The Effect of "Talk It Out" on Six Graders' Beliefs about Aggression and Alternatives

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of "Talk It Out" conflict resolution program on six graders' beliefs about aggression and alternatives in a local school in Beirut. The quantitative approach was adopted where the total number of learners in the study was 51, from the same school, and whose ages ranged from 10.6 to 11.4 years. The sample was divided into two groups, where the control group had 25 learners from a grade 6 class, and the experimental group had 26 learners from another section. The measuring instrument that was used in this study is the "Beliefs about Aggression and Alternatives" survey. A pretest was done to both groups prior to the intervention period. Then, the "Talk It Out" program was employed for the experimental group over a period of five weeks. After that, the posttest was done and the results were analyzed using independent sample T-tests and paired sample T-tests. The results of this study showed statistical differences to the benefit of the experimental group over the control group.

Key words: conflict resolution, aggression, violence, elementary school, six graders

Introduction

Concern about conflict resolution education (CRE) has been growing in the past few decades for its promising effects on reducing violence, aggressive behavior, and resolving conflicts among school learners. Jones (2004) noted that CRE coincides with peace education, violence prevention, social and emotional learning (SEL), and anti-bias education. Turk (2018) found that conflict resolution, peace education, and peer mediation programs are effective on productive development of conflict resolution skills of the learners.

According to Bodine & Crawford (1998), conflicts in school learners originate from unmet basic needs of belonging, power, freedom, and fun. Complementary to that, two other factors that may account for conflict are: limited resources (such as time, space, money and property) and different values (i.e. beliefs, priorities, and principles). The responses to conflict can be: soft, hard, or principled. Soft responses involve avoidance, accommodation, or compromise; hard responses employ threats, aggression, force, and anger; and principled responses emerge from problem solvers who have profound communication and conflict resolution skills.

Jones (2004) proposed four structural elements of CRE. The first is the program model. There are four main models of CRE: the mediation program approach, the process curriculum approach, the peaceable classroom approach, and the peaceable school approach. The second is the educational level; this is essential to consider since younger learners go through conflicts differently and have different abilities to handle conflict compared to older learners. The third structural factor is the target population, which may depend on gender, ethnicity, ability (special needs or regular learners), in addition to staff, parents and learners. The fourth and last structural factor is the implementation of the CRE; this is concerned with the reliability and durability of the program as well as its coordination with existing school structures.

Laursen, Finkelstein, & Betts (2001) examined developmental trends in peer conflict resolution through a series of meta-analyses. They found that the patterns differ with age, having coercion more prevalent among children whereas negotiation was more common among adolescents. Moreover, conflict resolutions differed according to peer relationships, assessment procedures, and reporters. However, follow up moderator analyses remarked that negotiation increases and coercion decreases with age across peer relationships, assessment procedures, and reporters.

Driven by the promising effects of CRE programs on preventing violence, reducing aggression, and resolving conflicts, and noting that there are concerns about resolving incidents of aggressive behavior (Nadjarian, 2000;Tayara, 2006;Mukallid, 2011), bullying (Zein, 2001; Rabah, 2006), and conflicts among learners in Lebanese schools (Kandaguerjian, 1997; Hammoud, 2008), the researcher of this study decided to investigate the effectiveness of a CRE program in one of the elementary schools in Beirut.

For the purpose of this study, the conflict resolution program that was chosen is Talk It Out (TIO); it involves the use of conflict resolution, peer mediation, as well as negotiation in order to work out problems that are common in classrooms such as: teasing, put-downs, pushing, hitting, cheating, gossiping and refusing to share (Porro, 1996). In particular, the researcher was interested in studying the effects of Talk It Out on six graders' beliefs about aggression and alternatives as well as attitudes toward conflict.

Literature Review

The research on the effectiveness of conflict resolution programs is abundant in the literature; however, most of the studies (Bell, Coleman, Anderson, Whelan, & Wilder, 2000; Schellenberg, Parks-Savage, & Rehfuss, 2007) tackled programs that focus on peer mediation. Fewer studies (Graves, Nordling, Roberts, & Taylor, 1997; Bickmore, 1999; DuRant, Barkin, & Krowchuk, 2001; Turnuklu, Kacmaz, Turk, Kalender, Sevkin, & Zengin, 2009) were concerned about the effectiveness of broader CRE programs.

