Teaching All Students Constructive Conflict Resolution Through Academic Coursework

by Laurie Stevahn
Professional Development Associates
Minneapolis, MN.

Introduction

School-based conflict resolution programs can become school-wide discipline systems that empower all students to be self-regulated decision makers. When all members of a school community routinely manage conflicts constructively, the learning environment is enhanced. For this to happen, however, everyone in the environment must be mutually oriented to a set of conflict resolution procedures, learn to use the procedures skillfully, and have systematic structures in the school that routinely support use. The initial challenge is to teach every student problem-solving negotiation and peer mediation procedures for mutually resolving interpersonal disputes. The subsequent challenge is to ensure meaningful, ongoing practice of those procedures for continuous improvement. Neither of these challenges likely will be achieved if conflict resolution training is approached as an "add-on," separate and apart from the existing curriculum, or if training is limited to a small cadre of students selected from the student body to be peer mediators for the school. Although all students could be taught conflict resolution if it was a required course of study, all too often curriculum decisions become "either/or" choices between programs aimed at academic achievement versus those aimed at teaching interpersonal and social skills such as conflict resolution. Academic programs usually win.

Choosing between academic learning and conflict resolution training is unnecessary. It also eliminates the multiple benefits that can be achieved when a curriculum-integrated approach to teaching conflict resolution is implemented. Recent studies indicate that all students can learn conflict resolution skills in school by integrating training into the study of required academic coursework (Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, & Real, 1996; Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, & Schultz, 1997; Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, Green, & Laginski, 1997; Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, Laginski, & O'Coin, 1996; Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, Oberle, & Wahl, 1998). In these studies, elementary and secondary students received Teaching Students To Be Peacemakers (Johnson & R. Johnson, 1995) training as an integrated component of language arts, social studies, and interdisciplinary thematic

units. The training not only resulted in students internalizing the conflict resolution procedures for application to actual conflicts occurring in school, but also promoted increased academic achievement. This article describes how the curriculum-integrated approach to teaching conflict resolution works and elaborates on the multiple benefits that result.

Conflict In Academic Coursework

Conflict is abundant in academic coursework. Literature, social studies, and thematic units of instruction at all grade levels contain numerous incidents of unresolved conflict. Open any storybook, for example, and you will find conflict almost immediately. Whether the book is a novel for high school students or a picture book for elementary children, it is conflict between characters that captures interest, holds attention, and makes readers wonder how the dilemmas will be resolved. In Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, for example, the opening chapter finds Huck trying to escape the proselytizing of the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson who are determined to transform him from a scalawag into a civilized, virtuous, pious young man; in E. B. White's Charlotte's Web, Fern desperately is trying to stop her father from butchering Wilbur the pig; and in Dr. Seuss' The Cat In The Hat, Sally and her brother are uneasy about the Cat pushing his way into their house to show them his tricks one rainy day when their mother is out.

Conflict also inevitably is present in historical and current events. Social studies is filled with incidents of conflict--between leaders, among citizens, within families. At the end of World War II, for example, Allied leaders disagreed over whether to punish or rebuild conquered Germany; throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Americans disagreed over what constituted equal access to education; in the early 1900s in the United States, husbands and wives disagreed over whether women should have the right to vote. Although historical conflicts most often are controversies over law and public policy, each issue can be framed as an interpersonal dispute between individuals who have different wants and interests. The central question for students becomes: What outcomes are possible when constructive conflict resolution procedures are applied? Given the abundance of conflict in the curriculum, academic units become natural places for students to learn and practice constructive conflict resolution procedures.

Integrating conflict resolution training into academic subject matter basically involves weaving the practice of negotiation and peer mediation into the academic material. This entails (a) establishing cooperative relationships among students by structuring cooperative learning groups within the classroom, (b) defining conflict and identifying examples in the academic material, (c) applying problem-solving negotiation and peer mediation procedures to resolve the conflicts, and (d) transferring use of the procedures to actual conflict situations.

Structure Cooperative Learning Groups

The context in which conflict resolution training takes place influences the

effectiveness of the training (Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, & Real, 1996). In cooperative contexts where students are positively interdependent, training is more effective than in competitive/individualistic contexts. Students who are positively interdependent are linked as they strive to achieve a mutual goal--the success of one promotes the success of all, and vice-versa. The result is caring, committed, trusting relationships that become the foundation for constructively resolving conflicts. Using cooperative learning strategies in the classroom is an effective way to structure positive interdependence among students. That is why integrating conflict resolution training into academic coursework begins by structuring cooperative learning groups.

