Today we face one of the greatest challenges educators and other concerned adults will ever have to grapple with—how to reclaim our schools as caring, peaceable communities of learning. For many years, educators have realized the need to comprehensively address the social, emotional, and ethical development of young people along with the teaching of academic skills and content. Efforts to educate the heart along with the mind in the school context have come under a variety of banners such as affective education, cooperative learning, character education, and child-centered learning. Yet now, more than ever, schools need to adapt a broadly conceived and well-coordinated strategy to cultivate early adolescents’ social, emotional, and ethical development.

To participate as contributing citizens in today’s and tomorrow’s world, young people need to learn about the diversity of its people and cultures; they need to develop their thinking about how to approach conflict, handle emotions, and solve problems. Across our nation, teachers, school officials, and parents are looking to schools to provide students with the skills and competencies that will protect them from becoming victims or perpetrators of violence. Young people need guidance and skills that can prevent them from making potentially harmful decisions that could hurt themselves and others. Schools are seeking out programs that will help middle school youth develop social and emotional skills that will foster
resiliency and promote the development of caring, socially responsible young adults.

THE RESOLVING CONFLICT CREATIVELY PROGRAM

This chapter examines the work of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP), one of the largest and longest running models of social and emotional learning (SEL) in the United States. It demonstrates strategies for incorporating a comprehensive and systematic approach for integrating SEL through the lens of conflict resolution and intergroup relations into the daily life of middle school classrooms and schools across the United States.

Vision and Goals

RCCP began in 1985 as a joint initiative of Educators for Social Responsibility Metropolitan Area (ESR Metro) and the New York City Board of Education. The program started in three schools in Brooklyn, New York, expanded to many more schools within New York City by 1988, and still continues in New York under the auspices of the New York City Board of Education and ESR Metro. The RCCP National Center, an initiative of the national office of ESR, serves to disseminate the program throughout the country, operating in over 350 schools nationwide in 10 school districts in eight states. Daniel Goleman, author of Emotional Intelligence (1995), lauded RCCP, saying, “The Resolving Conflict Creatively Program is a model of emotional intelligence, a sane prescription for what ails our children, our schools, and our communities” (Lantieri & Patti, 1996).

When Tom Roderick, executive director of ESR Metro, and Linda Lantieri began the program in New York City schools some 13 years ago, their vision was guided by a shared commitment to educating children in the ways of peace. Ghandi’s words “If we are to reach real peace in this world and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children” were very real to them. They asked the following questions: What would help young people handle their emotions better and think differently about conflict and diversity? How could we best assure that young people would learn fundamental social and emotional skills along with their academic skills?

While the national global perspectives surrounding peace were paramount, Roderick and Lantieri agreed that to attain peace in the world it would be essential to address young people’s SEL by teaching conflict resolution and intergroup relation skills at the interpersonal level. And so, the work of RCCP is rooted in teaching concepts and skills that build classrooms
and school communities that model democratic principles. The young adults in these schools recognize the role they play in becoming socially responsible citizens of a pluralistic, participatory society.

RCCP’s primary strategy is designed to reach young people through the adults who relate to them on a daily basis at home, in school, and in their communities. The goal is to foster young people’s social and emotional development by focusing on emotional literacy, conflict-resolution skills, and intercultural understanding.

Vital to RCCP’s mission is a vision of schools themselves as communities. One of its central goals is to transform the culture of participating schools. Through understanding, empathy, and respect for one another, a cooperative school spirit can be established.

**Model of Implementation**

RCCP’s “peaceable schools” model reflects the experiences and practices developed by educators in schools and communities over many years. The essential components for effective implementation follow.

**CURRICULUM COMPONENT.** The K–12 classroom curriculum needs to focus on key skills: active listening, assertiveness (as opposed to aggressiveness or passivity), the expression of feeling in appropriate ways, empathy and perspective-taking, cooperation, negotiation, the appreciation of diversity, and methods for countering bias. RCCP lessons involve role-playing, interviewing, group discussion, brainstorming, “teachable moments,” and other experiential and affective learning strategies.