The positive effects of the reviewed peer mediation programs included: increase in the learners' awareness of conflict and its resolution, reducing school violence, and resolving actual conflicts. Bell et al. (2000) found out that children in a rural low-SES school can learn and state in writing how they would employ peer mediation to solve proposed peer conflicts. Schellenberg et al. (2007) conducted a three-year longitudinal study to detect the effectiveness of an existing peer mediation program in a diverse, suburban elementary school. It was noted that the used program (Peace Pal) has fulfilled its goal of reducing school wide violence, resolving conflicts, and teaching valuable and lasting conflict resolution and mediation knowledge. Johnson, Johnson, & Dudley (1992) noted the success of a peer mediation program on reducing the incidence of conflict referrals to the teacher, teaching

mediation procedures and skills as well as generalizing them in the learners' lives outside the school context. Johnson & Johnson (1994) documented the effectiveness of a peer mediation program in teaching negotiation and mediation procedures and skills to learners of third through to six grades of a suburban, middle-class elementary school. In addition, a reduction in the number of the conflicts referred to teachers and the principal was witnessed. Furthermore, the autonomous and constructive management of conflicts by the learners themselves accounted for the elimination of discipline problems. Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, & Magnuson (1995) realized that a peer mediation program was successful in teaching negotiation and mediation skills to learners in a mid-western, suburban elementary school. In addition, the training enabled the learners to apply the skills in real conflict instances durably over the school year. Johnson & Johnson, Mitchell, Cotton, Harris & Louison (1996) recorded that third and fourth graders who were trained as conflict managers have successfully mediated 323 conflicts, mostly involving physical and verbal assaults, during the school year. Johnson & Johnson (2001) found that peer mediation had positive effects on resolving physical and verbal aggression in third and fourth graders of an inner-city elementary school.

The studies that tackled more general conflict resolution programs also had positive effects on the conflict resolution skills of the target learners. Graves, Nordling, Roberts, & Taylor (1997) applied a conflict resolution program for reducing aggressive behavior of fourth graders. The results revealed that the learners' views toward conflict changed, realizing that conflict is an unavoidable incident. However, the results did not show persistent effect on behavior. That is, the learners were not always able to apply the learned skills when confronted with conflict. Bickmore (1999) presented a case study on fourth and fifth graders, showing that it is possible to include a conflict resolution program in the school curriculum that will develop the learners' abilities to resolve both social and interpersonal conflicts without losing focus of academic achievement. DuRant, Barkin, & Krowchuk (2001) evaluated the effectiveness of the Peaceful Conflict Resolution and Violence Prevention Curriculum, which is based on the Social Cognitive theory, on conflict resolution and violence prevention for sixth grade learners. The program showed positive short-term effects on self-reported use of violence and intention to use violence by the target learners. Turnuklu et al. (2009) studied the effectiveness of "Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation" (CRPM) training program on resolving the interpersonal conflicts of 10-11-year-old learners, and the results revealed that CRPM training is effective in resolving the conflicts of the target learners.

In Lebanon, there were several attempts of educational research on issues regarding bullying (Zein, 2001; Rabah, 2006) and aggression (Nadjarian, 2000;Hout, 2005;Tayara, 2006;Mukallid, 2011) but very limited research on conflict or CRE in particular (Kandaguerjian, 1997; Hammoud, 2008). Among six studied schools in Beirut, it was reported that 23% of the participants were involved in bully/victim issues (Zein; 2001). This is not negligible since 23% is

