

## Commentary: Considering Conflict Resolution Education: Next Steps for Institutionalization

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Over the past two decades, conflict education programs have educated children about constructive approaches to managing conflict in their schools and communities. For many, conflict resolution education (CRE) provides an answer to an increasingly troubling incidence of violence.

As Tricia Jones's review of CRE research confirms, these programs are effective in a variety of ways. Fortunately, this research has helped convince policymakers at the federal level that CRE is legitimate and deserving of support. The U.S. Department of Education's *Creating Safe and Drug Free Schools Action Guide* (1996) provides the following conclusion:

The effective conflict resolution education programs highlighted . . . have helped to improve the climate in school, community, and juvenile justice settings by reducing the number of disruptive and violent acts in these settings, by decreasing the number of chronic school absences due to a fear of violence, by reducing the manner of disciplinary referrals and suspensions, by increasing academic instruction during the school day, and by increasing the self-esteem, and self-respect, as well as the personal responsibility and self-discipline of the young people involved in these programs.

In 2001, the Safe and Drug-Free Schools Office in the Department of Education published a list of promising and exemplary programs. This list was generated by an expert review of evidence regarding the effectiveness for various programs. The resulting list contained nine exemplary and thirty-three promising programs—many of them conflict education programs.

As Jones notes in her article, even with an impressive body of proven benefits, there is more research that needs to be done, and her suggestions for fruitful directions in research are a critical foundation for institutionalization. There are many questions remaining to be answered about

children's individual benefits from CRE. Perhaps the most critical pertain to the long-term effects of participation in CRE. We have the opportunity to study how CRE can positively alter the direction of a child's life and the choices they make from their early years through high school and even into higher education. To see improvements in this work, we must also focus our research on what enables a teacher to better convey these skills to students, both for K–12 faculty and in higher education. Standards covering particular skill areas, topical content, and training amounts in each area have yet to be devised for the fields of CRE and SEL.

What is the difference in the academic performance and social skills of a child provided with CRE and one denied CRE? We have indicators that CRE and SEL can have profound impacts on the adults that children become and the lives they lead in terms of successful personal and professional relationships (Elias and others, 1997). Our research should follow these children into their lives and look at their abilities to work well with others in professional contexts, to form and maintain lasting and loving relationships, to partner and parent well, to connect with community. If CRE is about life skills, as many scholars and practitioners believe, how skilled are the lives led by those who have had the opportunity to participate in CRE when compared to those who have not?

These questions highlight the need for consideration of the institutionalization of CRE. If we accept that these programs are beneficial when used in the right contexts and implemented with fidelity, our attention should be on how best to provide CRE opportunities not only to the children in all schools, but also to classroom educators and adults that are a part of the school community. What is necessary to have CRE become a norm in the way that school communities operate? This is where I will focus the remainder of my comments.

### What We Need to Succeed: Institutionalization Issues for CRE

Eiseman, Fleming, and Roody (1990) define institutionalization as the process by which an innovation becomes embedded in operating procedures of a system. They list six indicators of the institutionalization of an innovation: (1) acceptance by relevant actors; (2) stable, routinized implementation; (3) widespread use of the innovation; (4) firm expectations that the practice will continue within the organization; (5) continuation of the program that is dependent on features of the organizational culture, structure, and procedures rather than the actions of specific individuals; and

(6) routine allocations of time and money. Relatively few CRE efforts have met all of these operational criteria. Many observers may conclude that CRE has begun to meet the first indicators in some regions in the United States but falls far short on the last five.

While CRE and SEL programs have been in existence for decades in the United States and are accepted as legitimate, as exemplified by legislation regarding CRE and SEL in almost every state, CRE implementation is still primarily stand-alone programming, such as peer mediation, rather than a comprehensive approach for all students and staff. CRE has usually been introduced into schools through external channels and treated as add-on programs rather than integrated into ongoing curricula, classroom activity, and everyday operation of the school. There are several reasons that CRE has yet to be fully institutionalized and seen as a necessary component of all education levels and incorporated as such.

First, it has been only in the past ten years or so that we have amassed evidence of the efficacy of these programs, thus justifying their institutionalization. And the critical support for these programs was not provided by the U.S. Department of Education and organizations like CASEL until 2000. It was essential that research demonstrate that CRE and SEL deliver promised benefits before integration into the larger education system was a possibility.

Second, CRE and SEL programs started as a means to provide students with specific knowledge and skills. As a result, the program models used were often stand-alone programs like peer mediation or intensive, short-term curricula like Program for Young Negotiators. The basic service delivery system was developed around CRE and SEL as add-on programming. This works fairly well when resources are plentiful. When resources dwindle and pressures to focus on academic content standards or state proficiency tests increase, these programs are often cut, reduced in size, or underresourced. CRE and SEL educators have learned that the best means of institutionalizing these programs is to make them a part of the daily life of the school through the daily work of its teachers. It maximizes their impact and their staying power (Elias and others, 2003).

