The Mediation of Inter-Ethnic Conflict

Peter Coleman and Morton Deutsch
Teachers College, Columbia University

INTRODUCTION

In a recently published paper (Deutsch, 1993), it was suggested that there are four key components to any comprehensive educational program to enable students to develop the attitudes, knowledge, and skills for resolving their conflicts constructively rather than destructively. They are cooperative learning, conflict resolution training, the constructive use of controversy in teaching subject-matters, and the creation of dispute resolution centers in the schools.

A rationale for each of these components follows:

Cooperative learning fosters a sense of positive interdependence ("we sink or swim together") and helps students to acquire the social skills involved in working together effectively. It also provides students the opportunities to interact cooperatively with other students who are different in ability, race, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, etc.

Since Deutsch's early theoretical and experimental work on cooperation-competition (Deutsch 1949a, 1949b), there has been much work on cooperative learning. As Slavin (1983) and Johnson and Johnson (1989) have indicated in their extensive summaries of the research literature, cooperative learning has many positive effects on students, including a reduction in their prejudices toward students who are typically categorized as "different." I am sure that Robert Slavin will discuss this in detail at this meeting.

I want to emphasize that diversified experiences of successful and effective cooperation with individuals and groups of different ethnic backgrounds is a necessary component of any comprehensive educational program to improve ethnic relations
whether among youths or adults. However, it is not sufficient, by itself, since cooperation tends to deteriorate and fail under conditions of destructive conflict.

**Constructive conflict resolution.** There is much to suggest that there is a two-way relation between effective cooperation and constructive conflict resolution. Good cooperative relations facilitate the constructive management of conflict; the ability to handle constructively the inevitable conflicts that occur during cooperation facilitates the survival and deepening of cooperative relations.

In recent years, conflict resolution training programs have sprouted in a number of schools across the country. Although I believe these programs are very promising, little systematic research on their effectiveness has yet been done apart from "consumer satisfaction" studies (which generally indicate high levels of satisfaction). However, the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Teachers College has recently completed a fairly extensive study in an inner-city alternative high school (Deutsch, 1992) but its focus was not on ethnic relations. In brief, our data show that as students improved in managing their conflicts, 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 feelings of positive 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 performance.

Apart from the "victimization scale," which included items relating to whether the student was victimized in particular ways (robbed, assaulted, sexually harassed, insulted, etc.), we have no data specifically relevant to this Conference. Nevertheless, I believe that a constructive conflict resolution training program in schools would be likely to have desirable effects in reducing destructive ethnic conflicts.
The use of constructive controversy in teaching subject-matters. My limited experience with training in constructive conflict resolution suggests that, by itself, a single course or workshop is not usually sufficient to produce lasting effects in most students; they must have repeated opportunities and encouragement to practice their skills of constructive conflict resolution in a supportive atmosphere. Constructive conflict resolution must be infused into "teachable moments" in various courses and student activities. In addition, the active use of constructive controversy in teaching different subject-matters (Johnson and Johnson, 1992) could provide repeated and diverse opportunities for students to learn the skills of lively controversy rather than those of deadly quarrel.

MEDIATION

There are difficult conflicts which the disputing parties, even though well-trained, may not be able to resolve constructively without the help of third parties such as mediators. Informal mediation is one of the oldest forms of conflict resolution and formal mediation has been practiced in international and labor-management conflicts for many years. More recently, formal mediation has been increasingly applied to an ever-widening array of disputes in such areas as divorce, small-claims cases, neighborhood feuds, landlord-tenant relations, environmental and public-resource controversies, industrial disputes, school conflicts, and civil cases. Following in the wake of the explosion of the practice of mediation (and of the proliferation of textbooks and "how-to-do-it" books on mediation), there has been important but modest growth in research and theorizing on this topic. Kressel and Pruitt's (1989) book, Mediation Research, provides a definitive review of the research being done in this area.

