicate, in addition to also having a harder time communicating through the resolution process, and in the case with the restorative justice approach, with taking accountability. The problem solving loft in one of the kindergarten classrooms offers a unique opportunity for children to draw or write their feelings, a depiction of the problem, and possible solutions. For children who have communication difficulties, or are dual language learners, this could provide a powerful alternative for expressing themselves visually, and perhaps also independently.

While the literature addressing children's conflict resolution provides details about protocols and the reasoning behind them, this study also offers insight into practical contextual decisions, such as the head teachers' delineations of when they do *not* engage in conflict resolution with the children. During times of transition, or in cases when the domino energy effect would be too disregulating for the rest of the class, teachers decided it was not time to unpack the conflict. In other situations teachers used only some of the conflict resolution

steps they usually used in their classroom, demonstrating the flexibility and adaptability of the approach. Several of the teachers talked about how certain years, their class might have a few girls who seemed to thrive on the emotional processing component of the approach. In those cases, teachers would give the students a time limit, in order to prevent them from missing out on other activities throughout the day. And while constructivist approaches usually encourage teachers to allow children to come up with their own resolutions, even when they do not seem fair, one of the teachers talked about their own discernment process of when to intervene–namely when a win/lose pattern has arisen in which a particular child is consistently "winning." The teacher explained that they would then make a reflective comment about the situation in order to either clue in the other children, so that they could advocate themselves, or in cases where the other child had special rights and might not understand the situation, the teacher would have a conversation with the first child about being a good friend.

In this study, the findings show that teachers' scaffolding happens on an individual level, adapting their approaches for each child in each situation, but upon stepping back, one may also see the developmental shift in the collective zone of proximal development as the approaches change from preschool to prekindergarten to kindergarten. In the preschool classes, the teachers provide the greatest amount of direct instruction, while by the time the children have familiarized themselves with the classroom approach in kindergarten, many of the children are able to resolve their conflicts independently. The beauty of the problem solving loft in one of the kindergarten classrooms is not only that it is the

quintessential constructivist tool, having come from the children, but also that by having a separate space dedicated to children's resolution of conflicts, it visually and spatially reinforces the encouragement for children to try to resolve conflicts independently, with one another, but without teacher help.

The findings of this study help to make the invisible visible, as teachers talked about their own internal processes for remaining intentionally calm in the classroom and empathizing with children's perspectives. The observations also elucidated their relaxed and slow tones of voice in their classrooms. According to Scarlett (2009), "developmental approaches may be the most hidden because they can't be seen in any one featured method and because they are defined as much by the patience of educators as they are by the specifics of what educators say or do" (p. 214). Results of a recent study confirm the importance of teachers' emotion-related regulation (Swartz & McElwain, 2012). Teachers who were better able to regulate their own emotions provided more supportive responses to children's negative emotions and fewer nonsupportive responses to children's positive emotions. In addition, teachers who reported higher levels of perspective taking also exhibited more supportive and fewer nonsupportive responses to children's negative emotions (Swartz & McElwain, 2012).

If the teachers employ a developmental approach, then perhaps it is appropriate to infer that the approaches that make them cringe do so precisely because of their developmental *in*appropriateness. Many of the approaches the teachers describe as ones they avoid are commonly used responses to children's conflicts by other adults. While forced apologies tend to smooth things over on

the surface, the developmental questions remain: *What long-term skills does this nurture? What inner processes does this foster? What qualitative change does this affect?* The teachers' critiqued this approach for not addressing children's emotions, speaking for them and (often erroneously) labeling their emotions, teaching them that they may act as they wish, as long as they say "I'm sorry" afterwards, and because an empty apology does not serve anyone involved. By contrast, the head teachers' approaches foster children's ability: (a) to notice, acknowledge, and take care of their emotions, by taking breaks or deep breaths to calm down; (b) to express themselves with words, rather than physically aggressive means, whether they feel angry, upset or hurt; (c) to listen to others, and try to understand their perspective; (d) to work together with a peer toward a creative solution; (e) to take accountability for their actions and/or to advocate for themselves; and (f) to be a part of a community that respects one another.

Similar results are found when the developmental questions are applied to the other approaches the participants deemed cringe-worthy. Removing the object of the conflict, "So then NO ONE can play with it!" leaves the children completely powerless and immediately removes any opportunity to learn altogether. In addition, some of the teachers mentioned that it was problematic for adults to only listen to one child's side of the conflict, which in turn affords a partial learning opportunity from part of the audience. Punitive approaches, including the use of time out, were also deemed developmentally inappropriate in addition to "pointless." Rather than sending children to time out as a punishment,

one of the teachers explained that instead young children should be given concrete explanations, and opportunities to figure out what is being asked of them.

Two important contributions of this study are the windows into these teachers' grappling processes as they discern about the best ways to support young children's needs in challenging situations, particularly around children who regularly avoid conflict, and how to manage conflict resolution in an inclusive classroom. In this study I found there were two kinds of conflict avoidance: cases when one child did something to upset another and then ran away, not wanting to "check in," and cases when particular children regularly acquiesced to the demands of their peers. The findings suggest that the teachers were clear about how to deal with the former, but still grappled with the complexities of supporting the latter.

Teachers were concerned that children who regularly avoided conflict were missing out on opportunities to learn important skills, including how to advocate for themselves. The ability to stand up for oneself is considered a particularly important skill within US individualistic culture. Studies have shown cultural variability between individualistic and collectivist cultures particularly regarding conflict avoidance behavior (Tjosvold & Sun, 2002; Trubisky, Ting-Toomey, & Lin, 1991). One of these studies, which looked at employees and managers in China, indicated that in some cases, when managed constructively, avoiding conflict can be useful and even reaffirm already effective relationships. While it is tenuous to extend these findings to apply to young children, given the massive developmental gap between early childhood and adulthood, it does serve

to critique the US American conceptualization of conflict avoidance as necessarily an ineffectual practice.

One teacher's thoughtful reflection made a key distinction between a child who was easygoing and did not mind acquiescing, and a child who did mind, but lacked the confidence to address the situation for fear of becoming involved in a conflict. The teacher suggested carefully observing the child's emotions to discern which was the case, and if the child did seem upset, then the teacher should intervene in such a way that supported the child's skill set and confidence so that they were empowered to engage in conflict resolution. This particular finding could have powerful implications for teacher training around how to best support children who avoid engaging in conflicts.

