

Nursing Students' Perception of Conflict Management Styles of their Nursing Educators

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Abstract

Background: The interactive nature of the teaching process is built on a social relationship between teachers and students. Conflicts in the relationship between students and teachers may occur for a several reasons. Effective and constructive management of conflict can decrease its negative effects on the learning environment, students, and educators. **Purpose:** This study aims to investigate nursing students' perception of conflict management styles of their nursing educators. **Methodology:** The study was conducted in Faculty of Nursing, Alexandria University. 475 nursing students enrolled in the four academic years of the faculty were participated in the current study. Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory–II (ROCI–II) used in this study to determine conflict management styles nursing educators use to handle conflict with students as perceived by students. **Results:** Nursing students perceived that *Avoiding* was the most frequently style used by their nursing educators for conflict management. While, *Integrating* style was the lowest one. Other variables could influence their perception of conflict management styles such as sex, class year, frequency of experiencing conflict, and status of feeling successful in conflict management. **Recommendation:** The findings highlighted the importance of providing appropriate training programs for conflict management and resolution periodically to nursing educators in order to teach them how to deal with student' conflict more effectively. Nurse educators should utilize strategies like communicating respect, clarifying course goals, involving students in solving problems, and encouraging a sense of clinical and classroom community which could be helpful in managing conflict successfully.

Keywords: Conflict management style, nursing educators, student - teacher conflict, ROCI-II

1. Introduction

Conflict is healthy, common, and necessary for students' growth. However, conflict can become destructive to student learning when becomes personal or an obstacle to learning completion. University students are known to experience stress inducing problems throughout their education. Nursing students' inability to effectively manage the conflicts they encounter with their teachers is considered to be one of the reasons they have these problems (Ustun & Seren 2008).

Conflicts in the relationship between students and educators may occur for a several reasons which found to be; communication problems, lack of openness, time and feedback as students could lack dialogue skills with their teachers which could result in misunderstandings, a lack of shared meaning, and confusion which can cause conflict and create resentment. In addition, the equivocal expectations between students and instructors, difficulty in compromising with the values and the rules of the society, authority issues, anger and irritation, low performance and responsibilities, and disobedience to the rules and policies of the educational setting (Ustun & Seren 2008, Kantek & Gezer 2009). Another source of conflict is difference in thinking styles and values among students and teachers. Both teachers and students have different backgrounds, unique views of the world, and a variety of thinking styles. This diversity provides rich resources for problems and conflict. No understanding or appreciating the value of other students' thinking styles creates conflict (Ustun & Seren 2008). So, effective and constructive management of conflict can minimize its negative effects on the learning environment, students, and educators (Kantek & Gezer 2009).

Moreover, in educational setting, successful navigation of conflict depends on norms indicating commitment to conflict management, resolution, clear resolution procedures, and individual skills of teachers (Mahon 2009). Identifying students' experience of conflict with their educators and how students perceive the conflict management styles of their nurse educators is important as it shed light on perceiving these styles from another perspective in order to match their differences.

1.1. Study Framework:

This study was guided by the conceptualization of (Rahim 1983, 2000) of conflict management which considered as the most popular. He developed one of the most well-known questionnaires on styles of conflict management including five management styles; integrating, obliging, dominating, compromising, and avoiding. These styles could be operationalized as following;

Integrating style, also known as a problem solving style, in which an individual shows more interest in the concerns of the self and the others. This style includes cooperation between groups (openness, sharing of ideas, and examination of differences) to reach a solution that can be accepted for both sides. **Obliging style**, also known as obligating style, in which the individual shows less concern for the self and a high level of concern for the other side. **Dominating style**, also known as competing style, in which the person shows high level of concern for self and a low level of concern for the other side. This style can also be described as being consistent with a win-lose resolution or as an individual strengthening their position to win. **Compromising style**, in which the individual shows intermediate level of concern for the self and the other side. This style uses give-and-take or sharing the willingness to give up something to be able to make a decision that is acceptable to both sides. **Avoiding style**, in which the individual shows a low level of concern for the self and for the other side. This style is also known as assimilation or suppression and is a combination of withdrawal, passively assuming responsibility (Rahim 1983,2000, Rahim *et al.* 2000). Using the terminology of game theory, integrating style is identified with win-win term, obliging with no win/no lose, dominating with win-lose, compromising with lose-win, and finally avoiding style with lose-lose term (Rahim 2000).

