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ABSTRACT

This brief presents the assumptions underlying the approach taken by the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution, Teachers College, Columbia University, in creating a nonviolent school. It also provides specific program components that schools can implement. The approach is based on the recognition that violence is a function of the interplay between personal and social factors, and that conflict is a naturally occurring phenomenon with both constructive and destructive potential. A systemic approach toward conflict resolution can facilitate a change in the competitive culture of schools. Approaching schools from a systems perspective can facilitate change in the culture of school systems at disciplinary, curricular, pedagogical, and cultural levels. Peer-mediation training is a cornerstone of the student discipline system approach, as conflict resolution training is an essential part of the curriculum. Teaching strategies of cooperative learning and academic controversy can help students practice conflict resolution skills. Training in cooperation and conflict resolution that focuses on children ignores the reality that most adults working in school systems have had little preparation, training, or encouragement to work collaboratively themselves or to manage their own conflicts constructively. Teachers, parents, caregivers, and other community members with whom students interact should also receive training in cooperation and conflict resolution. (Contains 23 references.) (SLD)

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Number 5, 2000
COOPERATION, CONFLICT RESOLUTION, AND SCHOOL VIOLENCE: A SYSTEMS APPROACH

Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Teachers College, Columbia University

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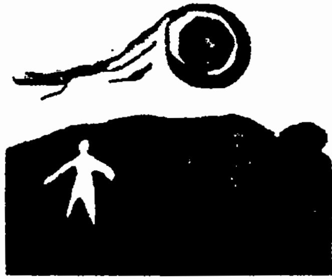

Choices Briefs

Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY

Number 5 2000

COOPERATION, CONFLICT RESOLUTION, AND SCHOOL VIOLENCE: A SYSTEMS APPROACH

It is a mistake to assume that causes of school violence reside only or primarily in the school. Child abuse and neglect, a culture of violence, economic and social injustice, and the easy availability of weapons, for example, contribute to the occurrence of violence but are largely not under school control. Nevertheless, there is much that schools can do to prevent violence and counteract harmful outside influences.

It is now apparent that schools have to change in basic ways in order to educate children that they are *for* rather than *against* one another, to equip them with the skills to resolve their conflicts constructively rather than destructively, and to provide them with an orientation to problems and a set of norms and skills that enables them to fulfill their needs in a nonviolent manner. Teaching and modeling these processes prevents violence and establishes a culture of peace and caring within schools which provides students with experiences of safety, inclusion, fairness, and hope. This brief presents the assumptions underlying our approach to creating a nonviolent school and then provides specific program components that schools can implement.

How Violence Erupts: Some Assumptions to Guide Prevention

The approach of the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution, Teachers College, Columbia University, is based on several elements related to the causes and prevention of violence.

Violence is a function of the interplay between personal and social factors. Violent behavior is the result of the confluence of specific characteristics of the perpetrator (i.e., needs, expectations, impulse control, knowledge, attitudes, and skills) and the situation (i.e., the norms, roles, history of relations, task and reward structures, culture, availability of weapons).

Conflict is a naturally occurring phenomenon with both constructive and destructive potential. Engaging in conflict can generate anxiety in people who associate it with negative or violent outcomes (i.e., fight or flight). In fact, successfully handling a conflict can be a positive experience, as doing so provides an opportunity for participants to learn about themselves and others, to make necessary changes in the *status quo*, to challenge obsolete ways of thinking, and to foster new ways of relating and working.

Competition and cooperation between people and groups produce profoundly different consequences. Too often, schools are structured so that students compete against one another: for the teacher's attention, grades, status, and admission to prestigious schools. Such competition induces the use of coercion, threat, or deception; fosters attempts to enhance power differences between students; encourages poor communication; heightens sensitivity to opposed interests while minimizing the awareness of similarities; generates suspicion and hostility; and increases the importance, rigidity, and size of conflicts. In contrast, cooperation induces a perceived similarity in beliefs and attitudes; a readiness to be helpful; openness in communication; trusting and friendly attitudes; sensitivity to, and emphasis on, common interests; and an orientation toward enhancing mutual power (Deutsch, 1973; Johnson & Johnson, 1989).