The teachers' concern about the potential exclusion of children with special rights in play, and their marginalization within the social makeup of the class, is a well founded concern (Guralnick, 1998; Odom et al., 2006; Okagaki, Diamond, Kontos, & Hestenes, 1998). One study found that children with mild delays exhibited a less adaptive and more negative interaction style, even when compared to typically developing children who were at the same developmental level (Guralnick, 1998). Another study looked at the differences in social acceptance and rejection between children with disabilities that are less likely to affect social problem solving and emotional regulation (e.g., speech-language or physical impairment) and children with disabilities that do tend to affect problem solving and emotional regulation (e.g., autism, developmental delay). The study found that children with disabilities that were more likely to affect social problem

solving and emotional regulation were more often socially rejected (Odom et al., 2006). Another study showed that typically developing preschoolers perceived hypothetical children with physical and language disabilities as just as likely as children without disabilities to have many friends (Okagaki et al., 1998). The results of these studies suggest that rejection has more to do with the children's limited social skills, as opposed to a mere perception of children with special needs as "different."

The findings in the current study suggest that the head teachers responded appropriately by thoroughly addressing the other children's reactions to children with special rights' challenges with regulation and problem solving. By comparison, some teachers might alternatively respond to this kind of rejection by simply decreeing, "We're all friends in our class" or directing, "we don't tell kids they can't play with us." Such a response is superficial and fails to address children's emotional reaction, for example, to a child repeatedly knocking down their building. Instead, the teachers in this study acknowledged those feelings, and then followed through to help the child who was upset to better understand. This kind of support was aimed at a more effective integration of the community, rather than a superficial and ineffective attempt to impose unity.

The findings in the present study show that the teachers made intentional efforts to help engage children with special rights and typically developing children in play together. This practice is supported by current research showing that children with disabilities interact more with their peers when teachers actively support their peer interactions (Kwon, Elicker, & Kontos, 2011). In

addition, another study showed that both parents' beliefs and children's attitudes toward children with disabilities were positively related to the frequency of children's actual contacts with them during play (Okagaki et al., 1998).

Limitations

One limitation of this study was the racial homogeneity of the sample. Since all of the participating teachers were white, this arguably limited the cultural scope of their responses (Picower, 2009). There may be ideological differences that exist in mainstream, white US culture that affected how teachers perceived peer conflict, resolutions, teachers' roles, and expectations of the children. As a white US American teacher myself, my own identity compounded the possibility of ideological blind spots in my analysis (see following section on Bias). The sample size was small, limited by the complexity and ambition of the study, however, given the depth of the qualitative inquiry, the sample was sufficient for addressing the research questions. Further research could include both more diverse head teachers, and those from other university laboratory schools. It could also compare classrooms outside the laboratory schools, such as public schools, Head Start programs, or other private preschools. Inter-rater reliability for the coding scheme was not established, but member checks of the thematic analysis helped to strengthen the validity of the findings.

Although EPCS was selected, rather than TEDCC, as the venue for the observations because it offered the least obtrusive means for observing the classrooms, there were some threats to validity based on my visibility. While the observation booths were kept dark and covered by a black mesh screen, I was

potentially visible to both children and teachers, which may have affected their behavior. I was also plainly visible when observing within the classroom (I spent part of one kindergarten observation session in the classroom's dramatic play area, which is out of view of the observation booth), and in the gymnasium (part of one preschool observation session took place in the gymnasium for a large motor dance activity).

Additionally, many of the children at EPCS know me as a teacher at the school. In each of these cases, if children attempted to interact with me, they were told by their teacher (or by me if observing outside of the booth) that I was working and could not talk with them. This procedure is part of the laboratory school culture, and children are familiar with the process of observers in the booth being unable to interact with people in the classroom. In each case, the children quickly returned to their play with few to no more attempts to engage me. In the case of the kindergarten observation, the children looked at me intermittently as they played in the beginning of the session, and then upon seeing that I was "working" and seemingly not paying attention to them, they continued their play without so much as a glance in my direction. In the case of the preschool observation in the gym, the children initially made several attempts to get my attention, inviting me to their dance party, but after their teacher explained each time that I was working, the children stopped talking to me, and became engaged in the activities led by their teacher. I hypothesize that, given our technological culture, children were familiar with the concept of an adult "working" at their computer as being inaccessible, or even not truly present. I saw this work to my

advantage as the children repeatedly seemed to disregard my presence while I typed away in each observational situation.

While I was visible to the teachers, the potential effect of my observations being overt was mitigated by the fact that these teachers have a long-standing experience of working in a laboratory school, and have the regular, daily experience of being observed for many purposes, including research. In addition, I also made full and complete disclosure of the purposes of the observation in the consent form, in addition to teachers' already having undergone both the individual and group interviews.

Bias

In a qualitative research study, the researcher is the instrument, which is both a strength and a weakness of qualitative research (Patton, 2002). It has been my responsibility to remain vigilant of my own biases, and having selected a grounded theory approach has helped to keep my analysis rooted firmly in the data. I have discussed my findings along the way with the participants as well as faculty (Dr. Martha Pott and Dr. Christy McWayne, Child Development, Tufts University; Dr. Bruce Fraser, Education, Boston University; Dr. Jo Trigilio, Philosophy, Simmons College), an early childhood colleague (teacher and researcher Colin Johnson), graduate student researchers (Lok-Wah Li and Amy Crowley, Child Development, Tufts University), and experienced qualitative researchers who served as consultants (Dr. Jess Greenstone, Tufts University; Dr. Jennifer Guzmán, UCLA).

My experience as an early childhood educator for nearly ten years afforded me a great deal of insight into the subject area, which was a strength in developing interview questions. Conversely, I needed to be conscious of my own biases and careful not to make assumptions about teachers' perceptions, beliefs or behaviors. During the interview process I asked follow up questions to clarify topics that the interviewees may have assumed I already knew, as an early childhood educator myself.

This awareness and reflexivity was extremely important during the classroom observations, since my own experience could have led to perception biases of what was happening. I made every effort to type direct quotations of the conflicts and interventions as they occurred, as well as raw descriptions of behaviors. Rather than make assumptions about teachers' intentions behind their interventions, I spoke with several teachers after I observed in their classrooms to inquire directly about their process and thoughts.

As a teacher at EPCS, I am a co-worker of three of the participating teachers. This may have affected how openly they felt they could share during the interviews, which could have skewed the data. Alternatively, our relationship could cause a greater sense of trust, leading to deeper sharing. The questions that were asked posed a minimal risk, and teachers were encouraged not to answer any questions they did not want to answer. Additionally, having interviewed teachers from schools with socio-constructivist philosophies, and as a teacher, myself, who has been trained in mostly constructivist educational environments, I acknowledge this ideological consistency in our fundamental teaching styles. The

purpose of this study was to illuminate the varied practices these experienced mentor teachers utilize to manage conflict in the classroom, rather than proclaim their approach as best.

Implications and Future Directions

In response to the critical lack of qualitative studies that examine the complexities of early childhood teachers' approaches to conflict management, this in-depth look at laboratory school mentor teachers' practices provides a rich and detailed description of teachers' discernment process when assessing whether, when, and how to intervene in children's conflicts. The descriptions of teachers practices, attitudes, and developmental trajectory in their conceptualization and response to conflict can help inform teacher preparation and trainings. This study also provides particular insight into teachers' conflict resolution practices within the context of a university affiliated laboratory school.

