The
WORKING TOGETHER TO RESOLVE CONFLICT
CURRICULUM

Introduction

Middle school students are often in conflict. As young adolescents, they struggle to figure out who they are as they change from day to day. They sometimes struggle with each other as well, as they try to find their place in the social structure. These internal and external struggles are not surprising, because the developmental tasks confronting young adolescents are daunting. The middle school years constitute roughly half of the time it takes boys and girls to change from children into adults. Sixth graders have about six years to become adults, and eighth graders have four. According to developmental psychologists, adolescents are seeking their identity, an identity they will carry with them into adulthood. An important part of that identity is how they manage interpersonal conflict. The *Working Together to Resolve Conflict* curriculum is designed to assist them in this developmental process.

By the time they are in middle school, adolescents have learned responses to conflict from family and friends. This is a process that usually takes place without much reflection or conscious awareness. Dealing with frustration, sharing, taking turns, and respect for others are aspects of adolescent life that are often not "front and center" in the minds of most middle school students. The *Working Together to Resolve Conflict* curriculum provides a way to call attention to conflict and introduce helpful ways to respond, giving students a set of positive experiences as they learn how to get along with others.

Theoretical Framework

Our conceptual framework for the *Working Together to Resolve Conflict* curriculum mirrors the internal and external conflicts and struggles that adolescents often experience. The "internal" part of our theoretical approach is cognitive: students need cognitive awareness of conflict and information about how to resolve it. Cognition is necessary for intentional activity. As important as cognitive information is, however, it is often not enough to bring about change. A more "external" focus is on behavior. Students need behavioral skills to operationalize their knowledge in useful ways.

A helpful perspective is that of Porter and Taplin (1987), who developed a theoretical framework for conflict and mediation. Their Triadic Mediational Transaction (TMT) Model calls attention to the backgrounds of conflicting parties, such as socioeconomic, personality, and attitudinal variables, that can influence behavior in conflict situations. Bringing these influences to awareness is an important step in learning to deal effectively with conflict.

Another relevant theoretical perspective is from developmental psychology. Students who develop positive, useful ways of coping with the various demands of their environment have an excellent chance of growing into emotionally healthy adults. Such development requires that students learn new ways of dealing with situations when their outmoded responses quit working. Developmental psychologists call this process of creating new cognitive structures accommodation (Berger, 1994). Accommodation takes place when a person's former developmental level is no longer adequate to meet new environmental demands.

Accommodation takes place most readily under conditions of both challenge and support (Ivey, 1991). Sufficient challenge is required to create a need to develop new ways of dealing with problems. Sufficient support is needed to create a climate in which the individual feels safe enough to risk trying new ways of coping with the environment's demands. Development—learning new and effective responses to environmental demands—takes place when challenge is present but not overwhelming in terms of available support.

A significant source of challenge for middle school students is conflict with peers. This challenge calls for a supportive environment, such as a school-wide conflict resolution program including peer mediation, to provide conditions conducive to the development of conflict resolution skills.

An additional theoretical perspective that underlies the *Working Together to Resolve Conflict* curriculum is the work of Lawrence Kohlberg (1963, 1984). Kohlberg's work in the area of ethical and moral decision-making focused on how people make behavioral choices. In his scheme, Level I, preconventional, involves a punishment and obedience orientation. Level II, conventional, involves social rules and group expectations. Helping students learn to resolve their own conflicts, instead of relying on a punishment-obedience orientation, is consistent with movement from a preconventional to a conventional orientation. This is an important step in becoming more self-directed and, therefore, more mature.

Development of the *Working Together to Resolve Conflict* curriculum

We developed our conflict resolution curriculum with input and feedback from a group of eight middle school teachers and counselors. The development process followed the administration of a needs assessment instrument to over 2000 middle school students. The needs assessment included the following seven subscales:
- aggression
- levels of disciplinary intervention
- conflict resolution styles
- outside influences
- need for help in solving problems
- effect of poor communication on conflict
- group aggression

The results of the assessment showed that a substantial number of students were distracted from productive activity each week by conflict. Through the needs assessment, we determined that knowledge and skills related to anger, and becoming more skilled at communication, were important areas of need.

The middle school teachers and counselors collaborated with us in writing and piloting the conflict resolution lessons. We changed lessons as appropriate, seeking feedback from other teachers and students in subsequent administrations. Although our theoretical base was an important starting point in developing the curriculum, the lessons themselves are practical. The underlying theoretical framework has guided their development but is not "visible" in the lessons content.

Practicality dictated two features of the curriculum: the number of lessons and the "teacher-friendly" format. We wanted to make sure that the *Working Together to Resolve Conflict* curriculum fit in well with general academic demands. *The curriculum is usable with a minimum of teacher preparation time.* Teacher Pages which contain information not included in student materials, are easy to identify and convenient to use. Overhead pages can be made into transparencies, and student worksheets also are ready to use, with suggestions for discussion provided. The curriculum provides a number of activity-oriented experiences designed to engage students' attention.

The Five Units of Instruction

Each of the five units has been strongly influenced by Porter and Taplin's (1987) TMT Model. As mentioned, various aspects of students' backgrounds shape their approaches to conflict and their responses to it. Conflict, anger,

and communication are at the heart of units one through four. Unit five focuses on peer mediation, which the TMT Model describes as an effective means of dealing with conflict.

Each unit has three lessons (except for Unit 5) that begin with a <u>Lesson Overview</u>, including objectives for the lesson and suggestions for presenting the material. The material in each lesson is organized so that a small number of concepts, definitions, or skills are presented. The concepts, definitions, or skills are immediately followed by a set of structured experiences designed to reinforce the material presented. Presentation format is varied through use of overheads and student worksheets. Some of the student activities are designed for individual work, while others provide opportunities for group interaction. *Teachers are encouraged to modify the instructions to suit their own preferences and to meet the needs of their particular students.* The three lessons in each unit focus on the same theme and are designed to be taught progressively. Depending on time available, teachers can cover all the content in one year and conduct reviews in subsequent years, or they can teach one or two lessons from each unit initially and the rest at a subsequent time.

Unit one: *Understanding Conflict*
This unit serves as an introduction to the curriculum and includes materials designed to heighten students' awareness that conflict is a natural part of living, but a part that requires skill to manage.

Unit two: *Effective Communication*
Unit two is designed to help students learn to become more effective listeners and speakers. Students are sometimes surprised when told that listening is an active process. Activities in this lesson focus on learning to be a more effective listener and positive ways to get a listener's attention.

Unit three: *Understanding Anger*
This unit introduces the idea that people have choices about how they deal with anger. Anger signs and anger activators are its focus. Anger signs are physical responses that let a person know that someone, including oneself, is becoming angry. The material covers how anger activators contribute to the escalation of conflict.

Unit four: *Handling Anger*
Practical steps that help people calm down, control anger, and prevent its escalation are presented in this unit. The three lessons introduce problem-solving skills as useful in preventing the escalation of conflict. Learning to solve problems before they become heated conflicts is the major focus.

Unit five: *Peer Mediation*
This one-lesson unit introduces peer mediation: what it is, its purpose, how it works, and how students can gain access to it. The underlying rationale is that students will be more likely to make use of peer mediation if they have an idea of what to expect from a mediation session.

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