A constructive process of conflict resolution is similar to an effective, cooperative problem-solving process. Perceiving a conflict as a mutual problem to be solved greatly increases the possibility of satisfying, constructive outcomes for all concerned. There is frequently a two-way relationship between effective cooperation and constructive conflict resolution. Good cooperative relations facilitate the constructive management of conflict; the ability to handle constructively the inevitable conflicts that occur during cooperation facilitates the survival and deepening of cooperative relations.

Competition begets competition, cooperation begets cooperation. A win-lose approach tends to escalate conflict and harden opposing positions, leading to destructive processes and outcomes and negative expectations for future interactions. A win-win approach fosters exploration of the root causes of the conflict and leads to constructive, sustainable solutions with positive expectations for future encounters (Deutsch, 1973).

There is an intimate connection between conflict and justice. Injustice breeds conflict and destructive conflict gives rise to injustice. Therefore, schools and communities must model inclusion, respect, and a commitment to social justice, and must openly and effectively address societal issues such as racism, sexism, and poverty.

A systemic approach toward conflict resolution can facilitate a change in the competitive culture of schools. Systemic approaches to conceptualizing conflict processes and intervention strategies have been gaining increasing attention at the interpersonal level (Pruitt & Olczak, 1995), in schools (Crawford & Bodine, 1997; Louis & Miles, 1990; Raider, 1995), at the organizational level (Costantino & Merchant, 1996; Ury, Brett, & Goldberg, 1988), and at the transnational level (Lederach, 1997; Rouhana & Kelman, 1994). For schools, a systems approach renders a conflict management program an integral component of the school's overall functioning (Costantino & Merchant, 1996). It synthesizes various strategies for violence prevention and targets a transformation in the cultures of schools.

Interventions for a Nonviolent School Culture

Approaching schools from a systems perspective can facilitate change in the culture of school systems at four levels: the ***disciplinary***, the ***curricular***, the ***pedagogical***, and the ***cultural*** (Raider, 1995). Interventions at these levels concern students and adults alike, are aimed at both individuals and systems, and promote empowerment, positive social interdependence, nonviolence, and social justice.

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Level 1. The Student Discipline System: Peer Mediation Programs

For difficult conflicts that the disputing parties are unable to resolve themselves, it is useful to turn to third parties such as mediators. We consider peer mediation programs a first-level intervention because they are typically what schools are most eager for and tend to be the easiest and least expensive program to implement; indeed, school mediation programs have been widely established. Their implementation is often a response to an increase in student disciplinary problems, incidents of violence, or the threat of violence in schools, but mediation is usually used to enhance the overall disciplinary system of a school, not replace it. Typically, students (some as young as 10 years, as well as those in high school and college), along with teachers, are selected to be mediators and are given between 10 to 30 hours of training and follow-up supervision. The mediation centers get case referrals from deans and teachers, and also from students.

Research shows positive effects on the student mediators: on their self-confidence, self-esteem, assertiveness, and general attitudes towards school (Crawford & Bodine, 1997). At the school level, mediation programs result in a significant drop in disciplinary referrals, detentions, and suspensions, and more positive perceptions of the school climate (less perceived violence and hurtful behavior among students) by both staff and students. However, mediation programs alone, although useful, are not sufficient to bring about the paradigmatic shift in education needed to prepare students to live in a peaceful world.

Level 2. Curriculum: Conflict Resolution Training

Schools and school districts are introducing conflict resolution concepts and skills into the curriculum, either as a stand-alone course or a unit within existing programs. Curriculum components, which comprise lessons and activities for preschoolers through university graduates, cover themes such as understanding conflict, communication, dealing with anger, cooperation, affirmation, bias awareness, cultural diversity, conflict resolution, and peacemaking. There are many different programs and their contents vary to accommodate the age and background of the students.