**PROFESSIONAL TRAINING.** Professional training and ongoing support for teachers provides 24 hours of introductory training on the RCCP curriculum as well as training in communication, conflict resolution, and “infusion” strategies for integrating these concepts and skills into social studies, language arts, and other academic subjects. Each teacher is assigned a staff developer who visits the school between 6 and 10 times during the year to help with preparation, observe classes, give demonstration lessons, discuss concerns, and otherwise help sustain that teacher’s efforts in the classroom.

**PEER MEDIATION.** A student-led mediation program provides a strong peer model for nonviolence and the appreciation of diversity and reinforces students’ emerging skills in working out their own problems. While peer mediation makes a large contribution to a more peaceful school climate, it is not a substitute for an effective disciplinary policy; if strictly enforced sanc-
tions against fighting are not in place, students are unlikely to turn to mediators for help.

**PARENT TRAINING.** Parent training enables RCCP to reach beyond the school yard, to increase family support for children's efforts, and to give parents the opportunity to learn more about intergroup relations, family communication, and conflict resolution. RCCP offers a series of four 3-hour workshops called Peace in the Family. At the workshops, parents can think about how they act as parents—what works and what they would like to do differently. RCCP provides concrete skills in various aspects of communication such as active listening for receiving messages and I-messages, for asserting one's feelings and needs in a nonjudgmental, nonattacking manner.

**ADMINISTRATOR TRAINING.** Administrator training introduces RCCP concepts and shows school administrators how they can use their leadership to encourage everyone within the school community to embrace and model humane, democratic, and creative approaches to dealing with conflict and diversity.

The RCCP model has been successfully implemented in urban, suburban, and rural communities across the United States. Each school district has adapted the model according to its own personal characteristics and needs.

**THE MIDDLE SCHOOL CURRICULUM: TECHNIQUES AND PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING SEL**

The middle school years provide the perfect opportunity to address the psychosocial needs of students and to offer them skill building to help them cope with the internal and external conflicts they face. At a time when many middle school youngsters ruminate about themselves, their negative self-perceptions often convince them that they are not smart, not liked, or not attractive. A responsive classroom curriculum provides these young people with opportunities to express and explore their concerns. In this way, more students, like Maura, can develop the social and emotional strength that allows them to hear how certain behaviors alienate them from others and to strive to change these behaviors. The daily life of the classroom becomes a safe community in which adolescent issues can be shared among peers and in which students can be guided by a caring adult.

RCCP classrooms incorporate six themes into the curriculum: cooperation, caring communication, expression of feelings, appreciation of
diversity, responsible decision making, and conflict resolution. Classroom teachers teach direct skill-based lessons in each of these areas. They also design lessons that infuse the newly acquired skills and strategies into their academic teachings. “The goal of the classroom teacher is to establish a ‘peaceable’ classroom, one in which these themes are apparent. Peace is regarded as a dynamic process that everyone works toward and believes in” (Kreidler, 1994).

COOPERATION. One of the first skills developed is cooperation. At the beginning of the year, language arts teachers might have students complete group stories. Math teachers might ask students to design and solve word problems together. Through a variety of cooperative activities, middle school youngsters learn to value cooperation and working with their peers. When teachers foster this learning, young people learn how to work together on tasks as well as how to reflect upon and modify their own behaviors. The key is encouraging the students to evaluate their own behaviors as well as those of the group. Teachers make the commitment to stress the importance of social skills while teaching academic tasks.

CARING COMMUNICATION. Like cooperation skills, the theme of caring communication is also developed. Real discussion and dialogue depend on honest, open communication. Middle school students learn to speak their feelings and actively listen to others. Through role plays and simulations, students experience the different effects that good and poor listening have on the speaker’s willingness to openly and nondefensively communicate. They learn how to paraphrase and reflect the speaker’s words, to ask clarifying questions, and to summarize at the end of conversations to assure that the parties clearly understand each other.

