

# CONFLICT AND AGGRESSION IN SCHOOL CONTEXTS: AN ANALYSIS OF PSYCHOEDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

## CONFLITTO E AGGRESSIVITA' NEL CONTESTO SCOLASTICO: UN'ANALISI DEGLI INTERVENTI PSICOEDUCATIVI

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### Double Blind Peer Review

### Citazione

Perrotta D. (2023) Conflict and aggression in school contexts: an analysis of psychoeducational interventions, *Giornale Italiano di Educazione alla Salute, Sport e Didattica Inclusiva - Italian Journal of Health Education, Sports and Inclusive Didactics*. Anno 7, V 2. Supplemento Edizioni Universitarie Romane

### Doi:

<https://doi.org/10.32043/gsd.v7i2.932>

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[gsdjournal.it](http://gsdjournal.it)

ISSN: 2532-3296

ISBN: 978-88-6022-479-8

### ABSTRACT

In this paper, I introduce the concept of conflict, by analyzing the emergence and the dynamics of such a problem in school contexts. Literature on conflict is analyzed by introducing several interrelated factors.

Focusing on the concept of aggression, I highlight the complexity of developing psychoeducational programs that are capable of intervening on specific factors rather than others. A greater focus on specific dimensions that influence aggressive or violent outcomes may lead to new insights for the development of new psychoeducational programs.

In questo articolo introduco il concetto di conflitto, analizzando le dinamiche di tale problematica nei contesti scolastici. La letteratura sul conflitto viene analizzata introducendo diversi fattori interconnessi. Concentrandomi sul concetto di aggressività, evidenzio la complessità di sviluppare programmi psicoeducativi in grado di intervenire su fattori specifici piuttosto che su altri.

Una maggiore attenzione alle dimensioni specifiche che influenzano gli esiti aggressivi o violenti può portare a nuove intuizioni per lo sviluppo di nuovi programmi psicoeducativi.

### KEYWORDS

Aggression, Conflict, Psychoeducational Interventions, Violence  
Aggressività, Conflitto, Interventi Psicoeducativi, Violenza.

Received 16/08/2023

Accepted 19/09/2023

Published 26/09/2023

## Introduction

Schools have the primary role of educating students and providing social competences that prepare them to adjust to society. It follows that schools have the potential to promote the development of an effective social well-being, in addition to preventing antisocial outcomes. Children's and adolescent's interactions are the primary means through which students learn how to deal with society, by experimenting with their social skills, experiencing conflictual situations, along with attempting to resolve them.

A discussion of conflictual situations does not only apply to the avoidance of perilous outcomes in school contexts, prevention of criminality and similar phenomena in society: indeed, social competence and academic success can also be hindered by antisocial behavior, as this kind of event obstructs a productive school climate (Quinn and Poirier, 2004; Poling et al., 2019). Moreover, conflicts or violence in school are commonly correlated with teacher burnout as well (Simões and Cardoso, 2022), other than jeopardizing the teacher's psychological well-being (Galad et al., 2007).

To this extent, the possibility of relying on school education to avoid antisocial outcomes in adult life is not a secondary subject, on the contrary, it has been widely studied. School education is commonly defined as a primary means to prevent antisocial behaviors, since aggressive behaviors may also lead to criminality in adult life (Akan, 2021). Moreover, other social diseases can also be prevented by working on primary and secondary education, such as drug abuse, psychopathology, and other diseases. Furthermore, schools are also the best setting for violence prevention programs (Farrel 2001; Turnuklu et al., 2010), as well as developing conflict management strategies so as to address various predictors of anti-social behavior, such as aggression, bullying, among others.

School provides the opportunity to develop cognitive skills, learn new abilities, in addition to offering a key context for developing affective skills, such as emotion regulation, as well as experiencing feelings of being appreciated or belonging to a community (Santamaría-Villar et al., 2021). The classroom context also offers an important environment to develop new social functioning, since the peer group shares emotional support and promotes social competencies (Santamaría-Villar et al., 2021).

