Teaching Conflict Resolution Skills to Students Can Reduce School Violence and Dismantle the School-To-Prison Pipeline by Empowering Students to Resolve Their Own Conflicts In a Cooperative and Constructive Way

By: David Polsky

Educators are constantly searching for ways to improve the school setting. Unfortunately, the education process is often compromised by concerns about school violence, and teachers and administrators are forced to spend much of the school day managing conflicts between students. Current attitudes toward violence in schools are rooted in theories of retribution, deterrence, and punishment, which are the same theories that form the foundation of this country's criminal justice system. Accordingly, schools have begun to use "prison-like" search procedures in an effort to reduce school violence, and the end result has been the development of a school-to-prison pipeline.

By addressing school violence through punishment and incarceration, however, teachers, administrators, and law enforcement personnel focus their efforts solely on stopping the immediate conflict and make no effort to protect the on-going relationship between disputing students. When teachers, administrators, and law enforcement personnel intervene in a way that fails to protect and strengthen the relationship between the disputing parties, these authority figures can only stop the immediate conflict in progress and cannot effectively manage future conflicts between disputing students. True violence prevention programs must be proactive, and must try to resolve the current conflict while seeking to promote a strong and positive relationship between the disputing parties in the future.

Conflict resolution programs can work to stop violence in schools and dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline by empowering students to resolve their own conflicts in a way that emphasizes the importance of maintaining on-going relationships.

Understanding Youth Violence

In addressing how to prevent violence in schools, it is important to understand that youth violence often occurs when a youth internalizes societal oppression. Modern society "shut[s] young people out, especially urban youth, and then…want[s] them to be well-adjusted and function in a world that does not treat them fairly."[1] When young people internalize societal oppression, the result is often violence:

> "Teen violence—the teen-to-teen abuse that happens in gangs, in couples, or from the school bully; the self-abuse from drugs and alcohol; unwanted pregnancy; suicide—all these can be seen as forms of learned helplessness, and hopelessness in teens."[2]

To stop the internalization of societal oppression that results in violence, "young people need opportunities that enable them to begin to take power to stop violence."[3] Involving urban youth in conflict resolution programs empowers these youth by allowing them to be agents for change and role models for others."[4] In addition, because students are involved in long-term, on-going relationships, they should be encouraged to use conflict resolution strategies where "joint benefit" is valued over "personal gain."[5] In this way, implementing programs and curricula designed to teach students conflict resolution

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[1] Close, Carole L., and Lechman, Kathy. "Fostering Youth Leadership: Students Train Students and Adults in Conflict Resolution". Theory Into Practice Winter, 1997: 11-16 at 12

[2] *Id.* at 12, citing Creighton & Kivel, 1992, p 55-56

[3] *Id.* at 14

[4] *Id.* at 16

[5] Johnson, David W., and Johnson, Roger T. "Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation Programs in Elementary and Secondary Schools: A Review of the Research". Review of Educational Research Winter 1996: 459-506, at 476

skills can serve to reduce violence in schools and to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline.

Understanding Conflict

There is no question that conflicts among students frequently occur in schools. However, not all conflicts end in violence, and in fact, some conflicts can be positive. To understand how conflict can have positive and negative consequences, it is necessary to understand the neutral nature of conflict, and to understand that it is a person's response to conflict, not conflict itself, that directs the conflict's outcome.

Conflict resolution strategies like peer mediation are rooted in "dual concerns theories", which posit that the "two major concerns in conflict resolution are (a) concern about reaching one's goals; and (b) concern about maintaining an appropriate relationship with the other person."[6]

Although there is a common fear that conflict will result in violence, conflict is not an inherently dangerous thing. Various theories of conflict suggest, "conflict is a necessary and positive condition for the development and growth of children and adolescents, and schools should therefore encourage and promote conflict and be conflict-positive."[7]

To understand the constructive nature of conflict, it is important to consider social interdependence theory, which suggests, "conflicts are inherent in all social relationships", and are not inherently negative.[8] Although conflicts are inherent in all social relationships, a conflict can have "destructive or constructive outcomes" depending on whether the conflict takes place within a cooperative or competitive environment".[9] Accordingly, it is important to understand the difference between cooperative and

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[6] *Id.* at 465
[7] *Id.*
[8] *Id.* at 464
[9] *Id.* at 464, 470

competitive environments, and to understand how schools can benefit when they create cooperative environments for their students.

Cooperative and Competitive Environments

In a cooperative environment, "individuals work together to achieve mutual goals."[10] When this happens, participants are focused on "long-term…strategies and solutions" that allow them "recognize that their long-term interests in a future ability to work together is more important than the immediate interests involved in the [present] dispute."[11] Establishing a cooperative environment is essential if conflicts between students are to be managed in a constructive way. To truly foster a cooperative school environment, educators and school administrators must find ways to encourage students to work together to attain mutual goals in a way that strengthens and protects their on-going relationships with each other.