Two cooperative strategies are particularly useful for setting the stage to teach conflict resolution as an integrated component of the curriculum. The first is the cooperative pair interview (Bennett, Rolheiser, & Stevahn, 1991). This strategy enables students to make comfortable connections at the onset--both with each other and with the academic material. In a cooperative pair interview, two students address a question, each interviewing and recording the response of the other on one shared answer sheet. The single answer sheet emphasizes positive interdependence within the pair (both partners must contribute to complete the sheet successfully), as does taking turns to perform the interconnected roles of interviewing/recording and responding. The social skills of listening carefully, paraphrasing accurately, encouraging elaboration, and participating equally also are emphasized at the start to promote successful interaction between partners and processed at the end to enable assessment of effectiveness and future improvement. Each interview question is carefully designed to be meaningful and interesting to students (so they want to respond); linked to personal experiences (so they have background knowledge to respond); open-ended and thought provoking (to stimulate reflection and curiosity); safe and non-threatening (to foster self-disclosure); and relevant to concepts, events, or themes in the academic material being studied. Sample questions for literature or social studies units include:

> What is most interesting (or meaningful, puzzling, surprising, irritating, etc.) to you in the material? Why?

> Which character/person in the story/unit most fascinates you? How are you the same as that character? How are you different? Given everyone involved in the story/unit, which character/person do you most identify with? Why?

> Which character would you most like to meet? Why? What would you like to find out from that person? What advice would you give that person?

> Have you ever been in danger or known anyone who faced danger? What happened? How did you/they survive the situation? Which character/person do you believe is most endangered in the story/unit? Why?

The second strategy is cooperative mind mapping (Bennett, Rolheiser, &

Stevahn, 1991). This cooperative strategy provides a way for students to think about and take notes on the academic material being studied while continuing to build positive relationships. Students begin by considering a body of information (reading a chapter in their novel or textbook, watching a film, listening to a brief lecture, researching a topic on the internet, etc.). In pairs, students then create one list of key ideas/events/details drawn from the material by taking turns recalling and recording such information on one team sheet. Next teammates brainstorm then agree on a symbol or picture for each item on the list. The cooperative goal is to produce one group mind map containing the information and illustrations (see Figure 1). Interpersonal and small group skills are emphasized, modeled, and processed for effectiveness. Upon completion, students also describe what they most appreciated or valued about working with their partner and celebrate mutual success. The mind maps ultimately become useful references that students use repeatedly as they next identify and reflect on incidents of conflict in the academic material.

Define And Identify Conflict

To deal with conflict, one must recognize that it exists. Because conflict occurs in cooperative as well as competitive situations, a definition is needed that can be applied to both. Deutsch's (1973) definition is useful: Conflict exists when incompatible activities occur. Specifically, interpersonal conflict occurs between two individuals when one's actions block, prevent, or interfere with the other attaining personal goals (Johnson & R. Johnson, 1995). Even kindergarten children understand what it means to be blocked from getting what you want. In a competitive situation, for example, two children experience conflict when they both simultaneously want to use the only computer in the classroom. In a cooperative situation, two children experience conflict when they both want to perform the same job (such as coloring, cutting, or pasting) to complete their team poster. Applying the definition of conflict, students of all ages can identify these and other conflicts they face in school, as well as those that exist in the academic material they are studying. The next step is to learn and practice integrative negotiation and peer mediation procedures to constructively resolve those conflicts.

Learn And Practice Negotiation

Negotiation is a process through which persons who have both shared and opposed interests and wish to come to an agreement attempt to work out a settlement (Johnson & F. Johnson, 1997; Johnson & R. Johnson, 1995). Two approaches are possible. Distributive negotiation is aimed at maximizing one's own gains at the expense of the other. It typically occurs in competitive environments and becomes a win-lose battle between disputants who wrestle concessions from each other in order to converge on an agreement. Integrative negotiation, alternatively, is aimed at maximizing the gains of both oneself and the other. It becomes a cooperative exercise in mutual problem solving as disputants listen carefully to each other's needs and underlying interests, communicate understanding of each other's desires and feelings, and jointly craft solutions to satisfy fully each other's concerns. The process,

when working well, becomes mutually empowering for disputants as they engage in critical thinking that takes them beyond compromise (a 50-50 split which tends to narrow and limit mutual satisfaction) to new and highly creative solutions jointly constructed to enhance and expand each other's well-being (solutions purposefully invented to give both parties what they want). Integrative negotiation typically occurs in cooperative environments and can be taught as a six-step procedure. The steps are (Johnson & R. Johnson, 1995):

1. State what you want.
2. Express how you feel.
3. Give reasons underlying your wants and feelings.
4. Communicate your understanding of the other person's wants, feelings, and reasons.
5. Invent three optional agreements that maximize benefits to both sides.
6. Reach an agreement by mutually selecting and shaking hands on one of the options.

