INTRODUCTION

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

THE ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL

The Alternative High School, established in 1971 as part of the network of alternative high schools in New York City, has approximately 180 students and 14 teachers, including a site coordinator, at each of its four campuses. People under the age of 19 years living anywhere in New York City may apply to any campus of the school. The school was created to serve older students who needed a school environment that both respected their maturity and supported them in moving into adulthood and the world of work.

Students are referred to AHS by high school counselors, the court system, and by self-referral.

Many of the young people enrolled in AHS are not mature enough to handle the social activity, fast pace, and bureaucratic structure of the traditional school. The belief is that in this smaller environment which offers more individualized attention, these students will be more capable of focusing on the goal of earning a diploma.

Although AHS students increasingly come from unstable, disoriented homes, in which there is little expectation concerning school, they also come from stable homes with working parents who do have high educational goals and expectations for their children.

The skill levels of applicants span a broad range and their attendance records are usually poor. Consequently, the number of high school credits a student has earned, combined with his or her age, is a factor in the admissions decision. For instance, a student who applies to AHS at age 18, with three-fourths of her credits earned, is a more likely candidate for admission than is an 18 year old with three-fourths of her credits yet to complete. The decision to select students is also influenced by the school's desire not to become a hang-out for over-aged students with no commitment to completion.

After enrolling, every student is assigned to an advisor and a student group. The advisor leads the group in discussions of academic progress, personal concerns, and school issues. Members of the group remain together for the duration of their enrollment and serve as added support for each other.

The demographic portrait of the student population at AHS at the beginning of this project was:

- African American (56.9%), Hispanic (40.5%), white (2.2%), Asian (0.4%), and Native American (0.1%);
- 5.1% of the students had limited English proficiency;
- 50.5% were females and 49.5% were males;
- About one third of the females were teen parents;
- Average age was 17 years;
- A majority came from disadvantaged households (51.6% were eligible for free or reduced price lunch);
- An increasing number came from families with high risk factors such as drug abuse and homelessness;
- The average number of prior high school credits was 20;
- The achievement rate was well below that of other New York City High Schools (at AHS 44.4% of the students were eligible for Chapter 1 services, whereas the range of eligible Chapter 1 students at regular high schools was 25.4%-30.4%);
- They continued to achieve below minimum standards at Alternative High Schools as measured by the state-wide Regents Competency Tests (RCTs), in reading, writing and math.
- Students who had dropped out had been out of school from six months to seven years;
- 40% of those who enrolled would graduate (the average period of enrollment for graduates was 1.5 years); 30% of those who enrolled would dropout; 15% of enrollees would transfer to other schools or programs.
THE TRAINING IN COOPERATIVE LEARNING AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Our project was initiated with the strong support of the Principal and Assistant principal of AHS. With their approval, members of our staff then met with the faculty at each of the four campuses of AHS to see if a substantial majority at each campus would be willing to cooperate with us in both the training and research aspects of our project. At a faculty meeting at each campus, we described the nature of the trainings in cooperative learning and conflict resolution as well as the research requirements. At three of the four campuses, such cooperation was obtained but a pending administrative reorganization made the fourth campus unwilling to participate.

Given the participation of three campuses in our project, we decided that:
- One campus, Campus A, would receive training only in conflict resolution;
- One campus, Campus C, would receive training only in cooperative learning;
- The third campus, Campus B, would receive training in both.

Although we expected considerable overlap in the effects of these two modes of training since both aim to develop similar social skills, e.g., communicating, perspective-taking, social problem-solving, finding common ground, and sharing, we thought there might also be interesting differences. There is more emphasis on “group process skills” and working together effectively in cooperative learning training while in conflict resolution training there is more emphasis on violence prevention and the process of negotiation. We also thought that the combination of both types of training would be synergistic, in other words, a cooperative orientation would facilitate conflict resolution, and constructive resolution of conflicts would deepen cooperation. By having the different types of training at the three campuses, we hoped to explore these matters.

Training of the administrators, coordinators, teachers, and paraprofessionals began in August 1988 and continued for two years. Training usually took the form of two-hour workshops after school about twice a month with the trainer on campus one day per week for individual staff development.

We used David and Roger Johnson’s cooperative learning training model. Our cooperative learning trainers were trained by the Johnsons.

The conflict resolution training drew upon several sources:
1. A theoretical model developed by Deutsch (1991) which articulates a number of basic principles of training in conflict resolution.
2. A training model originated by Raider (1987) which has been widely used in instructing managers and teachers in conflict resolution.

It should be emphasized that conflict resolution training was implemented in a flexible manner depending upon the context in which it was to be employed, e.g., orientation sessions for new students, Family Groups, vocational classes, etc.