close to a quarter of the sample. Rabah (2006) pointed out that most of the teachers and administrators in her study admitted that teachers play a central role in preventing bullying and that they should take action whenever they encounter bully related incidences. They also advocated for the need for in-service training to deal with the problem. Nadjarian (2000) examined the effect of social skills training by the ACCEPTS programs on the aggressive behavior of second graders in a Lebanese school. The results revealed significant effect of the treatment. Hout (2005) studied the effect of social problem solving training and emotional awareness on disruptive behavior and problem solving performance of elementary learners. She found that the training had a significant effect on the reduction of the learners' classroom disruptive behavior and enhancing their social problem solving abilities. Tayyara (2006) found a significant increase in self-esteem and decrease in aggressive behavior of middle school female learners in a school in Beirut who were subjected to building self-esteem program. Mukallid (2011) was concerned about studying the effect of training in social information processing on reactive and proactive aggression of fourth and fifth graders of a Lebanese elementary school. The perceptions of the fifth graders significantly differed whereas that of the fourth graders did not. However, both experimental groups of the two grades showed reduction in both reactive and proactive aggressive behavior, with frequencies of the proactive aggressive behavior being lower. Although these studies showed promising effects of interventions on reduction of aggressive and disruptive behavior of learners, they did not employ conflict resolution programs.

Few Lebanese studies that tackled the effectiveness of conflict resolution programs showed promising effects on reduction of aggressive behavior, increase in conflict resolution skills, and decrease in student referrals to teachers to resolve conflict. Kandaguerjian (1997) studied the effects of a "Win-Win" conflict-resolution program on the aggressive behavior and conflict resolution skills of middle school Armenian learners. The study revealed a significant treatment effect of the "Win-Win" conflict-resolution program on the aggressive behavior and conflict resolution skills, but non-significant differences in the follow-up stage. However, these findings were limited to middle school Armenian learners. There was other evidence of the effectiveness of conflict resolution programs at the elementary level in a school in Beirut. Hammoud (2008) found out that "Teaching Students to be Peacemakers" program accounted for a significant decrease in the behaviors of physical and verbal abuse of fifth graders in a Beirut school; in addition, there was a significant decrease in referring to the teacher to resolve conflicts.

To conclude, there is abundant universal evidence on the effectiveness of CRE programs on conflict resolution skills of learners. However, there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of CRE programs in the Lebanese context.

Statement of Research Question

This research aims at answering the following research questions:

1. Does the "Talk It Out" program change the six graders' beliefs about using aggression to resolve conflicts?

2. Does the "Talk It Out" program change the six graders' beliefs about using nonviolent strategies to resolve conflicts?

Method

This study relies on a quantitative method which is based on a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design in which the "Talk it out" program was implemented on the experimental group.

Participants
The study was conducted in a private school in Beirut. The sample was composed of two classes of grade six learners whose ages ranged from 10.6 to 11.4 years old. One class was taken as a control group (N=25), and it was composed of 13 girls and 12 boys. The other class was considered as the experimental group (N=26), and it had 15 girls and 11 boys.

Variables
The independent variable is the implementation of the "Talk Ito Out" conflict resolution lessons.

The dependent variables are:
1. Beliefs about aggression as measured by the Beliefs about Aggression and Alternatives Survey
2. Use of nonviolent strategies as measured by the Beliefs about Aggression and Alternatives Survey

Instrument
The instrument used in the pre and posttests of this study was the Beliefs about Aggression and Alternatives Survey which is adapted from Farrell, Meyer & White (2001), and targets learners of grade 6. The survey includes the following two subscales:

1) Beliefs about aggression
2) Use of nonviolent strategies, and it has an internal consistency of 0.72 for both subscales. There are 12 items in this survey that require a 4- point Likert scale response ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The items that involve the "Beliefs about Aggression" subscale include: 3, 4, 6, 9, 10, 11 and 12; the remaining items measure the other subscale.

A high score on the "Beliefs about Aggression" subscale indicates more favorable beliefs supporting the use of aggression. On the other hand, a high score on the "Use of Nonviolent Strategies" subscale indicates higher levels of support for using nonviolent strategies.

Procedure

Prior to the implementation phase, a pretest was conducted to measure the learners' beliefs toward aggression and alternatives. The "Talk it out" lessons were implemented over a five-week period. In each week, one of the five lessons was implemented. After the implementation phase, a posttest was done to measure the learners' attitudes after the intervention.

Results

An independent sample t-test was used to check whether the pretest results of the control and the experimental group were the same at the beginning of the study or not. Another independent t-test was done to determine whether the posttest results of both groups were similar or not.