In the first part of the paper, I introduce the topic of school conflict by examining how it is defined within empirical literature, in terms of several constructs and their relations. It will be shown that a clear definition of school conflict without reference to other psychological and sociological factors is not easy, since conflict is a general concept that includes several school phenomena, like violence and bullying as social behaviors, as well as aggressiveness and impulsivity as individual traits. Moreover, the concept of conflict is also often discussed in terms of psychological factors that may prevent it, such as prosocial behaviors, school connectedness, peer mediation skills, school or classroom climate, different forms of empathy, and so on.

In the second part of the paper, I will focus on aggression because of its striking importance in dealing with analyses of conflict, especially in the development of psychoeducational programs. With a brief introduction to different theories of aggression, and their related sub-dimensions, I discuss how these different conceptions are incredibly relevant as guidelines for developing psychoeducational interventions, through which managing several factors which lead to conflict. In the following section, I examine some psychoeducational programs that have been empirically tested, by focusing on their different dimensions of intervention. By analyzing different forms of psychoeducational programs to reduce aggression, both in children and adolescents, it will be clearer that several psychological factors affect aggressive outcomes.

In conclusion, I summarize the various analysis constructs that delineate the concept of conflict in school contexts, in order to suggest the need for further analysis to develop new psychoeducational programs, which can also be meant as research that can inform teachers of very complex school dynamics that are not easily identifiable.

### **1. The source of school conflict**

Despite the central importance of school and classroom contexts as a means to learn how to live in society, these same contexts are also exposed to the threat of several risk factors. Indeed, schools and especially classrooms are commonly exposed to the threat of antisocial behaviors, often defined in terms of conflict, like interpersonal or peer conflict. The concept of conflict in pedagogical and psychological literature concerns a wide range of studies covering different topics and specific constructs. At the same time, conflict can also be defined as a social phenomenon that includes friction, disagreement, and discord among individuals of a group, when beliefs, actions, ideas are considered unacceptable to others (Tschannen-Moran, 2001; Shahmohammadi, 2014).

In any case, school conflict can be considered as a primary subject that requires investigation and development of interventions, since school is the primary means to learn how to adjust in society.

Indeed, conflictual situations are not only detrimental to an effective learning environment, but they are also often associated with psychopathological outcomes in adult life (He et al., 2019).

Conflictual situations are often measured using a variety of instruments, with reports from students, parents and teachers. Identifying the presence of a social issue is the first step to evaluate how we may interact with it, but at the same

time it is also crucial to understand which sociodemographic and psychological factors underlie a specific conflictual situation.

A complete review of this literature is not possible in a single paper. Such a topic is characterized by a wide heterogeneity, as primary and secondary schools are strikingly different in terms of developmental stages and social dynamics.

Moreover, both aggression and violence, along with other constructs, have been studied in detail, enucleating several subcategories to discern and assess different forms of the same constructs.

Pedagogical and psychological literature investigate school conflict involving different but related constructs.

In this paper I propose that school conflict can be investigated in relation to two categories of constructs, one positive and one negative. In the first category we find constructs that assess positive features of school interactions or well-being, such as school and classroom climate, peer acceptance. For instance, school conflict can be analyzed as an inverse correlation to school climate (Fabbri et al., 2022). In simpler words, while conflict has a negative connotation, school climate has a positive one, it follows that a lower degree of school climate, or classroom climate (Elsaesser et al., 2013), can be interpreted as a major risk of interpersonal conflict. Unlike aggression and related concepts, school climate is a unifying construct that assesses how different learning experiences contribute to the development of academic, socioemotional outcomes and other factors in school context (Wang, 2020).

Therefore, unlike violence and antisocial behavior, school or classroom climate is considered to contribute to the academic and socioemotional outcomes in children and adolescents (Wang and Degol, 2016; Wang, 2020). Moreover, classroom climate is assessed in different domains, given its multidimensional nature: it encompasses teacher-student relations but also peer relations. Such a construct is defined as a predictor of antisocial or disruptive behavior.

