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ABSTRACT

This report evaluates the second and third years of conflict resolution programs that were established at both the elementary and secondary levels during the 1991-92 school year. The programs emphasized peer mediation, in which students in conflict meet with a pair of students trained in mediation skills. The mediators attempt to open communication so the disputants can share their perceptions of the conflict and come to a negotiated resolution. The program was assessed through questionnaires in its second year and focus groups and interviews in its third year. Questionnaire results suggested that students trained in the conflict resolution workshops felt they had gained substantial benefits; the programs were interesting and practical, and were useful outside their application to resolving school-based disputes. Some of the focus group participants, however, reported negligible use of their peer mediation skills in actual school situations. Part of the problem with low use may have been due to the definition of what constituted a conflict. Although the peer mediation programs proved successful in many schools, it became clear that the long-term success of programs depended on expanding its role in the school community, specifically in the areas of school discipline/classroom management, and the school curriculum. (RJM)

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An Evaluation of Conflict Resolution Programs at the Secondary Level at the Toronto Board of Education 1993-1994 The Evolution of a Model

January 1995

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Executive Summary

Conflict Resolution pilot programs at both the elementary and secondary levels were established at a number of schools during the 1991-92 school year. At the conclusion of the pilot phase in June 1992, the Board passed a resolution establishing Conflict Resolution for three years, from September 1992 until June 1995. During the pilot year and Years 1 and 2 (1991-94) the focus of the Conflict Resolution Advisory Team was on extending peer mediation. In peer mediation, students in conflict meet with a pair of students trained in mediation skills. The mediators attempt to open communication, so the disputants can share their perceptions of the conflict and come to a negotiated resolution.

Research Services was requested to undertake evaluations of the secondary Conflict Resolution programs from Year 1 to Year 3. It was envisaged that each year the research would have a different focus, and that the research for each year would build upon the results of previous years. The following report contains results for Years 1 and 2. In Year 1, Research Services assisted the Conflict Resolution Advisory Team in administering and analyzing questionnaires given to students, student conflict mediators, and teachers in May and June 1993. In Year 2, focus groups and interviews were conducted with students, teachers, and program administers from two schools, and with program facilitators from the original 1991-92 pilot schools.

Conflict In Toronto Secondary Schools

School Climate-- Most teachers and students had the same generally positive opinions about the school they belonged to, according to Year 1 questionnaire results. Teachers on the whole were more positive than students (sometimes by wide margins).

Frequency of Conflict in the School-- Over half the students in the questionnaire (57%) reported that they had not been involved in any conflicts between January and June 1993, while 43% were involved in more than one conflict (mostly between one and three conflicts). However, when students and teachers discussed what they meant by "conflict" in Year 2 focus groups, it became apparent that this is a concept that varies according to who is talking about it. That is, everyone considered "conflict" and especially "serious conflict" to be a certain level (or threshold) of dispute, but different people had different thresholds. Many students and some teachers defined conflict as referring to physical disputes; others thought school conflict consisted of a widespread level of dispute including rumour and gossip. Teachers and many (although not all) students thought that sexism and racism were "serious" conflicts along with physical conflict. There was a consensus among focus group respondents that students in the Year 1 questionnaire were probably referring to physical conflict.

The malleability of the concept of conflict was illustrated by a Grade 9 student focus group who were asked to comment on the questionnaire results. At the beginning of the session, most claimed they had not yet participated in conflict; after discussing it, most decided that they had participated in at least one conflict during the school year.

It is apparent from focus group results that any measure of "conflict" is going to aggregate diverse perceptions of what conflict is at the time of the questionnaire: it will not be an "objective" measurement.

Gender-- In the Year 1 questionnaire, male students reported that they were involved in conflicts more often than did female students. Year 2 focus group students were not so sure. They observed that male students are more likely to become engaged in physical disputes, but that female students are more likely to engage in other types of conflict like verbal disputes.

Types of Conflict-- Questionnaire results showed that verbal disputes about rumor and gossip are the types of conflict that occur most frequently; physical weapons with fights occur least frequently.

Location-- In questionnaire results, students were more likely to say that most conflicts take place outdoors (53%) while conflict mediators and teachers were more likely to think that conflicts take place in the school hall or other indoor places. The classroom was a distinct third as a location of conflict. Year 2 focus

group discussion backed this up, with both teachers and students noting that teachers do not see most conflicts, because they take place outdoors or away from teachers.

Resolution-- Year 1 questionnaire results showed a pronounced difference in how students and teachers thought conflicts are resolved: most teachers thought conflicts are solved when staff members mediate, yet little more than a quarter of students reported this to be so. Students thought that conflicts are worked out in a variety of ways. Year 2 focus group discussion also indicated a difference in student and teacher perception of teacher mediation. Many thought that some teachers impose a solution, without resolving the conflict behind the solution. Also, because teachers can see only a proportion of student behavior in the school, they often do not see the continuation of the conflict afterwards. Part of the difference may have to do with terminology, because "mediation", like "conflict", means many things to many people.

The Conflict Resolution Program

Attitudes Towards the Program— Year 1 questionnaire results suggest that students trained in the workshops felt they had gained substantial benefits: that the programs were interesting and practical, and were useful outside their application to resolving school-based disputes. Over three quarters of students and teachers agreed that it is important to teach conflict mediation skills to students. Thus, both students and teachers appear to be open-- at least in principle-- to conflict resolution courses in their school. In Year 2 focus groups, students noted that while there were instances where peer mediation and conflict resolution were not feasible, they gave examples where the techniques worked very well.

Difficulties with the Focus on Peer Mediation-- Focus group participants brought up a number of potential reservations that should be carefully examined:

- Most focus group participants reported a low frequency of use of their peer mediation skills in actual school situations. People in the facilitator group expressed concern that if students do not use their mediation skills in working situations, they might forget the skills, and the programs may be discredited. This would appear to be a mismatch of program design and implementation.
- Peer mediation relies on vice-principals for referrals. By implication this means that the type of conflict mediated would be "official" conflict, in that it has been recognized as serious or potentially serious by a staff member, and may be used as an alternative to disciplinary measures. However, "official" conflict is only a proportion of the full range of conflict in a school, not least because much of school conflict occurs out of the range of school staff. If the mediation of "official" conflict is what provides most of the raison d'être of the program, there may, again, be a mismatch between program design and implementation.
- Facilitators noted that many school conflict resolution programs are dependent on a key person or a small number of people, and are very susceptible to staff turnover. If a vice-principal leaves; or a program coordinator; or a few supportive teachers; then a program may falter. If programs are going to survive in secondary schools they will need a broader basis of support.

The Conflict Resolution Initiative in Transition-- During Years 1 and 2 (1992-94) members of the CR team analyzed the research and reviewed the status of each school program. The team concluded that while peer mediation programs were successful in many schools, it was becoming increasingly clear that the long-term success of programs was dependent on expanding Conflict Resolution's role in the school community, specifically in the areas of school discipline/classroom management, and the school curriculum. Year 2 focus group research had recorded this trend, with peer mediation being integrated into already-existing school programs, and offering of credit courses on peer mediation in some schools. A related but important change in direction was the recognition by the Conflict Resolution team that peer mediation should remain an important component of Conflict Resolution, but that that peer mediation is only part of the total skills and community development used in a supportive school development. Changes in program development will be examined in more detail in the research evaluation of Year 3.

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Background

What Is Conflict Resolution?

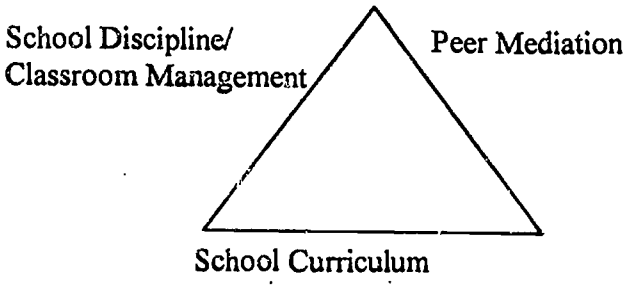
- Conflict Resolution is a process for dealing with conflict in the school system and elsewhere. A central premise of the process is that when conflict is well-managed, it is a normal, positive, and productive feature of human interaction. It is not an attempt to eliminate conflict; rather, it is a process for approaching a conflict and managing it in order to benefit oneself and one's relationships (Kearns, Pickering, and Twist, 1992).
- "Conflict Resolution programs" describe a set of structured activities, skills, and strategies within schools. These include mediation techniques such as peer mediation, and strategies or activities that are intended to be integrated into school curriculum, school discipline, and classroom management.
- These strategies are based on the principle of positive resolution: i.e., "that when handled constructively, conflict presents opportunities for growth and progress. People of any age can acquire skills and understandings that will help them to deal with conflicts in constructive ways." The assumption here is that many (although not all) conflicts have potential solutions that meet the underlying interests and needs of the parties to the dispute. This differs from the paradigm often used in negotiation where it is assumed that one person must win in a conflict and the other will lose, or that both must give up something. (Educators for Social Responsibility, 1994).
- Conflict Resolution is not intended as a type of discipline, i.e. to stop fighting or physical violence, or controlling behavior. Instead, it is intended to provide staff and students with a repertoire of skills and nurturing new ways of thinking about dealing with differences and conflict (Educators for Social Responsibility, 1994).

Conflict Resolution in the Toronto Board

Conflict Resolution pilot programs at both the secondary and elementary levels were established at a number of schools during the 1991-92 school year. At the conclusion of the pilot phase in June 1992, the Board passed a resolution establishing Conflict Resolution for three years, from September 1992 until June 1995.

A Conflict Resolution Advisory Team was first established during Year 1 of the full program, the 1992-93 school year, to support the establishment of school-based Conflict Resolution programs, and to provide training for all staff. This team consisted of secondary and elementary conflict resolution advisors, the Youth Alienation Advisor, and an outside consultant who was an expert on conflict resolution and peer mediation. During Year 1 (1992-93), secondary school programs were on-going at ten secondary schools.

The concept of Conflict Resolution in the secondary system was based on the interrelationship of three elements: Peer Mediation; School Discipline and Classroom Management; and the School Curriculum.



During the pilot year of the program and Years 1 and 2 (1991-94) the focus of the Conflict Resolution Advisory Team was on extending peer mediation. In peer mediation, students in conflict meet with a pair of students trained in mediation skills. The mediators attempt to open communication, so the disputants can share their perceptions of the conflict and come to a negotiated resolution.

Research

Research Services was requested to undertake evaluations of the secondary Conflict Resolution programs during Year 1 (1992-93), Year 2 (1993-94), and Year 3 (1994-95). It was envisaged that each year the research would have a different focus. Year 1 would be primarily quantitative, utilizing questionnaire methodology. Year 2 would be primarily qualitative, utilizing focus group methodology. Year 3 would be both qualitative and quantitative. The plan was that the research for each year would build upon the results of previous years. The following report contains results for Years 1 and 2.