Third, recent efforts at curriculum integration, like the National Curriculum Integration Project (NCIP) (Compton, 2002), focused on in-service teacher education in CRE and social and emotional learning (SEL). The assumption of these efforts was that the learning process was optimized if seasoned teachers were selected for training and implementation. While the NCIP program yielded hypothesized benefits (Jones and

Sanford, 2003), the evaluation of NCIP identified a number of resource and administrative challenges to securing adequate support for teachers involved (Jones, Sanford, and Bodtker, 2001). Unless a school had adequate resources to pay for external training, consultation, and coaching, the teachers did not have insufficient time to develop these skills and apply them in their classes. Basically, the in-service route seemed effective only for relatively well-funded and stable schools.

The culmination of these factors is that we have CRE programs that work but have been implemented in ways that reduce their centrality and diminish the probability of their long-term survival. To overcome this, we need to focus efforts in four areas: developing preservice teacher education in CRE and SEL, developing more flexible models for best practice implementation that build internal capacity within the school district, forming better partnerships with other organizations, and forming international networks.

### *Preservice*

While there are few preservice programs in conflict education or SEL offered by colleges of education, some are beginning to offer courses in this or integrate some CRE into their course content. The lack of preservice CRE may be attributed to general lack of specific skills training in CRE and knowledge of its benefits, lack of CRE curriculum that fits easily into conventional preservice course work, and connections of CRE to the national content standards and statewide exams for first-year educators.

While not widespread in teacher preparation, colleges of education are beginning to integrate CRE at graduate levels. Examples are American University's M.A. in teaching and M.A. in international peace and conflict resolution, a dual graduate degree program in which students must take fifteen credit hours of course work in peace and conflict resolution; Lesley University's M.Ed. in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in conflict resolution and peaceable schools, which prepares adults for leadership of programs that address social, emotional, and ethical development of children; Teachers College Columbia University's International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution, which offers courses for graduate students in organizational and social psychology and in education related to conflict resolution; and Wilmington College's requirement that all graduate education students complete a course in CRE before graduation.

Motivation to incorporate CRE and SEL is increased when state standards change. For example, the state of Wisconsin requires that an applicant for an initial regular teaching license must demonstrate competency as verified by a professional education program or school district supervisor in resolving conflicts between pupils and between pupils and school staff and assisting pupils in learning methods of resolving conflicts. As a result, the University of Wisconsin's School of Education, Teacher Certification Program, has a conflict resolution requirement (six hours of course work or equivalent in outside training).

Preservice CRE may affect the national challenge of teacher attrition. Educators agree that the level of teacher attrition in the first few years of teaching is unacceptably high (Darling-Hammond, 2003). The National Center for Education Statistics (1997) reports that about one-third of new teachers leave the profession within five years. And this problem is especially significant in urban education environments. Teacher turnover is 50 percent higher in high-poverty than in low-poverty schools (Ingersoll, 2001), and new teachers in urban districts exit or transfer more often than their suburban counterparts (Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin, 1999).

The research on teacher attrition reveals that a key factor is the new teacher's inadequate preparation for dealing with the realities of managing the classroom. Unable to handle conflict among students and deal with disruptive behavior, teachers become frustrated and are more likely to leave the profession (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997; Norton and Kelly, 1997; Tapper, 1995; Taylor, 1998). Undoubtedly, the adequacy of teacher preparation is instrumental in its effect on teacher attrition rates (Henke, Chen, and Geis, 2000).

New teachers complain that their education departments are not properly preparing them in conflict education and classroom management. Trube and Leighfield (2004) completed a survey of faculty in two-year and four-year teaching institutions in Ohio during spring 2003 and report that 89 percent report being completely or seriously underprepared in their teacher preparation programs in the areas of CRE and SEL. Ninety-two percent of the respondents indicated that "it is important that teacher candidates in my licensure area have knowledge and skills in conflict management."

Nancy Carlsson-Paige, professor of education at Lesley University, states, "If we are going to make progress in teaching conflict resolution to young people, we have to begin working more systematically with college faculty

and pre-service teachers” (personal communication, September 2003). James A. McLoughlin, dean of the College of Education at Cleveland State University, affirms, “. . . We realize that teaching and learning do not occur in isolation. Context as a conceptual framework includes the range of influences surrounding and infusing the teaching-learning process. In this connection, the idea of conflict resolution, diversity, and social-emotional learning are of central significance, particularly in urban settings where issues surrounding race, multiculturalism, socioeconomic status and exceptionality are in higher focus than in the larger society” (personal communication, October 2003).

Recently, the George Gund Foundation funded the Conflict Resolution Education in Teacher Education project (CRETE). CRETE is designed to educate teacher candidates about CRE and SEL so they can develop these competencies through their course work, student teaching, and initial professional practice. CRETE is designed to work with mentoring and induction processes to heighten new teachers’ abilities to apply the skills and knowledge acquired through the project. And CRETE is designed to evaluate, refine, and prepare project protocols and instructional materials for dissemination to other colleges of education throughout the nation.