Descriptive Statistics

The means and standard deviations of both the control and experimental groups are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Means and standard deviations of control and experimental groups

Variable	Pretest Aggression M	SD	Posttest Aggression M	SD	Pretest Alternatives M	SD	Posttest Alternatives M	SD
Control	3.42	.33	3.42	.39	1.53	.43	1.54	.41
Experimental	3.01	.53	2.53	.60	1.94	.72	2.54	.59

The table indicates that the control group had almost the same means on both subscales in pre and post tests. Moreover, the control group had higher means than the experimental group on both pre and post tests for the Aggression (i.e. "Beliefs about Aggression") subscale, and lower means on the Alternatives (i.e. "Use of Nonviolent Strategies") subscale. On the other hand, the experimental group had a reduction in the "Aggression" score and an increase in the "Alternatives" score.

Independent Samples T-test

An independent sample t-test was conducted for the control and experimental group for the pre and posttests. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Independent samples T-test

Control/Experimental	T	DF	p
Pre-Aggression	2.553	49	.014
Pre-Alternatives	-2.464	49	.017
Post-Aggression	6.231	49	.000
Post-Alternatives	-7.035	49	.000

The independent sample t-test showed a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between the two groups on both pre and post tests for both subscales.

Paired Sample T-test

The paired t-test was used to study if the "Talk It Out" intervention was effective or not. The paired t-test was employed on both experimental and control group before and after applying the "Talk it out" training and the results are displayed in Table 3. If the significance is less than 0.05 ($p<0.05$) then the results of the group differ; otherwise, if the significance is greater than 0.05 ($p>0.05$), then the results did not differ before and after the intervention phase.

Table 3: Paired sample T-test results

Variable	Pre-Post Aggression T	DF	p	Pre-Post Alternatives T	DF	p
Control	-.214	24	.832	-.569	24	.574
Experimental	8.568	25	.000	-6.559	25	.000

Apparently, the pretest and post test results do not show a significant difference in the control group (p>0.05). On the other hand, the pretest and posttest results of the experimental group differ significantly (p<0.05). Concerning the experimental group, the pretest and posttest comparison shows a reduction in the beliefs about aggression (t(25)= 8.568, p=0.000) and an increase in use of alternatives (t(25)= -6.559, p=0.000).

Discussion

The results of this study have answered the proposed research questions: "Talk It Out" program had a positive effect on reducing the aggressive beliefs of six graders and enhancing their beliefs of using nonviolent strategies to resolve conflicts. This finding supports several universal studies that tackled similar issues and adds to the research in the Lebanese context.

Whereas Turnuklu et al. (2009) witnessed positive effects of a CRE program on the change of behavior of learners; this study focused on the change in the learners' beliefs. On the other hand, the finding of this study concurs with DuRant et al. (2001) who reported a change in the intentions of six graders to use violence. Similarly Graves et al. (1997) noted a change in learners' views toward conflict; however, their study was limited to fourth grade learners.

This study adds to previous Lebanese studies that showed promising effects of other programs on reduction of aggressive and disruptive behavior of learners. Whereas Nadjarian (2000), Tayara (2006), and Mullakid (2011) came up with promising results of various interventions on the reduction of aggressive behaviors of learners, none of them employed a conflict resolution program. Furthermore, the previous Lebanese studies that showed promising effects of conflict resolution programs (Kandaguerjian, 1997; Hammoud, 2008) did not focus on grade six learners. Therefore, this study adds to the existing Lebanese studies in providing evidence for the effectiveness of the "Talk It Out" conflict resolution program on changing the six graders beliefs toward aggression and using nonviolent alternatives.

Conclusion

This study shows positive effects of "Talk It Out" program in changing the beliefs about aggression and the use of nonviolent alternatives of six graders in a local school in Beirut. The findings concur with some of the universal studies and add to the existing Lebanese studies. However, the study is limited to change in beliefs of six graders and did not tackle change in behavior. Nevertheless, results from this study may be used to employ the "Talk It Out" on Lebanese six graders for the purpose of reducing aggressive beliefs and enhancing beliefs of using nonviolent strategies to resolve conflicts.

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