

Integrating Conflict Resolution Training into the Curriculum

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Integrating Conflict Resolution Training Into the Curriculum

All students can be taught how to manage conflicts constructively by integrating training into the existing school curriculum. This article describes a practical and effective approach to curriculum-integrated conflict resolution training that involves students in repeatedly using integrative negotiation and peer mediation procedures to resolve diverse conflicts found in subject matter. Research results indicate that this approach to conflict training not only enables students to learn, use, and develop more positive attitudes toward conflict resolution, it also enhances academic achievement.

COMPETING PRIORITIES POSE A dilemma for educators who wish to teach students conflict resolution and peer mediation skills, yet cannot find the time to do so. No matter how virtuous conflict resolution training seems for the social and moral development of young people, many question the wisdom of squeezing one more requirement into an already overcrowded curriculum, especially in the face of pressure to enhance academic achievement and increase standardized test scores in U.S. schools (see the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001).

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Conflict resolution training, however, has the potential to positively affect academic learning by equipping students with interpersonal skills that support collaborative school environments that are conducive to achievement. In fact, many of the social skills that enable successful teamwork (e.g., presenting positions, listening attentively, communicating understanding, generating integrative solutions, and reaching mutual agreement on the best course of action) are the same skills that underlie constructive conflict resolution. Empirical evidence indicates that without training, many students may never learn such skills (D.W. Johnson & R.T. Johnson, 1996).

One solution to the training dilemma lies in adopting a curriculum-integrated approach to teaching all students conflict resolution and peer mediation skills. Although the idea of integrating conflict resolution training into the curriculum is not new—especially in English literature and social studies (e.g., Christenbury, 1995; Compton, 1998; Pereira & Watkins, 1997)—until recently little substantive information existed on the feasibility or effectiveness of doing so. Over the past decade, however, systematic research on the impact of integrating the Teaching Students To Be Peacemakers (TSP) Program (D.W. Johnson & R.T. Johnson, 1995) into a variety of curricula across age levels and educational settings has produced a body of evidence that consistently shows multiple benefits for

constructive conflict resolution as well as academic learning. This article describes the practical curriculum-integrated conflict resolution training procedures used in the TSP Program research and summarizes the outcomes that educators can expect when implementing this approach.

Curriculum-Integrated Conflict Training

Successfully integrating conflict resolution and peer mediation training into the school curriculum does not require the purchase of new student materials or instructional resources; nor does it require the development of new courses or units of study. Instead, curriculum-integrated conflict training starts with teachers examining the content of their existing curricula and identifying where conflicts occur. Conflicts especially abound in English literature, language arts, social studies, and the humanities. Open any novel or storybook, for example, and you will find conflict almost immediately. Conflict “hooks” us, piques our curiosity, and makes us wonder how each dilemma will be resolved.

Similarly, conflicts in the social sciences—including history, civics, government, economics, and so on—also capture attention, arouse concern, and stir emotion. Conflicts over resource allocation, land use, energy consumption, health care, affirmative action, and educational effectiveness, to name only a few, provide endless opportunities for deliberation. The central question for students becomes: What creative solutions can be crafted by applying constructive conflict resolution procedures to each problem?

Regardless of the subject matter, incorporating conflict resolution and peer mediation training into academics basically involves using constructive negotiation and mediation procedures to resolve issues embedded in the content. Essentially this entails

- establishing cooperative classroom conditions conducive to teaching, practicing, and using constructive conflict resolution skills;
- defining conflict and teaching students how to identify concrete examples that exist in the curriculum;
- practicing conflict resolution by applying integrative negotiation and peer mediation procedures to resolve the curricular-embedded conflicts;

- processing the effectiveness of each practice episode to plan for future refinement; and
- applying the procedures and skills to constructively resolve actual conflicts that occur in classrooms and schools.