The CRETE project builds on a history in higher education initiatives by the Ohio Commission for Dispute Resolution and Conflict Management. The commission has held Conflict Resolution Education Institutes for Higher Education Professional Preparation Faculty over the past five years. The goal of the institute is to assist faculty in providing future educators with the conflict resolution skills they will need to be leaders in creating safer, more supportive learning environments. The institute prepares faculty to examine personal conflict resolution skills, illustrate successful integration of conflict resolution content and skills into higher education courses, and develop strategies for institutionalizing conflict resolution in the professional preparation curricula of Ohio colleges and universities. Through this project, Ohio has also begun to make linkages between CRE and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) review that the majority of education departments undergo, and PRAXIS, a professional assessment for beginning teachers, which thirty-five of forty-three states use for teacher licensure. These types of linkages encourage and assist the faculty in legitimizing time spent on integrating this into their current syllabi and operations, as well as helping them to persuade other faculty to do the same.

### *In-School Capacity*

While there is currently a long list of best practice curriculum and programs for CRE and SEL, a vast majority of schools implementing them do not adhere to the best practice training guidelines for implementation and thus tend to not achieve the optimal results possible. This lack of adherence to “proper” implementation is due in part to the need for a more flexible model of best practice that includes addressing the challenge of limited resources for “proper” training. One way to address this is to include in the initial training a focus on preparing a core group of educator-trainers within the school district that will be prepared to continue the ongoing staff development and technical assistance needed in order to help enhance institutionalization. This will assist with challenges such as staff turnover and dwindling resources for outside trainers. This and the work in higher education would benefit from the development of a core group of standards for training adults in CRE, enabling them to optimally deliver the services and train their colleagues and the parents and students who work in the school community.

### *Partnerships*

Forming partnerships with organizations and institutions will be key to successful institutionalization. Fortunately, several of these partnerships have already been formed with organizations like CASEL, Educators for Social Responsibility, and the Association for Conflict Resolution, to name a few. At a minimum, there should be a network of professional associations and university as well as independent consortia.

In addition, there should be a stronger partnership between government, statewide education organizations, and CRE organizations. All states have legislation that requires the provision of CRE in some form (teacher preservice, in-service, continuing education, and others). But, those agencies responsible for implementing the legislation do not always have the CRE expertise to effectively implement the legislation. There is little information available on the support mechanisms that states assume will enable compliance with existing law. It would be valuable to find out about these support mechanisms and the nature of their use.

### *International Clearinghouse*

Work in CRE is becoming more prevalent around the world, with particular strongholds in European countries such as Norway, the Netherlands,

United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Ireland (Harris and Morrison, 2003). There is considerable interest in CRE from South America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. There is a need for some international network to link these efforts to accomplish the following:

- Development of a clearinghouse of current information on CRE programs
- Creation of research and evaluation agendas
- Development of an international youth network
- Promotion of teacher and professional educator preparation in CRE
- Clarification of culturally and contextually sensitive implementation processes to enable application of CRE efforts to fit the cultural and social-political conditions of the community of use

### Suggestions for Future Research

This section suggests specific research that is critical to accomplish CRE institutionalization:

- *Survey colleges of education for CRE graduate, undergraduate, and continuing education readiness.* A critical component of institutionalization lies in the ability of colleges of education to promote CRE courses and curricula at graduate levels, with elective and continuing education components, and pre-service initiatives. A nationwide survey would provide valuable information. First, it would yield an accurate picture of the current state of effort in this area. Second, the survey would clearly identify colleges of education and their programs that may serve as models for other colleges of education to follow. Third, this survey would allow us to compare our progress with related fields like character education, a comparison that may enlighten us on best practices for moving forward.

- *Conduct case studies on social-political factors with an impact on institutionalization in a specific school or district.* Understanding influences on program institutionalization is important. For example, Ritter and Boruch (1999) reported on Tennessee's STAR project, which sought to reduce class size. Similar case study research on CRE innovation and institutionalization, for example, in the Cleveland District, may help us better understand and attend to the social, political, and economic forces that affect the field. Case studies should be encouraged, especially on schools and districts where one or more of the following characteristics exists: there is a specific

staff member or program coordinator (at the district level or a full-time position at the school level); there has been a planning process in which the institutionalization of the CRE program has been a goal from the beginning; there is a clearly articulated K–12 coordinated effort in place and operating; or there is a communication infrastructure within the school or district that has been established and supported specifically to maximize the success of the CRE program.

- *Investigate large-scale institutionalization efforts in terms of political process and influence in related fields.* We understand relatively little about the process used to build a political initiative for a field like CRE. Examining the process used for character education or collaborative learning will contribute to identifying the machinery and process that helps make collaborative efforts and implementation happen.

- *Research what strategies, content areas, and minimum amounts of training of educators must be done in order for them to be able to not only model the skills of CRE, but also convey these skills to their university students and K–12 students.* While there are general guidelines for CRE content areas in which educators should be competent, the knowledge regarding the amount of training and optimal strategies for training them have not been developed or researched.

While significant strides toward institutionalization of CRE have been made since 1995, there is still much work to be done in order to see CRE institutionalized not only into the daily operations of our schools, but also in teacher preparation and educational policies and procedures nationally and internationally.

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