



Beyond Conflict Resolution¹

by Paul Kivel

IN THE LAST 20 YEARS there has been an explosion of interest in conflict resolution programs for young people. There are now many regional and national organizations and networks, national conferences, training programs, and several excellent curriculums. In every area of the country, at every level from K-12, young people are exposed to conflict resolution programs. I think this is a tremendous step forward. Every young person needs communication and problem-solving skills, every young person needs alternatives to violence for solving the conflicts that occur between people. Every young person needs the ability and the opportunity to participate in creating a safer community.

Where do we go from here? How do we turn the promise of conflict resolution into more than a way for young people to respond to fights and other forms of conflict? Conflict resolution by itself won't diminish the teasing, harassment, bullying, and social exclusion that plagues schools and students. Conflict resolution won't address the root causes of the anger that leads students to fight with each other. Conflict resolution won't create an educational community in which every student feels safe, included, and valued.

In fact, if we are not clear about our goals, conflict resolution can become just another tool that adults use to manage and contain students. Used with that intent, conflict resolution programs may be more humane, but are on the same continuum as, metal detectors, locks on classroom doors, and police on campuses.

What are your goals?

If you are looking for a student management tool, a way to reduce fights and other conflicts so that students can just get on with education, then basic conflict resolution should suffice. However this approach leaves some big issues of safety unresolved.

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First of all, the basic issues leading to conflict may remain. Students may still feel, and be, unsafe on campus. Students may not be any more empowered than before, and may, in fact, be divided between those who are conflict managers and those who are not. Racial, gender, and class divisions may be just as devastating to students as before. Teacher disrespect, abuse, and harassment of students may continue unabated. Basic values of competition, individualism, self-interest, and hierarchy, which produce so much violence, may continue to be reinforced in the classroom, in the halls, and on the athletic field. Opportunities for transforming the campus into a peaceable, cooperative learning community will be lost.

What is possible beyond a basic conflict resolution program?

Rather than simply an add-on—a way to help students respond to fights and disagreements—conflict resolution can become the basis for students and teachers coming together to decide what kind of community they want to be a part of. Issues of safety, inclusion, and fairness can be incorporated into the curriculum, into class meetings, into use of the playground, into all aspects of campus life. Teachers as well as students can participate in and be accountable for their behavior within community set standards. Teachers can develop cooperative classroom practices that break down the competition and individualism of traditional education. Students, with adult support, can be encouraged to take leadership in identifying problems in the school and coming up with solutions. The curriculum can be focused on issues of inclusion, alternatives to violence, and social justice so that students become adept at identifying bias, stereotypes, misinformation, exploitation, and violence and develop skills for intervention and activism.

As adults we need to look at our motives for adopting conflict resolution programs. Do we want to quiet young people down, or do we want to stir up their leadership and participation? Are we prepared to really listen to their ideas about what might be different at school? If our goal is to open up students' hearts and minds so that they can become critical thinking, active citizens, then the following are some of the areas we can begin to develop in our schools.

Initiation of class meetings

Cooperative classroom practices

Incorporation of a social justice curriculum

Development of all youth as peacemakers



Development of the leadership potential of every young person

Elimination of tracking, A.P. classes and other such divisive (and pedagogically suspect) practices

Involvement of students in developing discipline and restorative justice guidelines

Assessment of the curriculum for gender, racial, and other forms of bias and distortion

Holding teachers and administrators accountable for their behavior towards other teachers and towards students as an integral part of the conflict resolution process

Development of a service learning program integrated into the curriculum for all students

Training teachers and staff on these issues and practices

I think there is always a tendency for those of us who are adults to want students to behave, to act responsibly and maturely and just get on with their education. However students today are dealing with much that makes them angry. Many students feel frustrated, confused, and angry about the family violence, social problems, cutbacks in education and in recreation, arts, and cultural programs, and the lack of safe, challenging and well-paying jobs they experience. Conflict resolution programs will help them avoid taking out their anger on those around them. But if we go beyond conflict resolution we can help them come together with others and develop the leadership skills they need to address the roots of the problems they face. Going beyond conflict resolution benefits the students, benefits the school, and produces the cooperative, thoughtful, and active citizens our society needs.

Resources (from *Boys Will Be Men: Raising Our Sons for Courage, Caring, and Community*)

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Sex, Class and Age Equity. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983, 1998.

Sjostrom, Lisa and Nan Stein. *Bullyproof: A Teacher's Guide on Teasing and Bullying for Use with Fourth and Fifth Grade Students*. Wellesley, MA: Wellesley Centers for Research on Women, 1996.

Organizations

Bureau for At-Risk Youth 800-99-YOUTH www.at-risk.com

Children's Creative Responses to Violence 914-353-1796

www.eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/directories/anti-bias/ccrc.html

Educators for Social Responsibility 800-370-2515

www.esrnational.org

National Service-Learning Clearinghouse 800-808-7378

www.nicsl.coled.umn.edu

Network of Educators of the Americas 800-763-9131

www.teachingforchange.org

Peace Education Foundation 800-749-8838 www.peace-ed.org

Resolving Conflict Creatively 212-509-0022 www.esrnational.org

Teaching Tolerance magazine www.teachingtolerance.org

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