

“Hey, I’m a Good Problem-Solver!” Stephen’s Power Plays

by Rena Arcaro-McPhee

My journey in becoming a teacher-researcher almost ended before it began. Frightened by the staggering amount of numbers and statistics required in research, I delayed taking the most important class of my graduate career. Little did I know, I would come to love the research class taught by Debra Harkins, would later collaborate with her on many research papers on empathy and conflict, and ultimately be published in a respected early childhood journal.

Becoming a teacher-researcher

The many years I spent in the field of early childhood actually prepared me for the role of a teacher-researcher. In classes that specialized in child development, I was asked to observe children and record their behavior. My case studies included: temperament of a one year old named Greg, the mirror image of a three year old twin girl named Jen, a language development study of a two year old named Craig, social development of a one year old named Emily, and a bilingual kindergartener named Pablo. In all of these case studies, observing the child, recording behavior, and having questions unfold led me to understand the individual child better and paved the way for doing the kinds of action research I describe below.

Defining the Question. During the summer I began my class on teacher-as-researcher. I had been wondering about conflict and preschoolers. At our college lab school, we use a High/Scope model (Evans, 2002) and help support children in their conflicts by using a peer problem-solving model. Yet, I still had a lot of questions about preschoolers’ process of resolving conflicts:

- Do they seek directions and help from their teachers?

- What kinds of interactions did they use?
- Did these strategies change over time?
- Why/how did these changes occur?
- Did the strategies used at home carry over into the classroom?

I was eager to learn from the children and have them teach me what I need to know. At the college lab school, we have a peaceable classroom, a safe and trusting place for conflicts to happen (Levin, 2003). We try to view conflict as a “teachable moment” and support children as they try out new social skills or emerging ones. Teachers act as facilitators, rather than directors, and step in to support children when they need help negotiating a resolution to their conflict. Since most of the children come from backgrounds where conflict is handled for them, this approach needed to be learned and practiced. As the children began to internalize this framework, however, they learned to work out conflicts on their own.

Getting Started. I used my teacher-as-researcher class to study my questions about conflict. I used

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journaling and audio and video taping to record my observations each day. I began by looking at how conflict was handled in dyad (female/female, male/male, and female/male) situations throughout our school year. The children were ages four and a half to five and a half. Was there a difference in the ways girls and boys resolved conflict? It appeared so; but I needed to observe, record, and look at the information before I could support what I “thought” with documentation.

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The strategies I had observed children use in resolving conflict included: *power assertion*, *disengagement*, and two types of *negotiation* — *simple* and *sophisticated*. *Power assertion* is seen when a child is involved in an aggressive act with another that ends the conflict situation. *Disengagement* is seen when a child turns away or is distracted from a conflict situation. *Simple negotiation* is seen when a child states his/her own needs and the other child agrees. Finally, *sophisticated negotiation* happens when one child can take on the viewpoint of another and there is dialog between children (Arcaro-McPhee, 1997).

Case Study Approach. I was particularly interested in one child, Stephen, almost five, who encountered conflict every time he interacted with other children. Whether these situations involved females or males, the outcome was always the same: Stephen would pull toys away from others, call them names like “meanie,” and yell at them as he was walking away. He did not understand why the other children did not want to play with him. Although Stephen tried to connect with a child named Brian, a magnet child, even Brian was starting to avoid him. My planning time was at the beginning of the day and Stephen was fairly attentive. However, group time was turning into a nightmare because Stephen was a disruptive force for the other children. Stephen clearly needed help with his social skills, as well as support during other times of the day. My action research case study began. I planned to observe and document his behavior over the months we would spend together.

The information I collected on Stephen looked at: the children he had conflicts with, what the conflict was about, the kinds of strategies he used, what the teacher’s role was, and whether his strategies

changed over the course of our school year. I also wanted to see if there was something else going on, such as attention or sensory issues which Stephen needed help with through the course of the day. Only through my careful recordkeeping would I be able to learn the information I needed to work effectively with him.

During the course of the school year, Stephen went from using the process of *power assertion* as a way to deal with conflict to learning how to *negotiate*. He played with the girls and boys in our group at first, practicing his skills of negotiation. Then, Stephen tried out his skills with peers in my co-teacher’s group. At the beginning of the study, when he was beginning to become familiar with the peer problem-solving model, he needed the teacher to help guide him through the process. After several months of practice, Stephen began to rely on the teacher for support; but he initiated his own resolutions. He became more comfortable with this method of problem-solving; and his strategies, as well as his skills, improved.

Here are three typical conflicts Stephen was involved in during the course of our action research case study. The vignettes show the strategies he used with the other children to resolve conflicts, how his social problem-solving skills progressed, and discussion to highlight his behavior.

Month One:

During free-play time, Stephen chooses to play at the sensory table filled with birdseed and various items set out for pouring, filling, and measuring. There is also a water wheel being used by Matt, which Stephen grabs from him.

Matt: “Hey! That was mine!”

Stephen: “Well, I’m using it now!”