In addition to the above claims, cognitive and affective factors should also be discussed as mediators of conflictual situations, since a higher cognitive and affective development reduces the risk of antisocial outcomes. For instance, higher levels of empathy or socioemotional skills are necessary to prevent various forms of conflict, as well as emotional regulation or executive functions from a cognitive perspective. For instance, socio-emotional interventions in primary schools are discussed as means to improve conflict management (Santamaria-Villar et al., 2021). In other words, a lack of socio-emotional skills is interpreted as a possible mediator of conflict. Of course, such a definition is not totally linear, as I will explain later by analyzing different kinds of aggression.

On the contrary, we find several correlations with other constructs that possess a negative connotation, such as school violence, aggression, impulsivity, bullying. Of course, each of these concepts would require an in-depth analysis to be fully investigated. For instance, school violence includes several research that propose different models. Coie and colleagues (1991) introduce three forms of violence: reactive violent behavior, instrumental violent behavior, and bullying. While reactive behaviors are typically defined as response to a social stimulus, instrumental ones are more related to achieving social positions. Moreover, violence also requires several other distinctions: for instance, Olweus (2005), classifies violent behavior in terms of aggression: Covert aggression, instrumental aggression, reactive aggression, intimidating aggression. I do not join in these details, but it clearly shows the strong relation between different but complementary social dynamics.

Moreover, school violence also includes various typologies of interpersonal relations, such as violence against peers or teachers, as well as minor criminal acts (Santamaria-Villar et al., 2021).

Similarly, bullying is commonly considered as an indicator of conflict in schools (Shahmohammadi et al., 2014), although it is a very specific social phenomenon.

Bullying is arguably a very distinctive conflictual event that is characteristic of school contexts. It follows that bullying possesses its own features and would require a deeper analysis. In any case, bullying should be considered as an indicator of conflict situations as well, in a complementary sense to others like violence. Indeed, it may be positively correlated with the perception of peer conflict and similar forms of conflicts within schools.

As it should be clearer, it is not always possible to propose a clear distinction between these different domains of antisocial risk factors or mediators. For instance, conflict and violence can be defined in terms of degrees of anti-social behavior: whereas the way conflictual situations are managed may lead to violent behavior. In other words, the individual or collective strategy we use to manage conflict is considered as a predictor of violent outcomes (Mura et al., 2010). In such a paper we focus on aggression as a main factor to explain conflict, with a main focus on school contexts. Special attention will be paid to theories of aggression and psychoeducational interventions, meant as a tool to prevent or manage conflictual and aggressive situations.

## **2. Psychological factors underlying aggressive behaviors**

A definition of aggression includes many different areas of the individual functioning, such as cognitive, affective, and social skills, as well as strong relations to parenting styles and urban origins as causal factors. Furthermore, a clear understanding of causal factors underlying aggressive behaviors involves many different topics. As regards the cognitive profile, executive functions are relevant in explaining aggressive behavior, as they tend to be inversely correlated with impulsive traits. Indeed, from an intuitive perspective, impulsivity can easily be defined as associated with aggression, since an impulsive action is considered

as unmediated by thoughts, rules and so on. However, the relation between aggression and impulsivity does not follow such a linearity, indeed, it has long been studied by introducing fine-grained distinctions that are required to clarify this point.

The relevance of impulsive traits in explaining aggressive outcomes has been explained by the crucial distinction of proactive and reactive aggression (Raine et al., 2006). While the latter has strong association with impulsive traits, as it involves a reaction to a specific social stimulus, such an insult, proactive aggression is more related to cognitive processing, inasmuch as it involves deliberate, thoughtful actions. As should be clear, proactive aggression entails more complex cognitive and affective dynamics compared to the reactive one. Despite the relevance of the above model, other theories of aggression are also commonly used and considered as relevant in empirical literature: for instance, a theory distinguishes aggression in three categories: direct physical, direct verbal, indirect (Bjorkqvist et al., 1992). Even this theory is operationalized in a measure commonly used in aggression research (Poling et al., 2019).