Establish cooperative conditions

The social context where conflict resolution training takes place influences the effectiveness of the training. Cooperative contexts, compared to individualistic or competitive environments, produce the best results (Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, & Real, 1996). Cooperative classrooms promote the type of caring, committed, trusting relationships among students that set the stage for constructive conflict resolution.

Teachers help students establish cooperative relationships by using cooperative learning strategies in the classroom. Such strategies repeatedly involve students in small-group learning tasks that require all members to contribute knowledge, ideas, resources, and skills to successfully complete the tasks. Only when everyone “gives” can everyone achieve. Through giving, mutual respect and appreciation evolve.

In the TSP Program curriculum-integrated conflict training, we routinely use two cooperative strategies to foster the type of supportive relationships conducive to constructive conflict resolution: *cooperative pair interview* and *cooperative mind mapping* (Bennett, Rolheiser, & Stevahn, 1991). Although both of these strategies can be used repeatedly throughout training, the cooperative pair interview is especially useful for prompting students to share personal experiences that are connected to the major themes or issues that unfold in the academic material. Cooperative mind mapping, on the other hand, is useful for directly identifying and concretely representing important aspects of the academic material that will become the substance for practicing conflict resolution procedures.

Cooperative pair interview. The cooperative pair interview invites students to make comfortable connections at the onset, both with each other and with the academic material. In groups of two, students take turns interviewing each other on questions purposely designed to be (a) meaningful and interesting so students will want to respond; (b)

linked to personal experience so students can draw upon their own backgrounds; (c) open-ended and thought provoking to stimulate reflection and curiosity; (d) safe and nonthreatening to elicit self-disclosure; and (e) relevant to the characters, events, themes, or concepts in the academic material to illuminate the subject matter. The interconnected roles of interviewer/recorder and responder emphasize the mutual interdependence within each pair, as does the single shared answer sheet (i.e., one cannot successfully perform either role without the other; both participants need the answer sheet to complete the task). Consider the following sample interview questions that relate to common curricular themes of leadership and courage:

- Who is a leader you admire? What qualities make that person especially effective as a leader? Which person in the academic material do you most respect as a leader? Why? How are you the same as or different from that character?
- Have you ever been in danger, or known anyone who faced danger and lived to tell about it? What happened? How did you or they survive the situation? What character in the academic material do you believe is most endangered? Why?

Cooperative mind mapping. Cooperative mind mapping involves students in directly thinking about the academic material being studied while continuing to build positive interpersonal relationships. After considering a body of information—such as a story, a chapter in a novel or textbook, or an Internet resource—paired students pool their recollection and comprehension of the material to create a list of key characters, events, facts, and details. Challenging each pair to jointly list as many items as possible on one answer sheet reinforces mutual interdependence. After developing the list, pairs chronologically organize their items, brainstorm symbols or pictures to illustrate each, then map the items and illustrations clockwise around the designated central topic (see Figure 1). Upon completion, students process the effectiveness of their joint efforts and describe what they most appreciated or valued about working with each other. The mind maps ultimately become useful

references as students proceed to identify the conflicts embedded in the academic material.

Define and identify conflict

To manage conflict constructively, those involved must recognize it exists. Conflict exists among individuals when incompatible activities occur (Deutsch, 1973). Interpersonal conflicts arise when the actions of one person block, prevent, or interfere with another individual's ability to accomplish personal goals (D.W. Johnson & R.T. Johnson, 1995). Teaching this definition enables students to identify conflicts in their subject matter. Consider, for example, the conflicts in the following storybooks: In *Old Henry* by Joan W. Blos, students easily see that by not fixing up his rundown house, Henry blocks his neighbors from achieving their goal of keeping the entire community neat and tidy. In *The Gold Cadillac* by Mildred D. Taylor, students readily point to the conflict that finds Dee upset when her husband Wilbert uses all of the family's savings to purchase a shiny new gold Cadillac, thereby preventing the family from buying a new house.