Applying the steps of integrative negotiation to resolve conflicts found in academic material lies at the heart of teaching conflict resolution as an integrated component of the required curriculum. Initially, teachers need to demonstrate the entire procedure, help students understand the rationale for each step, provide vocabulary for expressing feelings, and model how integrative solutions aimed at mutual gain are constructed. Providing students with a conflict scenario role play script sheet (see Figure 2) further promotes success by giving a framework for writing negotiation dialogues prior to engaging in role plays. Repeatedly practicing the procedure to resolve the numerous and varied conflicts found in academic coursework enables students to internalize the steps, develop fluency in application, continuously improve communication skills utilized in the process (such as listening, checking for understanding, clarifying, etc.), and generalize application across diverse situations. A sample negotiation to resolve the conflict described earlier in Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn between Huck and Miss Watson is illustrated in Figure 3.

Learn And Practice Mediation

Mediation is a process through which a neutral, third party facilitates constructive conflict resolution between disputants. The mediation process includes four steps (Johnson & R. Johnson, 1995): (a) stopping hostility, (b) ensuring that disputants commit themselves to the mediation process, (c) facilitating integrative negotiation between disputants, and (d) formalizing their agreement by writing a contract. Students essentially learn and practice mediation as an integrated component of required curriculum in the same way they learn and practice negotiation. A conflict is identified in the material being studied; groups of three are formed for a mediation role play; each group member is assigned a role (two disputants and a mediator); groups apply the mediation process to resolve the conflict constructively; group members process their effectiveness in the mediation and share agreed-upon

solutions with the entire class in order to increase everyone's learning. Sometimes groups of four are formed to practice mediation. In this case, either two members serve as co-mediators (working as a mediation team to help the two disputants in the group resolve their conflict) or the fourth member observes and provides constructive feedback on the mediation process (carefully watching the role play and recording words/actions that contribute to the constructive resolution of the conflict).

Resolve Real Conflicts

Once all students learn to negotiate one-on-one and can mediate disputes between others, everyone is able to participate in a school-wide management program (Johnson & R. Johnson, 1995; Johnson, Johnson, Stevahn, & Hodne, 1997). In every classroom, a student (or pair of students) is designated as peer mediator for the day (or week). The role of peer mediator rotates among all students in the class and a standard place in the classroom is established for negotiations. Similarly, school-wide peer mediators serve the entire student body, rotating weekly or monthly. Negotiations take place at a centrally-established school peer mediation site. Training all students how to negotiate and mediate conflicts through the academic curriculum provides the common ground necessary for everyone to participate in such a school management program. It also allows everyone in the school continuously to refine use of procedures and skills. Routinely practicing constructive conflict resolution through academic coursework and systematically applying those procedures to resolve real conflicts ultimately institutionalizes school norms that support a safe and caring learning community.

Research Support

Five recent studies indicate that students benefit from the curriculum-integrated approach to teaching conflict resolution in multiple ways (Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, & Real, 1996; Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, & Schultz, 1997; Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, Green, & Laginski, 1997; Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, Laginski, & O'Coin, 1996; Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, Oberle, & Wahl, 1998). Three of the studies were conducted in Canada and two in the United States; three were at the high school level, one at the middle school level, and one at the primary level (participants were kindergartners, seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-graders for a total of 364 students); three of the studies integrated conflict resolution training into English literature units, one into a social studies unit, and one into an interdisciplinary thematic unit of instruction; all of the studies compared treatment versus control conditions (i.e., conflict resolution training integrated into academic curriculum versus the identical academic curriculum taught for the same period of time without conflict resolution); four studies randomly assigned students to conditions and one randomly assigned classes to conditions; four studies rotated teachers across treatment and control conditions; and all of the studies gave pre-, post-, and retention measures on conflict resolution and academic achievement. Compared to students in control conditions, students who received conflict resolution training

integrated into the required academic curriculum:

- learned and retained knowledge of the negotiation steps;
- applied those steps to resolve conflict situations like those students face in school;
- chose to use integrative versus distributive approaches to negotiation in bargaining exercises when use of either approach was possible;
- expressed more positive attitudes toward conflict;
- scored significantly higher on academic achievement and retention tests aimed at assessing critical thinking and reasoning;
- transferred the ability to use the conflict resolution procedures learned in one academic discipline to analyze the meaning of material in a different academic discipline, which resulted in higher achievement across disciplines.

These findings indicate that the curriculum-integrated approach to teaching conflict resolution is effective. Separate courses do not have to be added to what already seems to be an overcrowded curriculum in order to teach all students in a school conflict resolution procedures and skills. The academic curriculum provides an arena for continuous, meaningful practice in diverse situations. Such practice enables overlearning, which is necessary for the procedures and skills to become automatic habit patterns that guide behavior in real conflicts. It also enables students to more rapidly make a transition from novice to expert. Becoming a true expert in any domain requires the acquisition of an immense amount of domain-specific knowledge, much of which is obtained tacitly through experience (Wagner & Sternberg, 1985). Ongoing, frequent, varied practice provides the needed experience. Such practice is possible when conflict resolution training is integrated into academic disciplines such as language arts, social studies, and other subject areas that naturally contain an abundance of conflict and are required throughout one's school career.