Unfortunately, "most schools are dominated by competition, not cooperation."[12] In a competitive environment, "individuals work against each other to achieve a goal that only one or a few can attain."[13] A competitive environment causes individuals to "focus their energies on winning, [and pay] little to no attention to maintaining good relationships."[14] In other words, students are encouraged to pursue their goals in a way that does not cause them to think how their actions will affect other students. Students whose schools maintain a competitive school environment will undoubtedly resolve conflict with destructive outcomes, because they have not been taught that maintaining a relationship with other students is as important as resolving the immediate dispute.

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[10] *Id.* at 470, citing Deutsch, 1962, 1973; D.W. Johnson & R. Johnson, 1989
[11] *Id.* at 470-471
[12] *Id.* at 471
[13] *Id.* at 471 citing Deutsch 1962; D.W. Johnson & R. Johnson, 1989
[14] *Id.* at 471

Potential Destructive Outcomes of Conflict

Violent incidents often occur in schools when students respond negatively to conflict. When students do not manage conflict in a constructive way, students can experience "[negative] physical consequences, social isolation, humiliation, loss of status, lowered academic performance, lowered attendance, and personal feelings of confusion, anger, helplessness, and depression."[15] In addition, the "destructive management of conflict [has been shown to] lower [academic] achievement."[16]

The reason that students who do not use conflict resolution skills experience destructive outcomes is that these students "use conflict strategies that create destructive outcomes by ignoring the importance of their on-going relationships."[17] Furthermore, "when students become heavily invested in waging conflict, they tend to rigidify their positions and refuse to budge, misconstruing moves to resolve the conflict as signs of weakness."[18] Students who have not received conflict resolution and peer mediation training typically deal with conflicts by either withdrawing from the conflict, or using manipulation, coercion, or intimidation to "win" the conflict.[19] By doing so, they destroy their relationship with the other party, and make it difficult for the two parties to work together in the future in a cooperative way.

Potential Constructive Outcomes of Conflict

After undergoing conflict resolution and peer mediation training, students learn to "protect the future of their relationship [with the other person], and work [together] to achieve their immediate goals."[20] Resolving conflicts in a constructive way teaches

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[15] *Id.* at 482
[16] *Id.* at 486
[17] *Id.* at 498
[18] *Id.* at 484
[19] *Id.* at 473
[20] *Id.* at 480

students "communication, decision-making and negotiating skills".[21] In addition, teaching young people conflict resolution skills empowers them to "resolve their own disputes without adult intervention."[22] Conflict resolution programs that teach students to constructively resolve conflict are "empowering for the students who participate as mediators and as disputing parties."[23]

While studies have documented that "conflict resolution and peer mediation training result in increased self-esteem", these programs also serve to engage students in "self-regulation."[24] Students develop self-regulation skills when "they are given the opportunity to participate in decisions relating to their own lives."[25] Being meaningfully involved in decision-making develops self-regulation by promoting the development of a student's sense of "responsibility, discipline, and self-directed behavior."[26]

Research has shown that students are able to retain what they learn, and "current evidence indicates that conflict resolution and peer mediation training result[s] in students knowing the…procedures, being able to use the procedures in actual conflicts, transferring the procedures to non-classroom conflicts, transferring the procedures to non-school conflicts, and transferring the procedures to conflicts in the home."[27] Thus, teaching students conflict resolution skills can reduce in-school violence, as well as violence that occurs in the home and community.

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[21] Close, Carole L., and Lechman, Kathy. "Fostering Youth Leadership: Students Train Students and Adults in Conflict Resolution". Theory Into Practice Winter, 1997: 11-16 at 12
[22] *Id.* at 11
[23] *Id.* at 12
[24] Johnson, David W., and Johnson, Roger T. "Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation Programs in Elementary and Secondary Schools: A Review of the Research". Review of Educational Research Winter 1996: 459-506, at 489
[25] *Id.*
[26] *Id.*
[27] *Id.* at 481

One specific conflict resolution program that can be explored as a way to curb in-school violence and to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline is peer mediation.

Peer Mediation

Peer Mediation is emblematic of a conflict resolution program that emphasizes the need to constructively resolve conflict in a cooperative environment that places emphasis on resolving the issue in dispute and maintaining and strengthening the on-going relationship between the disputing parties.

The mediation process is defined by the Association For Conflict Resolution as, "a process of dispute resolution in which one or more impartial third parties intervenes in a conflict or dispute with the consent of the participants and assists them without coercion."[28]

The mediation process strongly values the parties' exercise of self-determination, and the decision-making authority rests with the participants themselves. This process allows participants to define and clarify issues, reduce obstacles to communication, explore possible solutions, and, when desired, reach a mutually satisfactory agreement. The mediation process affords participants the opportunity to express differences and improve relationships and mutual understanding, whether or not an agreement is reached.