To generalize, these related but different proposals of the same phenomenon can be conceptualized in a further way. Indeed, the definition of aggression has been further distinguished in terms of forms and functions. In the former case, by speaking of forms of aggression, we find behavioral categories like physical, relational, instrumental and so on, while with functions we denote categories like proactive and reactive aggression (Girard et al., 2019). In any case, distinctions between functions and forms of aggression are not exclusive: trajectories of aggression vary over time, also showing differences in developmental phases, especially during adolescence (Ojanen and Kiefer, 2013). For instance, physical aggression is common during toddlerhood but declines rapidly (Jambon et al., 2019), while we expect to find more complex forms of aggression in adolescent students.



It follows that a complete analysis of aggression is not an easy task, even though there are psychometrics studies that propose integrating instruments to address such a challenge.

Not by chance, self-report measures are mostly focused on either the functions or the forms of aggression. (Marsee et al., 2011), albeit there are several attempts to assess them simultaneously (Marsee & Frick, 2007; Ostrov & Houston, 2008; Marsee et al., 2011). As may be expected, the school context encompasses several different forms of aggression, and such empirical tools are crucial to detect these different dynamics.

Psychological models of aggression are incredibly important in developing psychoeducational programs that aim at reducing conflictual situations, by focusing on specific factors, such as aggression. In any case, if we introduce such an analysis in the perspective of analyzing and developing psychoeducational programs, we easily recognize that there are a lot of mediating and predicting factors implied in aggressive outcomes. Such an observation can be easily recognized in the psychological and pedagogical literature, as psychoeducational programs work with several steps to manage or reduce aggression and related constructs.

Not by chance, within the individual and group functioning we should also consider affective processes in explaining aggressive outcomes, especially empathy in its different forms. Again, we expect that higher degree of empathy (cognitive and affective), socioemotional skills, and other prosocial skills to be inversely correlated with aggressive behaviors. For instance, empathy is defined as the ability to understand internal states of other persons, even though it has been recently distinguished in two other forms: cognitive and affective empathy. Empathic processes are, therefore, considered as means of developing prosocial behavior, since these functions allow us to understand or anticipate other emotional states. Indeed, Empathy also plays a major role in promoting peer

acceptance, that it could depend on the above-mentioned different forms of empathy, such as cognitive and affective (Wang 2019).

To analyze the role of cognition in learning how to behave and regulating children and adolescent aggression several other cognitive functions can be introduced.

For instance, normative beliefs about aggression are defined as individual cognitions about the acceptability or unacceptability of behaviors (Henry, 2000).

Likewise, emotion regulation is another key topic in this literature, since it is possible to analyze this affective functioning in numerous ways, whereas there is a strong relation with aggressive outcomes and cognitive functioning as mediators, like executive functioning.

As it should be clearer, aggression plays a major role in determining and mediating other conflict dimensions. It follows that a better understanding of the psychological factors underlying aggression may be relevant in understanding how to deal with this issue in school context, and how to manage it. Several studies show that teachers' strategies to manage aggression have been investigated in terms of different forms of aggression. For instance, teacher's strategies can be conceptualized following the above-mentioned distinction of aggression: proactive and reactive. In the first case, the teacher acts before the escalation of an aggressive situation, while in the reactive approach the teacher behaviors occur after inappropriate behaviors (Safran and Oswald, 2003; Clunies-Ross et al., 2008).

Such a proposal is in my opinion very important in defining a strong bond between theories and intervention programs. While theorization is the primary means through which we develop intervention programs, the latter are also relevant to advise and inform teachers with new educational skills that are to be tested in complex situations, in order to evaluate their suitability for dealing with such different issues.

For this reason, I suggest that further analysis of different conceptions of aggression and its correlation with other psychological and social variables is a main path to follow. In order to develop a psychoeducational program, several individual and collective dimensions are to be analyzed. Most of the psychoeducational programs are, indeed, organized in a multilevel approach, whereas we can find self-conceptualization, emotion regulations, as I will briefly illustrate in the next paragraph.

