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ABSTRACT

This paper is a summary report of a study of the effects of training in conflict resolution and cooperative learning in an alternative high school in New York City. Three of the school's four campuses participated, with Campus A receiving conflict resolution training, Campus C receiving cooperative learning training, and Campus B receiving training in both. For 2 years, staff training occurred at all three campuses in the form of after-school workshops. The student training in cooperative learning involved five principles: (1) positive interdependence; (2) fact-to-face interactions; (3) individual accountability; (4) interpersonal and small group skills; and (5) processing (analysis of group functioning with the goal of improvement). The conflict resolution training taught active listening, "I" messages, reframing the issues in conflict, criticizing ideas and not people, differentiating between underlying needs versus positions, distinguishing between negotiable and non-negotiable conflict situations, developing "win-win" solutions, and destructive and constructive negotiation styles. Data were collected with questionnaires to 350 students before and after training, performance ratings of students, teacher behavior evaluations, and supplemental interviews. The results indicate positive effects on the students. As students improved in managing conflicts they experienced increased social support, improved relations, higher self-esteem, increases in personal control, and higher academic performance. Included are 10 references. (JB)

Summary Report*

The Effects of Training in Conflict Resolution and Cooperative Learning in an Alternative High School**

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Introduction

In the spring of 1988, an important and unique project was initiated by the staff of the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution (ICCCR) at one of the alternative high schools in New York City, which we will refer to as AHS. The project was aimed at finding out what effects the introduction of cooperative learning and training in constructive conflict resolution would have upon the students in AHS. Prior to this project, research on cooperative learning had indicated that it had rather positive effects on students under the favorable conditions of experimental classrooms; little research had been done on the effects of training in conflict resolution but psychological theory would suggest that it too would have positive effects. We were interested in seeing whether such effects could be obtained under the difficult circumstances typically found in a New York City alternative high school.

Summary of Results

The results of our study indicate quite positive effects on the students of our training in conflict resolution and cooperative learning. In brief, our data show that as students improved in managing their conflicts (whether due to the training in conflict

* The full report is available for $40.00 from ICCCR, Box 53, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY, 10027, (212) 678-3402.
** The authors of the report on which this summary is based are: Morton Deutsch, Vernay Mitchell, Quanwu Zhang, Nidhi Khattri, Lela Tepavac, Eben A. Weitzman, and Robin Lynch. The trainers were Ellen Raider, Denise Davis-Pack, Lynn Fine, and Janet Clausi.

resolution and/or cooperative learning), they experienced increased social support and less victimization from others. This improvement in their relations with others led to increased self-esteem as well as a decrease in feelings of anxiety and depression and more frequent positive feelings of well-being. The higher self-esteem, in turn, produced a greater sense of personal control over their own fates. The increases in their sense of personal control and in their positive feelings of well-being led to higher academic performances. There is also indirect evidence that the work readiness and work performance of students were improved by their exposure to the training. Our data, further, indicate that "consumer satisfaction" with the training and its results were quite favorable--the students, teachers, and administrators had generally positive views.[1]

These positive results were obtained despite the difficulties we experienced in implementing the training and conducting the research as we had originally planned: not the least of which was the curtailment of funds which reduced the length of training and research from three to two years. We believe the results would have been even stronger had our project continued as long as originally planned. However, despite the "noise" created by the problems we experienced, the consistent pattern of findings described above emerged from the statistical analyses of our quantitative data; our qualitative data are in accord with these findings.

The Training in Cooperative Learning and Conflict Resolution

Our project was initiated with the strong support of the Principal and Assistant Principal of AHS. With their approval, members of our staff then met with the faculty at each of the four campuses of AHS to see if a substantial majority in each campus would be willing to cooperate with us in both the training and research aspects of our project. At a faculty meeting at each campus, we described briefly the nature of the trainings in cooperative learning and conflict resolution as well as the research requirements that we

had. In three of the four campuses, such cooperation was obtained but a pending administrative reorganization made the fourth campus unwilling to participate.

Given the participation of three campuses in our project, we decided that at one campus, Campus A, there would be training only in conflict resolution; at another campus, Campus C, there would be training only in cooperative learning; and in the third, Campus B, there would be training in both. Although we expected that there would be considerable overlap in the effects of these two modes of training since both aim to develop similar social skills (e.g., skills in communicating, perspective-taking, social problem-solving, finding common ground, and sharing), we thought there might also be interesting differences. There is more emphasis on "group process skills" and working together effectively in cooperative learning while in conflict resolution training there is more emphasis on violence prevention and the process of negotiation. We also thought that the combination of both types of training would be synergistic: a cooperative orientation would facilitate conflict resolution, constructive resolution of conflicts would deepen cooperation. By having the different types of training at the three campuses, we hoped to explore these matters.

