The Comprehensive Peer Mediation Evaluation Project: Insights and Directions for Curriculum Integration

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As the other authors of this special issue have argued eloquently, there is a great value in considering curricular integration and infusion processes. They detail choices available in how integration and infusion may happen and suggest a variety of goals that may motivate educators and conflict specialists in these activities. With the exciting possibilities come a range of questions that researchers can help answer. This article briefly addresses three questions:

1. What evidence exists concerning the relative advantages of curriculum integration and cadre, stand alone, conflict education programs?
2. What are the practical issues to be faced to secure these advantages? And,
3. What questions can research address that will further our knowledge of curriculum integration and infusion as discussed in this special issue? These questions are answered here with information gained from the Comprehensive Peer Mediation Evaluation Project conducted over the past three years.

Is curriculum integration advantageous? In the early stages of the discussion of curriculum integration a pressing question has been whether curriculum integration provides advantages above and beyond more concentrated conflict skills education in the form of peer mediation programs. Conventional peer mediation training has been proven to positively influence children's management of school and home conflicts in elementary schools (Johnson et al., 1995; Johnson et al., 1996). And middle school students who received both conflict resolution training and peer mediation training have shown a significant increase in their use of integrative negotiation behavior (Dudley, Johnson, & Johnson, 1996). Until recently research has not established the impact of peer mediation programs in higher educational levels or addressed the comparative advantages of curricular integration and peer mediation training in terms of positive impacts for students or the larger school environment.

One of the purposes of the Comprehensive Peer Mediation Evaluation

Project (CPMEP) funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Surdna Foundation was to investigate the comparative advantages of these programs. CPMEP was a longitudinal field experimental study that investigated the effect of program type (peer mediation cadre or peer mediation only, peer mediation plus curricular infusion or whole school programs, and control schools) and educational level (elementary, middle, and high school) on students' conflict attitudes and behaviors, school climate, and program utility. The study was conducted in three sites (the Denver area, Philadelphia, and Laredo, TX); a 3 x 3 design was used in each of the sites. The study lasted 2 years, from 1995 through 1997 (with a third year of evaluation currently in progress in Philadelphia schools). A thorough description of the methods and results are reported elsewhere (Jones, forthcoming, Jones et al, 1997; Jones et al., forthcoming).

One of the major research questions addressed in the CPMEP study was "Are Cadre Programs Better than Whole School Programs (or vice versa)? In terms of impact on students' attitudes and behaviors, school climate, and program utility, is there a difference in the efficacy of these program models? ". Our results showed that both program models yield significant benefits. Cadre programs yield better individual outcomes while whole school programs yield better climate outcomes.

In terms of students' conflict attitudes and behaviors we found that:

1. peer mediators in whole school programs experienced less school and personal conflict but were less likely to help others than peer mediators in cadre programs,
2. cadre programs had a stronger positive impact on pro-social values than whole school programs,
3. neither cadre nor whole school programs were clearly superior in terms of impact on aggressiveness or conflict styles, and
4. cadre programs were more effective at increasing perspective-taking and conflict competence skills, for peer mediators as well as other students, than whole school programs.

In terms of school climate we found that:

1. whole school programs had a stronger positive effect on climate than cadre programs at the middle and high school levels; however, cadre programs were superior at the elementary level,
2. while both models impacted teacher/staff perceptions of climate, whole school programs impacted students' perceptions more than cadre programs,
3. the aspects of climate most positively influenced were task-related structure, perceived consideration, academic emphasis, principal's influence, and the overall school health. Yet, it is important to note that both schools with cadre and whole school programs had significant improvements in school climate when compared with schools that had no programs.

Finally, in terms of program utility, peer mediation in cadre and whole school programs were equally effective in terms of usage rates and agreement rates. There were slightly more referrals to mediation from students and teachers in whole school programs. And there were some differences in satisfaction with mediation. For high schools and middle schools, disputants and mediators in whole school programs were significantly more satisfied with the mediation process and outcome than their counterparts in cadre programs. The implication is that whole school programs may better prepare disputants for mediation by creating a broader knowledge of mediation and constructive conflict behavior.

The results do not support the assumption that whole school programs are clearly superior to cadre programs. Cadre programs have a stronger impact in terms of students' conflict attitudes and behaviors and whole school programs have a stronger impact in terms of school climate (for middle and high schools) and to a lesser extent program utility. Based on this evidence, schools that cannot afford a whole school approach may secure similar, or even superior, benefits with a cadre program that is well implemented. Thus, program models should be chosen with respect to a school's resources, goals, and size.

What are the best means of securing these advantages? The second general question concerns the best ways of implementing curriculum integration to secure the benefits found in the CPMEP study and suggested by other advocates of systemic integration (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). In order to secure the advantages of an integrated curriculum, there are at least three issues to be confronted.

