Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation in Public Schools: What Works?

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The effectiveness of conflict resolution and peer mediation programs developed by community mediation centers in fourteen elementary, middle, and high schools was examined and compared with three schools without such programs. Teachers and other school personnel were interviewed and surveyed by mail, providing both qualitative and quantitative data. Positive impact was found on school discipline systems and curriculum. Teachers gained skills useful for teaching and class management. Schools developed enlarged visions of teaching students to take responsibility for their own actions. Problems identified by school personnel are analyzed, and six elements essential for successful programs are proposed.

In recent years, conflict resolution and peer mediation programs have proliferated in public schools in the United States. In 1984, there were about fifty school-based conflict resolution programs; in 1992, there were about two thousand; by 1995, there were over six thousand programs, and over three hundred thousand students had been exposed to training in basic collaborative negotiation techniques (Girard and Koch, 1996). These programs are intuitively appealing to politicians and the public concerned about violence in schools as well as to participants in the community mediation movement. They are also attractive to educators who believe in cooperative learning, teachers as facilitators, and schools that are less hierarchical and more democratic.

But are conflict resolution and peer mediation programs in schools effective? The question was posed by Webster (1993) in an article, "The Unconvincing Case for School-Based Conflict Resolution Programs for Adolescents." Summarizing studies of violence prevention programs for adolescents in

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schools, Webster found little evidence of change in attitudes and behavior. He advocated targeting programs for learning social skills to younger children, providing intensive interventions for at-risk students, and addressing the problems of family and community environments of students.

Public schools are remarkably resistant to change. Decades of research on schools as well as the experience of school personnel confirm that new programs are frequently initiated and then neglected as new problems gain attention (Sarason, 1990). Especially *add-on, stand-alone programs* are likely to be discontinued after other issues engage the attention of teachers, school districts, and state legislatures (Stevahn and others, 1996). One teacher interviewee decried the number of new programs being portrayed as panaceas. Unfortunately, conflict resolution programs may be implemented quickly in schools, with varying degrees of quality, and in a few years people will say: We tried conflict resolution, and it failed!

School personnel and trainers from community mediation centers need information to help them develop long-term effective programs. This research addressed this need by posing three questions. First, what is the impact of conflict resolution and peer mediation programs developed by community mediation centers on attitudes and behavior of students? Second, what are the common problems of implementing these programs in schools? Third, what are the elements of high-quality programs that are likely to become institutionalized and effective? The answers are based on the perceptions of those who work in schools—teachers, counselors, and administrators.

Research on Conflict Resolution in Public Schools

In their comprehensive summary of research on conflict resolution in public schools, Johnson and Johnson (1996) pointed out how little is actually known about the nature and degree of conflict in schools. The public is very concerned about violence and safety, and these are obvious problems, especially in urban ghetto poverty areas, where violence is a way of life. But summarizing the results of fifteen studies on types of conflicts in schools, the Johnsons found that most conflicts were verbal harassment (name-calling, insults), verbal arguments, rumors and gossip, and dating or relationship issues. When there were physical fights, the physical violence seldom involved serious altercations or violations of law. The Johnsons concluded that alarm about violence in schools is not fully justified but that educators should be concerned about the frequency with which students manage their conflicts in destructive ways, even when these conflicts do not reach the level of violence.

School conflict resolution programs emerged from several sources—religious groups (Quakers, Mennonites), the peace movement, community mediation centers, the public health community, and the cooperative learning movement in education (Messing, 1991; Webster, 1991; Girard and Koch, 1996; Johnson and Johnson, 1996). Some programs emphasize identifying the

destructive aspects of conflict and immediate crisis intervention techniques; others focus on the constructive aspects of conflict, by teaching long-term positive resolution methods such as negotiation and mediation (Raider, 1995). Most of the latter programs train all students in conflict resolution–negotiation skills and train selected students further in the mediation process. There is considerable anecdotal evidence from earlier research that this second type of program is effective in changing students' attitudes and behavior (Johnson and Johnson, 1996).