Teachers further enhance students' understanding of conflict by helping them identify how those in conflict respond. Do disputants *force* to get their own way, each trying to win at the expense of the other? Does one *withdraw*, avoiding both the issue and the other? Does one *smooth* to appease the other, thus giving in? Do both *compromise* for a 50-50 split, each partially achieving desired goals? Or do disputants engage in *cooperative problem solving* to negotiate integrative solutions that fully meet everyone's needs? Although forcing, withdrawing, smoothing, or compromising may be warranted under certain circumstances, these options rarely benefit individuals who are in long-term relationships with each other, such as in families, schools, or work situations. Instead, cooperative problem solving, which entails using conflict resolution procedures to negotiate constructive outcomes, provides a way both can attain personal goals and maintain positive relationships when conflict occurs. Teaching students how to negotiate constructively becomes the next step.

Teach negotiation and mediation procedures

Negotiation is a process where individuals with shared and opposed interests who wish to

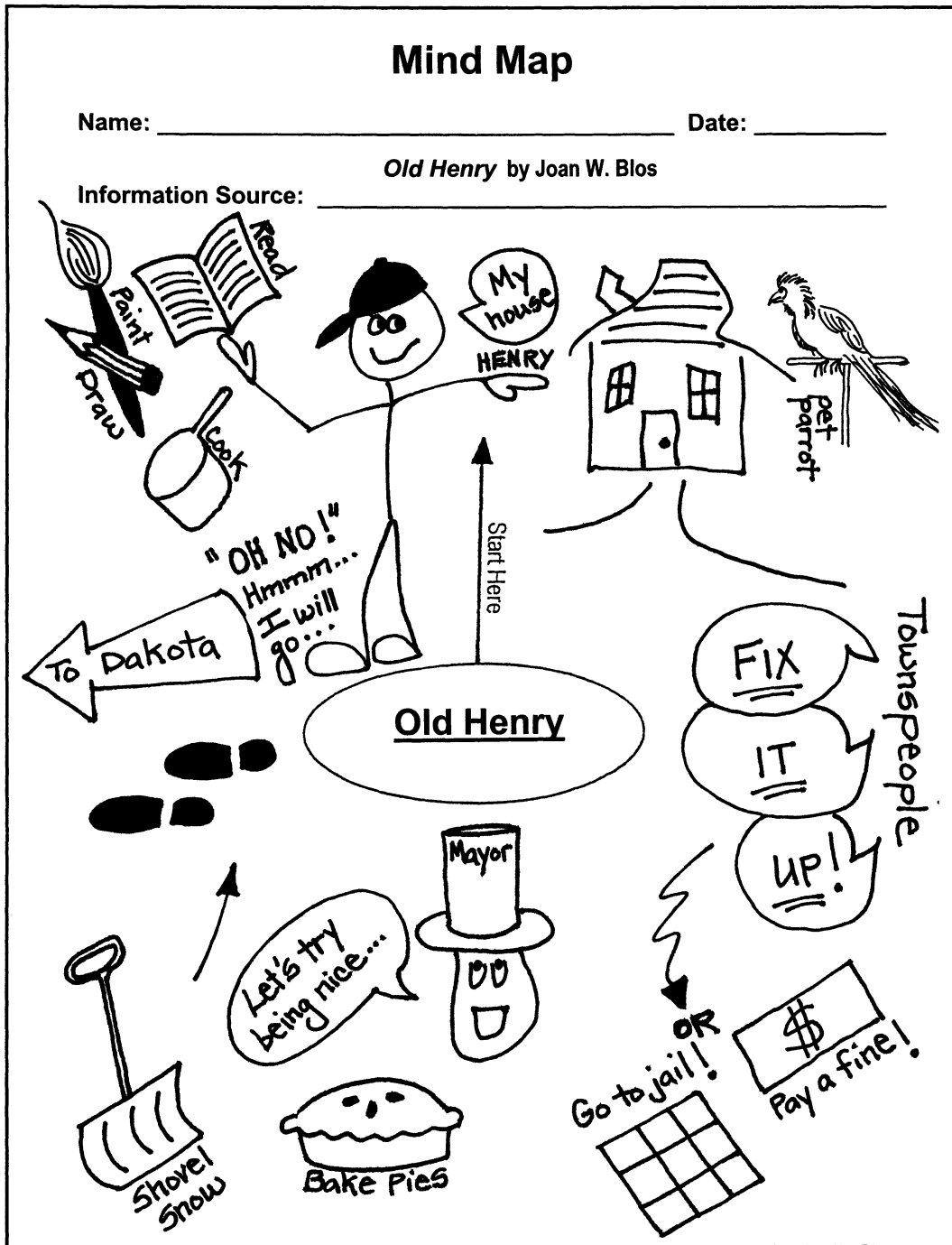


Figure 1. Sample mind map (© 1994 by Laurie Stevahn)

come to an agreement attempt to work out a settlement (D.W. Johnson & F.P. Johnson, 2002). Two approaches are possible. The *distributive* approach involves disputants in win-lose battles aimed at maximizing personal gain. Such encounters tend to take place in competitive environments that encourage forcing, as disputants attempt to wrestle concessions from each other toward an agreement most favorable to oneself. The *integrative* approach, alternatively, involves disputants in mutual problem solving aimed at maximizing joint outcomes. Not surprisingly, these encounters tend to occur in cooperative environments where disputants have a stake in maintaining ongoing positive relationships with each other. These negotiations consist of listening to each other's perceived needs and underlying interests, communicating understanding, and generating creative solutions that attend to each other's concerns. Derived from conflict theory and research in social psychology, the TSP Program (D.W. Johnson & R.T. Johnson, 1995) teaches integrative negotiation as a six-step procedure:

1. State what you want.
2. Express how you feel.
3. Give the reasons that underlie your wants and feelings.
4. Communicate your understanding of the other person's wants, feelings, and reasons.
5. Invent three or more possible solutions that enhance everyone's outcomes.
6. Agree and shake hands on the solution that maximizes mutual benefits.

