

## Conflict Resolution among Nigerian Children Using Peer Mediation

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### Abstract

Literature suggests that violence is a learnt behaviour and that children need to learn self-control and how to handle conflicts very early in life as a lack of these skills may have severe consequences in adult life. Conflict is a common feature in many Nigerian schools. It is also common to listen to parents complaints during Parent teacher Association meetings that some children are in the habit of causing trouble both inside the classroom and on the playground. Though, most classroom and out-of-classroom conflicts are settled by teachers, research suggests that children need conflict resolution strategies for power assertion and negotiation. This action research investigated the value of the fuss buster peer mediation programme on children's conflict resolution in a nursery and primary school in Ibadan, Nigeria. A pre-intervention record of frequency of conflicts in each class was taken for one week while the following week was spent on training children in peer mediation using the fuss buster programme. The programme was started after the one-week training and it lasted for six weeks, after which the effect of the intervention programme was analysed using descriptive statistics of frequency counts, means and percentages as well as qualitative analysis that expressed the reactions of the children, the fuss busters, conflict initiators and teachers to the programme. A comparative effect of the fussbuster programme on each class was also found. The findings revealed a high reduction in conflict in all classes while the grade one class had the highest reduction in conflict resolution. Teachers and children also expressed their interest in the programme. Teachers wanted the programme to continue as it allowed children to develop self-control and leadership skills. The research work was conducted in order to address the issue of conflict which has increased lately in many schools and seemed to have defied most methods used by teachers to solve it. It was recommended that mediation methods such as the fuss buster method should be introduced not only into the school system for conflict resolution but into the civic education curriculum.

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**Keywords:** conflict resolution, fuss buster, initiator, peer, mediation

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### INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is plagued with many types of conflict which in many cases have resulted in loss of lives and properties. Cases of ethnic rivalry, religious terrorism, conflicts among business associates, land and inheritance disputes, conflicts over resource control, trade related disputes and family related conflicts are so prevalent that it is hardly possible to read newspapers or watch the television without reading cases of murder or injury on persons as a result of conflict. According to Renner (2002), resource-driven conflicts alone killed more than 5million people, forced 5 to 6 million people to flee to neighbouring countries and displaced about 15 million people inside the borders of their home countries during the 1990s alone.

In many cases, children are victims of these conflicts. Children, especially those who are victims of armed conflict, experience the horrific impact of these conflicts (Machel 2009), while those whose live styles have been altered as a result of the conflict continue to live with the consequences of these conflicts throughout their lives. Some children lose one or both parents as a result of conflicts while some are displaced and have to live in completely strange environments as refugees. A lot of damage is done to

a child's life and his or her future aspirations as a result of conflict which in almost all the cases, is not caused by them.

Many researchers have, from their examination of the features that are common in majority of conflicts, explained what conflict is, using different terms. Chaplin (cited in Batubo,2010) defined conflict as "The simultaneous occurrence of two or more mutually antagonistic impulses or motives, while Willson and Hanna (1990) described it as "A struggle involving ideas, values and or limited resources". Nwolise (2003) opined that conflict is "A clash, confrontation, battle or struggle" whereas Dokun-Oyeshola (2005)described conflict as "Essentially concerning disagreement, disputes or controversy in ideas or viewpoints held by two or more individuals or groups". In spite of the negative nature of conflict and the consequences it produces, Otite and Albert (1999) see conflict as a dynamic phenomenon which is part of life They describe conflict as an engine of progress which transcends so many areas of life, ranging from international affairs to work and family life while Killen and Turiel (1991)also describe conflict as an expected part of pre-schoolers' social development.