The findings of this study not only highlight the need for more research and discussion around issues that experienced and highly educated teachers still grapple with, but also provide practical examples of how teachers can address challenging issues in the classroom, especially in supporting young children who regularly avoid conflict, and in building healthy, inclusive classroom communities.

Future research could compare the experiences and perceptions of new teachers with those of experienced teachers. It could also compare classrooms outside of the Tufts laboratory schools, such as public schools, Head Start programs, or other private preschools. One could also study potential changes in

teachers' approaches to conflict management throughout the year as the children become accustomed to the classroom culture, by collecting and comparing data at multiple intervals. Another area for further investigation could be the analysis of children's own reflections about the conflict resolution approaches in their classrooms.

Conclusion

The study reported above provides an in-depth examination into the thoughts and actions of experienced mentor teachers as they guide young children to understand the role of conflict in their lives and to learn how to manage it. This work has far reaching impact for the development of new teachers, whose training often includes only how to "manage behavior" in the classroom, as well as for the many children who grow up to be competent members of a society with the potential to help create a more peaceable world.

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Appendix A

Letter to TEDCC Director

Dear _____,

I hope this letter finds you well! My name is Jessica Nelson. I am a second-year master's student at Tufts in Child Development, and am also a TA at the Eliot-Pearson Children's School. I am working on developing a research project for my thesis and I wanted to take a moment to tell you about how I hope TEDCC can be a part of my study.

As a teacher of young children now for nearly a decade, I have always been particularly interested in conflict resolution in early childhood classrooms. Now as a master's student, I am excited for the opportunity to tailor a study specifically to my research interests. I am designing a qualitative study about how head teachers at Tufts' laboratory schools manage conflicts in their classrooms. The study will be open-ended and naturalistic, so rather than starting my research with a particular hypothesis or predetermined variables, I will be analyzing the data collected to see what information emerges. I am looking forward to learning how teachers talk, in-depth, about their practices in the classroom, and the philosophy beneath them.

This fall I hope to conduct one-on-one interviews with some of the preschool and kindergarten head teachers at both TEDCC and EPCS. I will collect, code and analyze the data, and depending upon what is found, I will hone a more focused set of research questions. In January and February I would like to unobtrusively observe in two to three classrooms. It is possible that both could be at one site, or one at each TEDCC and EPCS. Once the data from the interviews has been analyzed, I will determine which classroom observations would best facilitate further understanding of the research questions.

The study does not include any intervention with children, only interviews with teachers and classroom observations. I have applied for IRB approval for the interviews through BU, where I am currently enrolled in a qualitative research methods course (I am taking the course through the consortium since Tufts was not offering research methods this semester). I should be hearing from them this coming week, and I will let you know as soon as I have been approved.

I would be happy to answer any questions or concerns that you might have. You can also contact my advisor, Martha Pott. Thank you so much for your time!

Warmly,
Jessica

Letter to EPCS Director

Dear _____,

I hope this letter finds you well! As you know, I am working on developing a research project for my thesis and I wanted to take a moment to tell you a little bit more about how I hope EPCS can be a part of my study.

As a teacher of young children now for nearly a decade, I have always been particularly interested in conflict resolution in early childhood classrooms. Now as a master's student, I am excited for the opportunity to tailor a study specifically to my research interests. I am designing a qualitative study about how head teachers at Tufts' laboratory schools manage conflicts in their classrooms. The study will be open-ended and naturalistic, so rather than starting my research with a particular hypothesis or predetermined variables, I will be analyzing the data collected to see what information emerges. I am looking forward to learning how teachers talk, in-depth, about their practices in the classroom, and the philosophy beneath them.

This fall I hope to conduct one-on-one interviews with some of the preschool and kindergarten head teachers at both EPCS and TEDCC. I will collect, code and analyze the data, and depending upon what is found, I will hone a more focused set of research questions. In January and February I would like to unobtrusively observe in two to three classrooms. It is possible that both could be at one site, or one at each EPCS and TEDCC. Once the data from the interviews has been analyzed, I will determine which classroom observations would best facilitate further understanding of the research questions.

The study does not include any intervention with children, only interviews with teachers and classroom observations. I have applied for IRB approval for the interviews through BU, where I am currently enrolled in a qualitative research methods course (I am taking the course through the consortium since Tufts was not offering research methods this semester). I should be hearing from them this coming week, and I will let you know as soon as I have been approved.

I would be happy to answer any questions or concerns that you might have. You can also contact my advisor, Martha Pott. Thank you so much for your time!

Warmly,
Jessica

Appendix B

Individual Interview Recruitment Email

Dear _____,
(potential participant's name)

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Jessica Nelson, I am a master's student in Child Development at Tufts, and am also a TA at EPCS. As a preschool teacher for nearly ten years, I have always been particularly interested in conflict resolution with young children. For my thesis this year, I am conducting a study about how head teachers at Tufts' laboratory schools manage conflicts in the classroom.

In the coming month I will be conducting one-on-one interviews . If you are interested in participating, I would love to hear from you about your experience and your thoughts! The interview would last between 30 minutes to an hour, and everything you share would be confidential. I would be happy to come to TEDCC at a time that is convenient for you.

If you would like to participate or learn more information about the study, please contact me at any time. You can also contact my advisor, Martha Pott.

Thank you so much for your time, and I hope you have a great week!

Warmly,
Jessica

Appendix C

Individual Interview Informed Consent

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study, which will take place from October 2013 to November 2013. This form details the purpose of this study, a description of the involvement required, and your rights as a participant. I am student of a research course at Boston University and a graduate student of Tufts University.

The purpose of this study is to gain better understanding of teachers' conflict management techniques in the classroom. The method that will be used to meet this purpose is one-on-one interviews.

The benefits of the research:

- By deeply listening to experienced teachers in the field, we can learn how to best support young children's development of some of the key skills for building a peaceful society – managing conflict. We hope to identify what "high-quality" education can look like so that it can be communicated and utilized in early childhood programs.

You are encouraged to ask questions or raise concerns at any time about the nature of the study or the methods I am using. You can contact me and you can also contact my professor, Bruce Fraser, or my advisor, Martha Pott. You may obtain further information about your rights as a research subjects by calling the BU IRB office at 617-358-6115.

The interviews will be audio taped to help me accurately capture your insights in your own words. The tapes will only be heard by me for the purpose of this study. If you feel uncomfortable with the recorder, you may ask that it be turned off at any time. There is no inherent risk in this study. However, you also have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. In the event you choose to withdraw from the study all information you provide (including tapes) will be destroyed and omitted from the final paper.