Year 1

Research Services assisted the Conflict Resolution Advisory Team in administering and analyzing questionnaires given to students, student conflict mediators, and teachers, and administrators[1] in May and June 1993. The data was intended to be 'baseline' data, in providing an overall picture of how conflict is perceived and handled in secondary schools. Results were shared with the Advisory Team in a series of meetings between September and December 1993.

Year 2

Focus groups were conducted in May 1994 to enrich analysis of the survey data from Year 1; to get a sense of what people in schools think and feel about conflict resolution; and to get more detailed information about the implementation process in the school. Two secondary schools (one from the east side and one from the west side of the city) were selected, and agreed to participate. For each school there were at least two focus groups of students (one with students who had undertaken conflict mediation training, the other with untrained

[1] Questionnaires for administrators were examined by the Conflict Resolution team but because of small sample size were not analyzed in any systematic way; therefore, they are not included here.

students) and two groups of teachers (those with conflict mediation training and those without). In addition, a key program administrator from each school was interviewed. Finally, facilitators from the original 'pilot' conflict program at secondary schools participated in group discussion, sharing their experiences and perceptions of programs as they were implemented.

1993 Questionnaire Results

A Questionnaires: Sample Description

1. Students

Nine schools[2] with programs in Conflict Resolution were involved in the evaluation. In each school, a homeroom from each grade (9, 10, 11 and 12) was randomly selected for participation. Students completed the questionnaires in early June 1993; 478 students returned their questionnaires, a response rate of 53%. The demographic description of the sample appears to be similar to the demographic description of Toronto schools as available from student records.

Table 1: Student Demographics

Grade	%
Grade 9	24
Grade 10	24
Grade 11	21
Grade 12	26
Grade 13-OAC	4

Age	%
16 or less	45
17 yrs	21
18 yrs	12
19 yrs	9
20 or older	12

Gender	%
female	53
male	47

2. Conflict Mediators

Conflict mediators filled out their questionnaires in workshops held in late May/ early June 1993. 87 Conflict Mediators completed the questionnaire. Compared to the student sample, more conflict mediators are taking courses at the Grade 11 to OAC level; the proportion of females is much higher than the regular student population (62% instead of 53%).

Table 2: Conflict Mediator Demographics

Grade	%
Grade 9	18
Grade 10	18
Grade 11	21
Grade 12	27
Grade 13-OAC	17

Age	%
16 or less	46
17 yrs	24
18 yrs	14
19 yrs	9
20 or older	7

Gender	%
female	62
male	38

[2]The Alternative school system is being considered as one school for the purposes of this study.

3. School Staff

Two hundred fifty-five (255) teaching staff completed the Conflict Resolution questionnaire. This response rate of approximately 34% means that the sample should not be considered to be representative of the total population of teaching staff. However, from responses one might consider this sample as indicative of teaching staff who are supportive of the conflict resolution program.

Table 3: School Staff Demographics

Years of teaching	%
1 or less	10
2-4	20
5-9	14
10-19	22
20 or more	36

Gender	%
female	47
male	53

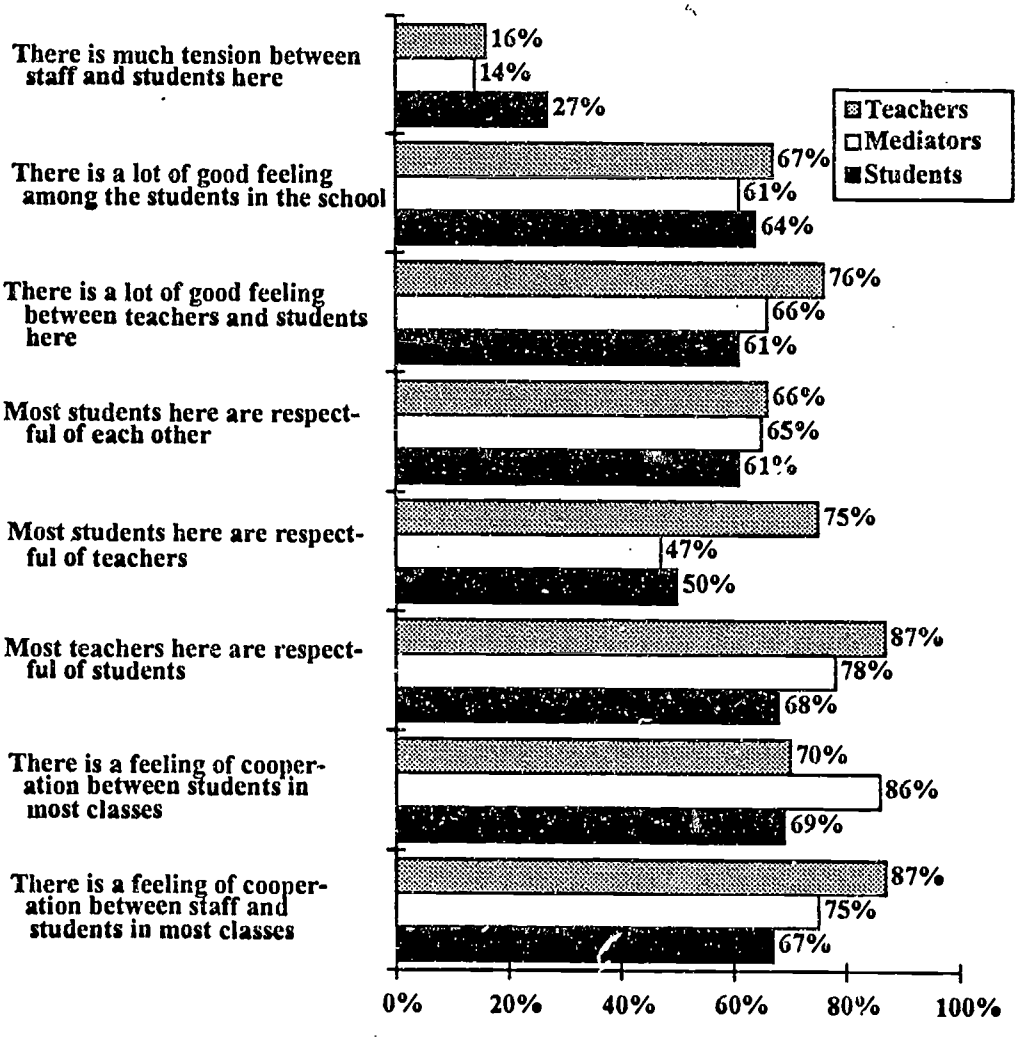
B Statements About Tension in the School

Most students, conflict mediators and teachers had positive attitudes towards the school system and themselves; few felt there was much tension between staff and students, while most thought there was a lot of good feeling between students, and between staff and students; that students were respectful of one another; and that teachers were respectful of students.

One observable difference was that with most statements, teachers tended to be more positive than students. For example,

- three quarters of teachers thought that students were respectful of teachers, while about half of students thought this;
- 76% of teachers thought there was a lot of good feeling between teachers and students, compared to 61-66% of students.

Figure 1: Statements About Tension and Conflict Resolution in the School (% who agreed)



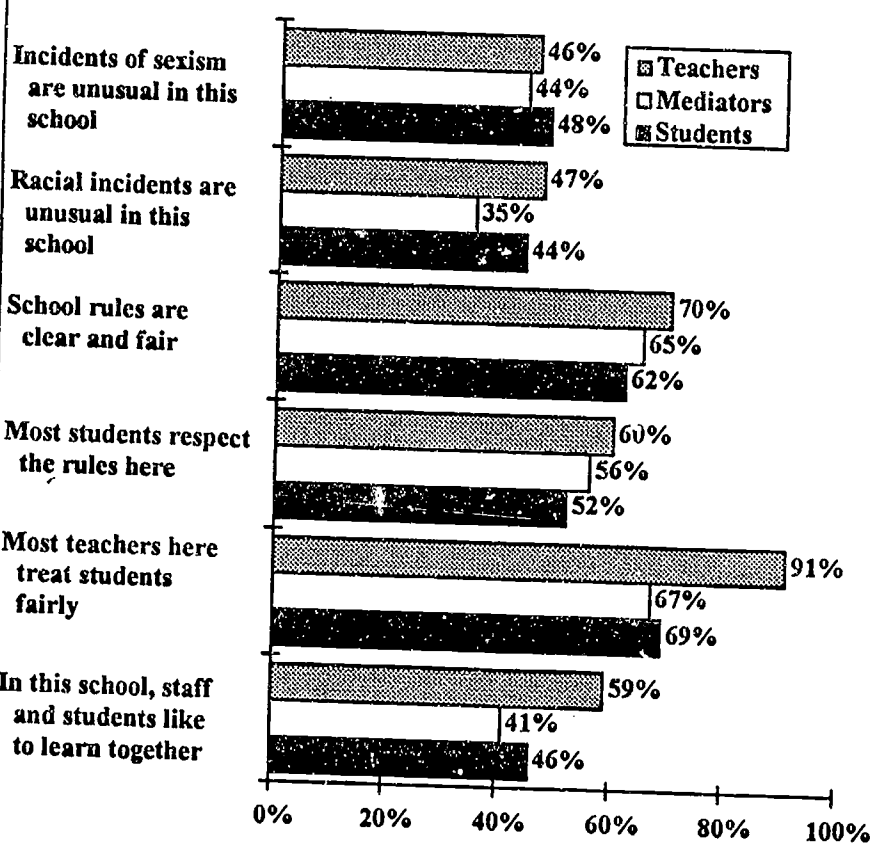
C. Statements About School Atmosphere

Teachers and students held similar pictures of sexism and racism in the school: 46% of teachers and 44- 48% of students thought that incidents of sexism were unusual at the school; 47% of teachers and 44% of students agreed that racial incidents were unusual. (However, only 35% of student mediators agreed that racism was unusual in the school; the majority disagreed.)

A majority of teachers and students agreed that school rules are clear and fair, and that most students respect the rules; however, teachers were **somewhat more likely** to agree than students.

Teachers were **much more** likely to agree that teachers treat students fairly (91% of teachers compared to 67-69% of students) and that in the school, staff and students like to learn together (59% of teachers compared to 41-46% of students).