EXPRESSION OF FEELINGS. We encourage students to express their positive and negative feelings. Put-downs such as “you’re ugly,” “you’re dumb,” and other painful comments are common at this age, but they don’t have to be. Through role plays and group exercises, the students learn that these negative, hurtful words are unacceptable. The newly acquired I-message becomes a powerful tool for the students: for instance, I feel angry when you call me a name because it hurts my feelings. Young adolescents don’t always use the formalized sentence patterns. Instead, they adapt their own versions of I-messages and use their words creatively to respond to hurtful criticisms.

Role plays and group simulations help young people identify their feelings and practice expressing them. Journal writing also provides a positive vehicle for expressing and identifying emotions. Students share their writing
with a trusted peer for a few minutes. This special time in which someone lends them a listening ear can free them to focus on the lessons of the day.

The better middle school students become at expressing their feelings, the easier it is for them to voice their hurt, disappointment, or anger toward another in a constructive and nonviolent manner. They learn that anger is a normal, healthy feeling that needs to be conveyed in productive ways. Young people need help to explore the reasons behind their anger, to release their anxieties, and to express their self-doubts. If anger is suppressed, it only erupts at a later time. Many early adolescents, similar to Raffi in his earlier years, keep these fears and doubts inside. Anger without a vehicle of expression can result in self-destructive behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse, or it can extend its reach to others in some form of violence.

APPRECIATION OF DIVERSITY. Middle school youth are overly concerned about appearance and being accepted by their peers. They struggle to find their own identity in a media-concentrated culture that promotes images of sexual prowess and physical beauty as the norm. Exploring the theme of appreciating differences, so essential to a generation who are inheriting a pluralistic, interdependent world, helps them to honor our human differences not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, intelligence, appearance, abilities, and religious beliefs. Teachers help young people recognize and appreciate diversity and different perspectives.

Every facet of the peaceable classroom guides students to discover their own cultural frames of reference and those of their peers. Differences are honored and spoken about. Discussions about prejudice and discrimination aren’t taboo. Young people explore their own stereotypes and unlearn the misinformation they have acquired about groups who differ from them. They learn to see past their own tinted lenses and to suspend judgment about others.

Sixth, seventh, and eighth graders learn how to identify, intervene in, and interrupt prejudice. Understanding the impact of discrimination on individuals and groups is a crucial component of the curriculum that is in need of exploration. Middle school youth look beyond their school and community and analyze how society creates social biases, how discrimination becomes institutionalized, and how certain groups have more privileges than others. Classroom and schoolwide policies reflect these new learnings.

RESPONSIBLE DECISION MAKING. Making responsible decisions is a hard task for us and even harder for the young adolescent who feels torn in a million directions. Learning how to make decisions in conflict situations is even more difficult. Middle school teachers in peaceable classrooms take the time to assist students to chisel away at the old destructive patterns they
often use to make decisions and to empower them with new tools to make informed, responsible choices. Although there are many decision-making models available, here is one we teach middle school students:

- Tell what the problem is.
- Find as many different solutions as possible.
- Decide which solutions are “good.”
- Choose one solution and act.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION. In the middle school curriculum, students explore the negative and positive consequences of different ways of handling conflict: aggression, collaboration, compromise, giving in, avoiding, delaying, appealing to authority. Young people become involved in decision-making processes through regularly scheduled class meetings in which they problem solve about class issues. In class meetings, they have a chance to use all the skills they have previously learned to say what they feel in nonattacking ways, to listen actively, and to be open to different points of view. Teachers and students together establish certain ground rules for the group, including not using put-downs and listening to each other without interrupting. Central to this practice is that young people learn that they can resolve problems themselves. The teacher facilitates the meeting so that ideas come from the students; it is not the role of the teacher to solve any of the problems that are brought to the group.

