

# Constructive Conflict in Classrooms and Beyond

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## Abstract

Conflict has exercised the minds of scholars since the academy was established. Yet, those studying conflict continue to struggle over what, precisely, it is and how and why it occurs. While theorists have made progress in understanding the *destructive* conflicts that precipitate harm, they have made comparatively less headway in comprehending the *constructive* conflicts that promote social change and development. Those who have probed constructive conflict have contributed theories of cooperation, collaboration, and transformation but have not adequately explored the connections between these conflict categories. Likewise, questions remain about why participants work together to address social disputes in mutually satisfactory ways.

This thesis aims to extend our knowledge by investigating the *what*, *how*, and *why* of interpersonal constructive conflict. Taking a transdisciplinary approach, the thesis brings contributions from conflict resolution, education research, peace and development research, social psychology, and sociology into conversation with each other. The thesis uses this conversation to investigate the dynamic and multifarious ways participants accomplish constructive conflict inside primary school classrooms. Through 174 observations and 97 interviews with 88 students and 24 teachers, the author witnesses, participates in, and documents constructive conflicts as they occur and explores these interactions from the perspectives of participants.

Thus, the thesis makes three contributions to the unfinished task of conflict theorizing. Empirically, the thesis provides thick descriptions of constructive conflict inside classrooms, addressing a gap in our knowledge of lived experience in a conflict-prone context. The thesis additionally contributes the CARE Framework, a tool for a relational analysis of conflict dynamics and participants' motivations. Finally, the thesis advances a Theory of Constructive Conflict. Inspired by grounded theory and symbolic interactionism, this model synthesizes theory and practice to understand constructive conflict as multiple phenomena consisting of cooperative, collaborative, and transformative categories.

**Keywords:** CARE framework, collaboration, cooperation, grounded theory, interpersonal conflict, participant observation, schools, transformation