Figure 2: Statements About School Atmosphere (% who agreed)



D. Statements About Conflict Resolution

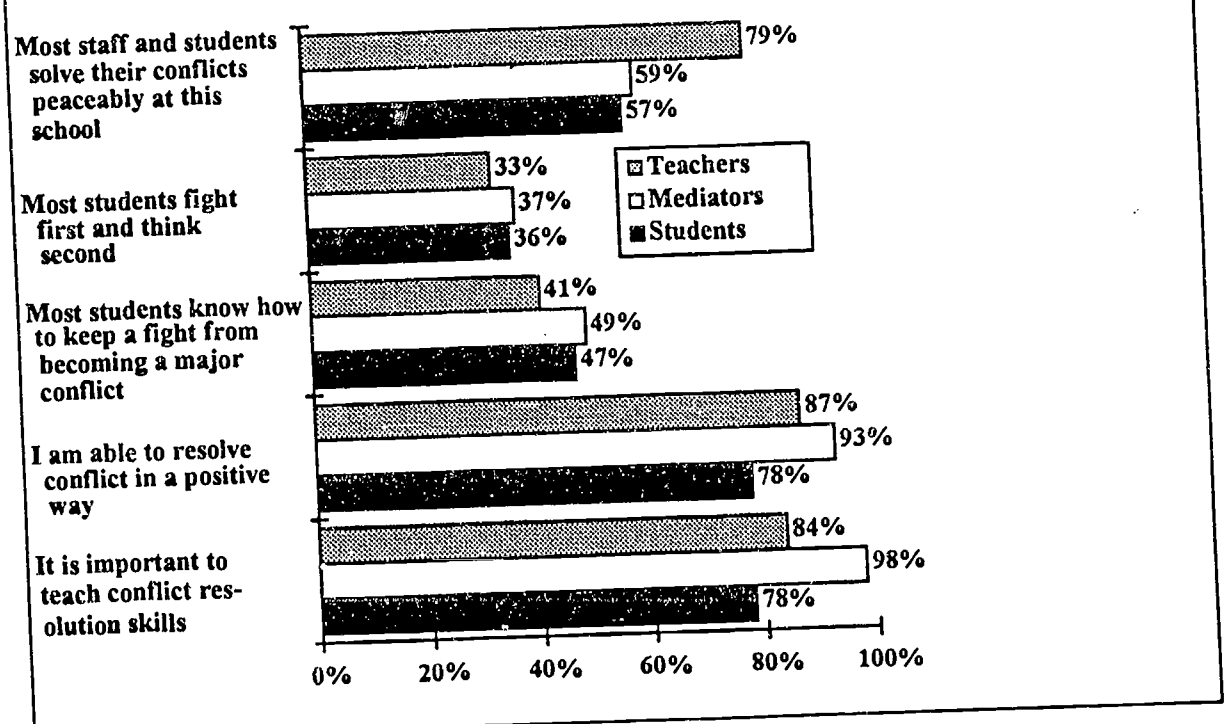
A majority of teachers and students agreed that staff and students solve their conflicts peaceably at the school, but again, teachers were much more likely to agree than students (79% of teachers compared to 57-59% of students).

The attitudes of both teachers and students towards student conflict-solving abilities were somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, only about a third of teachers and students agreed that students fight first and think second (33% of teachers, 36-37% of students). On the other hand, fewer than half agreed that most students know how to keep a dispute from becoming a major conflict (41% of teachers, 47-49% of students). Thus, while most may not think that students are overtly aggressive, there was a less than rousing endorsement of students' abilities to contain a potential conflict.

Yet, at the same time, students and teachers believed that they themselves could solve conflict. 87% of teachers and 78% of students said they had the ability to solve conflicts in a positive way (not surprisingly, nearly all of conflict mediators-- 93%-- said this). Most students therefore may think they can solve the conflicts they come across, while being less confident that their compatriots can do the same.

Regardless of this ambivalence, all groups agreed that it is important to teach conflict resolution skills to students: 84% of teachers, 78% of students and 98% of conflict mediators thought this. [3]

Figure 3: Statements About Conflict Resolution (% who agreed)

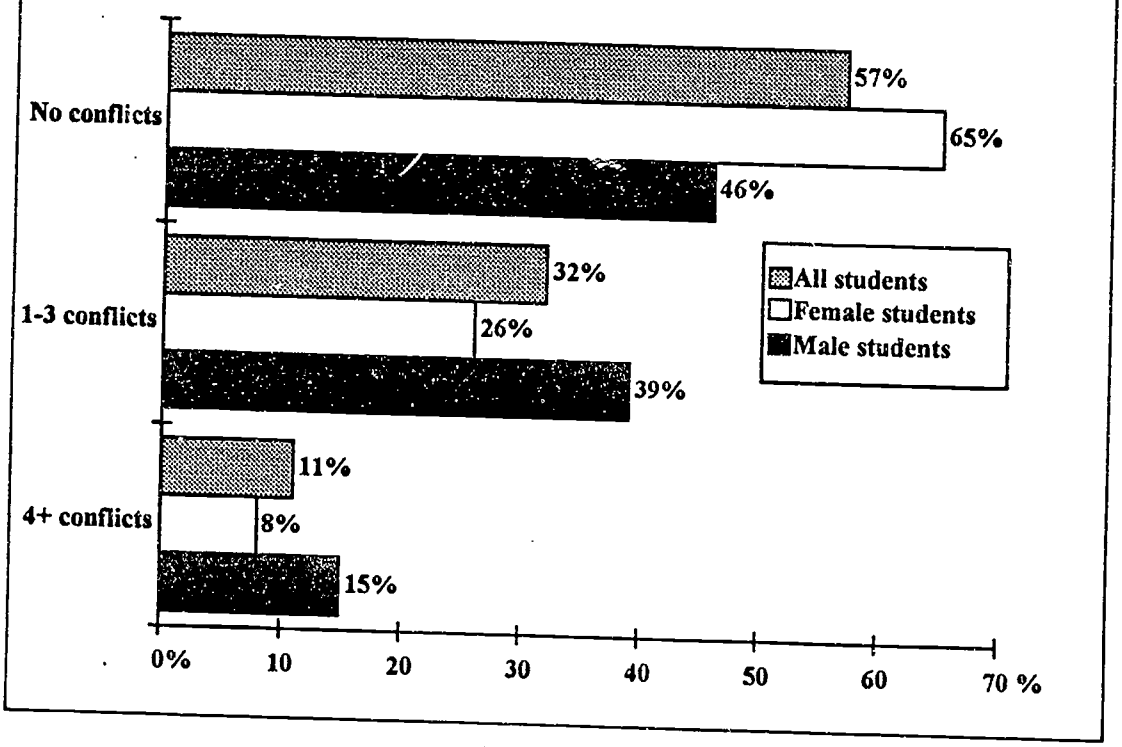


[3]Given that most thought they could solve conflicts themselves, students and teachers may be thinking that conflict resolution is useful, but for others in the school.

E. Frequency of Conflict

Students were asked how many verbal and/or physical conflicts they had been involved in over a six-month period, between January and June 1993. Over half (57%) reported that they had not been involved in any conflicts; a third (32%) reported involvement in one to three conflicts; a tenth (11%) reported involvement in four or more conflicts during that time. Male students reported that they were involved in conflicts more often than did female students.

Figure 4: Reported Frequency of Conflict Among Secondary Students (January to June 1993)



F. Types of Conflict That Happen At School

Participants were asked how often a number of school conflicts occurred. Rankings of types of conflict were similar, although not identical, among the students, conflict mediators, and teachers: all thought that verbal disputes about rumor and gossip occur most frequently; and that physical fights with weapons occur least frequently.

Table 4: Types of Conflict That Happen At School
(% that said conflict happened very often or often; rank in brackets)

Types of Conflict	Students (%)	Conflict Mediators (%)	Teachers (%)
Verbal disputes about rumor and gossip	55 (1)	65 (1)	47 (1)
Verbal disputes about property issues	31 (2)	33 (2)	28 (4)
Verbal disputes about gender relations	27 (3)	28 (3)	44 (2)
Disputes about race/racial issues	19 (4)	25 (4)	31 (3)
Physical fights without weapons	17 (5)	20 (5)	25 (5)
Physical fights with weapons	9 (6)	14 (6)	15 (6)

G. Conflict involvement

The three groups agreed that students are most typically involved in a majority of student conflicts, and that intruders are involved in between a fifth and a third of conflicts. Teachers tended to think that they as a group are more involved in school conflicts (21%) than did students (7%) or conflict mediators (8%).

Table 5: Involvement in School Conflict
(% of sample who said the following were typically involved in conflict at school; rank in brackets)

Who is involved	Students (%)	Conflict Mediators (%)	Teachers (%)
Students	66 (1)	90 (1)	72 (1)
Intruders	21 (2)	31 (2)	33 (2)
Gangs	17 (3)	15 (3)	12 (4)
Staff	7 (4)	8 (4)	21 (3)

H. Response to Conflict

All groups agreed that staff administrators or teachers are most likely to respond to conflicts at their school. However, teachers were much more likely to think this than students: three quarters of teachers thought that administrators usually respond to conflict, but less than half of students thought so. Comparatively few thought that no one usually responds to conflicts.

Table 6: Response to Conflict
(% of sample who said the following usually responded to conflict at school; rank in brackets)

Who Responds	Students (%)	Conflict Mediators (%)	Teachers (%)
Administration	45 (1)	71 (1)	72 (1)
Teachers	37 (2)	61 (2)	66 (2)
Students	21 (3)	29 (3)	22 (3)
Police	14 (4)	7 (4)	20 (4)
No one	9 (5)	6 (5)	4 (5)

I. How Conflicts Are Resolved

There was a fairly pronounced difference in how students and teachers answered this. Most teachers (59%) thought that conflicts are resolved when staff members mediate; slightly over a quarter of students thought this. Students thought that conflicts are worked out in a variety of ways: peer mediation, staff solutions, staff mediation, or everyone working in out themselves. Somewhat less than a fifth of participants thought that conflicts are not usually resolved.

Table 7: How Conflicts Are Resolved at School
(% of sample who said the following strategies usually resolve conflict at school; rank of strategy in brackets)

How Conflicts Solved	Students (%)	Conflict Mediators (%)	Teachers (%)
Student/friend/peer mediates	29 (1)	49 (1)	39 (2)
Staff member chooses solution	28 (2)	49 (1)	29 (3)
Staff member mediates	28 (2)	25 (4)	59 (1)
People in conflict work it out themselves	23 (4)	28 (3)	26 (4)
Conflicts not usually resolved	18 (5)	16 (5)	15 (5)

J. Location of Conflict

Again, there were some interesting differences in how different groups identified the location of most conflicts. Students thought most conflicts take place outdoors (53%); conflict mediators and teachers were more likely to think that conflicts take place in the school hall or other indoor place (50% of teachers, 66% of conflict mediators). The classroom was a distant third location of conflict.

Table 8: Location of Conflict
(% of sample who said the following locations were where conflicts usually happen at school; rank of location in brackets)

School Location	Students (%)	Conflict Mediators (%)	Teachers (%)
Outdoors, on school property	53 (1)	61 (2)	44 (2)
Hall, other indoor space	35 (2)	66 (1)	50 (1)
Classroom	17 (3)	33 (3)	24 (3)
Cafeteria	13 (4)	24 (4)	15 (5)
Washroom	8 (5)	6 (5)	17 (5)

K. Conflict Resolution Courses

Twelve percent of responding students (59 of 478) had taken **conflict resolution** courses at their school and slightly less than half of the conflict mediators had taken these courses (41 of 87, or 47%). Attitudes towards the courses were very positive from those who had taken them, especially from conflict mediators.