1.2. Significance of the study

Most of the research studies on conflict in nursing have been concerned with employee-cantered research on the staff nurses in hospitals. Few studies in nursing have been concerned with conflict management styles or modes of conflict resolution and sources of conflict and their resolution within educational setting (Ustun & Seren 2008).The shared opinion presented in all of research studies that, it is necessary to investigate the conflict management styles used to decrease instructor-student conflict, ensure student and instructor satisfaction, and create healthy learning environments. However, it was reported that this particular issue has been rarely investigated in the institutions of nursing education, on which this study was planned especially in Egypt. Yet, up to the knowledge of the researchers, no published national study in Egypt has explored conflict management styles used by nurse educators from nursing students' perspective. Therefore, it is a timely topic for research. Acquiring knowledge about how nursing students perceive conflict with their educators is important for nursing educators to be able to understand the problem from the students' point of view and approach classroom and clinical training management as a process of establishing and maintaining effective learning environments more successful.

1.3. Aim of the study

To investigate nursing students' perception of conflict management styles of their nursing educators.

1.4. The research question

How do nursing students perceive conflict management styles used by their nursing educators?

2. Methods

2.1. Research design

A descriptive research design was used to conduct this study.

2.2. Setting and participants

The study was conducted in Faculty of Nursing, Alexandria University. 435 of Nursing Students enrolled at the four academic years at 2010/2011 were included. They were classified into; 55 students at first academic year, 102 students at the second academic year,139 students at the third academic year, and 139 students at the fourth academic years.

2.3. Tool of the study

The tool of the study includes two parts:

Part one: A personal information form was developed by the researchers after review of related literature and contained a total of seven questions inquiring the students' (sex, age, academic year, frequency of experiencing conflict, environment in which the conflict was experienced and evaluation of success in conflict resolution).

Part two: Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II) Questionnaire developed by Rahim (1983,2000) was used to investigate conflict management styles nursing educators use to handle interpersonal conflict with their students from nursing students' perspective. The tool consists of 28 items classified into five styles namely: Integrating (I- seven items), Obliging (O- six items), Dominating (D-five items), Compromising (C-four items), and Avoiding (A-six items). Responses were measured on a 5-point likert scale ranged from "5" strongly agree to "1" strongly disagree. A higher score represents greater use of a conflict management style by nursing educators from students' perspective.

2.4. Validity and reliability

The study's tool was tested for internal reliability using the Cronbach's alpha correlation coefficient. The results proved tool to be reliable with a correlational coefficient α 0.852 while the statistical significance level was set at $p < 0.05$. The tool was tested for content validity and relevance in Egyptian culture by three academic members in the field of study including, two Lecturers from Nursing Administration Department and an assistant Professor from Nursing education Department. Accordingly, some items were modified to be more clearer. In addition, a pilot study was conducted on 40 nursing students (10%) that were excluded from the study subjects to ensure the clarity and applicability of tool, identify obstacles and problems that may be encountered during data collection and to estimate the time required to complete the study questionnaires. In the light of the findings of the pilot study, no changes were made in the tool.

2.5. Data collection

Written approval was obtained from administrative authority in the identified setting to collect the necessary data. The questionnaire was distributed by the researchers to nursing students who agreed to participate in the study. Each student took about 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Data were collected from nursing students after obtaining their acceptance using the questionnaire in two months, 2011.

Ethical considerations

Approval was obtained from Ethical Committee at Faculty of Nursing, Alexandria University. The researchers explained the aim of the research to all participants. Their privacy and confidentiality of data were maintained and assured by obtaining students' oral consent to participate in the research before data collection. The anonymity of participants was granted.

2.6. Statistical analysis

Data were coded by the first researcher and statistically analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science) version 20. Cronbach's alpha correlation coefficient was used to test study's tool for internal reliability. Frequency and percentages were used for describing demographic characteristic. Arithmetic Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) were used as measures of central tendency and dispersion respectively for quantifying variable under the study. Student's t-test was used to compare the means of two response groups of nursing students, and one-way ANOVA (F) was used to compare the mean scores of different groups among nursing students. All statistical analysis were performed using two-tailed tests and an alpha error of .05. P values less than .05 were considered significant.

3. Result

The result of the present study showed that about one half (50.8%) of students had less than twenty years old while, the another half had between 20-22 years old. The majority (73.1%) of them were female, while, 26.6 were male. About two third of students were enrolled in third as well as in fourth academic year respectively, 23.4 of them enrolled at the second academic year, while, 12.6% enrolled at the first academic year.