Applying the integrative negotiation steps to resolve conflicts found in academic content lies at the heart of teaching and practicing conflict resolution as an integrated component of the required curriculum. Once teachers introduce the steps, students can repeatedly use them to role-play constructive resolutions to the numerous conflict scenarios in their curriculum. Each role-play helps students internalize the negotiation procedure as well as develop fluency in applying it across diverse conflict situations. A sample negotiation role-play to resolve the previously mentioned conflict in *Old Henry* appears in Figure 2.

Sometimes people in conflict find it difficult to negotiate one-on-one, especially if issues are

complex, emotions are intense, or stakes are high. In such cases, mediation becomes an option for managing conflicts constructively. Mediation is a process through which a neutral third party facilitates integrative negotiation between disputants. The TSP Program teaches peer mediation as a four-step process:

1. End hostility between disputants—which often involves finding teachers, administrators, or other adult supervisors to intervene.
2. Ensure commitment to the mediation process—which involves getting disputants to voluntarily participate in mediation as well as adhere to a set of ground rules.
3. Facilitate constructive negotiation—which involves leading the disputants through the six-step integrative negotiation procedure.
4. Formalize the agreement—which involves writing and having disputants sign a contract that specifies their resolution and how they will carry it out.

Teaching the four-step peer mediation process as an integrated component of the academic curriculum occurs in much the same way as implementing the curriculum-integrated approach to teaching the six-step integrative negotiation procedure. Instead of solely role-playing disputing characters, however, students also take turns playing the role of mediator, guiding those playing the disputants through successful conflict resolution.

Process and refine conflict skills

Just as processing the use of social skills enhances cooperative learning outcomes (e.g., D.W. Johnson & F.P. Johnson, 2002; D.W. Johnson & R.T. Johnson, 1989), processing the effectiveness of conflict resolution practice episodes promotes future refinement of students' use of integrative negotiation and peer mediation procedures. When students discuss how well they have applied the conflict resolution procedures and what they can do to improve, they clarify which behaviors most contribute to skilled use of the procedures. Such clarification, in turn, helps students achieve the central purpose of constructive conflict resolution, namely negotiating mutually optimal outcomes while maintaining positive relationships with each other.