Table 9: Statements About Conflict Resolution Courses (% who agreed)

Statement	Students (%)	Conflict Mediators (%)
A. The course was interesting.	81	100
B. The course was practical and therefore worthwhile.	80	100
C. Most students would benefit from a course in conflict resolution.	66	98
D. Most teachers would benefit from learning about conflict resolution.	79	100
E. More courses in conflict resolution should be offered.	64	93
F. I deal with conflict better after taking the course(s).	60	93
G. I understand conflict better now.	76	95
H. I help my family/friends with their conflicts.	61	85
I. The conflict resolution program has made our school a better place.	59	61
J. Most students at this school are in favor of the conflict resolution program.	48	54

(of those 59 students and 41 conflict mediators who took the courses)

L. Experience with Peer Mediation

Half the sample of conflict mediators (51%) had been trained only since January; 47% had not yet had the opportunity to engage in a conflict mediation, while 53% had engaged in one or more mediations (males were more likely to have engaged in four or more mediations). Attitudes towards peer mediation were very positive.

Table 10: Statements About Peer Mediation Courses (% who agreed)

Statement	Conflict Mediators (%)
A. My methods of resolving conflict have changed since I became a peer mediator.	81
B. Most students would benefit from conflict resolution training.	95
C. I am more satisfied with the results of conflict resolution that I was using other methods in the past.	80
D. I enjoy being a peer mediator.	96
E. I have helped others with their conflicts through peer mediation.	77
F. I have helped others with their conflicts outside peer mediation.	77
G. I have helped my school be a better place.	68
H. Mediation skills are good life skills.	98
I. Peer mediation has helped me to learn to resolve on my own difficulties.	88

Summary of Year 1 Research

School Climate and Conflict
Most students, conflict mediators and teachers had positive attitudes towards their school and towards the level of conflict and potential conflict in their school. In most attitude statements, teachers were more positive than students, sometimes by substantial margins.

Types of Conflict
All three groups of participants thought that verbal disputes about rumor and gossip are the types of conflict that occur most frequently; all thought that physical fights with weapons occur least frequently.

Frequency of Conflict
Over half the students (57%) reported they had not been involved in any conflicts between January and June 1993, while 43% were involved in one or more conflicts (mostly between one and three conflicts). Male students reported that they were involved in conflicts more often than did female students.

Who is Involved
Most participants thought that students are typically involved in school conflicts (66% of students and 72% of teachers). Intruders were cited by between a third and fifth of participants; gangs were cited by 12-17% of participants.

Location
Students were more likely to say that most conflicts take place outdoors (53% of students) while conflict mediators and teachers were more likely to think that conflicts take place in the school hall or other indoor places. The classroom was a distant third as a location of conflict.

Resolution
There was a pronounced difference in how students and teachers thought conflicts are resolved. Most teachers (59%) thought that conflicts are solved when staff members mediate, yet little more than a quarter of students reported this to be so. Students thought that conflicts are worked out in a variety of ways. Somewhat less than a fifth of participants thought that conflicts are not usually resolved.

Conflict Resolution Programs
Over three quarters of students and teachers agreed that it is important to teach conflict mediation skills to students. Twelve percent of responding students had taken conflict resolution courses at their school. Attitudes towards the courses were very positive among those who had taken them.

Directions for Year 2 (1994) Research

After discussion of results, members of the Advisory Team thought that the following questions should be addressed in Year 2 research:

- When students and teachers talk about "conflict", are they talking about the same thing? What do people in the secondary system mean by "conflict"?
- Are some conflicts considered to be more "serious" than others?
- Are female students involved in less conflicts than male students, as the questionnaire research suggests?
- Teachers and students appear to have differing interpretations of teacher mediation in student conflict. Why is this?
- How do teachers and students-- both involved and not involved in the Conflict Resolution program-- interpret the program as it exists in their school?

1994 Focus Group Results

A. Objectives and Uses of Research

Research in 1993-94 had the following objectives:

- to collect qualitative data to enrich analysis of the quantitative data collected in the spring of 1993;
- to get a sense of what people in schools think and feel about conflict resolution (i.e. their understanding of the key terms, their perception of need for it, their sense of its usefulness);
- to get detailed information on the process of starting and implementing a conflict resolution program;
- to shed light on the factors that affect implementation and medium/long term continuity;
- to provide information to the Toronto Board of Education to monitor and improve conflict resolution programs, and to guide implementation decisions in the future.

B. Methodology

The data was collected through cases studies of conflict resolution programs at two schools, and interviews with conflict resolution facilitators.

The primary method used was focus group research. Focus group research originated in the 1940's with studies conducted on the reaction of listeners to various types of radio programs. Since that time it has primarily been used for market research, advertising research on radio and television, and political analysis (Thyssen, 1986). In more recent years, focus group techniques have been introduced into educational research.

Focus group interviewing is a technique involving an invited conversation among carefully selected informants and a researcher called a moderator or facilitator. All of the people in the group have a shared common experience (e.g. viewing the same television program, or being in the same high school system). Following careful analysis of the experience, a discussion outline is developed. The interview is then conducted and focuses on the informants' interpretations of this shared experience (Thyssen, 1986).

1. Case studies of conflict resolution programs at two schools

The Conflict Resolution programs at two secondary schools -- one from the east side and one from the west side of the city -- were examined in detailed case studies. One school selected had been involved in the Spring 1993 study, while the other had a new program. An advantage to this 'case study' methodology is that it provides in-depth detail about programs in those two secondary schools. One limitation is that useful types of conflict resolution from other schools are missed.

During May 1994, interviews were conducted at each school with:

- the school administrator most knowledgeable about the program (personal interview)
- teachers who had received training and were actively involved in the program, including facilitators (focus group)
- teachers at each school who had not received training (focus group)
- students who had been trained as peer mediators/conflict resolvers (focus group)
- students who had not been trained (focus group).

2. Conflict Resolution Facilitators

In May 1994, a discussion on the Conflict Resolution program was held with facilitators who were trained during the pilot (1991-92) year of the program, and had the opportunity to observe and participate in all three years of the program.

C. Concept of "Conflict" in Secondary Schools

All groups included a discussion of what "conflict" is . To start the discussion, moderators showed a graph with results from the 1993 survey, showing the percentage of students who were involved in conflicts during a six month period. (This graph, which is seen here on p. 9, showed that 57% of students said they were not involved in any conflict, that 32% were involved in 1 to 3 conflicts, and that 11% were involved in four or more conflicts.) Participants discussed what it meant to be involved in a "conflict" at secondary school. Participants were then shown a list of different disputes that happen in high schools, and asked if they thought these were conflicts, and, if so, if they were *serious* conflicts.

1. What is "Conflict"?

The picture of "conflict" that emerges is one of a concept that is both varied and changeable. That is, everyone considered "conflict" and especially "serious conflict" to be a certain level (or threshold) of dispute, but different people had different thresholds of dispute; and the level can be modified, as happened in one discussion.

Students

Most students who did not have conflict resolution training typically defined conflict as physical confrontation. Certainly, the first reaction when asked to define "serious" conflict was to describe a physical confrontation.

> Heated argument or physical fighting-- that is conflict.

> The only one I think of as a conflict is two students having a physical fight.

Some had a more subtle distinction. Two untrained students noted that verbal conflict also can result in injury.

> (Verbal disputes) can hurt, depending on wha they say. When you talk to a person about their lives or something, when you start getting into the personal business.

I guess I would consider physical (conflict to be "serious"). Emotional, I mean verbal, can be just as bad.

They are serious but on different levels.

But students were more likely to put non-physical confrontation in a different category, for example,

Student: Obviously, if two people are fighting about something, you obviously don't like each other so it makes you come to physical contact. That's a problem but swearing at a teacher or just talking or having an argument over a rumor doesn't necessarily mean you don't like each other or have a problem.
Moderator: what is it then-- just communicating?
Student: Yea.

Students with conflict mediation training, not surprisingly, had a more comprehensive view of what conflict was. One group defined examples of conflict as

Rumors; misunderstandings; boyfriend-girlfriend fights; different styles and beliefs; racial clash; people sharing lockers, and things get misplaced; people look at each other, with dirty looks; disagreements; cliques; friends fighting over misplace possessions; conflict within a person; conflict with a teacher (for instance student rebels, who can't work with a teacher); accusations and gossip.

These students made a clear link between verbal disputes and physical conflict, e.g.

If I bump into someone in the hall, and he asks me what my problem is, and if I start talking trash to him, it just gets to the point where we are losing tempers. By circumstances...it escalates.

Teachers and Facilitators

Most teachers have a more encompassing view of conflict, seeing all types of disputes suggested to interviewees as conflict-- both physical and non-physical. Rumor and name-calling and joking was seen as a potential source of physical and/or "serious" conflict.

One group of teachers without conflict resolution training saw the roots of conflict in individuals' frustration, anger, low self-esteem, and peer pressure. These teachers tended to see conflict in terms of bad or inappropriate behavior. They saw this being made worse by a "lack of clarity about what kinds of behavior or what it is that is expected or encouraged". They felt that students, especially at the Grade 9 level, need a structured environment.

The criteria for **serious** conflict were shared by all groups:
- physical fights with or without weapons;
- if race and/or gender is involved.

This was not, however, universally held. One teacher, who was noted as a respected member of staff and representative of a significant proportion of opinion, noted that to him conflict was physical, but when people disagree, that is arguing. The teacher said that in thirty years, he has seen only three fights in his class.

Both teachers and conflict facilitators said that the students who responded to the 1993 questionnaire must have believed that "conflict" referred to physical fights, verbal fights, "overt stuff". It was thought that students see some things (e.g. telling someone to shut up) as "communication", while teachers see them as conflict.

> They certainly aren't talking about the everyday things that go on when two or three people, or 25 people, share some space together. The students are excluding rumors; they don't recognize it as the source of the fight. (Facilitator)

> Students don't necessarily recognize conflicts that happen. They don't think of things in terms of conflict because conflicts are so everyday and so common. They tend to think of conflicts as the open, overt incidents. (Teacher with conflict resolution training)

> We are saying that conflict is so much a part of these kids lives that they don't see it as conflict until somebody suggests that it is conflict, that it doesn't have to happen, and that there are other ways of resolving it. (Teacher with conflict resolution training)

> Conflict is something common in [students'] daily lives (many of them), which they just survive". (School vice-principal)

2. Changes in Perception of Conflict

One group of Grade 9 students illustrated the fluidity of the definition of "conflict". When asked for personal examples of conflict at the beginning of the session, they said they could not think of any, or said were not involved in any at school. Yet by the end of the session, having discussed the concept of "conflict" in schools, most had revised their opinion-- saying instead that they had been involved in between one and four conflicts. By that time, *all* examples on the list of disputes were considered to be conflict by all students, because:

- they can lead to fights
- they involve people who are angry at each other, or
- they "have reasons".

Thus, within a period of less than one hour, students had substantially altered their understanding of the term "conflict" in a school setting. In a sense, they had moved from the view of conflict expressed by untrained students to that expressed by trained peer mediation students.