Matt: “I need that!”

Stephen: "Hey! I need that!"

Matt: "I wanted to play with it. Can we share that?"

Stephen turns and walks away.

The teacher intervenes by asking Stephen if he would like to talk to Matt. He looks at her, and then shakes his head, "No."

Stephen's attempt to get the water wheel from Matt shows his *power assertion* approach to conflict. Matt tries to *negotiate* with him by offering to share the water wheel, but Stephen walks away. When the teacher intervenes and asks Stephen if he would like to talk to Matt, he declines. The teacher respects his wishes and supports him this way for the next few months.

Month Four:

Brian is in the small block room building a structure with Adam. Stephen comes over to the teacher and says, "I want to play with Brian." The teacher facilitates and brings Stephen over to Brian.

Stephen: "Brian, I want to play with you."

Brian: "Well, I'm playing with Adam. I played with him yesterday at my house. When you're not here, I play with Adam. And when Adam is not here, I play alone." Stephen looks at Brian when he talks to him, but then walks away.

Stephen progressed in this example by using verbal language to express himself instead of pulling or grabbing. Stephen does walk away from the situation, using *disengagement* for his resolution; he has a hard time understanding Brian's viewpoint. Also, Stephen does not try to *negotiate* with Brian when the teacher asks if he wants to say anything else to his friend. The teacher respected both children's approach to the conflict.

Month Nine:

Outdoor in the play yard, Stephen and Joey are playing gas station with the tricycles and gas pump. Stephen is riding the tricycle and Joey is playing gas attendant, pretending to fill up the gas tank of Stephen's car. The play is quite harmonious and the boys switch roles, with Joey on the tricycle and Stephen at the gas pump. Joey rides up and Stephen fills his tank with fuel. Then, Joey rides around the driveway and comes back again.

Stephen: "The gas station is closed. We'll be open on Friday. Come back. Oil gas station is open!"

Joey comes over and grabs the gas pump away from Stephen. Joey yells, "Let me be it!"

Stephen: "No, I just got here!"

Joey: (very insistent) "I want to be it!"

Stephen: "You can have a turn when I am done."

Joey: "Want a turn on my bike?"

Stephen: "Okay, but it won't be fun." He gets on the bike and rides around. He comes back to Joey, "I need gas."

Joey: "Give me money."

Stephen: "Okay." He gives Joey the money and rides away. The teacher asks Stephen if he is okay with the situation and he nods his head, "Yes."

At the end of our school year, Stephen was using *negotiation* as his strategy for resolving conflicts with others. He was able to listen to other children's views, try to understand their feelings, and verbally communicate his own needs. This conflict showed that Stephen tried to understand Joey's needs and incorporated them into their play. The *negotiation* and resolution happened without teacher intervention, although she gave follow-up support by asking Stephen about his feelings.

Stephen was able to practice his social skills in a safe and encouraging environment. The more situations he encountered, the more opportunities Stephen had to learn about resolving conflicts. As Stephen felt supported by his teachers, he experimented with different strategies. He realized that he would not "get in

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trouble” for his responses to conflict but would be respected and guided to success by those around him.

The value of action research

Through his successes, Stephen gained many new problem-solving skills. He also developed an increased respect for himself and others, more inner control and autonomy, noticeable empathy, and a sense of empowerment to solve his problems. There was magic and self-confidence in his words when Stephen told me, “Hey, I’m a good problem-solver!”

As a teacher, I learned so much from Stephen and the way his growth impacted our classroom through this action research study. Stephen really wanted to get along with others but did not have the experience or skills to resolve his conflicts. With the support of his teachers, Stephen practiced his social skills. Just as we set up *opportunities* for children to practice their physical skills to sit up, crawl, and walk, Stephen needed his teachers to set up “*teachable moments*” for resolving conflict. His peers saw the difference and began to approach Stephen as a valuable playmate and problem-solver. Our classroom became calmer and a better place to have fun and learn.

It warmed my heart to watch Stephen walk around with the confidence that whatever conflict he came across, he would be able to come to a successful resolution. What more could a teacher ask for? I continue to use what I learned about action research and about teaching problem-solving in my daily life in

the classroom. Thank goodness for action research and the implications it has for all of us involved, then and now.

References

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Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers

by Kay Albrecht

Adding technology: This action researcher used technology to help her gather information and data. Audio and videotapes provided plenty of information for her to analyze and reflect upon. Support teachers’ interest in action research by providing access to technology when it enhances a project.

Focusing on Stephen: This action research focused on the way one child was handling conflict and impacting other children. It was designed to help him grow and develop socially with other children. Teachers often have questions about one child in their classroom or an awareness that one child changes the dynamics of the classroom. When a teacher comes to you with problems about one child, refer her to this article as a framework for beginning action research to find out more information.

It takes time!: Notice that we have nine months of data about Stephen and his challenges, the teacher’s intervention, and the changes that gradually allow him to succeed with his peers. Make sure to help teachers see the value in taking time and returning to the role of observer in order to see change occur.