They indicate that there is considerable evidence of user satisfaction with mediation and some evidence that the agreements reached through mediation are both less costly to
the conflicting parties and more robust than traditional adjudication. However, there is strong evidence to suggest that mediation has dim prospects of being successful under adverse circumstances. As Kressel and Pruitt (1989) have succinctly expressed it: "Intensely conflicted disputes involving parties of widely disparate power, with low motivation to settle, fighting about matters of principle, suffering from discord or ambivalence within their own camps, and negotiating over scarce resources are likely to defeat even the most adroit mediators" (p. 405).

Third-parties (mediators, conciliators, process consultants, therapists, counselors, etc.) who are called upon to provide assistance in a conflict require four kinds of skills if they are to have the flexibility required to deal with the diverse situations mediators face.

The first set of skills are those related to the third-party's establishing an effective working relationship with each of the conflicting parties so that they will trust the third-party, communicate freely with the mediator, and be responsive to the mediator's suggestions regarding an orderly process for negotiations. The second are those related to establishing a cooperative problem-solving attitude among the conflicting parties toward their conflict. Third are the skills involved in developing a creative group process and effective group decision-making. Such a process clarifies the nature of the problems that the conflicting parties are confronting by reframing their conflicting positions into a joint problem to be solved. It also helps to expand the range of alternatives that are perceived to be available, it facilitates realistic assessment of their feasibility as well as desirability; and it assists in the implementation of agreed-upon solutions. Fourth, it is often helpful for the third-party to have considerable substantive knowledge about the issues around which the conflict centers. Substantive knowledge could enable the mediator to see possible solutions that might not occur to the conflicting parties and it would permit the mediator to help them assess proposed solutions more realistically.
The mediation of inter-ethnic conflict clearly calls for all four types of skills. In addition, it calls for understanding the specific social psychological processes involved in ethnic conflict. Since others at this Conference will be addressing this topic in detail, we simply want to note that a mediator of such conflicts should be tuned into: the misunderstandings and miscommunications that often arise from cultural differences; the ethnocentrism characteristic of most groups; the stereotypes of the other group which are frequently held; the importance of one's ethnic membership in defining one's self-identity; the emblems, symbols, personages, and historic events which are central to the group's definition of itself; and the prior relationship between the conflicting ethnic groups -- their rewarding experiences as well as those which have led to grievances.

SCHOOL MEDIATION

We have searched the literature to see what research, if any, has been done on the mediation of inter-ethnic conflict. So far as we could determine, very little (if any) systematic research has been done. So, we will briefly review the existing research on school mediation instead. Generally, few studies have assessed school based conflict resolution or mediation programs in a systematic fashion (Lam, 1989, for a review). The few studies which have explored their impact indicate that, in general, the participants are satisfied with the training and find it useful.

Educators want conflict resolution and/or mediation programs in the schools for several reasons. The reason most frequently given has been the increase in violence between students and teachers and among students. Such violence ultimately affects the quality of education in schools.

There are over 35 college and university campuses which now have mediation programs. Many more elementary, middle, and high schools report training in conflict resolution and mediation in The Fourth R, the newsletter of the National Association for
Mediation in Education (N.A.M.E.). Rationales and evaluative summaries of some of these programs are given in Wilson-Brewer, et al., (1991) and Lam (1989). Following the conflict resolution and mediation movement initiated in the United States, some schools in Canada are similarly incorporating conflict resolution skills training into their curricula.

If popularity is an indicator of value, there is ample evidence to show that conflict resolution and mediation training are considered to be successful by many educators. Several feature articles report the beneficial aspects of these programs as ascertained by both subjective and objective measures. Evaluations of student mediation programs further show that the student disputants have been satisfied with the mediation outcomes (Lam, 1989). Additionally, studies of peer mediators show that their self-image is enhanced (Lam, 1989). A profile of a student mediator showed that not only did she feel that her relationships became better, but also her grades became better.

Keeney (in Lam, 1989) reports that the principals and the teachers of the schools involved in the "New Mexico Mediation in the Schools" program have had a positive reaction to the program. They feel that the school atmosphere and student interpersonal relations have improved now that there is a constructive and legitimate channel for dealing with conflicts. One good indicator of program acceptance in the school is that about 60% of the upper elementary students wanted to be trained to become mediators. No negative effects of the program are noted.