Research on the impact of the *Teaching Students to be Peacemakers* (Johnson and Johnson, 1995a) program showed that students can learn conflict resolution concepts and negotiation and peer mediation skills and apply them to conflicts at school and at home (Johnson, Johnson, and Dudley, 1992; Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, and Acikgoz, 1994; Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, and Magnuson, 1995; Johnson and others, 1995, 1997). Moreover, conflict resolution training can enhance the learning of academic material—for example, by having students learn conflict resolution–negotiation methods and then role-play conflicts from a novel (Stevahn and others, 1996). These research reports are especially significant because the authors tested empirically a model based on social psychological theory, using random assignment of students to experimental and control groups.

One of the major obstacles to institutionalizing conflict resolution programs is that they are based on a set of assumptions incongruent with the culture of many schools. To put it most simply, these programs emphasize cooperation, whereas the culture of schools emphasizes competition. Most adults in schools, as well as in other bureaucracies, have little training or encouragement in managing conflicts cooperatively (Raider, 1995). People may try to avoid conflict, and they may use authoritarian methods to gain compliance. In this competitive context, teachers figure out ways to control their classes and to maintain some degree of order. Conflict resolution programs, in contrast, assume more open, trusting, democratic relationships—relationships in which there is frequently conflict, but the conflict is handled in more constructive ways.

Conflict resolution training is more effective when it is an integral part of a cooperative rather than an individualistic learning process. Because students who are learning in a cooperative setting do more of their work in groups and because their academic success depends on the group, conflict resolution skills help these students reach their academic goals. (Deutsch, 1993; Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, and Real, 1996). When teachers are committed to working with students as facilitators encouraging cooperative activities, and administrators are committed to developing a discipline system for the whole school that gives responsibility to students, teaching of conflict resolution skills is likely to be more effective (Tennent, 1996).

As Johnson and Johnson (1996) pointed out, more research needs to be done on programs other than their own, which is an intense, high-quality

program, with thoroughly trained teachers. There is, in fact, evidence of schools in which teachers and peer mediators were not trained thoroughly, and consequently the student mediators were viewed as policemen and were disliked by other students. The Johnsons advocated training all students in both negotiation and mediation, constantly reinforced (every week) in all grades, K–12, with all students taking turns as peer mediators.

Most conflict resolution programs in public schools have been implemented with the help of community mediation centers. Staff from centers (and sometimes volunteers) provide training in negotiation and mediation as well as consulting and support. Frequently, programs are implemented under less than ideal conditions, constrained by varying levels of funding and support from school district offices. How effective are these programs, and how can they be strengthened?

Method

The data on perceptions of teachers and other school personnel are from a sample of seventeen public schools from four school districts in two southern states—six elementary schools, six middle schools, and five high schools. All schools were in small cities, surrounding suburban areas, or rural areas. Fourteen of the schools had conflict resolution and peer mediation programs, which had been in operation from one to seven years. For comparison, three schools were chosen that had no programs.

In the fourteen schools with conflict resolution and peer mediation programs, teams of teachers, counselors, and administrators participated in training sessions, lasting two to five days, conducted by staff from community mediation centers. First, the whole student body was trained in conflict resolution-negotiation, including collaborative problem solving, communication skills, and listening skills. Then a selected group of students received twelve to fifteen hours of training in peer mediation (in elementary schools, usually fourth and fifth graders). In some elementary schools, all fourth and fifth graders were trained in mediation and took turns mediating in their own classrooms. Community mediation center staff frequently helped with training, especially in the first year or two. Mediators worked in teams to help peers resolve disputes, sometimes in informal settings and more often in scheduled confidential meetings. Disputants could request a mediation, or they could be referred by teachers, administrators, or peers.

The author visited each of the seventeen schools for a full day to interview teachers and other professional staff in brief (ten- to twenty-minute) semistructured interviews, individually or in small groups. Four hundred twenty-three school personnel were interviewed; 85 percent were teachers; 4 percent, teachers assistants; 3 percent, administrators; 4 percent, counselors; and 3 percent, other professional staff. One hundred sixteen were interviewed individually and 307 in groups of two to thirteen people; the median size of the groups was four persons.

In addition, in the fourteen schools with programs, all teachers and staff received a questionnaire by mail asking them to evaluate the program's impact. Three hundred four were returned completed, a response rate of 33 percent. Because these questionnaires were designed to elicit information about the impact of programs, personnel in the three schools without programs did not receive the questionnaires and participated only through interviews. Comparisons with the schools without programs are based on the interviews alone.