3. Racism and Sexism

Racism and sexism were considered in a more serious light than many other types of disputes. Teachers tended to include disputes involving racism and/or sexism as serious, regardless of whether there was a physical component or not. (It was noted that there were stringent Board guidelines on racism, sexism and sexual harassment which defined how these incidents would be handled.) Many students shared this view. For example, the Grade 9 focus group considered racism and ethnic issues to be serious because "it's hurting them mentally as well as physically".

At the same time, a couple of students noted that not all disputes between people of different races were racial incidents.

> One thing-- if it's me and a white guy in a conflict, stop calling it a race issue. Maybe it's just me and this guy in a fight.

Another student defined the seriousness of a racial conflict according to how the participant responded.

> (Verbal insults) might be serious, depending on what kind of person you are. 'Cause if someone is insulting you about your race and you're the type of person who takes it serious and defensive, you know it can be a big problem. But if you don't let it bother you then it's not serious.

4. Gender Differences

Students thought that males are more likely to become involved in physical conflict more often than female students. Yet some students noted that female conflict is as common, but in a different form.

For example, in the Grade 9 focus group, it was thought there would be more boys than girls involved in "fights". But the actual frequency of conflict would be equal, if all types of conflicts are considered. Another focus group of older students in the same school gave much the same reporting.

> Guys are more aggressive. Possibly the female students who took part in the (questionnaire) might have thought when they signed it they thought of more physical contact and girls fit into more verbal conflict.

> They get into conflicts but different ones...They get into relationship conflicts. You know, like boyfriends. Fighting about taking my man. Too many girls fight about that.

5. Teacher-Student Disputes

One area not covered in the questionnaire, but discussed in most focus groups, was teacher-student disputes. All noted that these occurred, although how they were dealt with varied.

One student, who admitted a problem in dealing with teachers described the "problem" as

> I'm the teacher, you're the student type thing. That's the reason. That's the problem with teachers. That's why I swear at them a lot. I have a bad temper. Just because I am the student, it doesn't give you the right to treat me like how you want. I understand that you are the teacher and I am here to learn; you are my elder and I should have respect for you, but you also have to have respect for me. And that's why I have a big problem with the student/teacher conflict because you know they treat you like you're nothing.

Another student described the differences as partly due to age and differing philosophies.

> Times change. I think some teachers are still caught up with teaching like in the 70's, like early 80's. It's now the 90's. You know students are changing. They're acting older because of this TV business. So, it's like, teachers are always saying we're going to teach you to go out in society

> and be a human or an adult but then they'll turn around probably two minutes later and drag you out in front of the whole class.

Teachers in one group noted that a "teacher-student conflict" might not really involve a conflict with a teacher, but may really be an expression of some other situation or other conflict (social or personal) that needs to be addressed.

An administrator from one of the schools noted that

> Just as incidents among students involve a small proportion of students in the school, conflict between students and teachers involve a small proportion of the staff. It is an issue of control. Many [teachers] need to be in control, not realizing that if you step back you will see that it is the students' behavior, and not a personal thing with you.

Teachers in two other groups mentioned that students were often unfair to teachers. "Where is that on the list?"

One teacher said he had no trouble because, quite simply, he did not allow it.

> No, I didn't have exchanges [with students in class]. I get paid to teach them. These are the rules, guys. After this you get to talk to the Vice Principal or somebody. I've been at this for 30 years. You want to survive at this game. I mean the Board pays me to run the learning in that situation. And I set the rules. I'm not a dictator. We talk about the rules. We spend a couple of periods on it. But once I set the rules, that is it. And when people go beyond that, I warn them once. And then I ask them to go somewhere else, that is it.

6. Teacher Mediation

Results of the 1993 survey showed a discrepancy between how teachers and students thought conflicts are solved. A majority of teachers thought that conflicts were ended when teachers mediated, but students thought that conflicts were worked out in a variety of ways. Students in Year 2 were asked for their interpretation of this difference. Many felt that teachers would impose a solution, rather than resolving a conflict. Also, several students noted that because teachers could see only a proportion of student behavior in the school, teachers often did not see the continuation of the conflict afterwards. The students' comments included:

> I don't know what the teachers are thinking about themselves but I don't think that teachers can solve conflicts. I think if anything they'd break it up. The teachers are breaking it up and sending students down to the office. So it's not a teacher who is solving that problem.

> They (teachers) pause the conflict for a second. They don't stop it.

> As soon as the teacher is out of the way they (conflict disputants) are at it again. They are pretending to make up. We all know they are just waiting for the teacher to leave.

> They don't even know about the conflicts that are going on in the school. [There are] conflicts kids know about that teachers don't know. Like a fight that goes on outside the school.

> It's up to the students to resolve if they want it.

Teachers also discussed this difference. They tended to offer two explanations:

- The first reason is similar to the students'-- teachers simply do not see all conflicts. Teachers are often "out of the loop"-- i.e., incidents happen away from school; teachers only see students for a few hours a day.

- Second, students are thinking of different kinds of conflicts. They are unaware of teachers' perceptions of a conflict (as including more than serious physical conflicts). As a result they do not see the frequency of teacher mediations that do take place. "Teachers are mediating 'informally' all the time". That is, students think they are being told a story, told to be quiet, etc. but actually a conflict is "being mediated or headed off".

Teachers who had taken conflict resolution training added another explanation: that teachers may produce a compromise to quell a problem, but the conflict is still there. And the students must still deal with the conflict themselves. Teachers think they have mediated, but they have just stopped the expression of the conflict for now.

Part of the difference may have to do with terminology. "Mediation", like "conflict", means several things to several people. *Mediation* in the Conflict Resolution process means that the disputing parties resolve their conflict with the assistance of a third party, such as a teacher or peer mediator. *Arbitration*, on the other hand, is a process whereby the third party resolves the conflict following input from the disputing parties. Thus, what is referred to a "mediation" by many teachers is "arbitration" in the parlance of conflict mediation: the teacher intervenes in a dispute and arbitrates an immediate solution of the situation in hand. The difference relates to responsibility for the outcome. Disputing parties in arbitration have less responsibility for the outcome of the conflict (and less empowerment to resolve the conflict).

7. Feedback to Teachers About Disputes

Teachers in both schools were concerned that when they observe or intervene in serious incidents that they should be informed about the outcome. (Typically, intervention or involvement leads to a referral to the office or guidance department.)

> Sometimes we never hear what actions are taken with some of these students that are referred, and what disciplinary actions (are) taken.

> I personally really resent that we're not told. I know part of this is Board policy but...

> Referrals seem to go one way. Either to the office, or guidance counselor. We know there is something wrong with this students because they act it out in the class or whatever. But, if it's a serious situation, then we have to deal with people day in and day out in the classroom and we aren't given any background. Maybe we could handle some things differently with that particular student if we knew.

D. Focus Group Discussion on the Conflict Resolution Program

1. How Conflict Resolution Programs Have Been Implemented

Implementing Peer Mediation

In the first years of implementing conflict resolution initiatives, most schools focused on setting up peer mediation programs. Setting up a peer mediation program typically included:

- involving the staff (in staff meetings and/or workshops)
- selecting a facilitators(s) (i.e. teachers given release time for a semester or longer; guidance or student support professionals; or teachers taking responsibility on a volunteer basis).
- recruiting and training students to be mediators
- establishing a procedure for use of the program
- making the program known in the school.

In the two schools examined, and according to reports of facilitators from other schools, potential peer mediators were selected and recruited carefully to ensure their commitment and ability to do the job. Attempts were made, with varying degrees of success, to recruit "negative leaders"-- students with a high degree of social credibility among the other students. The training included work with the school facilitator(s), outside consultant and group training sessions with students from others schools.

According to those interviewed, the peer mediation program typically worked in this way:

- Students in conflict, who might enter mediation, are referred to the program by staff or come forward themselves.
- The program facilitator (in some schools a guidance counselor, in most a teacher) or the vice-principal interviews and asks students if they want to go into mediation.
- The bulk of referrals come from the vice-principal and from guidance.
- The facilitator chooses two peer mediators who are not close to the participants.
- Mediators follow step-by-step rules strictly until they reach some kind of agreement. One of the goals is to listen to each other, clarify and restate positions (which you cannot do in the middle of a fight). Most of the time it gets to a resolution. Some times participants come back and resume mediation, sometimes they leave and do not get back together.
- Some mediations had little voluntary involvement from the disputants, so these mediations did not work. Most have been "gentler", with very positive outcomes.
- Teachers-student conflicts are not dealt with the in program.

Variations on the process exist. For instance, a school started conducting mediations with one teacher and one student as mediators. Another area where the programs vary is in efforts to follow-up after a resolution has been reached. There was no common procedure for follow-up, and even within the same school, different conflicts were followed up differently.

The actual process of mediation was described by one student mediator from School B in this way:

> It was like the role plays we did. We opened up with an introduction, gave them the ground rules, let them know they are there voluntarily. Afterwards we start gathering the information. We get each of them to tell each of their stories, and the other one listens and tells it back, to make sure they heard it. And afterwards, you find out what they did when this situation took place. So the other person really knows the feelings; because when you are having a conflict you are not really listening, you are saying more than listening. After they listen to each other, hear each other out, then they are asked to tell any kind of solutions they feel are possible. Out of all the solutions they come up with they get to choose the ones they feel will work. And they sign an agreement.

At both School A and School B, participation by student participants in the peer mediation program is voluntary and referral is an option available to administrators. But in practice, there could be varying degrees of pressure to participate, as the following comments by peer mediators indicate:

> You can come and ask for a mediation...but the majority that we have done is referrals from the office.

> Some people do it because they don't want to be suspended.

> It's used more as a threat. 'You deal with it with students [in mediation] or you deal with me [the vice-principal] and you take the chance of being kicked out'.

> I thought it was voluntary.

> It is voluntary, they have to agree to do it, but it is the ultimatum that they are being given.

> Them being forced to be there is good. Because, otherwise I can't see people just coming in.

Administrators at both schools indicated that where participation was less than voluntary the process was less likely to be effective.

History of the Program at School A

At the time of the focus groups, School A was in the third year of a conflict resolution program.

In the first year, workshops were held by the consultant for all staff, with subsequent off-site two day training for 25 or more staff. Two half-time Conflict Resolution facilitator positions were established. The two people in those positions developed the model of conflict resolution used in the school. In this first year, the focus was on mediation of conflicts. There were 8 to 10 cases of mediation.

The second year continued with mediations. There were some problems, however. Students were well trained, but practice was needed. "If you don't have a lot of business, the kids don't have the opportunity [to practice and develop skills]". Also, there was some underlying resentment among staff (given that two people had been allotted time for the program), and there was a tendency among some staff to become disengaged from the program and leave it to the facilitators.