Insights gathered by you and other participants will be used in writing a qualitative research report and as a part of my thesis, which will be read by my committee of professors and presented in April 2014. Though direct quotes from you may be used in the paper, your name and other identifying information will be kept anonymous.

Name (print): _____

Signature: _____Date: _____

Investigator's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix D

Individual Interview Guide

How do early childhood teachers in a lab school explain how they manage conflict in their classrooms?

- Hi, thank you for meeting with me. I'm interested in talking with you about how you manage conflict in your classroom. I'm going to ask you questions; the questions are a guideline, but I want to get as full a picture as possible, so feel free to add anything along the way. Also feel free to not answer anything if you don't want to.
- Confidentiality - everything you say will be confidential; none of this information will be reported using names or any other identifying information. Though the sample size is small, I will do my best to make it unidentifiable.
- Recording - helps me to capture responses in your words.

Definition of conflict

- What are some of the common conflicts you see happening between children in your classroom?
- How do you know a conflict is happening?

Teachers' approach(es) to conflict

- Imagine a conflict that happened recently in your classroom...
    - Describe the conflict.
    - What did you do?
    - How did the children respond?
    - Was this a typical example of how you respond to peer conflicts?
- How do you decide when to intervene?
- What are some of the typical responses children have to the process?
- How would you describe your approach(es) to conflict between children?
- Is your approach connected to an approach you learned somewhere?
    - If YES:
        - Where did you learn it?
        - Was it hard to learn? Why?
    - If NO:
        - How did you develop your approach?
- How has your approach changed over the course of your career as a teacher?

Teachers' assessment of approach(es)

- What often works with this approach?
- When does it not work? What gets in the way of this approach being successful?

- What approaches by others have you witnessed that make you cringe? Why?
- What do you see as the teacher's most important role in peer conflict resolution in the classroom?
- If you were coaching a new early childhood teacher-in-training, what would you say to her/him about conflict resolution in the classroom?

Theory and goals underlying their approach(es)

- I'd like to talk some more about your goals and expectations for children in your class regarding conflict resolution with their peers…
    - What skills are you trying to teach through your approach? How?
    - What are developmentally appropriate expectations of what children are capable of at this age? What do you not expect them to be able to do?
- Children at this stage are often described as "ego-centric" and unable to see situations from another's perspective. Does this description fit with what you see your students as capable of? How so and/or how not?

- Is there anything else you would like to share with me regarding conflict resolution in the classroom?

Demographic Information

- Would you mind telling me…
    - Ethic background, sex; How many years teaching; ages of students.

Closing Statement

- Thank you very much for participating. That's it for my questions.
- When my thesis is complete I'm going to write an executive summary (5 page overview of the thesis). Would you like a copy of it? I also hope to present it to the teachers and/or the community and you might be interested in coming.
- If you think of anything you'd like to add later, please feel free to let me know.

Appendix E

Individual Interview Thank You Email

Dear _____,

Thank you so much for allowing me to interview you for my thesis research on how early childhood teachers manage conflict in their classrooms. It was very helpful to talk with you and I really appreciate you taking the time out of your day!

As I said at the end of the interview, I will be writing an executive summary of the study, which should be ready in April, and I will be happy to send you a copy. If you think of anything else you'd like to include, I would love to hear from you. And, of course, everything that you share with me is held confidential.

Thank you, again!

Warmly,
Jessica

Appendix F

Group Interview Recruitment Email

Dear _____,
(potential participant's name)

I hope this email finds you well! Thank you again for participating in the one-on-one interview for my thesis research about managing children's conflicts in the classroom. I was able to collect a lot of really interesting data, and am looking forward to sharing the results with you when I'm done!

The findings so far have been fascinating, with some particular issues coming up repeatedly in many of the interviews. I would love to flesh out some of these topics further by gathering participating head teachers to meet and discuss the questions together. Sometime in the coming weeks, I would like to hold a one-time, group interview with any of you who may be interested from the first round of interviews (5 potential participants).

If you are interested in participating, I would love your input! There will be snacks, and it should last no more than an hour. In reporting the findings, everything you share will be confidential. This focus group interview is completely voluntary, and you can feel free to say no, or drop out at any time.

If you would like to participate or learn more information about this part of the study, please contact me at any time. You can also contact my advisor, Martha Pott.

If you are interested, please let me know by [one week from sent date] so that we can pin down a date! Thank you so much, again, for your time, and have a great week!

Warmly,
Jessica

Appendix G

Group Interview Informed Consent

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study, which is taking place in February 2014. This form details the purpose of this study, a description of the involvement required, and your rights as a participant. I am a graduate student of Tufts University.

The purpose of this study:

- To gain better understanding of teachers' trajectory throughout their careers regarding their conception of conflict management in the classroom.
- To gain better understanding of the issues that teachers still grapple with regarding conflict management in the classroom.

The benefits of the research:

- Many studies have measured the success of specific interventions, and numerous books offer specially titled conflict resolution protocols, but this study will offer important insight into these teachers' trajectory of transformation in their approaches to conflict management in their classrooms. By learning more about particularly challenging areas as identified by experienced teachers themselves, this study could help inform teacher training, and highlight areas for further inquiry into the challenges that teachers face in the actual implementation of conflict management protocols in diverse classrooms.

The risks of this study:

- Although findings will be reported confidentially and identifying information will be removed from reports of the findings, the aggregate data does reflect upon the participants as a group. Given the small sample size and the limited schools/age groups, participants may feel that the results expose their practices. The findings will be reported at Tufts University, which is directly associated with their place of employment, and may lead to feeling exposed at work about challenges they face in doing their jobs.

The methods that will be used to meet this purpose include:

- Focus Group Interview

You are encouraged to ask questions or raise concerns at any time about the nature of the study or the methods I am using. You can contact me, and you can also contact my advisor, Martha Pott. You may obtain further information about your rights as a research subjects by calling the Tufts SBER IRB office at (617) 627-3417.

The interview will be audio taped to help me accurately capture your insights in your own words. The tapes will only be heard by me for the purpose of this study.

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. In the event you choose to withdraw from the study all information you provide will be omitted from the final paper.

Insights gathered by you and other participants will be used in writing my thesis, which will be read by my committee of professors and presented in April 2014. Though direct quotes from you may be used in the paper, your name and other identifying information will be kept anonymous.

Name (print): _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Investigator's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix H

Group Interview Guide

Conceptualization of conflict throughout career:

- How did you react to conflict between children when you first started teaching?
- How has your approach changed over the course of your career as a teacher? Why?
- If you were coaching a new early childhood teacher-in-training, what would you say to her/him about conflict resolution in the classroom?

Challenging situations:

- What about when particular children in your class avoid conflict?
- What kinds of challenges arise when managing conflict in an inclusive classroom [classrooms with children with special needs]?
- What other kinds of conflict management situations do you still find challenging?
- What do you do when you come up against a challenging situation like these? How do you manage it? How do you decide what to do?
- What do you think the field needs to do to address these issues, if anything?