Research findings further indicate that integrating conflict resolution training into academic coursework enhances achievement. Academic achievement has long been the primary target in education. In the social sciences and humanities particularly, teachers want students to be able to construct understanding about the underlying meaning of information, make inferences and interpretations through critical analysis and reasoning, and connect generalizations forged from academic material to contemporary issues. Integrative negotiation and peer mediation procedures, when applied to conflicts in academic coursework, appear to help students achieve those outcomes. The six-step negotiation procedure, most notably, provides students with a framework for deeply processing and elaborating academic information. By applying the framework to conflicts in academic subject matter, students essentially climb into the hearts and minds of the storybook characters or historical figures by examining their underlying interests, identifying their emotions, reversing perspectives to better understand their alternative viewpoints, and thinking both divergently and convergently in the quest to invent and agree upon solutions that will maximize joint outcomes. More elaborate conceptualizations of the material emerge and memory is enhanced (Stevahn, 1997).

Conclusion

Teaching students conflict resolution through the academic curriculum is not a new idea, especially in English (Christenbury, 1995) and social studies (Pereira & Watkins, 1997). Neither is the academic goal of fostering competent critical thinkers who can engage in high quality reasoning, evaluate bodies of information, and construct justifiable conclusions. While many instructional strategies have significant, positive effects on student academic outcomes (Joyce & Weil, 1996; Johnson & Johnson, 1989), none will equip students with the capacity to manage their own interpersonal conflicts constructively without extensive practice of procedures and skills. Integrating conflict resolution training into the curriculum, therefore, must go beyond thinking and talking about conflicts, causes, solutions, etc., solely at an intellectual level. Systematic, cumulative practice resolving conflicts also must occur. Academic coursework provides the substance for students to engage in such practice by role playing conflict-after-conflict in lesson-after-lesson in unit-after-unit, year-after-year. Structuring such practice makes all the more sense when the result is increased academic achievement. This ultimately may be key to the institutionalization and long-term maintenance of conflict resolution programs in schools because the history of innovation in education indicates that a program is more likely to be ignored and discontinued unless it is perceived to be an effective tool in increasing student achievement (Fullan, with Stiegelbauer, 1991; Fullan, 1993). More immediately, however, integrating conflict resolution training into academic coursework is a practical and feasible strategy for enabling all students in a school to learn how to manage conflicts constructively. Doing so promotes student responsibility, ownership of behavior, and greater participation in school-wide governance. Schools can become places where intellectual pursuits and the resolution of interpersonal disputes combine to enhance the quality of life and learning for everyone.

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Figure 1: Sample Mind Map

Figure 2: Conflict Scenario Role Play Script Sheet

Figure 3: Sample Negotiation

Miss Watson	Huck Finn
I want you to use manners and dress properly and be an upstanding, respectable young man	I want to be my own person and dress however I wish and just be free to do whatever I want!
I feel so much anxiety and concern when you are running about and I don't know where you are	I feel annoyed and irritated when you keep asking me to be something that I am not
My reasons are that my sister, the Widow Douglas, and I are responsible for raising you and providing guidance so that you will have a successful future. I don't want to fail and have you end up without a job or a comfortable lifestyle because we didn't provide the discipline and education needed for success	My reasons are that there are so many adventures that I want to experience and I'll miss them if I'm always having to be prim and proper and account for my whereabouts. I learn so much from happening upon unexpected situations!
My understanding of you is that you want to be able to run with the moment and being civilized all the time prevents you from doing that. You're afraid that you'll miss out on some important experiences and that upsets you	My understanding of you is that you're afraid that I won't succeed in life if I don't practice being civilized and my not being proper creates stress for you. You're committed to giving me the best possible future that I can have

PLAN A	PLAN B	PLAN C
Huck will dress up and be respectable Sunday and one other day during the week. On the	Miss Watson will teach Huck how to write stories about his adventures. A regular schedule will be set up for	Miss Watson will teach Huck manners and he will demonstrate them properly to show competency.

remaining days, Huck can have adventures but always be home in time for dinner each evening.	writing two days a week and on those days Huck will dress up. Miss Watson also will help Huck learn how to sell his stories to newspapers and magazines for profit.	Huck will teach Miss Watson how to have adventures. Together they will set up an "adventure vacation" business. In this way, Huck will learn how to provide for his future by doing something that he loves.

We agree on Plan B and shake hands on it!