The original design of the study also included gathering data over a three-year period on the incidence of fights, disciplinary referrals, detentions, suspensions, and expulsions. However, all schools did not provide the data, and some schools reported data inconsistently; so it was not possible to use the information for this analysis.

Results

Interviews with school personnel yielded two types of information: first, perceptions of the impact of conflict resolution and peer mediation programs, and second, identification of problems in implementing and sustaining programs.

Perceptions of School Personnel on the Impact of Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation. It is, of course, difficult to isolate the impact of conflict resolution and peer mediation programs. Program effects were intertwined with effects of other factors such as management style of administrators, varying classroom management practices of teachers, introduction of related programs such as character education and police officers in schools, and changing composition of students in classes and schools. Moreover, perceptions of teachers and staff varied at every school: some believed strongly in the programs, and others were skeptical. Nevertheless, there were some common themes that emerged from the responses of school personnel regarding discipline, curriculum, teaching methods and class management, and school culture (Raider, 1995).

Discipline. Most school personnel believed that the programs enhanced schoolwide discipline by providing an alternative for dealing with student behavior within the system. Teachers reported fewer fights and suspensions. They were happy to have a constructive way of dealing with students' behavior. Some pointed out that peer mediation had helped unite the forces that bring about better discipline in the school as a whole. Though more counselors and smaller classes were needed to provide personal attention for students, peer mediation had the additional advantage that peers listen to student needs and reinforce constructive behavior.

Thirty-eight percent of respondents to the questionnaire believed that, since the start of the programs, fighting at their school had decreased to a moderate or great degree, and 53 percent believed their school was safer to a moderate or great degree (Table 1, questions 1 and 2). Over half of the respondents believed

Table 1. Perceptions of Impact of Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation Programs in Elementary, Middle, and High Schools

	Percentage				
	To a Great Degree	*To a Moderate Degree*	*To a Small Degree*	*Not at All*	*Number of Responses*
Discipline					
1. To what degree has fighting decreased in the school since the start of the program?	9.5	28.9	48.3	13.3	263
2. To what degree has the peer mediation and conflict resolution program contributed toward a safer environment at your school?	9.6	43.6	36.4	10.4	280
3. To what degree have students begun to use peer mediation to resolve conflicts at your school?	9.7	46.2	36.5	7.7	299
4. To what degree have you referred students to mediation?	10.3	29.6	30.2	29.9	301
Curriculum					
5. To what degree have you integrated the skills and concepts from the conflict resolution curriculum into the curricula you teach?	14.5	32.6	35.5	17.4	276
Teaching Methods and Class Management					
6. To what degree have you used conflict resolution techniques for dealing with classroom management-discipline?	19.5	40.4	31.5	8.6	292
School Culture					
7. To what degree have students begun to use the skills taught in conflict resolution to resolve conflicts at your school?	6.9	42.8	46.2	4.1	290
8. To what degree have students begun to take responsibility for solving their own problems without asking an adult for help?	2.7	29.3	62.2	5.8	294
9. To what degree do students use communication skills to deal with interpersonal problems?	3.4	39.9	53.7	3.0	296

Note: Numbers are in percentages (except in last category—*Number of Responses*). Respondents were school personnel from five elementary schools, five middle schools, and four high schools. Of 304 respondents, 75 percent were teachers; 10 percent, teacher assistants; 7 percent counselors; 3 percent, administrators; and 5 percent others.

Source: The questionnaire was developed by Blythe Tennent.

that students had begun to use peer mediation to resolve conflicts to a moderate or great degree, and four of ten had referred students to mediation to a moderate or great degree (questions 3 and 4).

Frequently, school staff spoke about the time peer mediation saved them, for teaching or for more serious administrative discipline or counseling. A teacher said, "There are times when I'm so glad to be able to say, 'We're going to teach now. You're going to get to go to peer mediation over this now. Would you let go a minute, because help's coming?' That has bought some real teaching time for me, knowing the child has something to go to."

A middle school assistant principal pointed out that peer mediation had solved some problems that might also have been solved by an administrator; but with administrative discipline, the students are more likely still to be angry at the end of the process. Another said, "We rely on peer mediation tremendously. Often, when students come to me, I refer students to mediation. . . . It keeps them out of the administrative loop. I know it's made my life better, and it's made life better for a lot of kids."

