

MAKING MEANING OF CONFLICT: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY IN TWO
PRESCHOOL CLASSROOMS

by
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study was conducted to examine the phenomenon of conflict as a relational process as it is played out in the natural settings of two classrooms. The researcher sought to explore the developmental potential that conflict affords children as they try to make meaning of their relationships within the peer culture. It breaks away from the cyclical and linear models of conflict interactions as it tries to understand the reciprocal role of individual and culture in the initiation, sustenance, and resolution of peer conflicts. The study was also designed to explore the researcher role as participant and observer on a continuum with participant at one extreme and observer on the other.

Data for the study were collected through participant observations over a period of two semesters in the first setting and five weeks in the second. The purpose was to examine disputes, particularly verbal exchanges made during these disputes, for insights of the child's understanding of the peer dynamics and culture that prevailed in the classrooms. Interpretive analysis of these disputes helped to embed the interactive events in their historical and sociocultural contexts.

The results of this study increase our understanding of the developmental aspects of conflict and give us a glimpse of the meaning children make of their disputes. It reinforces the view that (a) children are capable of managing their conflicts without much adult intervention, (b) that the larger peer culture often dictates the initiation and outcome of conflicts, and (c) that conflicts provide an ideal opportunity for children to develop perspective taking and for testing the terms of their relationship with peers.