Some elements are common to most programs as they share the goals of instilling the attitudes, knowledge, and skills conducive to effective cooperative problem solving, and of discouraging the attitudes and habitual responses which give rise to win-lose struggles. From a school systems perspective, this training establishes and reinforces a basic frame of reference and language for collaboration, and orients students to a process that is familiar but underutilized. The following are the central elements of many training programs:

Know the type of conflict. There are three major types of conflict: the pure competitive (if you win, I lose; if I win, you lose), the mixed-motive (both can win, both can lose, or one can win and the other can lose), and the pure cooperative (both can win or both can lose). It is important to know which kind of conflict is involved because the different types require different strategies and tactics.

Know the causes and consequences of violence, and of the alternatives to violence. It is necessary for students: to become aware of what makes them very angry and the healthy and unhealthy ways they express anger; to learn how to actively channel their anger in ways that are not violent and are not likely to provoke violence from the other; to understand that violence begets violence and that "winning" an argument by violence will provoke the other to try to get even in some other way; and to learn alternatives to violence in response to conflict.

Face conflict rather than avoid it. Students should realize that conflict may make them anxious, with the result that they may try to avoid it. They should learn the typical defenses employed to evade conflict: denial, suppression, excessive agreeability, rationalization, postponement, and premature conflict resolution. They should also identify the negative consequences of evading a conflict: irritability, tension, and persistence of the problem. Finally, they should recognize which kinds of conflicts are best avoided rather than confronted: conflicts that will evaporate shortly, those that are inherently unresolvable, and win-lose conflicts which they are unlikely to win.

Respect oneself and one's own interests, respect the other and the other's interests. Personal insecurity and the sense of vulnerability often lead people to define conflicts as "life and death," win-lose struggles even when they are relatively minor, mixed-motive conflicts. This definition may lead to conflict avoidance, premature conflict resolution, or obsessive involvement in the conflict. Helping students develop a respect for themselves and their interests enables them to see their conflicts in reasonable proportion and facilitates their constructive confrontation. Helping students learn to respect the other and the other's interests inhibits the use of competitive tactics, such as power, coercion, deprecation, and deception, which commonly escalate the dispute and often lead to violence.

Avoid ethnocentrism: understand and accept the reality of cultural difference. Students need to be aware that we all live with people from many different cultures. They should learn to understand and accept the reality of cultural differences, understand the culture of the other in a conflict, and help the other to understand theirs. But they should also expect cultural misunderstandings, and use them as an opportunity for learning rather than as a basis of estrangement.

Distinguish between "interests" and "positions." Positions may be opposed but interests may not be (Fisher & Ury, 1981). The classic example is that of a brother and sister, who each wanted the only orange available. The sister wanted the peel of the orange to make marmalade; the brother wanted to eat the inner part. Their positions ("I want the orange") were opposed, their interests were not (Follett, 1940). Often when conflicting parties reveal their underlying interests, it is possible to find a solution that suits them both.

Explore personal interests and those of the other to identify the common and compatible interests. Identifying shared interests makes it easier to deal constructively with the interests that a student perceives as being opposed. A full exploration of each student's interests increases empathy and facilitates subsequent problem solving.

Define the conflicting interests between oneself and the other as a mutual problem to be solved cooperatively. Students should define their dispute in the most narrow terms possible, as a "here-now-this" conflict rather than as a conflict between personalities or general principles (e.g., as a conflict about a specific behavior rather than about who is a better person). Diagnosing the problem clearly and then creatively seeking options for dealing with it leads to mutual gain. If no option for mutual gain can be discovered, both students should seek to agree upon a fair rule or procedure for deciding how to resolve the conflict.

In communicating with the other, listen attentively and speak so as to be understood. Doing this requires students to make an active and ongoing effort to listen to and take the perspective of the other, and to hear the other's meaning and emotion in such a way that the other both is and feels understood. Similarly, students should communicate their own thoughts and feelings in such a way that it is likely that the other understands what is said.