In peer mediation, an impartial third party that is a member of the same peer group as the disputing parties will facilitate the mediation process. In the context of school peer mediation, this means that an impartial student will act as the mediator, and will intervene in a conflict between two disputing students.

Implementation Suggestions

Before considering methods of implementation, it is essential to understand that before programs like peer mediation can be successful, the entire school community must

[28] See http://www.Acrnet.org

understand the benefits of using conflict resolution strategies that emphasize the need to constructively resolve conflict in a cooperative context. Student mediators must be viewed by other students as "helpers, and not as spies or tattletales" if conflicts are to be resolved in a constructive and cooperative way.[29]

One approach to the implementation of conflict resolution programs is to include a "mini-course on mediation as part of [larger] social studies curriculum".[30] This mini-course would be most effective if it was designed as part of a "spiral curriculum", where students receive 12 years of training, with lessons becoming more complex and sophisticated each year."[31] Making conflict resolution training a part of school curricula would allow all students in the school community to be exposed to its concepts and familiar with its use.

Another approach to the implementation of conflict resolution programs is to create an extracurricular conflict resolution "club" that meets before or after school, or on the weekend.[32] Teaching conflict resolution skills in an extracurricular club would probably not expose all of the students to conflict resolution techniques, but it could train a small number of highly motivated students to act as peer mediators or as role models.

In addition, efforts must be made to make the school environment more cooperative and less competitive. Research has shown that "when conflict resolution and peer mediation programs are implemented in the existing competitive, individualistic context of schools, their effectiveness can be severely compromised… In order to teach students

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[29] Graham, Tony, and Cline, Paul C. "Mediation: An Alternative Approach to School Discipline". The High School Journal Dec. 1988-Jan. 1989: 73-76 at 75

[30] *Id.*

[31] Johnson, David W., and Johnson, Roger T. "Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation Programs in Elementary and Secondary Schools: A Review of the Research". Review of Educational Research Winter 1996: 459-506, at 486

[32] Graham, Tony, and Cline, Paul C. "Mediation: An Alternative Approach to School Discipline". The High School Journal Dec. 1988-Jan. 1989: 73-76 at 75

how to seek solutions to problems rather than to "win", educators must create a cooperative context in the classroom and school."[33]

One way educators can make the school environment more cooperative is to encourage teachers to structure "cooperative" learning lessons. In addition to promoting constructive and cooperative conflict resolution skills, the "integration of subject area learning and the learning of the conflict resolution and peer mediation procedures can increase students' academic performance."[34]

Regardless of how programs teaching conflict resolution skills are implemented, it is necessary that the "frequent and continued practice of conflict resolution procedures take place", so that the skills become "so overlearned that they become automatic habit patterns that guide behavior in serious and intense conflicts."[35]

Conclusion

Today's youth "are rarely involved in processes that affect them", but are then expected to enter the world as "empowered adults" who are capable of making decisions in a mature way."[36] In particular, school violence prevention programming is [an issue] that [is] discussed and debated without the involvement of the students."[37] For school violence prevention programs to truly work, "diverse urban young people need to be agents, not just objects, of [change]."[38]

Current attitudes about how to manage school violence are rooted in antiquated theories of punishment. When adults intervene to resolve conflicts between students by

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[33] Johnson, David W., and Johnson, Roger T. "Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation Programs in Elementary and Secondary Schools: A Review of the Research". Review of Educational Research Winter 1996: 459-506, at 472
[34] *Id.* at 486
[35] *Id.* at 486, 487
[36] Close, Carole L., and Lechman, Kathy. "Fostering Youth Leadership: Students Train Students and Adults in Conflict Resolution". Theory Into Practice Winter, 1997: 11-16 at 12
[37] *Id.* at 11
[38] *Id.* at 11, citing Bickmore, 1993

punishing them, the students are made to feel helpless and oppressed. Empowering students to resolve their own disputes can resolve conflicts in a way that promotes cooperation and an increased recognition of the importance of maintaining an on-going relationship. Implementing these programs into school curricula can transform a school culture from one of competition into one of cooperation, and can help teach students how to resolve conflict constructively and cooperatively, in their schools, homes, and communities.

In order to "ensure that conflict resolution methods become part of the larger community, young people need to be self-empowered in ways that many adults resist."[39] Teaching conflict resolution skills to youth in schools empowers young people, teaches them to resolve their own conflicts in a constructive and cooperative way, and ultimately, reduces violence in school, at home, and in the community. Promoting peer mediation programs that emphasize a constructive approach to conflict resolution in a cooperative environment is one way to empower young people and to mobilize students to stop the violence that is destroying our schools and communities.

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[39] *Id.* at 12