Regarding nursing students' opinion about experiences of conflict with their teachers. The highest percentages of nursing students (64.4%) had experienced conflict with their nursing educators during learning experiences. More than one half of them (55.9%) reported, they sometimes experienced conflict with their teachers. While, 9.7% always experienced conflict with their educators. 44.4% of students experienced conflict in the clinical area, 38.6% of students experienced conflict in both clinical area and classroom. While, 17% of

students experienced conflict in classroom. Finally, 56.1% of students felt that they were partially successful to manage conflict with their nursing educators. About one quarter of students felt that they were successful to manage conflict with their nursing educators. On the other hand, 18.4% of students felt that they were unsuccessful to manage conflict with their nursing educators. Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of nursing students according to their conflict experiences.

Variable	No	%
Previous experiencing conflict with teacher		
Yes	280	64.4
No	155	35.6
Frequency of experiencing conflict with teacher		
Always/Often	42	9.7
Sometimes	243	55.9
Seldom	150	34.5
Conflict experienced environment		
Classroom	74	17
Clinical Area	193	44.4
Both of them	168	38.6
Feeling of success in managing conflict with teacher		
Successful	111	25.5
Partially successful	244	56.1
Unsuccessful	80	18.4

In relation to conflict management styles of nursing educators as perceived by nursing students, it was found that nursing students perceived *Avoiding* conflict management style as the most frequently used style by their nursing educators in managing conflict with them followed by obligating style where mean (55.7 and 54.3) respectively. While, *Integrating* was the least frequently style used by nursing educators to manage conflict with students where the mean (49.8). Figure 1.

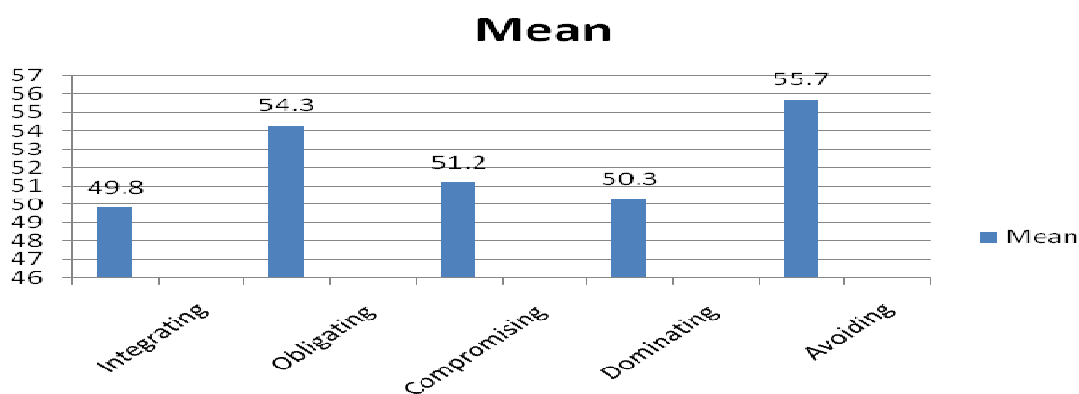


Figure 1: Nurse educators' conflict management styles as perceived by nursing students.

As regard nursing students perception of conflict management styles by students' sex, a statistical significant difference was found between male and female nursing students regarding their perception of integrating, obligating as well as compromising conflict management styles of their nursing educators where ($t=7.970, p=0.005$, $t=3.661, p=0.004$ and $t=4.841, p=0.028$) respectively. Female students had the higher mean for these styles. Table 2.

Table 2. Relationship between nursing students' sex and their perception of nurse educators' conflict management styles.

Conflict management styles of nursing educators	SEX		t	p
	Male Mean± SD	Female Mean± SD		
Integrating	46.2±15.69	51.1±16.27	7.970	0.005*
Obligating	51.9±15.88	55.2±16.36	3.661	0.004*
Compromising	48.2±17.24	52.4±17.62	4.841	0.028*
Dominating	51.1±14.58	50.0±15.72	0.473	0.492
Avoiding	54.1±13.84	56.3±14.25	2.152	0.143

[†]p: p value for student-t test *: Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$

Concerning nursing students perception of conflict management styles by the academic year, there were significant differences among students enrolled in different academic years regarding their perception of integrating, Obligating, as well as Dominating conflict management styles where ($f=3.595, p=0.014, f= 4.111, p= 0.007$, and $f= 7.421, p= 0.000$) respectively. Nursing students at the first academic nursing year had the highest mean regarding these styles. Table 3.