Initial training of the administrators, coordinators, teachers, and paraprofessionals took place in August 1988; almost all of the eligible people participated in the initial training except for several who had unbreakable prior commitments. There were three days of conflict resolution training for people from Campuses A and B and two days of training in cooperative learning for those from Campuses B and C. During the 1988-89 and 1989-90 school years, training of the teachers continued at each of the three campuses. At Campus A the training focus was conflict resolution for both years; at Campus C for both years it was cooperative learning; at Campus B the focus was on conflict resolution in the first year and cooperative learning and conflict resolution in the second year. Training usually took

the form of two hours of after-school training workshops about twice a month with the trainer on campus one day per week for individual staff development.

The training model which we used for cooperative learning is the model developed by David and Roger Johnson of the Cooperative Learning Center at the University of Minnesota. Our trainers in this area were trained by the Johnsons. There are five key elements involved in cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1986). The most important is positive interdependence. Students must perceive that it is to their advantage if other students learn well and that it is to their disadvantage if others do poorly. This can be achieved in many different ways -- e.g., through mutual goals (goal interdependence); division of labor (task interdependence); dividing resources, materials, or information among group members (resource interdependence); and by giving joint rewards (reward interdependence).

In addition, cooperative learning requires face-to-face interaction among students in which their positive interdependence can be expressed in behavior. It also requires individual accountability of each member of the cooperative learning group to one another for mastering the material to be learned and for providing appropriate support and assistance to each other. Further, it is necessary for the students to be trained in the interpersonal and small group skills needed for effective cooperative work in groups. Finally, cooperative learning also involves providing students with the time and procedures for processing or analyzing how well their learning groups are functioning and what can be done to improve how they work together.

The model for training in conflict resolution drew upon several sources: (1) a theoretical model developed by Deutsch (1991) which articulates a number of basic principles of training in conflict resolution; (2) a training model originated by Raider (1987) which has been widely used in training managers and teachers in conflict resolution; (3) a curriculum on violence prevention developed by Prothrow-Stith (1987); and (4) curricula

for conflict resolution and mediation developed by Sadalla, Henriquez, and Holmberg (1987) of the San Francisco Community Board for use in the schools. It should be emphasized that conflict resolution training was implemented very flexibly depending upon the context in which it was to be employed -- orientation sessions for new students, Family Groups, vocational classes, etc.

Such basic negotiation skills as the following were to be discussed:

Active listening: checking to see whether you understand the other person correctly and whether he/she understands you correctly.

"I" messages: telling the other person what you think, not reading the other person's mind and telling him/her what he/she thinks.

"Needs" versus "positions": talking about the needs, interests, and feelings of you and the other person rather than your opposing positions.

Negotiable versus non-negotiable conflicts: kinds of conflicts which should be avoided because there are no good solutions.

Individual conflict style: how you personally tend to deal with most conflicts; what kinds of conflict styles different people have.

Putting yourself in the other peoples' shoes: how other peoples' view points might be different from yours; how to understand the other person's point of view.

Anger and violence: how anger affects your ability to handle conflict; how violence can be avoided even when you're very angry.

Reframing the issues in conflict: talking about the issues in other ways to find more common ground between yourself and the other person.

Criticize ideas and not people: criticize what people say rather than who or what they are.

"Win-win" solutions to conflict versus compromises: finding solutions where everyone gets what they need, rather than solutions where everyone gets some of what they need.

Role play, group activities, and discussion groups were to be utilized in the practical application of negotiation skills to the students' lives in home, school, and work settings.

Mediation skills were also to be taught. The students would have the opportunity to practice mediation by facilitating constructive conflict resolution. It was assumed that helping others would reinforce one's desire to use the newly learned skills in one's own conflicts.

Theory

Based upon Deutsch's (1949a, b; 1973; and 1985) and Johnson and Johnson's prior theoretical work (summarized in their 1989 book), we developed a set of theoretical propositions which can be summarized as follows. In brief, we assumed that both types of training would lead to an improvement in the social skills that would facilitate constructive conflict resolution and effective working together with others; we further assumed that training in constructive conflict resolution would particularly enhance the former set of skills while training in cooperative learning would particularly improve the latter type of skills. Next, we posited that an improvement in managing conflict and working together with others would have a positive impact on the students' relations with others which would be reflected in their receiving greater social support from others and being less victimized by others. The increased positiveness of the student's social environment toward him/her would, in turn, lead to greater self-esteem as well as more frequent positive mental states (e.g., "cheerfulness," "life is interesting") and less frequent negative mental states (e.g., "upset," "tense," "depressed"). As the student's self-esteem increased and the social environment became more positive in its responsiveness to him/her, we expected that

the student would feel a greater sense of control over what happened to him/her (internal locus of control). Since prior research has demonstrated a strong relationship between academic achievement and locus of control, we also assumed that an increased sense of control over one's fate would lead to greater academic achievement.

