

DYNAMICS OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION STRATEGIES: A CASE STUDY OF RIOTS BETWEEN STUDENTS IN CLASS VIII AT AL IKHLAS CIPADU JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of interpersonal conflicts that occur among Class VIII students of SMP Al Ikhlas Cipadu, which are triggered by distortions of digital communication, group imitation behavior, and the dissemination of unverified information. Incidents involving verbal and physical altercations between classmates illustrate the complexity of social interaction in the digital age, where text messages and ambiguous contexts are a source of chain misunderstandings. The research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method, collecting data through in-depth interviews with the parties involved, homeroom teachers, school counselors, and students' parents. Key findings suggest that conflict does not occur due to substantial problems, but rather due to the absence of information verification and adolescents' tendency to seek social validation through group conformity. The resolution strategies implemented include tiered mediation, clarification of information, character building, relational recovery, and prevention education involving the entire school ecosystem. The results showed that holistic interventions involving teachers, counselors, parents, and peer groups were proven to be more effective in preventing conflict recurrence than punitive handling alone. Research suggests the need to integrate digital media literacy and nonviolent communication learning in the junior high school curriculum.

Keywords: interpersonal conflict; digital misunderstanding; educational mediation; group conformity; conflict management; adolescents; Junior High School

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji dinamika konflik interpersonal yang terjadi di antara peserta didik Kelas VIII SMP Al Ikhlas Cipadu, yang dipicu oleh distorsi komunikasi digital, perilaku peniruan kelompok, dan penyebaran informasi yang tidak terverifikasi. Insiden yang melibatkan pertengkaran verbal dan fisik antarteman sekelas menggambarkan kompleksitas interaksi sosial di era digital, di mana pesan singkat dan konteks yang ambigu menjadi sumber kesalahpahaman berantai. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus, mengumpulkan data melalui wawancara mendalam dengan pihak yang terlibat, guru wali kelas, konselor sekolah, dan orangtua siswa. Temuan utama menunjukkan bahwa konflik tidak terjadi karena masalah substansial, melainkan karena ketiadaan verifikasi informasi dan kecenderungan remaja untuk mencari validasi sosial melalui konformitas kelompok. Strategi resolusi yang diterapkan mencakup mediasi berjenjang, klarifikasi informasi, pembinaan karakter, pemulihan relasional, dan edukasi pencegahan yang melibatkan seluruh ekosistem sekolah. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa intervensi holistik yang melibatkan guru, konselor, orangtua, dan kelompok sebaya terbukti lebih efektif dalam mencegah rekurensi konflik dibandingkan penanganan punitif semata.

Penelitian menyarankan perlunya integrasi literasi media digital dan pembelajaran komunikasi nonkekerasan dalam kurikulum sekolah menengah pertama.

Kata Kunci: konflik interpersonal; misunderstanding digital; mediasi pendidikan; konformitas kelompok; manajemen konflik; remaja; SMP

Introduction

Conflict is an inherent phenomenon in every social structure, including in the school environment. However, the proportions and characteristics of conflicts that occur in the era of digital connectivity have undergone significant transformation. Contemporary adolescents do not only experience a conflict of values or interests that are manifest, but are also entangled in the dynamics of communication that often divide the understanding of the meaning of the message itself (Wilmot & Hocker, 2011). At Al Ikhlas Cipadu Junior High School, a secondary education institution located in the Cipadu area with a student population of around 96 people, there was a riot incident involving a number of Class VIII students in October 2024.

The incident began with a comment written through digital communication media, which was interpreted by one of the students (Student A) as a personal insult. The interpretation was then shared with his close friends, who then spread the modified narrative to a wider group. Within a few hours, the assumptions and speculation accumulated into a collective narrative that positioned the student who wrote the original comment (Student B) as the "deliberately insulting" party. Certain groups who felt solidarity with Student A then showed their support through ridicule and negative labeling to Student B. This phenomenon resulted in a rapid escalation, until finally a verbal confrontation occurred and had reached the physical stage in the school environment.

The importance of studying these incidents lies in several academic and practical reasons. First, studies on adolescent interpersonal conflicts mediated by digital technology are still not widely carried out in the context of Indonesian education, while the phenomenon is increasingly prevalent (Boyd, 2014). Second, most research on school conflict focuses on punitive or disciplinary aspects, while the educational dimensions of resolution and prevention still require more empirical exploration. Third, the conflict resolution strategy applied by the school in this case demonstrates a systemic and recovery-oriented approach (*restorative*) that deserves to be documented and analyzed as good practice (Zehr, 2002).