The introduction of the complexity of aggressive causal factors or association with aggression may be considered as an advice to develop aggression management with a focus of different dimensions. A major investigation on the possibility to manage aggression is not only relevant in addressing a correct psychological functioning in children and adolescents, but to prevent limitations to the educational system as well. Indeed, disruptive behaviors do not only interfere with teaching but also with learning processes. Moreover, it is also recognized that disruptive behavior in the school context leads to the internalization of psychological problems in teachers and school personnel, such as depression and anxiety among others (Greene, 2005).

### **3. Psychoeducational intervention to manage aggression in school contexts**

Psychoeducational interventions are a key means through which intervene on school dynamics, so as to leverage or mitigate conflictual situations. The current literature shows that there are several proposals of interventions aimed at reducing aggression in school contexts, since aggressiveness is one of the main psychological traits that lead to conflict or violence. However, psychoeducational programs are very heterogeneous, given different conceptions of aggression, the

different needs between primary school children and adolescents, and many different psychological levels as targets of the interventions.

Several studies show that children have different patterns of aggression compared to adolescents (Akan 2021). Moreover, a clear distinction between different patterns of aggression is not easy to identify. Recalling the distinction between proactive and reactive aggression, we often find overlaps between the two kinds of aggression (Crapanzano et al., 2010). It follows that psychoeducational interventions to reduce aggression are different when applied at different developmental stages, it follows that age requires great attention. In this paragraph I propose some brief examples of psychoeducational programs that have been tested as effective in reducing aggression levels and related variables. As it will be clear, each educational program implies an involvement of several factors of cognitive and affective processing, as well as different constructs related to the school environments and targets of the intervention. Indeed, the strong relation between different concepts, such as conflict, aggression and violence is generally recognized, as is evident by analyzing these literature. Despite these similarities, a clear understanding of different factors or mediators that lead to aggressive outcomes is a contemporary challenge. Not by chance, a meta-analysis reveals the complexity to solve such a question (Dymnicki et al., 2011).

With this paragraph I do not present a systematic review, but I am interested in showing the different levels at which some psychoeducational programs work, in order to discuss the complexity of understanding how to affect and reduce aggression level, or in general conflictual situations. With the following paragraphs I resume a few psychoeducational programs which have been empirically tested.

The “Violence Reduction Psychoeducation program (VRPP)” (Akan, 2021) has been applied in adolescents. This program is organized with 8 sessions that cover

different topics: communication, conflict resolution, emotion regulation, empathy, and anger management skills. Such an intervention confirms a reduction in aggression score in the experimental group but not in the control one, confirming its effectiveness in similar settings.

Another proposal can be identified in mediation programs, also defined peer mediation (Shahmohammadi et al., 2014), as a response to conflictual situations. Such kind of programs are specialized in teaching mediation skills, meant as basic skills to enhance life and relationships which are relevant in each social context (Shahmohammadi et al., 2014). These mediation skills are to be considered as basic competence to deal with interpersonal problems, such as conflictual situations. For instance, Maccoby and Scudder (2011) discuss five points to deal with conflicts: anticipate, prevent, identify, manage, resolve. Similar trainings are considered in their importance to manage conflictual situations, especially with a focus on their application on school contexts.

In interventions focused on children's interactions within the school we find several studies that investigate the role of emotions, or socio-emotional skills. Again, the goal of the interventions is to reduce conflict and violence, even though it is clear that there are many different psychological factors that mediate such an outcome. The study by Santamaria-Villar and colleagues (2021) works on several levels of psychological dimensions: personal knowledge, self-esteem, empathy, group cohesion, emotions, emotion regulation, relaxation, assertiveness, communication, and conflict resolution. Evidence shows that socio-emotional factors, and their close relations with other psychological dimensions, are critical to reduce conflict and preventing school violence. This article concludes that socio-emotional skills are key means of preventing violence and similar outcomes in schools, by also recognizing that such a kind of intervention is easily replicable by teachers.

The Conflict Resolution and Peer mediation (CRPM) program is another intervention that focuses on conflict resolution in elementary schools (Turnuklu et al., 2010). The training program focuses on four basic skills: understanding the nature of interpersonal conflict, communication skills, anger management skills, and interpersonal conflict resolution skills. Evidence confirms that such a program reduces the level of aggression in the experimental groups while not in the control one.