In the schools without conflict resolution and peer mediation programs, on the other hand, peer mediation was simply not available as one of the options within the schoolwide discipline system. Otherwise, teacher attitudes about discipline were similar in both groups of schools. Teachers in both groups valued consistency and fairness, and they appreciated the support of administrators when it was necessary to refer students to the office. Teachers in both groups of schools also discussed the difficulty of achieving consistency throughout a school, given the differing attitudes and practices of individual teachers. The main difference was that schools with peer mediation had an additional option in their discipline system, one that was widely appreciated by administrators and teachers.

Curriculum. The conflict resolution and peer mediation programs affected the curriculum of the schools in several ways. First, conflict resolution–negotiation training was integrated into the curriculum for the whole student body. Some high schools taught a series of lessons in ninth-grade classes, such as health or adviser-advisee classes. Some middle schools taught a series of lessons each year in health classes. In elementary schools, counselors often went into classrooms to teach conflict resolution.

Second, training and practice specifically for peer mediators, though sometimes an extracurricular activity, often was part of the curriculum. In some high schools, mediators were trained in an elective class, Peer Helping I, which also included peer counseling and tutoring. Peer mediation training constituted about one-third of these courses, about twenty to twenty-two hours. Students completing Peer Helping I could then apply for admission to one or more semesters of Peer Helping II, in which they did a combination of mediation, counseling, and tutoring on a regular schedule.

Third, some teachers who had been exposed to training in mediation, cooperative learning, or social skills education incorporated conflict resolution into their own curriculum. One tenth-grade teacher of world literature taught

students listening skills, so they could learn to appreciate "other people's stories" as well as "my story." Others reported teaching about conflict resolution in "teachable moments." One of the middle schools included conflict resolution in an elective class on Life Skills. Almost half of survey respondents integrated skills and concepts from the conflict resolution curriculum into the curricula they taught (Table 1, question 5).

A fourth influence on the curriculum was observed in the widespread agreement that teaching conflict resolution skills for lifelong use, as well as academic skills, is a legitimate aim of schools. One teacher remarked, "Students learn appropriate interpersonal skills which will help them in various settings and relationships during adolescence and adulthood. It's a very worthwhile program because it promotes lifelong learning–coping strategies."

In schools without programs, there was no formal conflict resolution training included in the curriculum for all students. However, the comparison schools did have conflict resolution training for small groups of students. In the middle school, there was a weekend of training in peer counseling for Natural Helpers. In the high school, some conflict resolution training was part of the Tech Prep curriculum. In the elementary school, the counselor taught skills to a small group of students who had been involved in conflicts.

Teaching Methods and Class Management. Many teachers spoke of the importance of modeling constructive conflict resolution in their relationships with students in the classroom, and many teachers had long practiced informal mediation. Sixty percent of teachers reported using conflict resolution techniques for class management and discipline to a moderate or great degree (Table 1, question 6). They reported that their exposure to conflict resolution training had influenced and enriched their own teaching methods and classroom management, enhancing their skills of listening, communicating in a nonthreatening way, and solving problems. For example, an elementary teacher said:

> When I first started teaching, I had such a tendency, because of the way I was raised, to sort of jump in and take sides with one kid. Like if I saw a kid hit another kid, well that kid was guilty. By golly, that was all there was. Because hitting is just not OK. But then, it was like all the things that led up to it. I don't think I was real good about getting to the bottom of it. So I don't know if that would be a helpful thing for teachers, it might be. I was really impressed with the way the Mediation Center would train the teachers to get both sides of the story. It was amazing what you find out; like, golly, I've found out *this* part of it! And also, about kids being able to take the other kid's perspective.

In the comparison schools, without formal conflict resolution programs, teachers also had creative ways of teaching and managing classrooms; some

intuitively used methods central to the conflict resolution approach; many used informal brief mediations. However, there was a difference in emphasis: teachers in the comparison schools were more likely to intervene in student conflicts, to set their own rules for the class, and to tell students to come to an adult for help first. In contrast, teachers in schools with programs used the language of conflict resolution more often and were aware of having these additional techniques in their "bag of tricks."