This study intends to comprehensively describe the dynamics of these conflicts, analyze the complex root causes, and document resolution strategies that have proven effective in minimizing negative impacts and preventing similar conflicts in the future.

Literature Review

Conflict from a communication perspective is defined by Wilmot and Hocker as the expression of a mismatch between two or more parties caused by a perception of incompatible goals and limited opportunities (Wilmot & Hocker, 2011). In the context of adolescence, interpersonal conflict is often rooted in distortions of perception, rather than in substantial disagreements of interest. This is in line with the Social Cognitive Theory put forward by Bandura, which emphasizes that individual behavior

is not solely determined by external stimuli, but is influenced by cognitive processes and the construction of meaning carried out personally (Bandura, 1986).

Theory of Mind, a framework that examines an individual's ability to attribute mental states to others, explains why digital communication often fuels misunderstandings. Boyd argues that the capacity to infer the intent behind a short, minimalist text message is not trivial, especially for teens who are still in the process of cognitive development (Boyd, 2014). The absence of nonverbal cues, disconnected social contexts, and ambiguity of language make individual interpretations dominant in determining the meaning of messages. Moreover, when the message is discussed in a group, each member of the group brings their own interpretation, creating a significant divergence between the sender's intent and the collective acceptance.

The phenomenon of conformity and *peer pressure* has been extensively studied in classical social psychology research (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). In the context of adolescence, the desire to be accepted by the group often outweighs individual moral or rational considerations. Cialdini and Goldstein named this mechanism as "*Descriptive Norms*", where individuals follow behaviors that are seen as common in their group. When a group member shows support for one side in a conflict, the other members often follow the pattern, not because of their deep understanding of the issue, but because of a desire to maintain the group's cohesion and their social status.

In terms of conflict resolution, the paradigm *restorative justice* offers a different perspective than a punitive approach. According to Zehr, *restorative justice* focuses on relationship repair, accountability, and transformation, not just condemnation (Zehr, 2002). This approach is particularly relevant for educational contexts because it views conflict as an opportunity for learning and character development. Mediation, as one of the restorative mechanisms, involves a neutral third party to facilitate dialogue between the parties to the dispute. Research by Umbreit shows that mediation in schools is not only effective in resolving specific conflicts, but also in developing communication and empathy skills among adolescents (Umbreit, 1995).

Furthermore, *Nonviolent Communication* (NVC) developed by Marshall Rosenberg offers a framework for transforming destructive communication patterns into communicative and collaborative ones (Rosenberg, 2003). NVC emphasizes the authentic expression of needs and empathy for the needs of others as a foundation for conflict transformation. In the context of adolescents who are used to short communication and tend to be aggressive on social media, NVC learning can be a preventive intervention that has a long-term impact.

Method

This study uses a qualitative design with a case study method (*Case Study*). The case study was chosen because the purpose of the study is to understand in depth the processes of conflict occurrence, contributing factors, and resolution mechanisms applied in specific contexts, rather than to generalize conflict patterns to the broader population (Yin, 2018). The unit analysis is a conflict incident involving Grade VIII students of Al Ikhlas Cipadu Junior High School in October 2024.

The research participants consisted of (1) seven students who were directly involved in the conflict, namely two students who were the main parties and five other students who were involved; (2) one homeroom teacher of Class VIII; (3) two BK

counselors/teachers who handle the case; and (4) four parents of the students involved. Participants were selected *purposively*, prioritizing those who had direct knowledge and access to information relevant to the research focus. The recruitment process involves the school and the student's parents by emphasizing voluntariness and confidentiality of identity.

Data was collected through three main techniques: in-depth interviews (*in depth interview*), observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted individually with each of the students involved, teachers, and parents, using an open-ended question guide that allowed for an in-depth exploration of their perceptions of the causes of conflict, the dynamics that occurred, and their assessment of the resolution strategies applied. Interviews take place in two to three sessions to ensure depth of data and provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on their answers. Observations were made on student interaction in the school environment, especially in the classroom and play area, and attended several mediation sessions to understand the dynamics of direct communication. Documentation includes the collection of relevant digital messages, teacher records, reports from school counselors, and documents implementing prevention programs conducted by the school (Yin, 2018).

Data analysis follows thematic coding procedures (*thematic coding*) according to Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interview transcript data is read repeatedly to identify key patterns and meanings. The initial code is generated for each unit of meaning relevant to the research question, then the code code is grouped into more abstract categories. Category categories are then integrated into a major theme that describes the structure and dynamics of conflict. The analysis process involves triangulating data sources to improve validity: statements from students are compared with researchers' observations and teacher reports to verify the consistency of narratives. To maintain methodological rigor, the study also involved member checking by confirming key findings to several key participants.