However, despite its purported positive impact on social interaction and growth of a society, conflict, according to (Chamberlain 2000) is said to be a learned behaviour which evolves from anger that is not managed, frustration and disappointment. Conflict, though a part of normal child development, should be resolved peacefully, children therefore need to learn constructive ways of dealing with anger and civil ways of making requests and resolving disagreements in order prevent violence. Children need to learn some very important skills at the very early years, some of these skills are very essential for them to be able to develop into adults who are able to settle disagreements without resorting to violence. Some of these skills are self-control and learning to handle conflicts. Since conflict is a learned behaviour, conflict resolution through mediation ought to also be learnt as early in life as possible.

If children are trained to resolve conflicts amicably and they practice this skill in their daily lives, when they become adults, their generation may likely experience some peace. It is on this note that this action research sets out to find out the effect of a technique of conflict mediation known as peer mediation (The fustbuster programme) on the rate of conflict among children aged 5 to 12 years in a primary school in Nigeria.

Children are said to engage in conflict when they attempt to meet their needs and wishes (Rourke, Wozniak & Cassidy 1999 cited in Gillespie and Chick 2001). Children's conflicts are common in schools, at home, on the playground, at the church or other religious houses. In fact, virtually everywhere one finds children, they are engaged in conflict. In most cases, parents and teachers play the role of mediators. In Yoruba culture for example, adults are expected to serve as mediators in children's conflicts but in most cases they serve as judges as they apportion blame and one party still ends up being unhappy at the end of the "conflict mediation". However, when children are taught constructive ways of dealing with anger, frustration, disappointment and hurt, they learn to prevent violence (chamberlain 2000)

Conflict resolution according to Miller (2003) cited in Ogege (2009) is a variety of approaches used to terminate conflicts through the constructive solving of problems, distinct from management or transformation of conflicts. In any conflict resolution, (Miall et al 2008, Ogege 2009) insist that deep rooted sources of the conflict are addressed and resolved, behaviours are no longer violent neither are attitudes hostile. The different approaches to conflict mediation include arbitration whereby the dispute between two parties are settled by a tribunal chosen

by them and the decisions of the arbitrator is binding on both parties (Batubo & Digitemie-Batubo 2010).

For conflict resolution to be effective, it has to be culturally appropriate. However, a lot of adjustment needs to be made when mediating in children's conflict in Africa particularly in Nigeria in order to have a win-win solution because many adult mediation strategies in our indigenous cultures usually apportion blame to one party leaving him feeling aggrieved even after the "mediation" and in most cases seeking future ways of taking revenge.

While a lot of techniques of resolving conflicts are being examined to resolve adult conflicts in Nigeria, studies on conflict resolution among children are very scanty, whereas, if peaceful conflict resolution is taught early in life and practiced in all areas of life many of the violence and terrorism being experienced now may end or be drastically reduced. Most conflict mediation techniques are used for conflict resolution among adults whereas only teachers and other adults (who may not necessarily be the children's choice) are expected to assist children to resolve their own conflict. While teachers' role in children's conflict mediation can never be completely removed, it is very important that children learn how to resolve their conflicts by themselves without engaging the teacher all the time so that they can grow up tackling their own challenges by themselves in a very civil manner.

Moreover, teachers should spend more time and attention on more positive situations and reinforce good behaviour (Gillespie and Chick 2001) and not on conflict resolution alone whenever they are with children. Besides, studies on conflict resolution among children suggest that children seldom ask teachers to intervene in their conflicts but rather use power assertion and negotiation to resolve their conflicts most of the time (Killen & Turiel 1991, Rourke, Wozniak, and Cassidy 1999).

Children's conflicts usually result in different outcomes and according to wheelers (1994), four outcome categories are:

- Unresolved: children simply drop the issue or leave the area, finding different activities or playmates.
- Adult intervention: an adult suggests or imposes a solution.
- Submission: one child unwillingly yields to another child's dominance.
- Mutually agreeable solution: achieved through bargaining, compromising, finding an alternative activity, or turning the conflict into a game.