Be alert to the natural tendencies to bias misperceptions, misjudgments, and stereotyped thinking. Commonly occurring in both students during heated conflict, these errors in perception and thought interfere with communication, make empathy difficult, and impair problem solving. Errors include either-or thinking, demonizing the other, shortening one's time-perspective, narrowing the range of perceived options, and making the fundamental attribution error. The fundamental attribution error is illustrated by the tendency to attribute the aggressive actions of the other student to that student's personality while attributing personal aggressive actions to external

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circumstances (such as the other student's hostile actions). The ability to recognize and admit misperceptions and misjudgments clears the air and facilitates similar acknowledgment by the other student.

Develop skills for dealing with difficult conflicts. First, these skills will prevent students from feeling either helpless or hopeless when confronting others who are more powerful, who do not want to engage in constructive conflict resolution, or who use dirty tricks (deception, backing out of an agreement, personal attacks, etc.). The skills will help students realize that they usually have a choice: they do not have to stay in the relationship with the other. Second, the skills will help students be open and explicit to the other about what the other is doing that is upsetting and about the personal effects of it. Third, the skills will help students avoid reciprocating the other's noxious behavior and attacking the other personally for that behavior (i.e., the student will criticize the behavior, not the person); doing otherwise often leads to an escalating vicious spiral.

A phrase useful for characterizing the stance a student should take in difficult (as well as easy) conflicts is to be "firm, fair, and friendly": *firm* in resisting intimidation, exploitation, and dirty tricks; *fair* in holding to personal moral principles and not reciprocating the other's immoral behavior, despite provocation; and *friendly* in the sense that the student is willing to initiate and reciprocate cooperation (Fisher & Ury, 1981).

Know oneself and typical personal responses in different conflict situations. Different people deal with their anxieties about conflict in different ways. Thus, it is useful to emphasize six different dimensions of dealing with conflict which can be used to characterize a person's predispositions to respond to conflict (Deutsch & Coleman, in press). Students' awareness of their predispositions may allow them to modify their views when they are inappropriate in a given conflict. The six dimensions are these:

- Conflict avoidance—excessive involvement in conflict.
- Hard negotiator—soft negotiator.
- Rigid-rule oriented—loose process-preference.
- Intellectualized response—emotion-laden response.
- Escalating conflicts—minimizing conflicts.
- Compulsively revealing information—compulsively concealing information.

Finally, throughout conflict, remain a moral person. A student should continue to be a person who is caring and just, and should consider the other a member of the same moral community—someone who is entitled to care and justice. In the heat of conflict, there is often the tendency to shrink one's moral community and to exclude the other from it; this permits behavior toward the other which would otherwise be considered morally reprehensible and can escalate conflict and turn it in the direction of violence and destruction.

A two-year study of the effects of conflict resolution training and cooperative learning on at-risk students at an alternative urban high school found that they had a variety of positive effects (Deutsch et al., 1992). Trained students improved in their management of personal conflicts, experienced increased social support, and felt less victimized by others. Enhanced relationships with others led to increased self-esteem and more frequent positive feelings of well-being, as well as a decrease in anxiety and depression. Higher self-esteem, in turn, produced a greater sense of personal control, and students' positive feelings of well-being led to higher academic performance and better work-readiness and performance.

Level 3. Pedagogy

To further enhance the development of conflict resolution skills from specific units or courses, students can practice these skills in their regular subject areas with two teaching strategies: ***cooperative learning*** and ***academic controversy***.

Cooperative Learning. Cooperative learning has five key elements (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1986). The most important is *positive interdependence*. Students must perceive that it is to their advantage for other students to learn well and to their disadvantage for others to do poorly. They can be helped to understand the value of positive interdependence in many different ways: through mutual goals (goal interdependence); division of labor (task interdependence); division of resources, materials, and information among group members (resource interdependence); and joint rewards (reward interdependence).

Teachers should help students to go beyond the awareness of positive interdependence to develop a prosocial orientation that fosters caring feelings toward each another: students should want their classmates to do well and feel good for the other students' sake, not only for their own. Cooperative learning requires the individual accountability of each member of the group to the others for mastering the material taught and providing appropriate support and assistance. Students need to develop the interpersonal and small group skills that enable effective cooperative work in groups. They need to have time and procedures for assessing how well their learning groups are functioning and what can be done to improve the way they work together. Finally, cooperative learning groups should be heterogeneous with regard to gender, academic ability, ethnic background, and physical disability.