Results and Discussion

Anatomy of Digital Misconceptions

The incident began when Student B sent a text message to Student A through the Instagram application commonly used among teenagers. The message reads: "Football matches lose well, aren't you good at it?" The phrase, although intended by Student B as a casual rhetorical question (as Student B admitted in the interview), was interpreted by Student A as a condescending crude sarcasm. This negative interpretation is then communicated to Student A's closest friend, with the addition of a subjective interpretation: "He insulted me." This altered narrative then spreads to a wider group of friends, and with each transmission, an increase in emotions and assumptions occurs (Boyd, 2014).

This phenomenon illustrates the process of cognitive distortion that often occurs in chain communication. Each individual who receives the message makes a cognitive reconstruction based on their own mental schema, and in the process, certain details are omitted, other details are added, and the entire narrative begins to shift from its original meaning (Bartlett, 1932). Plus, that the emotional intensity increases as the message travels: from casual questions to sarcasm, from sarcasm to insult, from insult to personal attack.

The absence of temporal, historical, and relational contexts in textual communication means that the recipient of the message must rely entirely on their own internal context to provide interpretation. Student A, who may have had previous negative experiences or certain emotional vulnerabilities, found in the message a correlation with the negative assumptions they had about Student B. This process made the first interpretation very dominant and difficult to change even when additional information became available.

Group Conformity and Conflict Amplification

The second phase of conflict dynamics is characterized by the rapid formation of group solidarity. A close friend of Student A feels the need to show emotional support to his friend who is perceived to have been hurt. This form of support is not always a rational verbal comment, but often an explosive emotional expression, such as sharing feelings of anger, mocking Student B, or giving him a negative label. The researchers observed that this group intentionally or unintentionally created a shared narrative that positioned them as the "moral" party (for defending their friend) and Student B as the "evil" party (for having hurt their friend).

The psychological mechanisms operating here are in group bias and out group homogenization. Group A sees the members of their group as diverse and complex individuals, while Student B and his supporters are seen as homogeneous groups with the same negative characteristics (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Research by Tajfel and Turner shows that through even minimal group categorization, individuals will show preference for their own group and discrimination against other groups, especially under conditions of competition or conflict.

The most problematic aspect is the emergence of "*bandwagon effect*" among students who initially had no personal involvement in the issue (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955)(Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Some of the students interviewed admitted that they did not fully understand what was at the heart of the conflict, but followed the mocking behavior towards Student B because "everyone did it" or because they "wanted to be accepted by the group." It is a pure form of normative conformity, in which individuals adjust their behavior not because they believe in what is being done, but rather to avoid social rejection. This situation creates a kind of self-sustaining momentum of conflict in which the movement continues to escalate, not because of the objective escalation of the problem itself, but because of the group's growing dynamics.

The spread of gossip and slander is the next phase of this amplification. Gossip is a form of communication that has complex social functions, including the maintenance of group cohesion, the determination of social norms, and the negotiation of identity (Dunbar, 2004). In this case, the gossip about Student B develops into an increasingly fantastical story, with details that cannot be verified. Some students mentioned that Student B had a "history" of insulting others (which had never happened before), while others added malicious motivations behind Student B's actions (such as envy or wanting to damage reputations). This slander creates a psychological justification for those who mock Student B, because they believe that Student B "deserves" to be treated as such.

Restorative Justice-Based Resolution Strategy

When the incident reaches the stage of physical confrontation in the school environment, the school activates the conflict handling protocol involving homeroom teachers and school counselors. The strategies applied do not focus on punitive punishment or negative influences, but on dialogue and relationship restoration. The first phase is "information pooling," where teachers and counselors invite each party involved to share their perspective on what has happened. In this phase, the active listening technique (Rosenberg, 2003) used to ensure that every perspective is valued and heard without any interruption or direct judgment.

The second phase is formal mediation that brings together the parties to the dispute in a safe and controlled space. The mediator, in this case, is an experienced BK teacher acting as a neutral facilitator, not as a judge or authority who determines who is right and who is wrong. Mediators use the "*reframing*," namely changing the language of conflict that is *blame based* (blame) to be *interest based* (interest-based) (Moore, 2014). For example, when Student A expresses a feeling of being "humiliated," the mediator helps identify the need behind the feeling, the need to be respected and acknowledged. Similarly, when Student B expresses resentment, the mediator helps recognize the need to be accepted and understood.