The only mode of conflict resolution that was administered for this study in wheeler's outcome is the mutually agreeable solution which makes the

parties involved happy at the end of the situation. This is also in agreement with the earlier definition of mediation as a conflict resolution technique that is used in a community setting such as a school or family. There is usually no victor and no vanquished unlike the other outcomes where the aggrieved party may still be unhappy at the end.

#### Statement of the problem

Many children in Nigeria have learned to resolve their conflicts through Physical combat and other unhealthy methods, this may be as a result of the environment in which many children grow up where they usually watch adults engage in physical combats in order to settle scores. Some even watch their parents quarrel everyday in order to resolve issues. Teachers usually do not make matters better because many are not trained on methods of resolving conflict among children and so make use of many methods that may not promote healthy social relationship among the children. This action research therefore intended to find out if a method of conflict resolution which is not usually used in this country but which has been used successfully among children in some other nations will help to reduce the incessant conflict among Children in Nigerian schools.

#### Research Questions

The following questions were raised for the study:

- Does the fuss buster peer mediation programme reduce the number of conflicts in the different classes?
- In which class does the fuss buster programme have the greatest positive effect?
- What effect does the peer mediation technique have on conflict initiators?
- What effect does the programme have on the fuss busters?
- Do teachers see this programme as an effective strategy for conflict resolution?

In the school used for this study, conflict usually arises from issues such as jumping the queue when coming from morning assembly or when going out to play, fighting over play equipment, pinching others, using abusive language, accusing others wrongly, calling others names, bullying, fighting over writing materials, lying and stealing other pupils' materials and other issues that has to do with children's interaction with one another.

#### METHODOLOGY

This is a participatory action research. The instruments used for the research were observation, diary record of conflicts as well as interviews with children and teachers. Parents' and teachers' informed consent were sought and collected in writing before the commencement of the programme. All parents and teachers gave their consent by completing the parents' consent form.

#### Participants

The study took place in a suburban school in Ibadan, Nigeria. The children in the school were children of parents who were teachers, middle level civil servants as well as traders. 60% of the children live in owner-occupier bungalows belonging to their parents while 30% live in 3 bedroom rented flats and the remaining 10% live in tenement houses. The community in which they live is a small but developing community which is of low density but is likely to become a high density area in the near future. The children are bilingual, speaking both English and Yoruba languages. There are no children from other Nigerian tribes all of them are Yoruba, a tribe in the south west of Nigeria. All the 77 children in the school (kindergarten to Grade 5) took part in the programme.

Teachers who were already trained as peer mediators took all the children through a training programme in peer mediation. All the classes in the school took part in the training programme, the fussbuster programme was adapted to suit the environment and culture in which the children are growing. The teachers used stories and illustrations of situations around them to teach the children the need for them to learn self-control and the ability to resolve conflicts using peaceful ways.

The programme took place over a period of 8 weeks in the first instance (the analysis covered the effect for the first six weeks but the programme continued for the whole year). All class teachers in the classes involved took part in the programme. The first week was spent on recording the number and type of conflict that took place in each class each day. The conflict that took place on the playground was also recorded. The conflict initiators in each class and methods used for resolving the conflicts were recorded everyday for the whole week.

The week that followed was spent on teaching conflict resolution and reasons for resolving conflicts without the use of violence or force. Teachers told the children stories on the assembly ground, playlets were used by teachers and children to demonstrate the evil effects of conflicts and the need to resolve conflicts peacefully. Teachers also spent the first 10 minutes every day in each of their classes to teach children rules for conflict mediation. The rules were adapted from the Richmond Teachers for Social Justice Rules for teaching mediation to kids. It involved the stages for peer mediation and what was expected of the parties in conflict as well as the mediator (fussbuster).

Teachers continued to take the record of conflicts in each class as well as the playground during the second week in spite of the training on conflict

resolution, however, children were free to choose any mediation method they desired.