The “Count on me program” is an intervention aimed at improving school climate, which shows effectiveness in primary education (Pina et al., 2021). This intervention program has four main objectives: raising awareness of different kinds of aggression along with the benefits of improving a good coexistence; promoting respectful existence; developing self-control; promoting the role of peer group in regulating existence. To achieve these four objectives the program is organized into 8 sessions, each with different topics: Introduction of the program; Violence as a form of fun; Violence as a way to enhance self-esteem; Violence and social skills; Violence as a self-defense; Violence and impulse control; Gender-based violence; and the last sessions of review of the above introduced topics (Pina et al., 2021). Such a study claims the effectiveness of this program in enhancing the school climate, that is a reduction of antisocial behaviors as well. A complete analysis of programs and their effects is not an easy task to achieve. A meta-analysis corroborates the multidimensional dimensions of conflict and violence, but also recognizes the important role of several mediators in primary schools. Along with aggression levels, gender and school-level variables are also key factors to consider (Dymniki et al., 2011), such as school’s level of poverty or neighborhood factors, and homicide rates (Farrel et al., 2011). Yet, the socio-cognitive dimension plays a main role in delineating aggression. Mediators like the ability to generate alternative non-violent solutions to conflict, friendship skills, reading skills, normative beliefs about aggression (Dymniki et al., 2011), and

others are to be considered as mediating factors in learning aggression. This meta-analysis concludes by claiming that these mediators can be classified into three general categories: skill acquisition, socio-cognitive variables, and classroom characteristics. Despite their internal differences, all of these factors need to be conceived as mediators that are worthy of analysis to reduce aggression levels. As anticipated, although this cannot be defined as a systematic review: my interest is to pay attention to the complexity of this task, as a clear understanding of factors that lead to aggressive outcomes can help to develop new psychoeducational programs. Not by chance, the exemplified studies introduce individual and social skills, which are also very different from each other. For instance, we can hypothesize that communication skills are clearly relevant in promoting conflict management strategy, avoiding physical aggression as well as avoiding conflictual situations from leading to violent events. The same goes with emotion regulation, which is often introduced as a mediating factor in various educational programs. Without denying the importance of emotion regulation as a salient skill for correctly interacting in social contexts, we are clearly introducing a very complex concept. Even though in this paper I focused on psychoeducational programs, there are a lot of studies that discuss the relation between emotion regulation and aggression. Such a studies are mostly related to cognitive investigations, since emotion regulation is a broad concept that often includes different forms of cognition. For instance, emotion regulation is often associated with the aforementioned distinctions between proactive and reactive aggression. As explained earlier, the former category is commonly defined as a controlled form of aggression, insofar as it involves planning, anticipating and other cognitive processes.

To sum up: such observations are not intended to criticize studies that focus on aggression reduction programs, but on the contrary, to underline the complexity of this topic when we are dealing with the need of solving or mediating conflictual

or violent situations. Such an analysis has been proposed to suggest a greater attention on the complexity of aggression as a psychological and social phenomenon, especially in school context, underlying conflictual situations.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper, I discussed the concept of conflict as a general category that includes several social phenomena and underlying psychological processes, especially in the school context. I proposed a distinction between positive and negative forms of analysis of conflictual situations, so as to show their strong relations but also denoting a different focus on which developing interventions programs. In my opinion, a focus on a construct like school climate or peer acceptance allows us to develop intervention programs that focus on improving basic interpersonal skills, which is different from developing a conflict management or violence reduction programs that, on the contrary, has a greater focus on preventing violent outcomes.

Greater attention to aggression in its various forms, as well as in its correlation with many other psychological and social factors, is proposed as a main subject that needs further analysis both in intervention contexts and in educational settings. Teachers are often confronted with classrooms that include disparate conflictual situations, which are generated by underlying psychological and sociological factors that are difficult to detect. The possibility of developing psychoeducational interventions is proposed as an empirical means to evaluate how several factors are implicated in conflictual situations, so as to propose new interpretations to help teachers in developing a greater understanding of the phenomenon and its possible resolution.



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