Clark and Mann (in Lam, 1989) report that the five year old mediation program at Poughkeepsie Middle School was successful in improving attendance, building self-esteem, and creating a sense of responsibility within the student body.

Positive effects of conflict resolution/mediation training have also been noted by the parents. Parents of student conflict managers in the "New Mexico Mediation in the Schools" program have reported being pleased with their children's involvement and have
reported carry-over into the family of the skills that were learned in their school. In one
district, parental training has been carried out at the request of the parents. Keeney
indicates that it is often the changes which parents see at home which arouse their
interest. These reports are encouraging as they point to the beneficial aspects of conflict
resolution training in areas outside of the school.

Parents of the students have benefited from conflict resolution programs in other
ways as well. In one study, the parents involved in disputes with the school were
considerably more satisfied with conflict mediation after the school personnel had been
trained in conflict resolution skills than they were prior to that training. The post-training
ratings made by independent observers of the performance of the participants were also
higher (Maher, in Lam, 1989). In addition, the observers commented that such a program
would be beneficial for themselves.

Thus, many reports note the enthusiasm of the parties involved with school
mediation/conflict resolution training programs. Several researchers and practitioners,
however, point out the caveat involved in uncritically lauding mediation/conflict
resolution programs. Although the idea of mediation/conflict resolution is being sold to
schools extensively, there haven't been many intensive efforts to evaluate what is working
and what isn't, which might in fact limit the potential of such program (Lam, 1989).
There is a need for much more systematic assessments of these programs after
implementation, using rigorous data collection and analysis procedures.

THE MEDIATION OF INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICT

In light of the scarcity of research on the mediation of inter-ethnic conflict, we
decided to conduct an "experience survey" of a select group of expert mediators in the
New York area who have served as mediators in inter-ethnic conflicts. This Spring, Peter
Coleman, who is a mediator and mediation trainer, interviewed eleven (11) individuals
who had mediated ethnic group conflicts. The interviews followed a semi-structured format with open-ended questions which focused on the conditions, processes and effects of mediating ethnic group conflicts. A few follow-up interviews were also done with disputants who had been involved in the mediations and were willing to waive their right to confidentiality.

A variety of ethnic groups were represented in the sample of disputants (Hispanic, Asian, White, African-American, African, Hassidic, Central American, American Indian, and Haitian). The disputants also ranged in age from high school age to adult, included males and females, and were from a wide range of socioeconomic classes. The mediators also represented a broad range of ethnic groups. The conflicts varied in level of severity from minor arguments and misunderstandings to organizational standstills, industrial sabotage and acts of violence. Many of the conflicts had long histories. A few of the cases had legal proceedings pending over the issue of concern to the mediation. All of the cases, with one exception, utilized a formal mediation process, however many of the cases also utilized other conflict resolution strategies. The majority of the conflicts existed within some type of system (school, government agency, community, etc.).

In general, what emerged from the interviews was a broad scope of information concerning ethnic group conflict mediation which we have organized into five general categories of mediator activities. Kressel & Pruitt (1989) in describing what mediators do, indicate that their diverse actions can be grouped under four major headings:

a. establishing a working alliance with the parties;

b. improving the climate between them;

c. addressing the issues; and

d. applying pressure for settlement.
We add a fifth to this:

e. assuring implementation of the agreement.

In focusing our discussion on these five points we hope to articulate more specifically some of the "do's and don'ts" of effective ethnic group mediation to broaden both our practical and our theoretical understanding of the processes involved.

Establishing a working alliance with the parties.

Initial contact between the disputing parties and the mediators. The mediator (or mediation center) may be approached by one or more of the disputing parties or the mediation may occur as the result of third parties -- e.g., the outreach of the mediator or of a school's mediation center or at the insistence of teachers, administrators, parents, or the courts. Almost all mediators believe that mediation is more successful when the disputing parties participate in it on a voluntary basis. However, successes have been reported even when initial participation in mediation was not truly voluntary; particularly, when the mediator can convince the conflicting parties that they need mediation. As a school's mediation center becomes well-known and well-respected, more and more students will bring their conflicts to it.