School Culture—Teaching Students to Take Responsibility for Their Actions. One of the themes of the teachers' comments was that conflict resolution programs encouraged students to take responsibility for their actions. Respondents reported positive changes in behavior: students were solving their own problems and using the language of constructive problem solving, such as *I-messages.* A teacher commented, "It empowers students. It helps students feel in control of their lives and their actions, when conflicts can be resolved without adults." Another said, "Students feel they are doing something worthwhile; they are part of the school process." Fifty percent of school personnel reported that students had begun to use conflict resolution skills to resolve conflicts at the school to a moderate or great degree (Table 1, question 7). Thirty-two percent said students had begun to take responsibility for solving their own problems without asking an adult for help to a moderate or great degree (question 8). Forty-three percent believed students used communication skills to deal with interpersonal problems to a moderate or great degree (question 9).

Though there were diverse viewpoints in every school, a number of students, administrators, and teachers who had been skeptical at first had seen enough positive results to make them more receptive to the program. The majority of administrators and teachers understood the philosophy of the program and were supportive. Though some students, especially in high school, initially thought that mediation is "not cool," many of them changed their minds. One high school mediator said, "Usually people don't like the idea of mediation, until after they come in and do it. We don't make decisions for anybody. We don't give advice. They solve the problem." For some students, mediation was better, at least, than punishment. In schools where programs had been established for three years or more, students more often took the initiative in asking for mediation or suggesting mediation for another student.

Comparing schools with and without conflict resolution programs, the goals of teachers were similar, but there was a difference in the teachers' vision of how to teach responsibility. Teachers in schools without programs were more likely to emphasize students' coming to the teacher for help. Teachers in schools with programs were more likely to add another dimension—students' learning how to listen, to assert themselves in nonthreatening ways, and to solve their own problems step-by-step. The enlarged vision of how to teach responsibility can be attributed to the exposure of school personnel to conflict resolution training, the visibility of peer mediation and conflict resolution programs in

their schools, and the positive experience of teachers and administrators with these programs over a period of up to seven years.

In summary then, the impact of peer mediation and conflict resolution programs was evident in four interrelated areas of the life of the schools: the schoolwide discipline system had an additional option, making it more flexible in dealing with student behavior. The curriculum was enriched with specific skills useful for school, home, and adult life. Teachers were trained in skills that helped in their teaching and class management. The culture of schools included an enlarged vision of students taking responsibility for their own actions.

Teachers and administrators who had seen conflict resolution programs work believed in their usefulness. They valued conflict resolution not simply as a means of improving discipline in their school (although this is certainly one goal) but also for teaching attitudes and skills for lifelong use. Implicitly then, teachers interpreted conflict resolution and mediation as *transformative* (Bush and Folger, 1994; Folger and Bush, 1996). Conflict resolution was part of moral education, the aim of which is to change individuals, to empower them, and to enable them to respect and recognize the needs and goals of others.

Problems Identified by School Personnel. For teachers in elementary, middle, and high schools, there were two major problems in teaching conflict resolution that were mentioned frequently—the lack of time and the influence of families and society. In addition, there were several common problems of implementing and sustaining conflict resolution and mediation programs—providing sufficient staff resources and leadership, keeping the whole school community informed, effecting more training of teachers, working with both at-risk and average students, overcoming student and teacher resistance to conflict resolution and mediation, countering disputants' using mediation to get out of class, and selecting and supervising mediators.

Lack of Time. Teachers reported intense time pressures, resulting from mandates from state and school district to cover designated curricula and to prepare students for state testing, from coping with large classes, and from dealing with students with difficult behavior and academic problems. Teachers wanted more time to deal with academic and personal problems of individual students. The lack of time limited some teachers' willingness to attend workshops, include conflict resolution as part of their curriculum, and allow students to leave classes for mediation. Even teachers sympathetic with the aims of peer mediation questioned the timing of students' leaving classes, especially academic classes. These problems were more intense during the first year or two of the program, when "everyone wanted to go to mediation." By the third or fourth year, these problems were frequently under better control. Many mediations were done during lunch period or during nonacademic classes. When it was necessary to call disputants out of academic classes, coordinators worked with teachers to make sure students were called out of class at convenient times. Some teachers were concerned about the length of time

it takes to solve a problem through formal mediation compared with a quick solution by a teacher or by the disputants themselves. Though recognizing the long-term benefits of mediation for the disputants, they felt that some disputes were not serious enough to spend so much time on.