Table 3. Relationship between nursing students' academic year and their perception of nurse educators' conflict management styles.

Conflict management styles of nursing educators	Academic year				F	P
	1 st year (n=55)	2 nd year (n=102)	3 rd year (n=139)	4 th year (n=139)		
	Mean± SD	Mean± SD	Mean± SD	Mean± SD		
Integrating	56.3±13.44	48.9±17.14	49.4±16.72	48.2 ±15.64	3.595	0.014*
Obligating	60.8±10.91	52.7±18.1	52.4±17.70	54.9±14.52	4.111	0.007*
Compromising	54.1 ±13.71	50.2±18.94	51.6±19.83	50.4±15.48	0.711	0.546
Dominating	58.2±10.53	51.9±15.06	47.5±17.64	48.7±13.84	7.421	0.000*
Avoiding	54.7±13.10	55.9±14.35	57.0±15.79	54.7±12.66	0.711	0.546

Fp: p value for F test f (ANOVA) *: Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$

Moreover, there were significant differences among students with different frequency of experiencing conflict regarding their perception of integrating, obligating and compromising conflict management styles of nursing educators where ($f=7.295, p=0.001, f= 6.328, p= 0.002$, and $f= 4.854, p= 0.008$). Nursing students who always experience conflict with their nursing educators perceived these styles higher than those who sometimes or seldom experience conflict with their educators. Table 4.

Table 4. Relationship between nursing students' frequency of experiencing conflict and their perception of nurse educators' conflict management styles.

Conflict management styles of nursing educators	Frequency of experiencing conflict			F	P
	Always (n=42)	Sometimes (n=243)	Seldom (n=150)		
	Mean± SD	Mean± SD	Mean± SD		
Integrating	58.7±16.71	48.9±16.04	48.7±15.97	7.295	0.001*
Obligating	62.7±16.71	53.4±15.66	53.4±16.58	6.328	0.002*
Compromising	59.2±18.14	50.4±17.62	50.3±16.94	4.854	0.008*
Dominating	53.8±15.10	49.6±15.83	50.4 ± 14.77	1.280	0.279
Avoiding	57.9±12.73	55.7± 13.86	55.5 ± 15.02	0.561	0.571

Fp: p value for F test f (ANOVA) *: Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$

In addition, there was no statistical significant relationship between conflict management styles and conflict experiences environment Table 5. While, significant difference was found among students with different feeling of success in managing conflict regarding their perception of all conflict management styles of nurse educators. Students who felt unsuccessful had the higher mean of all conflict management styles. Table 6.

Table 5. Relationship between conflict experienced environment and nursing students' perception of nurse educators' conflict management styles.

Conflict management styles of nursing educators	Conflict experienced environment			F	P
	Classroom (n=74)	Clinical area (n=193)	Both of them (n=168)		
	Mean± SD	Mean± SD	Mean± SD		
Integrating	51.0±16.38	48.9±16.05	50.3±16.45	0.582	(0.559)
Obligating	54.5±16.04	55.0±15.58	53.5±17.21	0.366	(0.693)
Compromising	52.6±16.84	50.1±16.36	51.9±19.25	0.702	(0.496)
Dominating	52.2±15.04	49.6±14.24	50.2±16.83	0.790	(0.454)
Avoiding	53.0±13.42	55.3± 2.26	57.4±16.22	2.671	(0.070)

Fp: p value for F test f (ANOVA) *: Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$

Table 6. Relationship between feeling of success of conflict resolution and their perception of nurse educators' conflict management styles.