In many school settings, having a conflict resolution curriculum can provide a basic language and familiarity with the process that will facilitate the willingness of disputants to participate. Often the students of these programs become the "eyes and ears" of the mediation centers in the schools; referring conflicts to mediation and encouraging their peers to use the service. In many of the interviews the involvement of these students, their own personal transformation and the diffusion of their enthusiasm for mediation throughout the school was crucial to the success of the centers and was the core of an actual culture change with regard to handling conflicts.
Some mediators believe that it is better if mediation begins at an early phase of a dispute before positions have hardened; others feel that at a later stage when polarization has occurred, the issues are clearer. We think the earlier, the better.

Establishing trust. All mediators emphasize the importance of a trusting relationship between the mediator and the disputing parties. There are three interrelated bases of such trust: the personal credibility of the mediator, the credibility of the institution with which the mediator is affiliated, and the credibility of the procedures which the mediator employs. In inter-ethnic conflict, the possible ethnic bias of the mediator or of his/her institution is sometimes an issue. To overcome such doubts, some mediators believe the professional role of the mediator and its ethical code requiring impartiality should be stressed. Others also emphasize the mediator is only a facilitator with all decisions being made by the disputing parties. Still others believe that having a team of mediators, so that each of the disputing ethnic groups are represented on the mediation team, is also helpful.

Personal credibility is often established through mediator contacts with each of the disputing parties prior to mediation. At such meetings, the mediator in appearance, manner, and behavior must impress the party with whom he or she is meeting that he or she is impartial, fair, professional, and understanding of both the substance and feeling of what is being said. The use of students who have been trained as mediators, rather than adults, was recommended in student-student conflicts because of their greater ability to understand and speak the language of their fellow students.

Improving the climate between the parties.

Initially, this aspect of the mediation process can be particularly difficult in inter-ethnic conflicts, but successful mediation can provide an experience which will foster
better relations between the ethnic groups. Several ways that this can be approached are outlined.

**Setting the stage.** It is often valuable to establish a favorable climate between the parties prior to the mediation. This is illustrated in this quote from a mediator who was working on a conflict between faculty members at a school:

So I did a lot of behind-the-scenes talking to everybody. I ran a multi-cultural sensitivity training for 1/2 day. Taught something about culture. Taught how culture could influence conflict. In the interim, The Black Teachers Caucus put on an evening event of a Black event which was spectacular! The Site Based Management negotiating team went. It was a first class event. Black spirituals and food and it was fabulous. This was the first time that the African-American teachers had put on an evening. In this school people get status by putting on activities. So by the mediation time had evolved the multi-cultural thing had happened, and they had the Black cultural event.

**Providing a procedural heuristic.** Mediation can provide a cognitive framework that encourages the safe and constructive resolution of conflict. It provides disputants access to the other party, establishes ground rules to assure civil discourse and safety, offers a forum to understand the other's predicaments and concerns, and most importantly focuses the parties on future solutions not on past blame. This is particularly important when working cross-culturally because it provides a common context within which differing cultures can communicate.

**Allowing and moving beyond emotions.** Allowing the appropriate ventilation of anger, frustration, and resentment of the parties seems to be necessary in order for disputants to get on to the deeper feelings of hurt, loss, and fear which can have a transformational effect on the parties. Allowing emotional expression also enables the disputants to "get it out" and get beyond the intense feelings which may be clouding their
perceptions of the issues. If the mediator can allow their appropriate expression within the limits of the ground rules, they may be better able to identify the real issues in the conflict.

There are considerable differences in cultural beliefs about what is an appropriate level of acknowledgment and expression of emotion. This is best identified by the mediator and openly stated in inter-ethnic conflicts.

**Identifying and clarifying ethnic assumptions.** Culture can influence one's view of what conflict is, how it is appropriate to respond to it, where responsibility lies in reaching an agreement, the role of the mediator, as well as what is possible under an agreement. Many of these assumptions are so subtle that they demand a considerable amount of patience from the mediator, listening carefully to the exchange, identifying and confirming assumptions, and then sharing them with both sides. As mentioned earlier, same-culture mediators can facilitate the process of making the different ethnic groups aware of how each group's background is affecting their conflict and its mediation.