Influence of Families and Society. Often teachers spoke of the influence of the home, neighborhood, and community on students. Among low-income families, children often have only one parent and sometimes no parents; others have immature parents. At all income levels, where there are two parents, both may be working, often for long hours. Many parents of all social classes lack parenting and conflict resolution skills. There is spousal abuse, drug and alcohol addiction, and physical abuse of children. Teachers recognized that these powerful socializing influences have been affecting students since birth, and continue to do so for many hours each day and week, leaving the school as only one influence, often rather weak, on the child. As one teacher said, "We cannot fix something in five hours that has taken a lifetime." Several schools had tried offering workshops or programs for parents, but teachers did not feel these programs had been effective in reaching the families who needed it most. Moreover, even when a child's family has one or more caring adults, the neighborhood environment of many children is permeated with violence, crime, and drugs. Beyond this is the influence of the wider community and the mass media, especially television, which attracts audiences with entertainment about violence, crime, and destructive conflict. Teachers felt that schools alone cannot solve these problems.

Staff Resources and Leadership. Some schools did not have resources to provide strong, consistent leadership for conflict resolution and peer mediation programs. Coordinators need to have enough time to select, train, and supervise mediators; keep the program visible in the school; and work with administrators and teachers to integrate it into the overall discipline system of the school. Often, coordinators teach conflict resolution in the classrooms as well. Most frequently, but not always, counselors provide the leadership of the program, sometimes with help from other teachers in the school. In some schools, coordinators are supported by specially funded programs, such as the Student Assistant Program. Peer mediation is usually only one of many responsibilities of the coordinators.

Keeping the Whole School Community Informed. Teachers sometimes lacked information about what was going on in the school as a whole, saying, "I can tell you what is going on my own classroom, but I really don't know what is going on in the school as a whole." "I don't know whether we still have a mediation program or not." "This is my first year here, and I am not sure what we do in conflict resolution." "I don't know how the mediators are chosen." "I have no idea how many mediations take place or what the results are." "I don't know how to refer students to mediation." The problem was present even in schools with strong, well-established programs, in schools where all teachers had received orientation at the beginning of the program. The problem is especially

common among teachers relatively new to a school. Each school had made efforts to keep the whole school community informed about mediation and conflict resolution. Peer mediators often publicized the program, with posters and flyers, programs at assemblies, and presentations in classes of first-year students. In some schools, giving all students and teachers input into the nomination process helped keep everyone informed.

Need for More Training of Teachers. Frequently, teachers said they would like to have more training in the teaching of conflict resolution skills. Teaching conflict resolution was not included in their teacher preparation. Counselors were trained in conflict resolution, but not always in techniques of mediation. The only training most teachers had was that provided by community mediation centers. Every year, new teachers who had not been trained came into the schools. Those who had been trained said they would like refresher courses and teaching resources. Most K–3 teachers had not yet been exposed to conflict resolution training, nor did they include conflict resolution training in their teaching.

Problems of Working with Both At-Risk and Average Students. Teachers said many conflicts in their classrooms and schools were caused by a small minority of at-risk students. These students brought multiple problems—difficult home environments, low academic achievement, low motivation, and lack of social skills. It was difficult to teach at-risk students in large classes with mostly average students. Understandably, at-risk students were seldom nominated by teachers or other students for mediator training, yet they would benefit immeasurably from such training. Many teachers favored alternative schools, programs, and special opportunities for conflict resolution training for at-risk students.

Student and Teacher Resistance to Conflict Resolution and Mediation. Some teachers, although not a majority, felt that enough students or teachers did not *buy into the program,* lessening its effectiveness. A small number of teachers, expressed in interviews and surveys, believed that the program was a waste of time, or that it had not made any appreciable difference in the school, or that students were not mature enough to handle mediations, or that more traditional methods like corporal punishment should be brought back into schools. On the other hand, some teachers reported that although skeptical at first, after several years of the program, they had become convinced of its value by their own experience with students who had solved disputes through mediation.

Disputants' Using Mediation to Get Out of Class. Frequently, teachers said that some students, especially at the beginning, used the opportunity for mediation as an excuse to get out of class. Student mediators and adult coordinators were also aware of this problem and had taken steps to deal with it. Some schools limited the number of times a student may have a dispute mediated during one academic year. Experienced mediators had learned to assess how serious disputants are and to cut short unproductive sessions. In most schools, this problem diminished as the program developed over the years.