Conflict management styles of nursing educators	Feeling of success of conflict resolution			F	P
	Successful	Partially successful	Unsuccessful		
	(n=111) Mean± SD	(n=244) Mean± SD	(n=80) Mean± SD		
Integrating	39.7±12.33	50.6±15.08	61.2±16.14	51.355	0.000*
Obligating	45.6±13.83	55.7±15.46	62.2±16.68	29.854	0.000*
Compromising	42.3±14.45	51.9±15.91	61.6±20.19	32.719	0.000*
Dominating	48.5±14.71	49.6±14.04	54.8±19.29	4.387	0.013*
Avoiding	50.1±14.46	56.6±13.0	60.9±14.69	15.715	0.000*

Fp: p value for F test f (ANOVA) *: Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.05$

4. Discussion

Constructive conflict management strategies are important in maintaining a positive learning environment. Yet, little is known about interpersonal or school variables associated with teachers' use of such strategies with students. Although conflict experienced in education cannot be entirely eliminated, it is possible to minimize its negative effects with effective management of conflict. The goal of conflict management is to interfere with negative or dysfunctional conflict while encouraging healthy conflict that will incite the individuals, primarily, and groups to be innovative and successful (Morris-Rothschild & Brassard 2006).

The result of the present study revealed, high percentages of all nursing students experienced conflict with nurse educators during their learning experiences, experienced conflict in the clinical area followed by classroom. Also, above one half of students felt they were partially successful to manage conflict with their nurse educators. The reason of these results was possibly that the students have more chance to develop a one-to-one relationship with their instructors in the clinical areas in comparison to the classroom environment and encounter a variety of clinical-specific problems. This relationship might involve difference in opinions and attitudes between teachers and students that could result in conflicting issues or situations. This result could be supported by (Kim 2003) who illustrated that anxiety levels and interpersonal relationships of the students with their teachers may be adversely affected by a variety of factors such as being monitored by the instructors in the clinical area, fear of making mistakes or being assessed by the instructors, and relationship with the health professionals in the clinical unit, which could cause conflict and disagreement between teachers and students.

This result was similar to the findings of (Kantek & Gezer 2009) who revealed, the majority of the students stated that they had experienced conflicts with a faculty member during their educational and learning experience. They reported, the majority of students experienced conflict with teachers, and majority of those who experienced conflict stated that the most common site for conflict was in the clinical field, and students perceived they were successful in conflict management. In this respect, (Meyers *et al.* 2006) stated, instructors who had uncaring behaviors experienced higher levels of conflict with students and conflict was found to be associated with instructors' choice of teaching methods, their demeanor in clinical training, and the way they responded to demanding situations. Strategies like communicating respect, clarifying course goals, involving students in solving problems, and encouraging a sense of clinical and classroom community could be helpful in managing conflict successfully.

It is noteworthy that, the result of the present study revealed that nursing students perceived that **Avoiding** style was the most frequently conflict management style used by their nursing educators followed by obligating style. While, **Integrating** style was the lowest style used by their nurse educators in managing teacher- student conflict. This result may be explained as, both teachers and students may perceive experiencing a conflict would damage their relationship. Students may fear of retribution and trouble with teachers and fear about their achievement that could be affected by conflict with teachers. Also, teachers have a power in their relationship with their

students. Accordingly, because students have little chance of defying faculty members, it was expected that the both would use less aggressive styles in their conflicts such as avoidance behaviors. This result go in the same line with (Jamieson & Thomas 1974) who stated, the predominance of avoidance behaviors when students experience differences or conflict with their teachers portrays a relative inability or unwillingness of the students to be other than passive, dependent receiver of whatever comes from the teachers at the same times teachers also tend to avoid and dislike problem and troubles with students. Also, (Harrison 2007) found, students harbor or avoid conflicts with their teachers because they are afraid or because they view pursuing a resolution to the conflict as futile will likely lessen their evaluations of the university, make interactions with teacher more difficult, and likely have an impact on the quality of education they experience.

On the other hand, nursing students perceived that integrating styles was the least style used by nurse educators in managing conflict with students. This could be related to the perceived power differential that could separate students and teachers and the tendency of teacher not to confront issues openly with their students. Also, students might lack the self esteem that could contributes to difficulties in expressing negative emotion with their teachers and avoid to confront even to find a collaborative solution to any problem. This result could be supported by (Valentine 2001) who stated, infrequent use of integrating style may be related to lack of students' self assurance to confront conflict with their teachers and lack of commitment as well as recognition of collaborative situation between teachers and students.

However, the result of the present study was inconsistent with the findings of (Kantek & Gezer 2009) which reveled, the most commonly used style was the integrating management style, followed in second by the compromising style. In addition, the least used management style was the dominating style which results in win-lose solutions. Also, (Rahim *et al.* 2000, Rahim & Psenicka 2002) found, the most frequently used conflict management style in the educational environment has been noted to be the integrating style, and the least used styles have been reported to be the dominating and avoiding styles.