A peace table (table covered with white cloth or white paper) was put in every class in a conspicuous place for children to use for peer mediation. The list of rules to be followed when resolving conflicts was pasted on the top of each peace table for all disputants and fusbusters to read before any mediation started. This was placed in each class at the beginning of the training week so that children could get used to it by creating mediation scenarios and practising being fuss busters even before the programme started. As soon as a conflict happened the disputants took their chairs picked a fusbuster that was acceptable to the two of them and moved to the peace table to resolve the conflict using the steps taught by their teachers

Each class had the mediation steps written on the bulletin board and had it read to the children by the teacher each morning. Each class rule was simplified to make them easily understood by learners. Some classes even had children sing songs and poems (in Yoruba language) composed from the rules and had children in other classes learn and sing them on the assembly ground and playground. The record of conflict type, rate and resolution techniques were taken during the two weeks training. Children were free to use the fusbuster if they wanted to or use any other mediation techniques.

After the two weeks of training and preparation, children started the programme, they were instructed

to use the fusbuster to resolve conflict. Teachers took records of the type, number of conflict in each class as well as the children who served as peer mediators (fuss buster) and the ways the fusbusters went about doing the mediation. Furthermore, children were told to write down their experiences during the programme as conflict initiators, people involved in conflict and peer mediators. Teachers were also told to do a short write up on the programme and its values on the teaching and learning as well as the children. Questions were given to each child who could write to answer on the fuss buster programme and the lesson they are learning from it.

**FINDINGS**

This action research was analysed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The pre-intervention conflicts as well as the conflict experienced during intervention were analysed using simple mean and frequency counts. A comparative effect of the fusbuster programme on each class was also analysed using simple frequency counts and means. The research question will now be answered using the findings analysed below.

Based on the findings the research questions were answered as follows:

Question 1: Does the fusbuster mediation programme reduce the number of conflicts in the different classes?

Table 1: frequency of conflicts recorded before fusbuster programme

Class	Week 1	Week 2	Total	Mediation technique
Kindergarten	5	4	9	Teacher intervention
Grade 1	20	22	42	Teacher intervention
Grade 2	-	-	-	Teacher claims not to have any conflict in class
Grade 3	4	6	10	Teacher’s warnings and reprimand
Grade 4	5	5	10	Teacher’s warning
Grade 5	7	5	12	Teacher’s warning
Total	41	42	83	

Table 1 reveals a total of 83 conflicts in the school for two weeks, a mean of 41.5 conflicts per week. Conflicts were higher in the primary grades than the kindergarten grade while the grade twoclass teacher insisted that there was no conflict in her class. This class was excluded from the study even though the children were still given the peace table to resolve any conflicts. A case of no conflict is not a normal classroom situation. On a closer look at the situation in the class, the teacher was found to be very strict and rigid in her classroom management and this

could have been responsible for the “no conflict” situation, a situation where children obey out of fear.

This may not be the best environment for children to learn because conflict has been described as a dynamic phenomenon which is part of life and an engine of progress(Albert and Otite 1999) conflict is said to exist in stages and at the end brings a peaceful relationship. A situation where conflict is not allowed but suppressed results in uneasy peace which may not be good for peaceful social and emotional growth in any human relationship.

Table 2 : frequency of Conflict during intervention

class	Wk 1 conflicts	Wk 2 conflicts	Wk 3 conflicts	Wk4 conflicts	Wk 5 conflicts	Wk 6 conflicts	Total no of conflicts	mean /wk	Mediation technique
KG	2	0	5	1	1	1	10	1.66	Fuss buster
GRD 1	6	5	3	3	2	3	22	3.66	Fuss buster
GRD2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
GRD3	0	1	1	2	1	1	6	1.0	Fuss buster
GRD4	2	1	0	1	1	0	5	0.83	Fuss buster
GRD5	1	4	3	1	2	1	12	2.0	Fuss buster
TOTAL	11	11	12	8	7	6	57	9.5	