Appendix I

Observations Recruitment Email

Dear _____,
(potential participant's name)

Hello again! Along with a group interview, as described in my previous email, I am also interested in making some classroom observations to help deepen my understanding of conflict management in the classroom. Given that EPCS has booths to allow for the least obtrusive observations, I'm hoping to spend one to three mornings in each participating classroom observing children's conflict episodes and any interventions.

If you are interested in me observing your classroom, let me know and we can schedule the visits at times that are convenient for you. Again, in reporting the findings, everything I observe will be confidential. The observations are also completely voluntary, and you can feel free to say no.

If you would like to participate or have any questions, let me know!

Thanks!

Jessica

Appendix J

Observations Informed Consent

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the observations portion of this study, which is taking place in February and March 2014. This form details the purpose of this study, a description of the involvement required, and your rights as a participant. I am a graduate student of Tufts University.

The purpose of this study:

- To gain better understanding of children's interpersonal conflicts in the classroom, and teachers' interventions.

The benefits of the research:

- Many studies have measured the success of specific interventions, and numerous books offer specially titled conflict resolution protocols, but this study will offer important insight into these teachers' trajectory of transformation in their approaches to conflict management in their classrooms. By learning more about particularly challenging areas as identified by experienced teachers themselves, this study could help inform teacher training, and highlight areas for further inquiry into the challenges that teachers face in the actual implementation of conflict management protocols in diverse classrooms.

The risks of this study:

- Although findings will be reported confidentially and identifying information will be removed from reports of the findings, the aggregate data does reflect upon the participants as a group. Given the small sample size and the limited schools/age groups, participants may feel that the results expose their practices. The findings will be reported at Tufts University, which is directly associated with their place of employment, and may lead to feeling exposed at work about challenges they face in doing their jobs.

The methods that will be used to meet this purpose include:

- Classroom Observations

You are encouraged to ask questions or raise concerns at any time about the nature of the study or the methods I am using. You can contact me and you can also contact my advisor, Martha Pott. You may obtain further information about your rights as a research subjects by calling the Tufts SBER IRB office at (617) 627-3417.

Observations will not be audio or video recorded. I will take observational notes on my laptop. I anticipate making approximately one to three 2-hour observations, but may need to increase the number of observations if I have not documented

enough conflict episodes between children. All observations of your classroom will be scheduled with your permission.

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. In the event you choose to withdraw from the study all information you provide will be omitted from the final paper. Insights gathered in these observations, along with one-one-one interviews and a focus group interview, will be used in writing my thesis, which will be read by my committee of professors and presented in April 2014. Though direct quotes from you may be used in the paper, your name and other identifying information will be kept anonymous.

Name (print): _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Investigator's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix K

Observation Template

Observation Date: _____ Classroom: _____ Children's Ages: _____

Observation Start Time: _____ Observation End Time: _____

Conflict #: _____ Conflict Duration Time: _____ - _____

	Data/Description	Coding
Description of Context		
Description of players involved *(Physical description, sex, age)*		
Description of Conflict		
Intervention *(Who intervened? After how long? What happened?)*		
Resolution *(How did it end?)*		

Appendix L

Boston University Charles River Campus Institutional Review Board

25 Buick Street
Room 157
Boston, Massachusetts 02215
T 617-358-6115
www.bu.edu/irb

Notification of IRB Review: Exemption Request

November 18, 2013

Jessica Nelson
Student
School of Education
Two Silber Way
Boston, MA 02215

Protocol Title:	Early Childhood Teachers' Conflict Management in the Classroom
Protocol #:	3349X
Funding Agency:	Unfunded
IRB Review Type:	Exempt (2)

Dear Ms. Nelson:

On November 18, 2013, the IRB determined that the above-referenced protocol meets the criteria for exemption in accordance with CFR 46.101(b)(2). Per the protocol, Head Teachers in preschool and kindergarten classrooms will be interviewed to answer the question: How do early childhood Head Teachers in a laboratory school manage conflict in their classrooms? The exempt determination includes the use of: recruitment email, consent form, and interview guide.

Additional review of this study is not needed unless changes are made to the current version of the study. Any changes to the current protocol must be reported and reviewed by the IRB. If you have any changes, please submit the *Clarification Form* located at http://www.bu.edu/irb/. No changes can be implemented until they have been reviewed by the IRB.

In approximately six months, you will receive an inquiry from the IRB to ascertain whether your study still meets the requirements for exempt review

If you have any questions, please contact me at 617-358-6115.

Sincerely,

Mary McCabe
IRB Analyst
Charles River Campus IRB

Appendix M

Tufts UNIVERSITY

OFFICE OF THE VICE PROVOST FOR RESEARCH

Social, Behavioral, and Educational Research
Institutional Review Board
FWA00002063

February 20, 2014 | Notice of Action

IRB Study # 1401035 | Status: ACTIVE

ATTENTION: BEFORE CONDUCTING ANY RESEARCH, PLEASE READ THE ENTIRETY OF THIS NOTICE AS IT CONTAINS IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT PROPER STUDY PROCEDURES.

Title: Early Childhood Teachers' Conflict Management in the Classroom Throughout Their Careers

PI: Jessica Nelson
Faculty Advisor: Martha Pott

The PI is responsible for all information contained in both this notice of action and on the following **Investigator Responsibilities Sheet.**

Only copies of approved stamped consent forms and other study materials may be utilized when conducting your study.

This research protocol meets the requirements set forth by the Office for Human Research Protections in 45 CFR 46 and is approved under Expedited Category 7.

Reviewed 2/19/2014 – Expires 2/18/2015

- Approved for 5 participants for the duration of the study.

Protocol Management:

- All translated study documents must be submitted for review, approval, and stamping prior to use.
- For all changes to the protocol, submit: *Request for Protocol Modification* form
- All Adverse Events and Unanticipated Problems must be reported to the Office of the IRB promptly (no later than 7 calendar days after first awareness of the problem) using the appropriate forms.
- Six weeks prior to the expiration of the protocol on 2/18/2015, investigators must submit either a *Request for Continuing Review* or a *Request for Study Closure*
- All forms can be found at: **http://www.tufts.edu/central/research/IRB/Forms.htm**

IRB Administrative Representative Initials: _____

20 Professors Row, Medford, MA 02155 | TEL: 617.627.3417 | FAX: 617.627.3673 | EMAIL: SBER@tufts.edu

Appendix N

Codebook: EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS' CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

BEGINNING OF TEACHING CAREER

Teacher Reaction: Comparison Previous/Now:
Teacher talks about reaction to conflict early in their career and/or compares reaction to conflict earlier in career with reaction now.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — I think what's changed the most is that I, um, unless there's a real physical safety or really, like, a real emotional safety issue at stake, I used to feel like I had to, like, get right in there and solve it immediately, or just tell them how to solve it. I wasn't comfortable with conflict.