The third year had a similar focus, but there was an attempt to broaden the program to include work in the classroom. Other teachers became more involved. This year saw an expansion of the program, especially in work in classrooms and in Grade 9 student advisory (mentoring) groups (Grade 9's that meet twice a week with a teacher advisor)[4]. Conflict Resolution facilitators met with advisory groups of these issues. It became a broader program, reaching more students. Facilitators went wherever teachers wanted them (e.g. drama, physical education). During 1993-94 the program had been involved in some serious incidents. Students involved in a conflict with racial overtones had mediation (including mediation "advocates" from the communities involved) which were thought useful.

History of the Program at School B

The 1993-94 school year was officially the first year for the Conflict Resolution Program in School B. However, there had been extensive 'pre-program' setup in the 1992-93 school year. During that year, the external consultant working on the program gave Conflict Resolution training to staff on an afternoon session. As well, one of the Board advisors had given training to over 20 staff in anger management and mediation; and other staff from the school attended workshops on conflict resolution and mediation that had been offered outside the school.

In addition, a peer program for students ("Peer Helping") had already been set up in the school, independent of the Conflict Resolution program. This second program had several components: mentoring, community drug awareness, involvement with parents' night, and so on, offered within a credit course given by guidance staff.

It was thought that Conflict Resolution (and specifically peer mediation) would be a good fit with the existing Peer Helping program, and was integrated into Peer Helping in 1993-94. As well, Conflict Resolution was integrated with the Grade 9 mentorship program at the school.

During the 1993-94 school year, there were two staff directly involved and 17 others partially involved. Vice-principals, the Guidance department and Student Support Services were aware of the program and asked for referrals. In this first year, there had been 9 referrals between September and May.

2. Perceptions of the Program in the Schools

One perception, common to most respondents, was that peer mediation is a useful alternative for students in conflict. Students, teachers, and administrators said they saw the peer mediation program serving as an option for students to deal with conflict, instead of traditional disciplinary action or the continuation of the conflict.

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[4]Under Ministry of Education and Training, curriculum guidelines, all secondary Grade 9 programs have a "mentoring" component, although the specific elements of the program are left to the discretion of the school.

Perceptions about how it works

Students' understanding of what is involved in peer mediation depended on their experience with the program and the amount of information they had received about it. The comments of one group of Grade 9 students from School A are indicative. The students talked about what they called "peer mediation" in this way:

- The program is "supposed to make people who are having a dispute make up." "Or at least talk about it."
- "You sit down with another student [who is not part of the conflict] and they talk it through with you and they supposedly have you go out and make up. Usually don't though."
- "What I know about peer mediation is that there is one teacher and one student. They don't talk, they just ask questions about what is going on. They listen and make you listen to the other side of the story. You try to resolve it, to come to a common ground where you can find an agreement...after a week they check up on you. They make you sign a contract that says you agree to at least try to resolve it. And if it falls through, you will probably have another one."
- "Sometimes the teacher is not involved".
- "[Mediators] are usually older. Always from different classes [than participants]. It is better to have the mediator from a different grade."

Profile and credibility of the program among students

> At the beginning of the year they have a big thing [assembly] and say if you want to be a peer mediator, come to the office. (Grade 9 student, School A)

Among trained staff and students, there was a general lament about the difficulty of maintaining a high profile and credible reputation for the program. They recognized the sources of these problems, in the word of one student mediator: "the coverage of it, it's not well known". All the groups discussed the challenges of promoting a program for students in a large school. Respondents also felt that it was not easy for a student to initiate a resolution process.

The reputation of the program was problematic in both School A and School B. Some students were concerned that the program was not perceived as credible or having a good reputation through the school. One mediator said:

> A lot of people in this school think they are too cool to be mediated. A lot of people don't have the school spirit. They think that they are too good to participate in anything.

Other student mediators echoed this concern. Some felt that students who are habitually involved in "conflict" would not be interested in using a program like theirs. Similarly, students who are interested in establishing a "rep" within the school and provoke fights for this reason were considered unlikely candidates for mediation.

Students in the focus groups said that boys tended to have different feelings about the idea of conflict mediation than girls. They felt that girls would be more interested in entering a

mediation process, whereas boys would be reluctant to do so. In the words of one Grade 9 girl, "it is probably more the girls will go. The boys will think they can handle it themselves."

Awareness and knowledge of the peer mediation program among Grade 9's at School A was relatively high. The program at that school had targeted Grade 9 advisory groups as an area of promotion and conflict awareness work. Facilitators and students at the school reported interest among Grade 9's in becoming peer mediators.

Students who had been through a conflict resolution as disputants and had a successful outcome were very positive about the process and its' potential to make a difference. These comments from Grade 9 students at School A are indicative of the role of direct experience:

> Most of the time it does work if you get involved.

> There was a verbal dispute with another student. Name calling. The teacher asked us to go. And we went and told each side of the story and sort of came to an agreement. It's still going on [the dispute and mediation]- it only happened this week.

> There was name calling, rumors, gossip, threats, everything. And we went to peer mediation. There was a lot of people involved in it (from two it escalated into five of us). The two main people went to peer mediation and resolved their conflict. Then they brought everyone into one big session, then they divided into smaller parts that were one on one. And it's resolved. We had to sign a contract. And I think it worked.

Perceptions among staff

Staff who had trained in conflict resolution or peer mediation tended to be enthusiastic about the program and its potential in solving interpersonal conflicts, improving school atmosphere, and giving students important social skills. Among untrained individuals, some were positive but some were simply disconnected from the program. Among untrained teachers, for instance, the peer mediation program was often seen as something they were not involved with, something that the "main floor" (administration, guidance, etc.) are working with. In the words of one untrained teacher:

> When you say you've referred something to a vice-principal or guidance, you're saying I have a problem with these two students. You're not saying 'the conflict resolution program'. You're leaving the choice for them to make.

Among untrained staff, there were some who felt that conflict resolution initiatives were driven by the Board-- part of a "bandwagon" or "political" development-- not by demand within the school. Trained and untrained teachers acknowledged that perceptions of a program as externally motivated lessened its credibility among staff. Some staff, even those who said they try to address conflict in what they teach and among students, felt the program was "a political flagship" and that the program diverted resources "instead of taking what exists and making it better, more effective."

Types of Conflict Appropriate for Mediation

Teachers tended to feel that student-teacher relationships were outside the territory of programs like this, although trained teachers were more open to the possibility. Among untrained teachers, and some trained teachers, there was the feeling that peer mediation was intended only for student-student conflict and that conflicts involving teachers and students as disputants were not dealt with by the program. (In fact this was the explicit goal of the program in most schools.) At School A mediation techniques had been used in conflicts involving students and teachers with the vice-principal acting as the mediator. The vice-principal had also applied the mediation techniques informally as well.

Program facilitators reported that some vice-principals tended to pass on only minor conflicts to the peer mediation programs. They attributed this to: the feeling that the program is not appropriate for serious conflicts; the administrators' concern over jurisdiction and power; and the increased sensitivity to issues of conflict violence, in part related to the increasing involvement of the police.

3. Impact of Training on Mediators and Staff

Trained student mediators and trained teachers were usually highly enthusiastic about the process. Students trained in peer mediation, even if they had performed few or no mediations, indicated that the program influenced their personal lives. Their positive attitudes to conflict resolution/peer mediation training reflect the questionnaire findings. The student mediators from School B thought the program had an important impact on them, even though only one had actually participated in a mediation in school:

> It hasn't affected me, but it makes me more aware of what I'm doing. Like now I'm negotiating, now I'm brainstorming.
>
> I used to get very carried away when I had a fight or an argument...but ever since this mediation training I'm more calm. Especially in the house with my dad. Now I don't go head on... I express myself but I do it calmly, I don't let my stress level go up. It has affected me in a positive way.
>
> I think all parents should get a course in mediation. When you get that birth certificate signed, you also get that mediation.
>
> All the steps are in my head. I use them with my mother, and when I'm with my friends.
>
> Eventually, it just becomes second nature.

Staff trained in the procedures of mediation also reported an impact on their way of communicating with students and others.

> Without this training I wouldn't have had the wherewithal to be that calm and be a calming influence [in response to a fight between two students in the hallway].
>
> I still get angry in class and I still find myself in conflict. What it allows me to do is step back. I can calm down quickly, [in less] turnaround time, and kids do too. And we can talk.

4. Difficulties Faced by Peer Mediation Programs

Underutilization of Mediator.

It was agreed that there were a number of reasons for what was thought to be an underutilization of mediators. At present, most of the referrals come from school vice-principals (although the guidance department was also involved in School B). Teachers with training in School A noted that staff do not know how to tie into the program. There was a lack of clarity about how to refer students and what the parameters of the program are. The in-school facilitators explained how it was difficult to promote and explain the program to staff in a busy schedule, and with the great demands on staff.

The facilitator focus group was especially concerned about a perceived lack of referral and underuse of conflict resolution in schools. They felt the challenge was to get a sufficient number of meaningful referrals. This was important because there have been cases where there were referrals only of minor conflicts, which tended to discredit the process. Among the reasons for the lack of referrals were:

- staff perception of what a conflict is. Many teachers and administrators have a limited sense of what conflict is. Not sharing a basic premise of this approach (that it is part of everyday life, and is widespread) means that many school staff do not connect with the project in any way.
- a perception that "there are no problems at this school" (related to above).
- the absolutely pivotal role of the vice-principal. The vice-principal is "the filter system for the program". If the vice-principal does not buy into the program, it will not work. It was therefore thought essential to have the administrations' active and visible support, and for program facilitators to consult with the vice-principal.

Facilitators emphasized that the lack of referrals and mediations leads to loss of student mediators' interest in conflict resolution. Students in the program need to stay interested and use their skills.

Student Turnover

Coordinators, the vice-principal, and trained staff in School A thought that the mobility of the student population in this semestered school was a serious limitation to properly developing the program: the program "loses trained kids after the first semester." Among other comments by teachers with and without training:

- Turnover of the student population means you can't establish the program profile in the school. Mobility works against creating a school climate with peer mediation as a known and visible part of the school because you have virtually a different school every year.

- Programs like this work at the elementary level where older students have been there for several years and older students know each other. Whereas in the [secondary] school, the Grade 9's are not necessarily the Grade 10's and they certainly aren't the OAC's. The turnover is far too high.

- That is why is have to be a Board-wide project; "it just can't be from school to school".

Staff Turnover

Participants noted that the turnover of committed and trained staff could also limit the development of individual school programs. In School A, the vice-principal noted that the original coordinators and supportive staff had left the school. When this happens, new development is needed each time. A facilitator from the facilitator group gave an example of how staff turnover, working with other factors, had crippled the development of a program in its third year

> [In the third year] everything fell apart. There were new vice-principals and principal. We weren't getting referrals and support. Some key teachers in the school who had been supportive moved on. Because of other changes in the school [such as destreaming] it was hard to keep things focused for students and others in the school. There was no help from other "levels" to get the message out that this is an important program...