Hundreds of research studies have been done on the relative impact of cooperative learning (compared to competitive or individualistic learning) which indicate very favorable effects on students (see Johnson & Johnson, 1983, 1989). Group members develop considerably greater mutual commitment, helpfulness, and caring, regardless of their differences. They develop more skill in taking the perspective of others, emotionally as well as cognitively; greater self-esteem and a greater sense of being valued by their classmates; and more positive attitudes toward learning, school, and their teachers. Students usually master the curriculum more effectively by cooperative learning, and also acquire more skills and attitudes conducive to effective collaboration with others.

Use of Constructive Controversy in Teaching the Curriculum. Teachers, no matter what subject they teach, can stimulate and structure constructive controversy in the classroom that will promote academic learning and the development of conflict resolution skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1987, 1992). A cooperative context is established for a controversy, for example, by: (a) assigning students to groups of four, (b) dividing each group into two pairs that are assigned positions on the topics to be discussed, and (c) requiring each group to reach a consensus on the issue and turn in a group report on which all members will be evaluated.

This structured controversy has five phases: (1) the paired students learn their respective positions; (2) each pair presents its position; (3) students advocate strongly and persuasively for their positions in an open discussion; (4) each pair presents the opposing pair's position as sincerely and as persuasively as it can, in a perspective-reversal; and (5) the students drop advocacy of their assigned position and seek to reach consensus on a position that is supported by the evidence. In this last phase, they write a joint statement with the rationale and supporting evidence for the synthesis their group has agreed on.

Structured controversy not only makes the classroom more interesting but also promotes the development of perspective taking, critical thinking, and other skills involved in constructive conflict resolution. Constructive controversy enhances students' understanding of opposing positions and encourages a better integration of diverse ideas (Tjosvold & Field, 1984; Tjosvold & McNeely, 1988), which results in higher quality solutions to problems, more productive work, and strengthened relationships (Tjosvold, 1989; Tjosvold, Dann, & Wong, 1992).

Level 4. The School and Community Culture

Most training in cooperation and conflict resolution in schools throughout the country focuses on children. This focus denies the reality that most adults working in school systems have had little

preparation, training, or encouragement to work collaboratively themselves or to manage their own conflicts constructively, let alone teach these skills to others. In order for schools to take full advantage of the gains from peer mediation programs and cooperation and conflict resolution curricula, their staffs also must be trained. Collaborative negotiation training for adults often parallels student training, but it focuses on problems that are more germane to the personal and professional lives of adults. We stress that all adults in schools should be trained: teachers, administrators, counselors, bus drivers, lunchroom aids, paraprofessionals, librarians, coaches, etc. Doing so can help institutionalize the changes through adult modeling of the attitudes and behaviors desired for the students; demonstration of the value of such approaches; and encouragement of the development of new language, norms, and expectations around conflict and conflict management throughout the school community.

Collaborative training and processes need not and should not stop at the school doors. In fact, many student conflicts originate outside of school: at home, on the school bus, or at social events. Parents, caregivers, local clergy, local police officers, and members of local community organizations, among others, should be trained in conflict resolution and involved in the overall planning process for preventing destructive conflict among children and youths.

Conclusion

In promoting cooperation, constructive controversy, and conflict resolution processes as the core of any comprehensive program in nonviolence, we have been guided by the belief that it takes more than a single course to bring about fundamental change. Students need to have continuing experiences of constructive conflict resolution as they learn different subjects, and a school environment that provides daily experiences of cooperative relations, constructive resolution of conflicts, and social justice. Such experiences, combined with an education in the principles of cooperative work and conflict resolution, should help students develop generalizable attitudes and skills which are strong enough to resist the prevalent countervailing influence in their non-school environments. They should also help students acquire the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that will enable their cooperation with others in resolving constructively the inevitable conflicts within and among families, communities, ethnic groups, and nations.

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