Conflict Scenario for *Old Henry* by Joan W. Bloss

Henry comes to the city and moves into a rundown house that has been empty for years. The townspeople are happy because they assume that Henry will fix up his property. Henry, however, has better things to do with his time and energy. His house remains in disrepair. The mayor represents the townspeople in the negotiation.

Mr. Mayor	Henry	
<p>1. I want ... I want you to fix up your house and keep your property tidy.</p>	<p>1. I want ... I want to keep my house the way it is.</p>	
<p>2. I feel ... I feel puzzled and angry.</p>	<p>2. I feel ... I feel annoyed and upset.</p>	
<p>3. My reasons are ... My reasons are that I take pride in our city. I care that we keep our community neat and tidy so that families will want to live here and businesses will thrive. An unkempt city will cause people to leave and then businesses will lose money. Property values may also decline. Your property also poses a safety hazard to the children in your neighborhood. They can get hurt if they stumble on your unswept walkway.</p>	<p>3. My reasons are ... My reasons are that I am getting older. It's difficult for me to do strenuous physical work. It's also more important to me to spend my time doing creative things that make me happy, like drawing, cooking, reading, and playing with my pet parrot. This house is perfect for working on my art projects because it doesn't matter if I spill my paints—everything blends together. Besides, I like the “natural” look and I don't have extra money to do home repairs.</p>	
<p>4. My understanding of you is ... My understanding of you is that you can no longer do the physical work it takes to fix up your house and you don't have the money to pay others to clean up your yard. You feel irritated when we ask you to tidy up your place because it suits you just the way it is, especially for doing your art projects. You like the “natural” look—it makes you feel comfortable. You also want to spend your time being creative rather than fixing up your place, because creativity makes you happy.</p>	<p>4. My understanding of you is ... My understanding of you is that you want me to fix up my property to make it look nice. You feel mad because to you, my house is an eyesore, which might decrease the value of the other homes in the community. You're afraid that families may move away. You also care that nobody gets hurt by tripping on debris that may be on my walkway.</p>	
<p>5. Plan A The city council will sponsor a work party to fix up Henry's property. Local businesses will donate supplies and food. Henry will cook a feast for the townspeople who participate. While the adults are painting and repairing the house, Henry will play with their children by reading books aloud, drawing, and showing his pet parrot. Thereafter, the city will cut Henry's lawn every week and Henry will do nonphysical volunteer work for the city.</p>	<p>5. Plan B Henry and the townspeople will contact a well-known “home magazine” and volunteer Henry's house as a “before and after” remodeling project. The magazine will pay for the supplies and hire the workers. Henry will allow the magazine to publish the story and photographs.</p>	<p>5. Plan C Henry will allow his property to be open to the public as a bird sanctuary. The humane society will help Henry keep up his property. Henry will sell tickets for admission and use that money to help pay for repairs. He will tidy up the front yard and make it safe for visitors, but will keep the back yard natural. The city will advertise, hoping to make Henry's place a national tourist attraction that will bring in revenue to help the local economy.</p>

6. We agree and shake hands on ...

We agree and shake hands on Plan B. Our backup is Plan A if a magazine will not participate in the project.

Figure 2. Sample negotiation role play (© 1994 by Laurie Stevahn)

Teachers can facilitate processing in a number of ways. Providing specific feedback on observed use of the conflict resolution procedures helps students better understand both the verbal and nonverbal dimensions of enacting those procedures, including the effects of particular phrases, voice tones, facial expressions, eye contact, body posture, and so on. Also, asking students to notice what facilitates conflict resolution—versus what stalls or hinders negotiation—helps them pinpoint what works as well as more precisely talk about behaviors that helped or impeded progress. Through repeated group processing, students increasingly become more sophisticated in their ability to skillfully engage in negotiation as well as successfully mediate the conflicts of others.