We also assumed that the trainings would lead to better work performance because of the students' improved social skills.

Types of Data Collected

In June, 1988, prior to the start of any training, we administered lengthy questionnaires to 350 of the approximately 540 enrolled students at the three campuses who were then in attendance. The purpose of this initial questionnaire was to obtain information from and about the students prior to the introduction of our training. We also obtained information from questionnaires and interviews administered to students who were in attendance at the three campuses of AHS at the end of the first and second school years after our training was introduced.

The kinds of information and measures contained in the initial questionnaire, and in subsequent questionnaires and interviews as well as in systematic observations and other data we collected, provide an overview of our research objectives. We obtained measures of the student's self-esteem; sense of control over his/her fate; mental and physical health; the social support received from his/her family, school, friends, work, neighborhood, etc.; amount of victimization experienced (e.g., being "insulted or threatened," "physically attacked," "sexually harassed," "forced to hand over money or things"); problem-solving orientation; academic achievement (as measured by RCT scores); work readiness; perceived amount of crime in school; and the perceived social climate of the school.

The student posttest questionnaires, administered after our training had begun, included measures of all the key variables of the initial questionnaire. In addition, it included measures of the student's improvement in working effectively in groups and in

resolving conflicts. It also included a measure of the student's conflict style. Further, it contained questions which pertained directly to the student's experiences with the cooperative learning and/or conflict resolution training. For example, how frequently was he/she in a class which had such training? Which of a list of conflict resolution topics were discussed or which cooperative learning activities were used in their classes? Was the training useful to them? What did they like and dislike about the training?

In addition to the questionnaire filled out by the students, we obtained work performance ratings of a sample of students by their work supervisors at the end of the students' work internships. Also, teachers filled out a Behavior Rating Scale on a sample of their students. Systematic observations were also made of the training sessions, a random sample of students as they followed their daily schedules, and of various classroom and non-classroom activities. These were supplemented by interviews with various members of the teaching and administrative staff.

Results and Conclusions

The major results of our project have been described in the introduction. It is evident that these results are consistent with what one would expect from prior research and theorizing. We are unable, however, to draw any definitive conclusions about the relative effects of the training in conflict resolution as compared with that in cooperative learning. Unfortunately, the campuses differed not only in the training which they received, they also differed in other important respects. It was impossible to disentangle the effects which were due to the campus differences and those due to the training differences. Nevertheless, collectively we have the subjective impression that the combined training was the most effective.

We conclude by stating that our study was conducted under conditions which were considerably more difficult than those under which most prior studies were conducted. The students in our study were more "at-risk," facing more difficult life circumstances, and

were also older; the teachers were working in more adverse conditions, more decrepit buildings, and in a more demoralized educational system than in most previous studies. The fact that our training produced positive results under these difficult conditions and that our results are consistent with prior theorizing and research suggests that cooperative learning and conflict resolution training are valuable in a wide range of educational settings.

Endnote

1. Our data also indicate that the students felt that AHS provided a much more favorable climate than their prior high school. They think that at AHS there are fewer disciplinary problems, less victimization, and less criminal activity among student; students have more opportunity to participate in school policy-making and to control their own work; more group learning occurs; and academic standards are not so difficult nor as discouraging.

It is relevant to ask whether the positive findings about the effects of our training interventions can be attributed to the effects of the favorable school climate at AHS rather than to the training. Our data clearly indicate that the student changes, which we attribute to the effects of the training, can not be explained by student exposure to the more favorable school climate of AHS. In June, 1988, we administered questionnaires to 350 students who were in attendance at AHS for at least a year and in September, 1988, we administered similar questionnaires to 291 entering students. In both instances the students had not yet been exposed to any training in cooperative learning or conflict resolution. Presumably, if the favorable school climate at AHS was the causal factor leading to student improvement on the psychological variables with which we have been concerned, then the students who had been in attendance at AHS would have had more positive scores than the entering students. This is not the case: there are no statistically significant differences favoring the students who had already attended AHS on self-esteem, locus of control, or any of the mental health variables; in fact, the slight (non-significant) differences favor the entering students. We note that this lack of statistically significant differences also speaks against the notion that the "maturation" of the students provides a reasonable alternative explanation of our findings. The students who were attending AHS in June, 1988, were older (average age = 18.3 years) than those who entered in September, 1988 (average age = 17.1 years).

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