The third phase is information clarification. In this phase, the mediator helps identify the original message that triggered the misunderstanding and distinguish it from the interpretation that has developed. Student B is given the opportunity to explain the true intent of the short message, while Student A is given the opportunity to explain the interpretive process they went through. Through this dialogue, both parties began to understand that the conflict that occurred was not due to malicious intentions, but because of the limitations of the communication medium and differences in cognitive schemes (Boyd, 2014).

The fourth phase is the restoration of the relationship, which involves drafting a mutual agreement on how the relationship will be rebuilt going forward. In these cases, both students agree to use more direct and verifying communication (e.g., asking directly if something is not understood) rather than making assumptions based on short messages. They also agreed to become *role model* to their friends about the importance of verification before forming assumptions (Zehr, 2002).

In parallel with mediation between the main students, the school also holds meetings with parents to involve them in the process of understanding and resolution. These meetings are important because parents often have strong perceptions and emotions about what has happened to their child, and their involvement in the restorative process increases buy-in to the agreed solution (Zehr, 2002). Teachers also provide education to parents about the dynamics of digital communication and its implications for adolescents' social-emotional development.

The fifth phase, which is preventive, is coaching and education for the entire class. The homeroom teacher allocates time in learning to discuss the dynamics of the conflict that has occurred (without naming the parties involved), the psychological roots of group conformity (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004), and how to be an active

bystander in preventing the spread of gossip. Digital media literacy programs are also integrated to increase students' awareness of the limitations of textual communication and the importance of verification before shaping assessments. Long-term monitoring is carried out by the school counsellor to monitor the social dynamics of Student A and Student B, ensuring that there is no residual resentment or ongoing bullying.

Effectiveness of Long-Term Strategies and Learning

Based on follow-up interviews conducted three months after the incident, both Student A and Student B reported that their relationship had improved significantly. More importantly, patterns of social interaction in the classroom showed positive changes: students became more critical of unverified narratives before spreading them, and there was an increase in clarification behavior (asking the accused person directly rather than making assumptions). Homeroom teachers also noted a reduction in incidents of gossip and ridicule in the classroom compared to the previous semester.

These findings are in line with Umbreit's research which shows that restorative mediation is not only effective in resolving specific conflicts, but also in producing spillover effects in the school culture as a whole (Hopkins, 2004). When students see that school institutions respond to conflict in a respectful, dialogical, and learning-oriented way, they tend to adopt the same pattern in their personal interactions.

Conclusions

A case study of the riot incident at Al Ikhlas Cipadu Junior High School demonstrates that adolescent interpersonal conflicts in the digital age cannot be fully understood or resolved through conventional disciplinary approaches focused on punishment. The conflicts that occur are the result of the complexity of interactions involving communication distortions, individual cognitive biases, group dynamics, and amplification through social media (Boyd, 2014). Effective treatment requires a systemic approach that involves *Multiple stakeholders* (students, teachers, parents, counselors) and focuses on dialogue, clarification, and relationship restoration rather than mere confinement or punishment (Zehr, 2002).

The practical implications of the findings of this study include several recommendations for educational units. First, schools need to integrate learning about digital media literacy and nonviolent communication as an integral part of the curriculum, not just a responsive intervention to incidents (Rosenberg, 2003). This education should include an understanding of the limitations of textual communication mediums, cognitive biases that influence interpretation, and the practice of verifying information before forming judgments or disseminating narratives.

Second, education units need to build internal capacity in terms of mediation and restorative justice. Teachers and counselors should receive ongoing training on mediation techniques, active listening, and conflict reframing from a perspective *interest based* (Moore, 2014). The availability of professionally trained facilitators will improve the quality of the resolution process and the probability of long-term success.

Third, schools need to develop clear protocols for handling conflicts involving digital communications, including guidelines on when and how to access digital data as evidence (while maintaining privacy and ethics), as well as guidance for students on responsible communication practices in social media. Without clear protocols, there is a risk that conflict handling will become the arbiter who determines the interpretation and judgment of what is meant in a digital message, even though this is often ambiguous and multi-interpreted.

Fourth, there needs to be a long-term monitoring system that tracks the progress of students who have been involved in conflict to ensure that there are no recurrences or adverse long-term psychological impacts. This monitoring should involve collaboration between teachers, counselors, and parents, with a focus on emotional support and social skills development (Durlak et al., 2011).

This study was limited to one specific case in one school with a specific sociodemographic context, so generalization of findings to other contexts should be done with caution. Further research involving *multiple sites*, longer longitudinal studies, and comparisons between schools applying restorative versus punitive approaches will enrich our understanding of the relative effectiveness of various adolescent conflict management strategies in the digital age.

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