UNDERSTANDING OF CONFLICT NOW

Important:
Teacher talks about conflict as important or positive.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — that it's a learning opportunity, so not seeing it as something, as uncomfortable and as noisy and messy as it can be. To not avoid it. To not see it as something you just want to like- To look at it as a really important part of what's happening in the life of a preschool classroom. And that you are, you are that, the teaching that you are doing in that moment is just as important as the teaching you're doing when you're talking about, you know, rhyming words, or you know, quote unquote academic skills.

Teacher Reaction Now:
Teacher talks about their own reaction to conflict.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — I think the other thing, too, that's really hard for teachers is the struggle of keeping your distance. Two children have a conflict between each other, it's *their* conflict. It's not your conflict (laughs). You're not a part of it. Um, and that's *really, really* tough for you know some teachers. And I think all teachers, at some point, will get annoyed with another, with a child, because they hit some really, you know, very friendly

child who never does anything to anyone, and is really pleasant, and I mean, I think it's just sort of human nature to be like, to have a reaction of like, "Oh!!! What?!" but really keeping that in check, because it's not, it isn't you, and I think parents have a hard time with that. Their child does something to another child and they get really upset, and it's like. Yeah, I understand they feel like it's a reflection on them, but also it's like, it's your child's conflict with this other person, like keep some kind of perspective, um, about it. And that's hard, that's really hard. Because there's an emotional response, especially if it's about, if it's something physical. You're, you know, you can feel annoyed with a child because they hit someone else (laughs), but you know.

Teacher's Role:
Teacher describes or names the role of the teacher in managing conflicts.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — I would say that I see myself as more of a, more than sort of the problem solver, as just the facilitator of, um, I guess, as a coach, kind of. Helping each child express what they need, what they want, and then figure out how to best work out the solution.

Children's Skills:
Teacher describes/lists the skills they believe children learn through resolving conflict.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — I think, um, empathy, recognizing feelings of others, perspective taking, um, assertiveness skills, just sort of standing up for yourself and speaking up for what you want, um, and compromise, being flexible. Um, and cooperating, I feel like, oftentimes as I said, once you've sort of, once kids are clear about what's happening, they're usually pretty willing to figure out a way to make it work. Um, and some sense of a responsibility to the community and to sort of making, taking care of each other

APPROACH NOW

TEACHERS' DECISIONS OF WHETHER, WHEN, AND HOW TO INTERVENE

Teacher Intervention-Timing:
Teacher talks about the timing of their interventions, how quickly they intervene.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee	If you don't get up and go over then it escalates, and then it becomes two conflicts that have to be resolved. The one first, you know, maybe someone hurting another child, and the first conflict of just like, well, they were using this. But also, visually, I think, visually scanning the room because, again, some of them are young, very young.

Teacher Observes:
Teacher observes children's conflicts.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee	Now I'm like, hmmm, they're fighting (laughs). Hopefully they can work it out, I'll just watch. Like that, I'm much better, um, able to sit back and kind of let it unfold. Which I think is really important because it gives them the opportunity to problem solve it on their own, and, figure it out, and, they do.

Child Requests Teacher Intervention:
Situations when children request intervention from a teacher during a peer conflict.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee	Child X tells knock knock joke, then Child Y tells one with the word poop. Child X goes to tell Teacher A, "No! Don't tell the teacher!" Child Y says. Child X tells Teacher A nearby.

FACTORS - KIDS

Age:
Teacher takes into account children's age in determining how to manage a conflict.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — with the 3s and 4s I find that it's all just so new to them (laughs). Um, they're just at that stage of having any type of awareness of somebody else, and what somebody else might be wanting or thinking, um.

Individual:
Teacher takes into account children's individual skills and needs in determining how to manage a conflict.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — I think it really depends on the kids. I'm not always as physical with kids. It sort of depends so that, it depends on the kid. There are some kids that need more physical support,

Speech/Language:
Teacher takes into account children's speech and language skills in determining how to manage a conflict.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — They may not be verbal, so, they let you know how they're feeling just by their body positions or their nonverbal sort of, they're communicating their needs nonverbally. They might be slowly inching away from an area, or, um, you could see the body tensing up, or, so these are things that are just silent. They're getting frustrated or annoyed or angry. And then they don't know how to necessarily handle those emotions, but, and they're not being verbal about it. So going over and seeing what's happening, diffusing the situation, and talking about it.

FACTORS - CONTEXT

Ratio:
Teacher talks about ratio, number of teachers in the classroom, or teaching alone.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee A: I think my first year or two teaching I was really, um, concerned about like resolving it quickly, kind of, um, containing the conflict. That I had this underlying fear that it could spin out of control if I didn't, you know, get in there and contain it and resolve it super fast. And that's not necessarily the approach any longer. But, yeah. I think I had a good amount of fear of it spinning out of my control.

Interviewee B: Were you alone?

Interviewee A: Yeah.

Interviewee B: With what age group?

Interviewee A: Kindergarten.

Interviewee B: Oh. I was preschool with three other teachers, so, it was a team of us. It does make a big difference.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION APPROACH

Source:
Teacher discusses where they learned their conflict resolution approach(es).

EXAMPLE

Interviewee But yeah, it was when I first started teaching in Head Start and um, there were like professional development sessions around kids' social emotional development and conflict resolution. And there were like very specific kind of like guidelines and steps around working through conflict. We read, like Nancy Carlson Paige, her work, and then there's like stuff from the Peaceable Schools Network. So like, yeah, PD work around that. And then seeing other teachers put it into practice and then trying it myself.

Approach:
Teacher describes their conflict resolution approach(es).

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — occasionally there might be, um, like a dialogue, um, about something, but again, it's, a lot of the conflicts that happen happen between two nonverbal children, or a verbal and a nonverbal, so it's kept pretty simple. "Were you playing with this?" yes. "Oh, they said they were playing with this." "Did you want it?" yes "Oh, you wanted it? They just said they wanted this" "Oh, well, when will you be done?" You know, that back and forth. "Oh, you'll be done in five minutes, or oh, you'll never be done? Oh my! That's a long time! (laughs) Well, when you're done give it to (laughs) give it to your friend, and they'll give it to you when they're done" so there's a lot of the teacher just modeling back and forth.

Adaptations:
Adaptations made in conflict management due to varying contexts and children's needs/skills.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — it sort of depends on the intensity of the conflict and on the children, so obviously kids who have, um, are challenged with issues around speech and language, um, impulse control, um, sensory kind of stuff, it's a little, they need more teacher support.