In this respect, (Abdul-Basit *et al.* 2010) stated, the heart of conflict resolution is the management of conflict and an important aspect is enabling teachers and students to mediate and to find their own solution to a disagreement. This relates to promoting ethical and social development, inter-student and student-teacher relations, and problem-solving skills. Also, (Good & Brophy 1997) stated, teacher who try to understand the problem from the student's point of view and approach classroom and clinical training management as a process of establishing and maintaining effective learning environments are more successful than teachers who place more stress on their roles as authority figures or disciplinarians. Both (Abdul-Basit *et al.* 2010 and Good & Brophy 1997) recommended, teachers should focus on the development of cognitive and interpersonal skills for conflict resolution instead of heavy and inflexible use of rules as it may lead to student dissatisfaction and resentment. In order to promote good behaviors and reduce conflicts, teachers should listen to students, taking their points of view and use negotiating and problem solving techniques.

Additionally, some nursing students' variables examined for relationship with their perception of nurse educators' conflict management styles, revealed statistically significant differences in perception of styles used according to sex, the class year, frequency of experiencing conflict, and status of feeling successful in conflict. For example, female students have higher mean regarding conflict resolution styles of integrating, obliging and compromising styles than male students. This could be related to that teacher might take in consideration the nature of female students who could be more concerned with their interpersonal relationship with others; they could find conflict threatening to them so they have a tendency to compromise something or collaborate with teacher rather than confronting any problems with them. This could be supported by (Harrison 2007) who found that females are more likely to be concerned with relationship than male and more likely to build coalitions and more concerned about relationship with teachers and demonstrating more concern for their future relationship through their collaborative and positive behaviors. This result is consistent with (Seren & Baykal 2007) who found that female students have higher collaborative conflict resolution skills than male students.

Moreover, integrating and obligating styles had the highest mean among students enrolled in first academic year, among students who experiences conflict always and students who felt unsuccessful in managing conflict with their teachers. These results inconsistent with the findings of (Kantek & Gezer 2009) which revealed that obliging style was used less by those who experienced conflict frequently, in comparison to those who experienced conflict rarely and occasionally. Moreover, the compromising and avoiding styles were used more by those who evaluated themselves as unsuccessful in conflict management; and the integrating and obliging styles were used more by those who felt successful in conflict. Also, (Rahim 2000) revealed that those using the

integrating style experiencing infrequent conflict and those using dominating or avoiding styles having more experience with conflict.

In this respect, (Ustun & Seren 2008, Seren & Baykal 2007) suggested, the emphasis on interpersonal relationships, communication and interaction covered in the nursing education curriculum, as well as skills employed during practice, are influential in developing conflict resolution skills. Also (Martin 1998) recommended, educators must change how they view and in turn manage conflict with their students. Through the use of appropriate training and an increased awareness of conflict management and resolution, schools and universities can produce not only good learners but also effective teachers.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The finding of this study concluded that nursing students perceived Avoiding style of conflict management as the most frequently style used by their nursing educators. While, Integrating style was the least style used by their nurse educators in managing teacher- student conflict. Other variables could influence their perception of conflict management styles such as sex, class year, frequency of experiencing conflict, and status of feeling successful in conflict management.

Based on the previous findings the following are recommended:

- Appropriate training programs for conflict management and resolution should be provided frequently to nursing educators in order to teach them how to deal with student' conflict more effectively.
- Nurse educators should enhance a healthy learning environment with open communications and listen to students.
- Nurse educators should utilize strategies like communicating respect, clarifying course goals, involving students in solving problems, and encouraging a sense of clinical and classroom community which could be helpful in managing conflict successfully. Nursing educators should increase the stress on the importance of conflict and conflict management in core curricula of the nursing students especially from the first academic year for students' enrollment .
- Further research study is recommended for determining conflict management style utilized with nursing students from nursing educators' perspective.

6. Study Strengths and Limitations

This research study provides another perspective of conflict management styles in learning environment from nursing students' point of view and how they experience conflict with their teachers in nursing literature. There is no published study in Egypt that investigate nursing students' perception of conflict management styles of their nursing educators using standardized measure such as ROCI-II. It could be a preliminary step for further researches in this area. Further research should compare between nursing students and nursing educators perception of conflict management styles and how they could differ. However, The result cannot be generalized on all nursing students in other governorates, we recommended cross sectional study for more generalization of findings.

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Declaration of conflicting interests

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