These differing assumptions, beliefs, actions, and perceptions can polarize the groups, stirring ethnocentrism and stereotyping.

**Intervening in ethnocentrism.** *Ethnocentrism* was defined by Sumner in his book *Folkways* (1906) as "the technical name for the view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything...Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior...and looks with contempt on the outsider." This is often an issue with groups in conflict even without cultural differences. Ethnic differences practically guarantees ethnocentrism.

The formula for intervening seems to be to: 1) identify and clarify existing ethnic assumptions, misperceptions, etc., 2) move on to the substantive issues (if they still exist), and 3) reframe the issues focusing on the cooperative pursuit of resolving the reoccurrence of the problem in the future. This is portrayed in the following example:
What happened at the multi-cultural event was that I realized that many came from the "melting pot" approach. Whites came from old generation Italian, Jewish, Irish, and had bought into the "melting pot" theory of race relations. Blacks were into the "salad bowl" theory. So in my head I thought how could this be solved. So I reframed it as a mediator that we need both soup and salad. I then asked them to brainstorm on the issue based on the reframing of how do you develop a governing structure that's fair and equitable and also includes representation of all the constituency groups...The solution was that there would be a Multi-Cultural Task Force made up of seven people appointed by the principal each year. The seven would be appointed based on the student demographics of the year, with proportional representation. So it seemed like a rational proposal that they all contributed to and felt very happy that they agreed to it. There exists a better understanding between members of the team. I provided for the development of cohesion and team building. They are better friends. In this situation the main concern was a recognition of the fact that there were needs on both sides. The opposition dissolved after this was agreed. The results are very strong to date.

Reducing stereotypes. Stereotyping, as Walter Lippman pointed out, is a natural process which is aimed at simplifying the complex set of data which impinge upon our perceptual and cognitive apparatuses. Negative stereotypes often develop to justify and explain the hostilities which began with ethnocentrism and unresolved conflicts of interest. Once they develop they hamper the mediation process and constructive conflict resolution. Other papers at this Conference are addressing the issues involved in reducing prejudices and stereotypes but these issues cannot be ignored by the effective mediator. He or she must, first of all, be aware of his/her own stereotypes and curb them. Secondly, he or she must foster diverse, extended, informal interactions between individuals of the different ethnic groups at meals, coffee breaks, recreational situations, in problem-solving
subgroups, and the like. These informal interactions should be structured so as to
individuate members of the different ethnic groups; to allow the opportunity to recognize
the individual aspirations, hurts, and needs of the different individuals; and to enable the
understanding of the other's views in the context of his or her life experiences.

Addressing the issues.

Before the issues can be addressed, they must be identified. This is often difficult
to do in inter-ethnic conflict because the opposing groups may have been frozen into
antagonistic positions which are not good representations of their underlying interests. In
some conflicts, a group's interests may be hidden out of fear of being exploited or a desire
to exploit the other; but, in many instances, the members of a group do not have a clear
picture of their own needs and interests. Often the emotional turmoil associated with
inter-ethnic conflict beclouds the issues and it is only after the emotional heat has been
reduced and a working relationship has been established between the conflicting groups
that the true issues can be recognized and addressed.

There are several approaches that a mediator can take to helping the conflicting
groups to identify and address the issues between them. When the hostility between the
groups is so great that face-to-face discussions are unfeasible or unlikely to be productive,
the mediator may work with each group separately to probe for their underlying interests
and their realistic aspirations, to identify a range of options for satisfying their interests,
and to appraise the options in terms of their desirability, feasibility, and timeliness as well
as in terms of objective criteria of fairness. The mediator may shuttle back and forth
between the groups in an attempt to broaden the areas of agreement and narrow the
differences between them. If this is successfully accomplished, the groups may be
brought together to work out the details of a full agreement. If not, the mediator may
draw up what he considers to be a fair agreement that addresses the interests of both.
He/she will then ask the two groups to use this text as the basis for negotiating a mutually acceptable agreement.