Upper lines=Pre-intervention  
Lower lines=during intervention

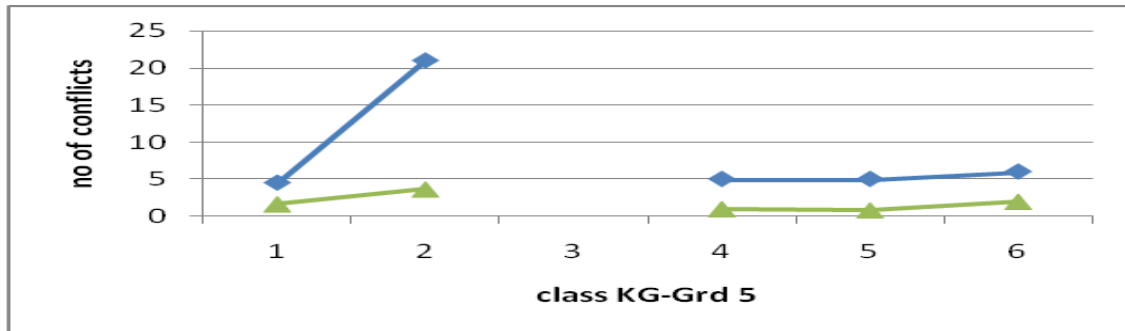


Figure 1: Comparison of frequency of conflict before and during intervention

Table 2 as well as figure 1 shows a general reduction in conflict in all classes during the intervention.

Question 2: In which class does the fuss buster programme have the greatest positive effect?

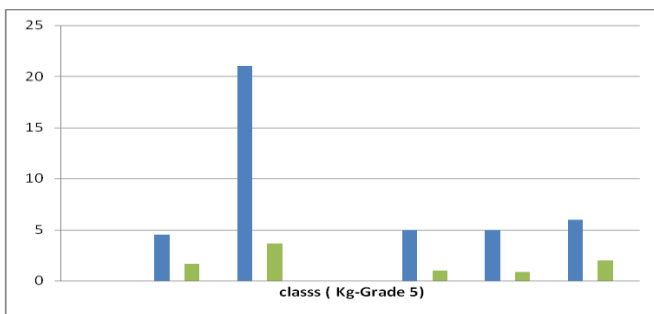


Figure 2: comparative analysis of the effect of the fuss buster programme among the classes.

Table 2 and figure 2 show that the most “conflict-ridden” class (Grade 1) that had a mean conflict record of 22 per week before intervention 3.66 during the programme, while the Grade 5 also had its conflict reduced from 6 per week before intervention to 2 per week after intervention.

The comparative effectiveness of the fussbuster programme in figure 3 further reveals the percentage of each class conflict to the total conflict in the school as well as the percentage of reduction of conflict during intervention in relation to the school conflict.

Table 3: Contribution of each class towards school conflict before and during intervention

Class	% Before Intervention	%After Intervention	%Difference
Kindergarten	11	18	-7
Grade 1	51	40	11
Grade 2	-	-	-
Grade3	12	09	3
Grade 4	12	11	1
Grade 5	14	22	-8
Total	100	100	

Even though there was a general reduction in the number of conflict in all the classes as a result of the fuss buster programme, the contribution of each class to the overall conflict of the school during the intervention shows a different trend from what it was before the intervention. Two classes (kindergarten, 18%, grade 5, 22%) contributed more to the general school conflict after the intervention than they did before the intervention (kindergarten, 11%, grade 5, 14%). This is due to the high effectiveness of the programme in reducing the conflict level of grade 1 from 51% to 40%.

Question 3: What effect does the peer mediation programme have on conflict initiators?

The fact that the frequency of conflicts have reduced in all the classes indicates that the conflict initiators might have also reduced their activities. The conflict initiators that were identified in each class before and during the programme were made to write on the intervention programme during the sixth week of the programme. They all wrote on their activities at the peace table and explained that they no longer initiated

conflicts anymore because the fustbuster programme has taught them to seek peace when they are offended.