OTHER APPROACHES

Whole Group Approaches:
Resolution approaches using the whole class.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — that style is more that it happens with the whole group. So the conflict gets aired really publicly. Um, you know, similar process, everybody shares what they saw or heard, not necessarily just the two kids involved, like whoever was there, um. Which I do, too, with these littler conflicts. And then, the whole group talks about solutions. And then the two people or however many people were the direct, or directly involved in the conflict, can either, right there with

the whole group, or they can go off on their own a little bit, decide which solution they're going to try and they come back and they report to the whole group. And then the whole group sort of agrees to hold them accountable to it, or remind them that that's what they agreed to.

Stories:
Using stories, puppets, or books with the class to manage or practice resolving conflicts.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee: So, when we sort of notice there's a common type of conflict happening in the classroom, we'll use these characters to present a problem, a similar problem. So it might be that kids are excluding, boys are excluding girls. So then we'll act out a scenario between Mark and Robert where Laura wants to enter the play (moves blocks with these names/pictures around as she speaks of them) and the boys say, "You can't play with us, you're a girl" or "Girls can't be astronauts" or whatever it is they're playing. And then while we're presenting the conflict, when the kids see a problem, they raise their hand and say "Problem!" So right away when they recognize it. And then we'll ask them to explain the problem. And then we'll talk about how it can be solved. So, "What do you think, you know, Laura's feeling?" "What do you think is going on with Mark and Robert?" Cause it's also like oftentimes they really focus on how they're like the *bad guys*, the ones causing the problem, but they're also doing it for a reason. So, anyway. So then we'll talk about possible solutions. It's pretty interesting.

Family:
Teacher discusses communication with families regarding conflict resolution.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee: I'll often ask parents for input, too, just to find out more information, how do they deal with conflict at home. Sometimes it's the total opposite from school, so, and then that also plays a role in decisions because if I know that they can, if they have skills in dealing with conflict, it's just we're not seeing them, then that can impact the way I sort of you know, interact I suppose, or act as a mediator, or …

Prevention:
Prevention of conflicts in the classroom.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee: And a few weeks ago I said to them, "You know, I think, here's what I predict is gonna happen. Once you two decide that you want to start working together instead of fighting over all of this, you're actually going to become really good friends. Like, I've seen this before in Kindergarten, when there are two girls who really have strong opinions and strong ideas. And, you know, once you can start hearing each other…" And they've been really *trying*, it's been really interesting

APPROACHES THAT MAKE THEM CRINGE

Don't:
Teachers describe approaches, which they have witnessed other adults use in managing conflict, that make them cringe.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee: time out. Anything that's punitive. Um, it's just punitive things just, I don't know. They also just seem pointless to me. Um, because children aren't making those connections, especially young children, they're not really making those connections. They're not thinking, "Oh, I'd better not do this because I might get punished in some way, disciplined in this horrible way." They're just going to do it!

TIMES WHEN THEY DO NOT USE CONFLICT RESOLUTION APPROACH

No Conflict Resolution:
Situations when teachers choose not to use conflict resolution approaches.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee: you're in the middle of a crazy transition and it's like (laughs) times, there's just certainly times of the day when it's really hard and you need to just like, move on. So it's like, it doesn't mean you're going to totally like, ignore it, but you might need to deal with it at a different time, so like, you know there's two teachers in the room and things are like feeling pretty chaotic, and so if you're spending

five minutes just focusing on this conflict, um, particularly if it's one where nobody's like been really hurt, but it's just over who gets to use the sponge to clean the table, and you know, it doesn't work in the busy transition times. And there are times when I think teachers just need to say, "this is how it's going to go" (laughs). I think everything can't be processed. Like, it's just too time consuming.

Teacher-redirecting:
Teacher redirects children's attention and/or behavior, or redirects to another child.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — Child X pulling box around by herself while others are rolling up sleeves.
Child X: "I can't do mine!" (frustrated voice)
Teacher A: "Ask Child Y for help."
Child Y helps best she can, then Teacher A adds paint.

Teacher-directing:
Teacher directs children.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — Teacher A comes quickly and physically moves Child X's body and blocks the door:
Teacher A to Child X – "Move away from the door."
Child Y opens the door again from adjoining room, bumping Teacher A's arm since they're blocking the door, their body between Child X and the door.
Teacher A to Child Y – "Stop." (firm tone) then latches the door above to keep it from being able to be opened
Teacher A To Child X, now in a calmer, slower voice – "If you stand behind the door you could get bumped."

TEACHERS' MOOD

Teacher Understanding Child's Perspective:
Teacher expresses an understanding of the child's perspective, or empathizes with the child's emotions.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — I think the other piece that's different for me now is that I have this, I have a lens that I have for all sorts of behavioral

pieces that come up during the day, which is that children tell us both what they know and what they're feeling and also what they need work on through their behavior. And so, I'm able to kind of see it more now as a message of you know, kind of what C was saying, you know, this is what they need to do. or this is a place where they need support in order to grow. Rather than, "This is a problem that has to be solved RIGHT NOW!"

Teacher Mood:
Teacher talks about their own mood.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — And I think a lot of people who become teachers and social workers, we're all the folks that in our own personalities are really empathic, and so it's really easy to get hooked into the emotionality of a kid. And it takes *practice* and years to kind of learn to not get sucked into that (laughs)

Teacher Tone:
Teacher uses a different tone for talking to children.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — one of the messages I send is, "Oh, yeah, they like to dump things out sometimes. It's fun to do (singsong voice), but it's also fun to clean it up" I think just normalizing it, normalizing, most things can just be normalized.

Trust:
Teacher consciously building trust with the children by following through on what they promise.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — Well, recently, now they know what… we're two months into the school year, they know what it means, they'll get a turn, they trust that they get a turn. But, um, you know, the first few weeks of school they didn't, they hadn't built that trust up yet. They didn't know that they would really get a turn. They wanted a turn right away, they didn't know how long they'd have to wait, or what that feels like. Um, and, yeah, there'd be tears. And I'd usually end up just holding them and helping them wait and consoling them. "Oh look! Now it's your turn! Your friend left. There's a space for

you" So that it just takes a while. It takes a while, it takes a couple months to really build up that trust that it's really going back and…

STILL GRAPPLING NOW

Grappling:
Teacher describes a situation with which they still grapple at this point in their career. This can include any kind of musing, questioning, or uncertainty in discerning how to manage a particular conflict situation.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — Often things start as a conflict between two children, and with this particular group of children, because of their emotional needs, it just escalates so fast. And then it also deregulates other people. And so something that could have started off as this very very minor conflict or little miscommunication can turn into something that disrupts the entire classroom in like fifteen to twenty seconds. And it's overwhelming for everyone, including the teachers, we're all just like, 'What's going on?!' And then it's hard to figure out what the priority is, so that I'm kind of figuring out, do I try to de-escalate or probably separate because there is also this very passionate, energetic, like kids will get very face to face confrontational yelling, starting to use mean words, possibly using their bodies, like, so is my goal to like, go there? Where the initial conflict is? Is my goal to kind of tone down the whole room? Separate?