A second approach is to have the mediator facilitate a direct problem-solving interaction between the two parties. The basic steps involve identifying the problems between the two groups, analyzing their causes, developing suggestions for solving the problems, evaluating these suggestions in terms of their desirability, feasibility, and timeliness, selecting the preferred options and developing a plan for implementing them, and, finally, developing methods of checking how well they are being implemented and establishing a future time for assessing the progress in their relations. The typical rules of interaction during a mediation, with the mediator's continuous attention to adherence to them, help to establish a civilized discourse during the process of cooperative problem-solving.

A third approach to intergroup problem-solving starts with ideals rather than problems. It involves several different steps. First, the mediator has the members of each group meet in separate parts of a room and have each group identify what they think an ideal relationship between the two groups would be. The two groups then meet together to see if they can agree on the characteristics of such a relationship and with the help of the mediator they often can. Next the groups meet separately to discuss the nature of their present relationships. They are then brought together to see if, with the help of the mediator, they can agree on their present relationship. Then, the mediator helps in identifying the various discrepancies between their ideal and the existing relationship. The two groups together or in mixed sub-groups then develop specific suggestions for moving toward an improved relationship. These suggestions are then evaluated in terms of their desirability, feasibility, timeliness, and fairness. And so on.
Applying pressure

Although the mediator of inter-ethnic conflicts cannot impose a settlement, he or she has an interest in obtaining an agreement which is responsive to the interests of the conflicting parties and also to the broader community of which they are a part: an agreement which is also fair and likely to endure. To obtain such an agreement, it may be necessary to use pressure on one or both sides at various stages of the mediating process. There are various sorts of influence tactics that a mediator can employ such as: statements about the realistic consequences of no agreement or of the use of a given strategy or tactic; employing his/her authority as an expert; stating approval or disapproval; involving higher authority than the local representatives of the conflicting ethnic groups (e.g., bringing in national leaders of the conflicting ethnic groups); threatening to withdraw as a mediator; providing incentives for an agreement; etc. It is evident that the use of pressure from the mediator can sometimes help a stalled negotiating process to get moving. Yet it is also apparent that it may backfire or have no lasting desirable effect if the pressure is not viewed as a legitimate influence attempt.

Assuring implementation of the agreement.

The mediator's role does not end with the achievement of an agreement between the conflicting parties. There are several other functions he or she can perform: providing advice and help in "selling" the agreement to the members of each ethnic group so that they will also support the agreement; identifying the steps involved in operationalizing the agreement including, when necessary, access to the resources necessary to its implementation; establishing criteria and procedures for monitoring and evaluating compliance with the agreement; and creating procedures for appropriate responses to either witting or unwitting non-compliance.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have tried to provide a picture of the current state of research on mediation in the schools and also provide an overview of what is involved in the mediation of inter-ethnic conflict. The research suggests that school mediation programs have positive effects in reducing violence and in enhancing the self-esteem and social skills of the mediator. It must be noted that the research is sparse, poorly funded, and not of high quality.

The research on the mediation of inter-ethnic conflict is non-existent. It mainly consists of a few case descriptions by the mediators. To supplement these case studies, Peter Coleman did interviews with eleven expert mediators who have worked on inter-ethnic conflicts in schools and elsewhere. Combining our own knowledge and experience with the insights garnered from these experts, we have provided an outline of some of the issues in mediating inter-ethnic conflict. Many of these issues are those involved in the mediation of any conflict. The issues unique to inter-ethnic conflict emerge from cultural misunderstandings, ethnocentrism, long-held stereotypes, and the importance of ethnic-identity to self-identity. Although the mediation of inter-ethnic conflicts is not easy, our experts indicated many successful outcomes of such mediation.

In conclusion, we suggest that there is need for support for both more education and more research in this area. Our sense is that there are few, if any, schools of education with educational programs that would qualify their graduates to be experts in this field and sufficiently knowledgeable to be able to train other experts. Clearly, there is a need to develop such educational programs, if school mediation programs are to be developed in an effective and responsible manner. It is also evident that there is insufficient research in this speciality of professional practice. There is an obvious need for the
development of research institutes to develop the knowledge to guide professional practice and the procedures to evaluate and improve it.
References