One of them, Semilogo grade five wrote this: *"Most times, I initiate conflicts, but it is never intentional. It happens because my friends make me angry easily but this fust buster issue has really helped me."*

While a grade one child Olorunfunmi wrote this: *"I don't like pepl distopinme so is slap them. Now i don't do it again. we go to peace table."*

This corroborates the assertion of Nkonya & Markelova & Kato (2009) that even in traditional African communities, rules are respected and everyone obeys the customary rules. Also, it confirms the African proverb that says "having a good discussion is like having riches" and the Botswana proverb that says "the good of conflict is discussion" (Moumakwa, 2010).

Question 4: What effect does the programme have on fust busters?

The fustbusters also seem to like the programme and enjoy being called upon to mediate in their peer's conflicts, the data collected revealed that while some of those who were chosen as fust busters were also conflict initiators and some were involved in conflict during before the intervention, none of them initiated any conflict and non was also involved in any conflict during the intervention. This implies that the children recognised the responsibility attached to the position of fustbuster.

A grade one fust buster Pelumi wrote this: *"They picked me as fust buster because i always make peace with all pupils in the class."*

Question 5: Do teachers see this programme as an effective strategy for conflict resolution?

All the teachers who took part in this programme wrote what they felt about the programme. One teacher in grade three Mr Ayowrote:

*"The fustbuster programme has helped in resolving various forms of conflict both inside and outside the classroom and that teachers now have more time for other responsibilities and students are now learning to take up leadership roles, therefore, fust buster has been of great benefit to both teacher and pupils in the school"*

Another teacher in grade five Mr Fatoowrote: *"When I first heard of the fust buster programme I liked it but now I love it! These are the advantages:*

*1. The rate of conflict in my class has reduced*

*II. My pupils can now easily settle a dispute wherever it occurs since they settle it in school, they will be able to settle it in the house, in church and will help them later in life*

*III. They've become more law abiding since they have to obey rules at the peace table."*

This corroborates the assertion of Finch (2008) that prepared teachers are open to learning about peaceful conflict resolution and also allows children to be in control of their conflict resolution.

Children who could write were also asked to answer questions on their experience with the fustbuster programme and they identified some gains of the programme which included not causing problems in class, settling disputes without fighting, controlling themselves and resisting the urge to slap or hit those who provoked them. Some however said that some of their peers took delight in initiating conflicts so that they could visit the peace table. All the same, they all seemed to believe in the programme and insisted that it has been effective in reducing conflict among them and they didn't have to keep reporting to the teacher all the time since they had the fust buster and the peace table.

## CONCLUSION

The fustbuster programme is an ongoing programme that is expected to last at least one session and get children to live peaceably among themselves by resolving their own conflicts without reporting to the teacher all the time. The programme has now been done for 6 weeks and the rate of conflict in all the classes has reduced while the children and teachers involved seem to enjoy the benefits of the programme. The result has been positive so far and has revealed the fact that conflict resolution among children can be achieved as early as possible (Gillespie and Chick 2001) and that children achieve success in conflict resolution (as with other learning activities) when they are actively involved in it. Children who learn to resolve conflicts in a civil manner learn to put others' interest into consideration even when provoked and also learn to solve their own problems (Information Library, 2009).

The research work is limited to one school the findings may not be generalizable for all schools in Nigeria. Such research work is needed in each of the different geo political zones in Nigeria for generalizability. As Nigeria has included civic education in her primary school curriculum, efforts should be made to organize workshops and seminars for teachers who are implementing this curriculum to put in place hands-on activities such as this peer mediation programme to help children practice the skills they need in order to be able to develop into citizens who will be law abiding and civil in conflict resolution.

When children are trained in peer mediation and conflict resolution, they not only continue to practice the skill everywhere they are, they also continue to be in charge of their problems to solve them.

*Please note that all proper names are pseudonyms while children's writings are written exactly as they wrote them with the spelling mistakes so that they will be the children's own work and not the author's.*

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