Resolve real conflicts

Teaching all students how to negotiate and mediate conflicts through the academic curriculum sets the foundation for implementing school-wide, student-centered behavior management programs. Such programs empower all students to actively participate in school life as self-regulated decision makers (Johnson, Johnson, Stevahn, & Hodne, 1997). When equipped with conflict resolution skills, all students can participate in constructively managing their own conflicts as well as assist others. In every classroom, for example, students can rotate the role of peer mediator daily or weekly. Similarly, school-wide peer mediators can serve the entire student body by rotating weekly or monthly. In both cases, designating a “conflict resolution corner” in each classroom and a “peer mediation center” in the school visibly reminds students and educators alike of their roles in upholding school norms that support constructive conflict resolution, thereby creating a safe and caring learning community.

Research Support for Curriculum-Integrated Conflict Training

The results of 12 studies conducted by the author and associates over the past decade on the effectiveness of integrating the TSP Program into existing curricula show that students benefit in multiple ways. Cumulatively, the studies included students across all grade levels (kindergarten through

high school); with varying academic histories (ranging from special needs to gifted); representing diverse ethnic backgrounds (primarily White and African American); in various language settings (English-only and French-English-bilingual); in the United States (California, Louisiana, and Minnesota) and Canada (Ontario and Quebec); in suburban, urban, and rural communities. The conflict resolution and peer mediation training was integrated into a variety of academic subjects including English literature, language arts, World War II history, leadership and law-related education programs, thematic friendship units, and French immersion coursework across content areas.

Of the 12 curriculum-integrated TSP Program studies, 9 examined the effectiveness of the *total-student-body approach* to conflict training, which aims to teach all students in a school conflict resolution through classroom instruction. These total-student-body conflict studies took place during the school year in five different public schools (two high schools, two elementary schools, and one comprehensive K-8 school). The 3 remaining studies examined the effectiveness of the *cadre approach* to conflict training, which entails teaching a small and usually select number of students to serve as peer mediators for an entire school. These studies took place at summer teen leadership camps, with several follow-up training workshops provided during the school year. Groups of students and their teacher leaders from secondary schools across several large school districts in the New Orleans area attended the camps. All 12 of the studies obtained multiple measures on two major types of outcomes: (a) conflict training outcomes to determine students’ knowledge of the negotiation and mediation procedures, use of those procedures, and attitudes toward conflict; and (b) achievement outcomes to determine students’ knowledge and retention of the academic content.

Conflict outcomes

The results of the curriculum-integrated TSP Program studies consistently demonstrate the effectiveness of the conflict training. Specifically, students who received the training

- learned and retained knowledge of the conflict resolution and peer mediation steps;

- willingly applied those steps to resolve conflict scenario/simulation situations like those students face in school;
- chose to use integrative versus distributive approaches to negotiation in bargaining exercises that permitted the use of either;
- applied the conflict procedures to resolve real conflicts;
- displayed higher levels of social perspective coordination;
- demonstrated greater knowledge and understanding of feelings experienced in conflict;
- exhibited more complex reasoning about the purpose, usefulness, and interrelatedness of the integrative negotiation steps; and
- expressed more positive attitudes toward conflict.

Clearly, the academic curriculum can provide an arena for continuous, meaningful practice of conflict resolution across diverse situations.

Achievement outcomes

The results of the curriculum-integrated TSP Program studies also repeatedly indicate that such conflict training enhances academic achievement. Specifically, students who practiced using integrative negotiation and peer mediation procedures to resolve the conflicts in their academic subject matter compared to those who did not

- scored significantly higher on classroom achievement and retention tests designed to assess students' knowledge and conceptual understanding of the material; and
- used the conflict procedures taught in one subject area (social studies) to analyze academic material in another subject area (English literature), when doing so was not prompted or necessary, yet nonetheless resulted in significantly higher scores on the final exam in the literature course.