Another facilitator illustrated how the departure of a committed vice-principal affected a program:

> [In the second year of the program] the VP who was keen left, and the replacement was semi-keen, but he was so busy that he couldn't pick it up. The program went down hill from there. Once the keen VP left, the program got fewer and fewer referrals.

Dependency on a "Key Person"

On a related note, facilitators observed that typically, one person has been the main catalyst for the development of individual conflict resolution programs. It was thought that this can lead to problems:

- If the 'key person' leaves the school, the program dies. "When a program becomes identified with an individual, and when that person leaves, because the school owns nothing, the school loses the whole thing".

- The program can become identified with the key person in the leadership role and that "almost absolves the school from taking any responsibility." This especially can be the case if the key person is a classroom teacher who is given release time to work on the program.

- "If a program fails in a school because one person left then we haven't done the proper work. If the program is self-sustaining that it has done well. But I think we still haven't got it. Because if I left [the program] would die at my school."

Need to Integrate with School Culture

> The program has to be part of the community of the school, and the community of issues. [Facilitator]

Facilitators commented that the peer mediation program programs they tried to implement did not flourish in some cases because the program was not adapted to the school situation. They emphasized the need to consult with the school community and prepare the school administration and staff for the new program. In retrospect, the process of consulting with administration, who may or may not be fully supportive of the program, and getting them on board, was not as adequate in some schools and it could have been. Working with the school staff to connect the program to staff needs and attitudes, "to create a perception that these programs will make their jobs easier" should have been pursued more actively.

> Now we see, in hindsight, that the facilitator's work had to be creating the climate in the school that would welcome [a program]. Which means talking to the VPs, getting them on board, getting the staff on board, not just in terms of 'this is a program', but on a personal level. This needed to be done first.

> You need to start where the staff is at.

> The initial vision was a focus on teaching kids to mediate. Later came the realization that these programs can not be successful within the culture of a school that is not receptive.

> We didn't fertilize the ground before we planted the seed.

5. Departure from the Focus on Peer Mediation

Some schools are moving beyond a focus on peer mediation to programs that address conflict from a wider perspective. Comments from facilitators and the experiences at Schools A and B suggest that these approaches concentrate on promoting conflict awareness and management techniques. The peer mediation program becomes a key part of the conflict resolution program. For example, at School A, which has had a peer mediation program for several years, the recent thrust was to work among Grade 9 students, through the Mentoring/advisory groups. At School B, the peer mediation approach was added to an already existing "Peers" program, in which students participated in school and community outreach work (such as drug awareness) as part of a credit course. The peer mediation process was seen as a natural addition to this credit program.

At another school, a teacher advocated developing a course on conflict, which "is part of the human experience". As a result of developing the course, the program was able to become more closely integrated into the school culture. "The program is becoming a success in the school because of the course" . The facilitations worked after issues such as racism were explored and discussed. The program in the school has evolved from conflict resolution to mediation, to facilitation, to leadership skill, to career and educational planning. It has evolved in this way to meet the needs of this school community. "A number of guidance programs are thinking of doing this sort of course."

Trained staff and facilitators indicated that the movement to a wider view of conflict resolution has arisen out of difficulties in implementing peer mediation. This desire to broaden the scope of conflict resolution programs was expressed most strongly by the facilitators:

> There is a problem around with what many people think Conflict Resolution is. Many think it is simply mediation with trained students. If you are looking at conflict and personal interactions that are really part of the fabric of the school then you are really looking at something that is a lot more than that. Conflicts could be dealt with differently. You could have people in the school who have the ability to handle conflict, when it emerges, in a way that is effective and everyone walks away feeling the real issues have been dealt with.
>
> As long as, as a system, people are content with a vision of Conflict Resolution as training people to peer mediate then we are in real serious difficulties. Because in reality we need all people in the system, the staff and students and parents too, buying in to a philosophy of what a conflict is.

Attempts to reach students with conflict awareness and preparation training were not yet widespread. Untrained teachers in School A who had conflict awareness done with their students had mixed feelings about the program. Some were not aware of the efforts; others said:

> I have had them [program facilitator] come to my class and the person involved didn't feel it was too successful.
>
> Teachers should get more training in this area. It should be something ongoing in the classroom. Not somebody coming in for a day or two and having a few sessions. It has to be reinforced, a type of behavior, and a certain way of approaching problems. It has to be there from day to day.

Summary Discussion

A. Conflict in Toronto Secondary Schools

1. School Climate

It is often claimed that students and teachers live in entirely different worlds. This was not found in responses to school climate statements. Most teachers, and most students, had the same generally positive opinions about the school they belonged to. However teachers, on the whole, tended to be more positive than students. Sometimes the differences were striking, for example:

- 75% of teachers thought that students were respectful of teachers, while 50% of students thought this.
- 76% of teachers thought there was a lot of good feeling between teachers and students, compared to 61-66% of students.
- 91% of teachers compared to 67-69% of students agreed that teachers treat students fairly.

2. Frequency of Conflict in the School

> Without a shared language for dealing with complexity, team learning is limited.
> - Peter M. Senge, The Fifth Discipline

Over half the students in the questionnaire (57%) reported they had not been involved in any conflicts between January and June 1993, while 43% were involved in one or more conflicts (mostly between one and three conflicts).

However, when students and teachers discussed what they meant by "conflict" in focus group discussion, it became apparent that this is a concept that varies according to who is talking about it. That is, everyone considered "conflict" and especially "serious conflict" to be a certain level (or threshold) of dispute, but different people had different thresholds of dispute. Many students and some teachers defined "conflict" as referring to physical disputes; others thought that school conflict consisted of a widespread level of dispute including rumour and gossip. Teachers and many (although not all) students thought that sexism and racism were "serious" conflicts along with physical conflict. There was a consensus among focus group respondents that students in the questionnaire results were probably referring to physical conflict.

The malleability of the concept of conflict was illustrated by a focus group with Grade 9 students who were asked to comment on the questionnaire results. At the beginning of the focus group, most claimed that they had not participated in conflict; after discussing it, most decided that they had participated in at least one conflict during the school year.

In the 1993 student questionnaire, male students reported that they were involved in conflicts more often than did female students. Focus group students were not so sure this was the case. They observed that male students were more likely to become engaged in physical

disputes, but that female students were likely to engage in other types of conflict: verbal disputes, or disputes about boyfriends.

It is apparent from focus group results that any measure of "conflict" is going to aggregate diverse perceptions of what conflict is at the time of the questionnaire; it will not be an "objective" measurement. This state of affairs is common to many other concepts, such as sexual harassment, bullying, and racism. For example, a recent evaluation of anti-bullying programs in the Toronto Board found that there was an increase in the number of children who reported they had bullied others, and an increase in the number of children who reported being victimized because of their race. Researchers hypothesized that this may reflect an increase in children's awareness of the different behaviors that comprise bullying.[5]

3. Types of Conflict

In the 1993 questionnaires, all three groups of participants thought that verbal disputes about rumor and gossip are the types of conflict that occur most frequently; all thought that physical fights with weapons occur least frequently. Students were most likely to participate in conflict. Nothing in focus group discussion challenges this finding.

4. Location

In the 1993 questionnaires, students were more likely to say that most conflicts take place outdoors (53% of students) while conflict mediators and teachers were more likely to think that conflicts take place in the school hall or other indoor places. The classroom was a distant third as a location of conflict. Focus group discussion tended to back this up, with both students and teachers noting that teachers do not see most conflicts because they take place outdoors or away from teachers.

5. Resolution

In the 1993 questionnaires, there was a pronounced difference in how students and teachers thought conflicts are resolved. Most teachers (59%) thought that conflicts are solved when staff members mediate, yet little more than a quarter of students reported this to be so. Students thought that conflicts are worked out in a variety of ways. Somewhat less than a fifth of participants thought that conflicts are not usually resolved.

Focus group discussion did indicate a difference in student and teacher perception of teacher mediation. Many felt that some teachers often only impose a solution, without resolving the conflict behind the solution. Also, because teachers can see only a proportion of student behavior in the school, they often do not see the continuation of the conflict afterwards. Teachers tended to agree that they might think a conflict is resolved when they intervene but miss its continuation afterwards. But they also noted that because students may be thinking only of serious physical conflict, they may be unaware of teacher mediations in other types of conflict. It was pointed out that teachers are mediating 'informally' all the time, often

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[5]Interim Results of the Toronto Board's Anti-Bullying Program, **Research Review**, May 13, 1994. As John Gardner writes about the concept of excellence, "I find that 'excellence' is a curiously powerful word, a word about which people feel strongly and deeply. But it is a word that means different things to different people". (John Gardner, quoted in Prakash and Waks, 1985.)

heading off a conflict before it has a chance to occur. Such diverse responses indicate that 'mediation', like 'conflict', is a work with many different potential meanings. The potential for misunderstanding is obvious.

B. The Conflict Resolution Program

> Educational change is technically simple and socially complex. While the simplicity of the technical aspect is no doubt overstated, anyone who has been involved in a major change effort will intuitively grasp the meaning of and concur with the complexity of the social dimension. A large part of the problem of educational change may be less a question of dogmatic resistance and bad intentions (although there is certainly some of both) and more a question of the difficulties related to planning and coordinating a multilevel social process involving thousands of people
>
> -Michael Fullan, The New Meaning of Educational Change

Within Fullan's *The New Meaning of Educational Change* there is a very unsettling paradigm switch. Based on an extensive overview of education implementation literature such as the RAND studies of the 1970's and his own research, Fullan notes that *most educational programs do not work*. Many may well be workable in a specific classroom or time frame, or may be based on a concept and methodology that is quite valid, but simply are not implemented in a way that produces intended results-- or else may be implemented but are not sustained. This is a paradigm switch because, through implication, many or even most programs mandated through educational institutions will not accomplish what is intended. Thus in becomes vital, in looking at programs, to consider three things:

- can a program work;
- will its current implementation strategy work;
- if not, can the current implementation strategy be modified to make it work.

1. Can Conflict Resolution Work?

Currently, there is little research available that can definitively support, or refute, the effectiveness of conflict resolution programs (for more detail, see Appendix A). The results of the Conflict Resolution program in the Toronto Board suggest that students trained in the Conflict Resolution workshops feel they have gained substantial benefits. In the 1993 questionnaire, 12% of students had taken conflict resolution courses. Attitudes towards the courses were very positive among those who had taken them, especially conflict mediators. For example, all mediators who participated in the 1993 questionnaire thought the conflict resolution course was interesting, practical and therefore worthwhile; nearly all thought that most students would benefit from a course in conflict resolution (98%), and that more courses should be offered (93%).

Conflict mediators and course participants also found the courses useful outside of their application to resolving school-based disputes. Nearly all said they deal with conflict better after taking the courses (93%) and that they understand conflict better now (95%). Most used the techniques outside of school: 85% said they help their family/friends with their conflicts, something also described in focus groups with student mediators.