The first issue is what the nature of the curriculum should be. In the CPMEP study all sites used the same curriculum for implementation, but selecting that curriculum required us to think about the goals we had for the curriculum and whether extant curricular packages would suffice or new packages would have to be developed.
There are many factors related to this issue. Foremost are questions about the goals that the school has for the curriculum integration. Are they seeking a focused development of problem-solving skills, a more general education in conflict education and social emotional learning, or a package that gives weight to bias awareness and communication? Not all curricula address the same information or are effective for achieving certain outcomes. Especially in the area of the combination of conflict education and social/emotional learning, we are only beginning to understand the potential for children and the needs for curriculum development (Jones, in press).

There are very difficult questions about what the general boundary of such curricula should be; how to develop curricula that are age, gender, and culturally appropriate; and how to develop curricula that are easily administered by teachers who have limited time for extensive training. Certainly, there are very strong examples of curricula available in the field. But we lack basic market testing of these curricula, and we definitely lack comparative assessments of their impacts.

The second issue is the development of support among faculty and administration for the innovation. There is considerable evidence that implementing any conflict education program depends greatly on the awareness and active support of teachers and principals (Jones & Bodtker, in press, Jones & Carlin, 1994). The research in peer mediation and conflict education is replete with tales of programs in decline or perpetual atrophy because they were planted in "unprepared soil".

Our experiences in the CPMEP project added insight to some of the difficulties in implementation. A different training organization worked in each site in the CPMEP study. Each organization was extremely experienced, dedicated and high quality. Further, each had worked to secure strong relationships with the school districts involved. Even under these circumstances, implementation was often problematic. Schools required training organizations to provide almost continual administrative and training follow-up throughout the two years of the project. Teachers who had been trained in the use of conflict education curricula still needed considerable attention and advice to maintain focus in light of the many competing demands on their time and energy. When schools lacked a committed administration and knowledgeable faculty, the difficulties of program implementation increased radically. And, these difficulties occurred in a situation where schools were being provided full resources for the programs in return for their participation in the CPMEP research. In more normal circumstances, program implementation depends on the resources of the school involved; they cannot count on provision of dedicated training organizations who provide constant monitoring as they learn the best ways to secure implementation for themselves.

Not only is the ideological commitment to curriculum integration important, the appropriate training of teachers and staff is also critical; for the adults must be able to model constructive conflict behavior in order to help students involved in curriculum integration efforts (Jones & Brinkman, 1994). This third issue requires more investigation. We know relatively little about the best ways to educate teachers and staff to model constructive conflict. A variety of approaches are available in terms of training curriculum, delivery service providers, and affiliation with professional organizations. But, which of these best prepare these adults for the important roles they will play in modeling behavior for students? There is currently no published research that examines these questions.

What more can research tell us? There are so many more questions than answers that it is difficult to know where to begin this discussion. But, for the sake of brevity, I will suggest three broad areas of work that researchers should pursue. Not coincidentally, these areas reflect on several of the comments of other authors in this issue.

First and foremost, research has much to tell us about the ideal process to help teachers and administrators learn and implement these innovations. This may seem a "keen grasp of the obvious"; to argue that we know little about how these programs come in to being and what the relationship between process and outcome is for integration and infusion. But the reality is exactly that, we know little. What are some specific topics researchers could explore?

What is the relationship between the identification and development of curriculum integration and the goals and motivations of a school? Given the variety of learning processes possible, what mechanisms are best suited to helping teachers learn these innovative approaches? What are the cyclical difficulties in the innovation diffusion process? What can and should schools expect in terms of the stages of development, both forward and backward, to insure that the programs take root and achieve what they are intended to achieve? Action research that utilizes a strong qualitative and longitudinal focus will help provide answers to these and related questions.

A second area of work is how these processes may extend to larger issues of organizational and systemic change. As many organizational theorists now concur, there is great merit to understanding how organizations change, not just what they change into and what they gain or lose from that transformation. The evolution from integration to infusion processes, as discussed by Randy Compton, resonates with the concepts of organizational culture and the development of "learning organizations" (Senge, 1990); or organizations that learn how they learn and can be reflective about that process and the higher level change it produces. If one goal of curriculum integration and infusion is to help our schools become organizations that value constructive conflict and enact productive conflict management practices; where students, teachers, and staff are empowered and participative, then we are seeking to make our schools learning organizations in the traditional and non-traditional meaning of that phrase.

And, a third area of work is research that would help develop models that match school characteristics, school goals, curricular integration or infusion models, and expected outcomes. Comparative analyses explaining differential impact of different models weighed against the differential costs of implementation are sorely needed.

Summary: We have many more questions than answers concerning curriculum integration. Fortunately, efforts like the Curriculum Integration project should help us shed light on curricular content and means of implementing these programs in schools. Projects like CPMEP shed light on what we can expect from different models of conflict education; thus aiding schools in selecting programs that better meet their resources and goals. Still, we should be focusing on the unanswered questions and supporting educators who can help provide information about the form, function, and efficacy of curriculum integration.

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