Academic achievement has long been the primary goal of education. In the social sciences and humanities, achievement means being able to construct understanding, make inferences, formulate interpretations, think critically, draw conclusions, and defend claims. Integrative negotiation and peer mediation procedures, when applied to subject

matter, appear to help students achieve those academic competencies. Most notably, the six-step negotiation procedure acts as a concrete framework that enables students to deeply process and elaborate academic material.

Conclusion

Schools can become places where intellectual pursuits and the resolution of interpersonal disputes combine to enhance classroom life and academic rigor. Educators no longer have to make either/or choices between programs aimed at increasing academic achievement versus those aimed at developing interpersonal competence. Accomplishing both simultaneously is possible, practical, and prudent for several reasons.

First, the likelihood of creating a safe, orderly school community where students can excel increases when all students not only learn procedures for constructive conflict management, but also use those procedures to resolve real conflicts. This requires knowledge, will, skill, opportunity, and organizational support. Students must know a set of procedures, be willing to apply those procedures, skillfully execute the procedures, have the opportunity to actually use the procedures when real conflicts occur, and receive support for doing so. Compared to other approaches, curriculum-integrated conflict resolution training makes it more feasible to abundantly practice as well as incorporate such procedures into school discipline and classroom management systems. School-wide cadre conflict programs fall short because such programs do not train all students. Also, although peer mediators in such programs can and do help untrained classmates resolve conflicts constructively, little if any evidence exists on the willingness or ability of the disputants to successfully resolve conflicts on their own in the future. Then again, conflict programs that do teach all students procedures, but do so separate and apart from required curricula, may also fail by not providing students with enough practice for skillful use. In fact, curriculum-integrated conflict training itself may fair no better if students only discuss conflicts in the subject matter, rather than actually practice resolving those conflicts. When, however, the curriculum-integrated approach to conflict training involves all students in the type

of sustained, meaningful practice that it readily can provide across diverse conflict situations, all students can skillfully learn to use the conflict resolution procedures—and many express their desire to do so.

Second, curriculum-integrated conflict training may be the key to overcoming factors that inhibit schools from institutionalizing conflict resolution programs, even when such programs are desired. Some of those inhibiting factors include (a) lack of time to teach add-on training packages designed separate and apart from required curricula; (b) the logistical inflexibility of scheduling school-wide peer mediations in a timely fashion when few students are trained; (c) lack of support from the entire faculty; (d) lack of school-wide discipline policies that require mediation for fights, detentions, and suspensions; and (e) lack of conflict-program visibility throughout the entire structure of the school (Munger & Stevahn, 2000). Integrating conflict training into the academic curriculum addresses each of these factors by enabling teachers to incorporate the training into time already designated for academic lessons; train all students, which automatically increases the number of peer mediators available throughout the school; and establish a grassroots program in which everyone participates.

Finally, the history of innovation in education indicates that school programs are likely to be ignored or discontinued unless perceived to be effective tools in increasing student achievement (Fullan, 1993, 2001). We now have empirical evidence that substantively links curriculum-integrated conflict resolution training to increased academic achievement. Aside from the interpersonal benefits of conflict resolution, the TSP Program integrative negotiation procedure appears to act as a cognitive “framework for thinking,” valuable as an information processing strategy in its own right. Similar to a host of other cognitive information processing strategies (e.g., Bruning, Schraw, & Ronning, 1995; Pressley & Woloshyn, 1995), the TSP Program framework provides the type of step-by-step guidance that helps students more thoroughly and effectively analyze, synthesize, evaluate, and remember academic material. The good news is, however, that using integrative negotiation and peer mediation procedures to process academic material has the additional benefit of positively affecting human relations. Integrating conflict resolution training

into classroom academic learning enables us to capitalize on both, thereby helping to transform schools into the optimal interpersonal and intellectual learning communities that they can be.

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