And although the technique cannot be universally applied-- students noted that there were instances where peer mediation and conflict resolution are simply not feasible-- it appears to

work very well in many of the cases described in focus group discussion. For example, among the student focus group participants were two who had a dispute resolved by the school's program. They noted that they would never be friends, but that they can now co-exist in the school.

Finally, over three quarters of students and teachers in the 1293 questionnaires agreed that it is important to teach conflict mediation skills to students. Thus, both students and teachers appear to be open-- in principle at least-- to conflict resolution courses in their school[6].

2. Difficulties with the Focus On Peer Mediation

As seen above, there were a number of success stories in implementing peer mediation. However, focus group participants brought up a number of potential reservations that should be carefully examined.

- Most focus group respondents reported a low frequency of use of their peer mediation skills in actual school situations. Thus at present, the most pronounced effects of the training are on the people being trained, although one can argue that the training may have an effect on the school culture even if it is not used specifically in mediation. Still, people in the facilitator focus group expressed concern that if students do not use their mediation skills in working situations, they may forget the skills, and the program may be discredited. Thus it seems that mediators are trained to facilitate conflict resolution in a format peer mediation program, with the assumption that they **will** engage in conflict resolution; yet a large proportion do not do this. This would appear to be a fundamental mismatch of program design and program implementation.

- Peer mediation relies on vice-principals for referrals. By implication this means that the type of conflict mediated would be what might be called "official" conflict, in that it has been recognized as serious or potentially serious by a staff member (teacher, vice-principal, student support staff, etc.), and may be used as an alternative to disciplinary measures. However, "official" conflict is only a proportion of the full range of conflict in a school (not least because much of school conflict occurs out of the range of school staff). If the mediation of "official" conflict is what provides most of the raison d'être of the program, there may, again, be a mismatch between program organization and implementation.

- Facilitators noted that many programs are dependent on a key person or a small number of people, and are very susceptible to staff turnover. If a vice-principal leaves; or a program coordinator; or a few supportive teachers; a program may falter. If conflict resolution programs are going to survive in secondary schools they will need a broader basis of support.

[6]Student mediators were not so sure: only 54% of mediators agreed that most students in their school were in favour of the conflict resolution program.

3. The Conflict Resolution Initiative in Transition

During Years 1 and 2 (1992-94), members of the CR team analyzed the research and reviewed the status of each secondary school program. The team concluded that while peer mediation programs were successful in many schools, it was becoming increasingly clear that the long-term success of any given school program was dependent on expanding Conflict Resolution's role in the school community, specifically in the areas of school discipline/classroom management, and the school curriculum.

The research in Year 2 had recorded this trend. Peer mediation was being integrated into individual school programs being developed for the new Grade 9 destreamed classes, and into already-existing but related programs, such as the Peers program in School B. Through the offering of credit courses on peer mediation, as well as in other ways, elements of conflict resolution were gradually being made part of the school curriculum.

A related but important change in direction was the recognition by the Conflict Resolution Team that peer mediation should remain an important part of Conflict Resolution, but that peer mediation is only part of the total set of skills and community development used in a supportive school environment. As a result, the Conflict Resolution Advisors have continued training in peer mediation as an essential component, with emphasis on working together with each school's staff and students in developing an appropriate model for that school. But at the same time, conflict resolution strategies and techniques have been incorporated into areas of classroom management (e.g. through implementation of the School Safety and Security Policy, and through liaison with crisis intervention programs, police, and community mediation services) and school curriculum (e.g. through developing and delivering staff programs for specific student needs; and integrating conflict resolution into regular curriculum areas, such as English.) For more details, see Appendix B. These areas will be examined in more detail in Year 3 of the Research study.

In going in this direction, the Conflict Resolution team has also been reflecting thinking in conflict resolution theory outside the Board. For example, Educators for Social Responsibility (an umbrella group of conflict resolution facilitators) has noted that "a singular focus on conflict resolution skills without attention to creating community may miss the underlying causes of problems. Caring and empathy are as important as knowing how to negotiate." (Educators for Social Responsibility, 1993.)

Appendix A: Research on Conflict Resolution

Anyone wishing to know the effectiveness of Conflict Resolution will not find any definite answers from looking at available research. In part, this is because Conflict Resolution programs are recent innovations, and therefore the process does not have an extensive literature. However, research on Conflict Resolution can also illustrate the difficulty of measuring effectiveness in education.

There are a number of studies with quite positive results on Conflict Resolution. These are, however, usually qualitative in nature, or use data that is primarily anecdotal. Other studies show great potential for Conflict Resolution programs, yet either the studies or the programs are in the early stages of development (Lam, 1988; Robertson, 1991; Benard, 1990; Jacobson and Lombard, 1992).

At the same time, in recent years, a number of articles and research summaries have questioned whether such programs have any questionable results. These studies or articles (for example Posner, 1994) have quite rightly pointed out that the rapid growth of these programs has not been founded on a solid foundation of research, and in some cases conflict resolution techniques may actually do harm. Yet one must take their criticisms in context:

1. "Definitive proof" in this context appears to be the classic pre-test/post-test with control group design, using quantitative social science methodology. It is all very well to say that only programs "proven" in such ways should be adapted; yet to do so would disregard many of the most important recent educational innovations, such as school feeding and mentoring programs. (See for example Ziegler 1991 on school feeding programs; Flaxman and Ascher 1992 on mentoring programs.) Unfortunately, it is rare for classic quantitative social science methodology to provide definitive results in educational research. The fluidity in definitions related to "conflict" makes such a feat even more challenging in anything related to conflict resolution.[7]

2. The predominately American Conflict Resolution programs examined by critics have a somewhat different orientation from that of programs such as the Toronto Board's. Many American programs, and research on these programs, have as their primary (if sometimes unstated) objective the *reduction of violent crimes* in schools, such as murders, knifings, and other criminal physical assaults. However, the Toronto Board program focuses on *raising awareness and skills in order to recognize, manage, and resolve conflicts effectively and peaceably*. Regardless of how one defines conflict, results of the 1993 questionnaires showed that violent crime is only a small proportion of total conflict in a school. The reduction of violent crime is therefore not the primary focus, although one would hope that with a reduction in all conflict, incidents of violent crime would also decline.

3. Critics of conflict resolution programs such as Webster (1992) point out that it is doubtful that peer mediation, for example, can overcome the powerful psychological and

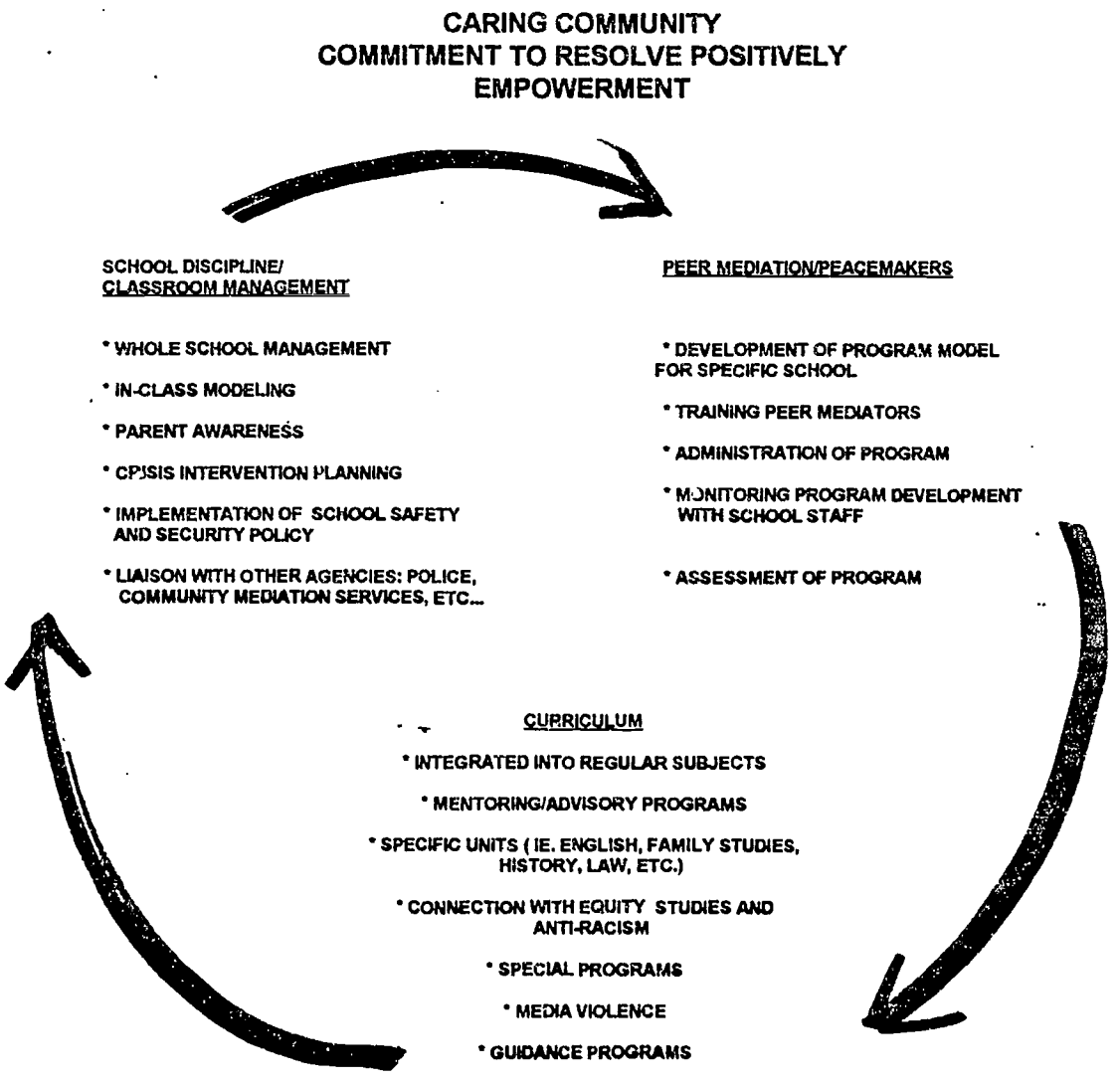
[7] The emphasis by such programs as the Toronto Board's is aimed at changing school culture. Such changes may take many years to implement, and successful implementation may not be easily measured through the sort of closed-ended and ordinal-scaled questionnaires most frequently employed in social science research.

socio-economic factors associated with violent crime. Yet analysis of the effect of these programs on non-criminal conflict (the focus of Toronto CR programs) appears to be lacking. One review of research, for example (Wilson-Brewer 1991, a primary source for Posner 1994) concentrated on issues associated with crime prevention, and excluded studies such as the Olweus anti-bullying research that served as the basis for the Toronto Board's anti-bullying program.

Appendix B: A School Model For Conflict Resolution

The following was developed by the Conflict Resolution Team for the 1994-95 school year. It is intended to represent the role of Conflict Resolution in three areas at the elementary and secondary levels: School Discipline and Classroom Management; School Curriculum; and Peer Mediation/Peacemaker programs.

A SCHOOL MODEL:



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