Selecting and Supervising Mediators. Although most teachers praised the work of peer mediators, some teachers believed that mediators lacked matu-

rity or were not representative of the whole student body. Each school, whatever its process for nominating and selecting mediators, attempted to represent the student body in terms of gender, ethnicity, social background, and academic achievement. At the same time, mediators were given real responsibility and freedom; to be effective, they had to be mature enough to handle this responsibility. By involving as many different groups as possible in the nomination process—students, current mediators, teachers, and counselors, the schools were addressing the problem of representation. By careful screening before final selection, as well as careful supervision of the mediators, helping them evaluate their mediations and learn from their mistakes, schools were addressing the problem of maturity.

Discussion: Elements of High-Quality Programs

On the basis of the perceptions of school personnel about the impact and problems of implementing conflict resolution and peer mediation programs, what can be learned about the elements of a high-quality program? What factors make it more likely that the programs will become successfully institutionalized? I suggest at least the following elements:

1. *Recognition that school programs alone are no panacea, given the influence of families and communities on students.* The insights of teachers and other school professionals corroborate those of critics and researchers on this point. Recognition of this reality, as urged by Webster (1993), along with complementary efforts to address these problems at their source, make advocates of school conflict resolution more credible to teachers. This means developing programs for communities and neighborhoods; for parents of young children; and for preschool, Head Start, kindergarten, and early elementary grades. As these are skills that are best learned in early childhood, early efforts will have the greatest long-term effects (Reiss and Roth, 1993). High-quality school programs, then, should be part of a larger strategy that includes addressing conflict resolution in families and the community.

2. *Long-term commitment.* It takes several years for a program to become institutionalized (Raider, 1995; Johnson and Johnson, 1995b). Public schools are buffeted by many pressures for new programs to deal with newly felt urgency about one problem after another. In the competition for time and resources, conflict resolution programs may be neglected. Questions of logistics and problems of implementation inevitably arise. The concepts and skills are difficult to learn. They are different from what many students and teachers experience in their homes and in the wider society. Some teachers and students understandably resist these new ideas. Time is needed for them to see for themselves that the programs do work and can make a positive contribution to the school.

3. *Programs designed to meet needs of both at-risk and average students.* Most violence and other disruptive behavior is caused by a small minority of students whose needs are quite different from those of average students (Webster,

1993). Students from low-income neighborhoods often must deal with far more difficult environments than middle-class students and have developed different attitudes toward conflict (Opotow, 1991). Conflict resolution programs should develop strategies for dealing with both kinds of students. Alternative programs, such as conflict resolution training as a part of out-of-school suspension, are such a possibility.

4. *Support from school administrators who understand the philosophy of conflict resolution, encourage teachers to include it in their teaching methods and curriculum, and refer students to mediation.* The principal sets the tone for the climate and culture of the school; teachers and students are well aware of what methods of discipline and teaching are favored by the principal. It is, of course, much easier for the principal to give strong support if the school district also does so. Another crucial aspect of the administration's role is to allocate sufficient staff time. A coordinator with adequate time is needed to supervise the peer mediation program thoroughly, including recruitment and selection of mediators, training, follow-up, refresher training, and keeping the program visible and the whole school informed.

5. *High-quality training and refresher workshops for school personnel who are teaching conflict resolution and coordinating mediation programs.* This develops a strong core leadership group of teachers who thoroughly understand and are committed to the program. Programs adapted to the needs of each school should be developed in dialogue with professionals and parents at the school. The whole faculty should be trained so they can incorporate the skills into their classroom management, teaching methods, and curricula. The training must be sufficiently long and intensive and provide enough time to practice skills so that teachers internalize them. Integration of peer mediation and conflict resolution with the academic goals of the school is important for increasing its chance of permanence (Stevahn and others, 1996).

6. *Continued involvement and support by community mediation center staff and volunteers.* Opportunities for training and retraining are needed each year as new untrained teachers come into the school. There is constant need for explanation and interpretation of the concepts of conflict resolution and mediation, for many people have never been exposed to them. People often assume, for example, that mediators suggest or impose solutions on disputants. For most teachers, the only training they receive is the in-service training provided by community mediation centers. In the long run, colleges of education should teach conflict resolution to all beginning teachers, as it is often taught to students in business and law (Raider, 1995). For the foreseeable future, however, the support of community mediation centers is absolutely essential for implementing and sustaining effective conflict resolution training in public schools.

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