Basic negotiation skills such as the following were to be discussed:
- Active listening: checking to see whether you understand each other correctly.
- “I” messages: telling the other person what you think, not reading the other person’s mind and telling him/her what he/she thinks.
- “Needs” versus “positions”: talking about the needs.

(continued)

**TRAINING SCHEDULE**

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<th>CAMPUS</th>
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**About the Author**

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CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND CI

interests, and feelings of you and the other person rather than your opposing positions.

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

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

- Putting yourself in the other peoples' shoes: how to understand the other person's point of view.

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

- Reframing the issues in conflict: talking about the issues in other ways to find more common ground.

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

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

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

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

THEORY

Based upon Deutsch's (1949a, b; 1973; and 1985) and Johnson and Johnson's theoretical work (summarized in their 1989 book), we developed a set of theoretical propositions which can be summarized as follows. In brief, we assumed that both types of training would lead to an improvement in the social skills that would facilitate constructive conflict resolution and effective working together with others. We further assumed that training in constructive conflict resolution would particularly enhance the former set of skills while training in cooperative learning would particularly improve the latter type of skills.

Next, we posited that an improvement in managing conflict and working together with others would have a positive impact on the students' relations with others which would be reflected in their receiving greater social support from others and being less victimized by others. The increased positiveness of the student's social environment toward him/her would, in turn, lead to greater self-esteem as well as more frequent positive mental states (e.g., "cheerfulness," "life is interesting") and less frequent negative mental states (e.g., "upset," "tense," "depressed"). As the student's self-esteem increased and the social environment became more positive, we expected that the student would feel a greater sense of control over what happened to him (internal locus of control). Since prior research has demonstrated a strong relationship between academic achievement and locus of control, we also assumed that an increased sense of control over one's fate would lead to greater academic achievement.

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

TYPES OF DATA COLLECTED

In June, 1988, prior to the start of any training, we administered lengthy questionnaires to 350 of approximately 540 enrolled students at the three campuses. The purpose of this initial questionnaire was to obtain information from and about the students.

We also obtained information from questionnaires and interviews administered to students who were in attendance at the three campuses of AHS at the end of the first and second school years after our training was introduced.

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

The student posttest questionnaires, administered after our training had begun, included measures of all the key variables of the initial questionnaire. In addition, it included measures of the student's improvement in working effectively in groups and in resolving conflicts. It also included a measure of the student's conflict style. Further, it contained questions which pertained directly to the student's experiences with the cooperative learning and/or conflict resolution training. For example, how frequently were they in a class which had such training? Which conflict resolution topics were discussed or which cooperative learning activities were used in their classes? Was the training useful to them? What did they like and dislike about the training?

In addition to the student questionnaire, we obtained sample performance ratings from students' work supervisors at the end of the students' work internships. Also, teachers filled out a Behavior Rating Scale on a sample of their students.

Systematic observations were also made of the training sessions; a random sample of students as they followed their daily schedules, and of various classroom and non-classroom activi-
ties. These were supplemented by interviews with various members of the teaching and administrative staff.

**SUMMARY OF RESULTS**

The results of our study indicate positive effects on students. In brief, our data show that as students improved in managing their conflicts (whether due to the training in conflict resolution and/or cooperative learning), they experienced increased social support and less victimization from others. This improvement in their relations with others led to increased self-esteem as well as a decrease in feelings of anxiety and depression and more frequent positive feelings of well-being. The higher self-esteem, in turn, produced a greater sense of personal control over their own fates. The increases in their sense of personal control and in their positive feelings of well-being led to higher academic performances.

There is also indirect evidence that the work readiness and actual work performance of students were also improved. Our data further indicate that teachers, and administrators had generally positive views about the training and its results.

It is relevant to ask whether the positive findings about the effects of our training interventions can be attributed to the effects of the favorable school climate at AHS rather than to the training. Our data clearly indicate that the student changes, which we attribute to the effects of the training cannot be explained by student exposure to the more favorable school climate of AHS.

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

These positive results were obtained despite the difficulties we experienced in implementing the training and conducting the research as we had originally planned, not the least of which was the curtailment of funds which reduced the length of training and research from three to two years. We believe the results would have been even stronger had our project continued as long as originally planned.

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

We conclude by stating that our study was conducted under conditions which were considerably more difficult than those under which most prior studies were conducted. The students in our study were older, more "at-risk," and facing more difficult life circumstances. Teachers were working in more adverse conditions and in a more demoralized educational system than in most previous studies. The fact that our training produced positive results under these difficult conditions and that our results are consistent with prior theorizing and research suggests that cooperative learning and conflict resolution training are valuable in a wide range of educational settings.

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**References**


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