Grappling-Avoidance:
Teacher talks about managing conflict with children who regularly avoid engaging in peer conflicts.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — one thing that I wish for, that kids aren't always capable of doing at this age is that there's, you know, the other side of this is that there's a handful of kids who don't really assert themselves and don't stand up for themselves. And, um, I don't know if it's an expectation or a hope, but for them, I really want them to, for some kids like X, just *stay* at the site of the conflict and engage in *any* kind of, even if it's just listening to other people talk about it, like, just stay there. And for other kids to just say no sometimes if they

don't want to have a certain role or they don't want to be dragged around by their friend, or they don't want to give up something they're working with, to stand up for themselves a bit. And that's harder! It's an interesting, it's like the other side of the…it's the non-conflict conflict.

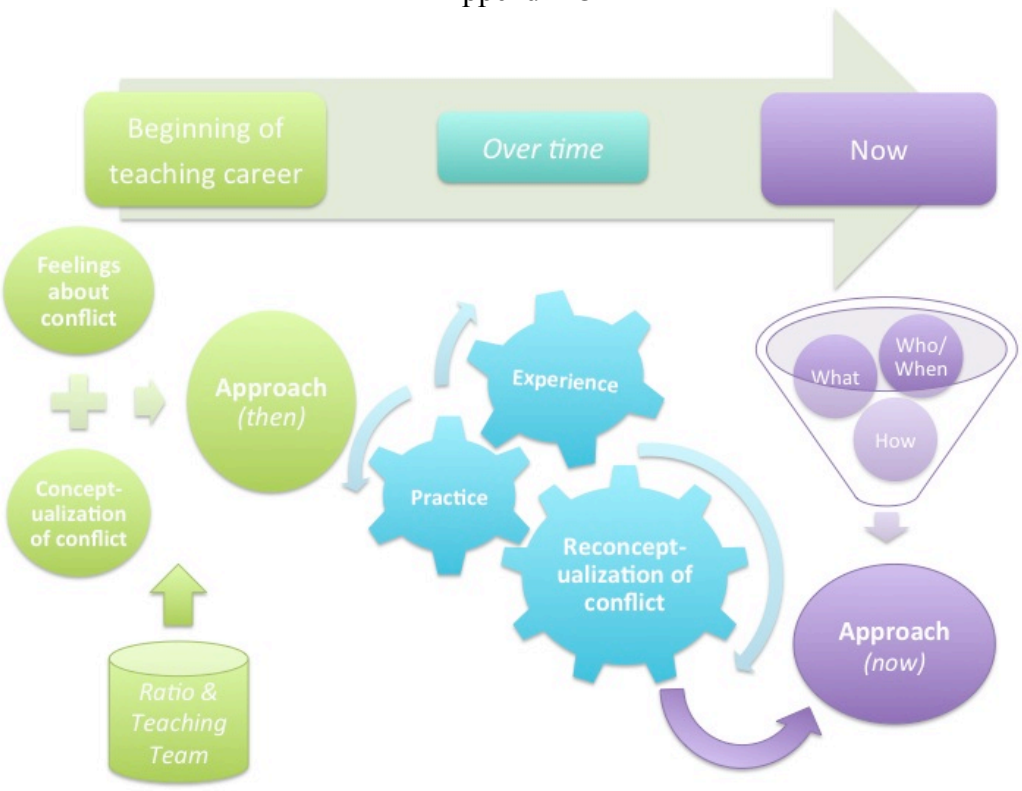
Grappling-Inclusive Classroom:

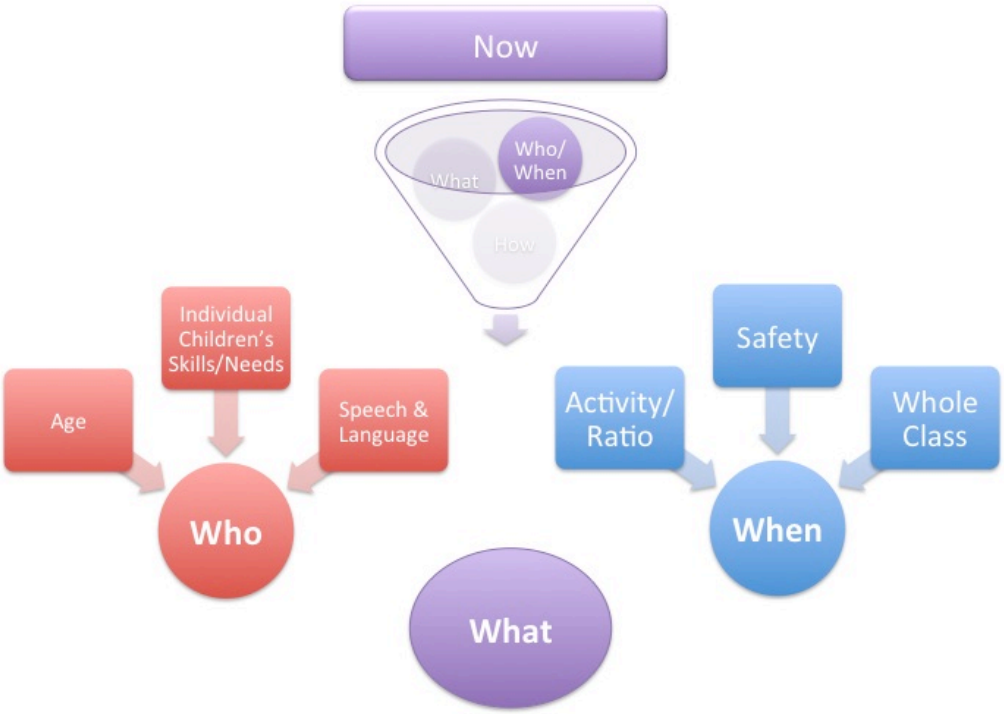
Teacher discusses how they manage conflict in classrooms that include children with special needs/rights.

EXAMPLE

Interviewee — I think what's really hard is when there's a child in the class who has, um, special rights, um, a particular need, maybe a sensory need, and other children don't, obviously, it's really hard at this age for them to understand why their friend is behaving in this certain way. And they get a lot of mixed signals. That's particularly hard. In supporting that child, and also the other children.

Appendix O


Beginning of teaching career
Over time
Now
Feelings about conflict
Approach (then)
Concept-ualization of conflict
Ratio & Teaching Team
Experience
Practice
Reconcept-ualization of conflict
What
Who/ When
How
Approach (now)


Now
What
Who/ When
How
Individual Children's Skills/Needs
Age
Speech & Language
Who
Safety
Activity/ Ratio
Whole Class
When
What