Finally, middle school students are ripe for using their conflict-resolution skills to help themselves and others. With a firm understanding of the concepts of conflict resolution and the wealth of skills they develop throughout the year, middle school students can successfully negotiate with their peers. Peer-mediation programs are implemented as supports to everything the students are already doing in the classroom. Trust is established, and conflict situations that once appeared bleak become manageable.

If we provide our young people with the skills they need, the opportunities to use them, and recognition for their accomplishment, resilient youngsters will emerge who are ready to help build school communities we can all be proud of. In this kind of classroom environment, young people achieve their very best—supported by each other and the adults who teach them.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF RCCP?

An early independent evaluation of the RCCP–New York City site, released in May 1990 by Metis Associates, found that more than 87% of the teachers said that RCCP was having a positive impact on their students.
Teachers and administrators reported the following changes among the students: less violence in the classroom; increased spontaneous use of conflict-resolution skills among children; increased self-esteem and sense of empowerment; increased awareness of feelings and verbalizing of those feelings; more caring behavior; and more acceptance of differences.

RCCP was highlighted in a National Institute of Justice report (De Jong, 1994). The U.S. General Accounting Office also lauded RCCP's work in its report School Safety (1995), which found that RCCP is “widely regarded as one of the most promising violence-prevention programs among public health experts.”

The RCCP Research Program has begun assessing the effectiveness of the RCCP in New York City during the 1994–1995 and 1995–1996 school years (Roderick, 1998). The study, funded by the federal Centers for Disease Control and private foundations, has three components: a short-term longitudinal process and outcome study of the impact of the RCCP on 9,000 children in 15 elementary schools; a management information system tracking the implementation of the program; and in-depth interviews with teachers in a subset of participating schools.

With such a large sample, the child impact component of the study could not be based on direct observation of children. Accordingly, the researchers put together a set of age-appropriate surveys that could be administered to children in their classrooms. These included measures of problem-solving strategies, aggressive fantasies, and hostile attributional biases. Previous research has shown that children's scores on these measures are correlated with their actual behavior. Initial findings of the study, based on year one data, consistent with previous studies of child development, confirmed that youngsters grow more aggressive over time. Children in this study, irrespective of their participation in the RCCP, increase their aggressive tendencies with age. Younger children can often generate more solutions to problems than adolescents who see fewer options available can.

The study also indicated that in classrooms where teachers taught lots of RCCP lessons, there was a significant positive impact on children's development over the first year of the study. In these classrooms children's hostile attributional bias was significantly lower compared with children in classes where teachers taught few or no RCCP lessons. Additionally, their choice of aggressive strategies for interpersonal negotiation was significantly lower. They did not show a decrease over time in their use of competent interpersonal negotiation strategies.

During the 1996–1997 school year, Metis Associates conducted an evaluation of the impact of RCCP in the Atlanta Public Schools in three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school after two years of implementation. Findings include the following.
64% of teachers reported less physical violence in the classroom.
75% of teachers reported an increase in willingness to cooperate in the classroom.
92% of students felt better about themselves.
Over 90% of parents reported an increase in their own communication and problem-solving skills.
The in-and-out-of-school suspension rates at the RCCP middle school decreased significantly while non-RCCP middle school rates increased during the same period.
The dropout rate at the RCCP high school decreased significantly while non-RCCP high school rates increased during the same period.

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Reflecting on our work over the past decade we have identified seven factors that have contributed to RCCP’s success.

1. RCCP asks for a long-term commitment (of at least five years) from any school system that wishes to do this work. RCCP starts with a commitment at the school district level—because the monetary resources and other supports often reside at the school district level. These resources are necessary to sustain this work over time. This is helpful for any agency to think about when working with schools.

2. Whenever possible, the work is undertaken in partnership with a non-profit, community-based organization devoted to furthering this type of work and a school system needing the work. This collaboration creates a certain leverage, which ensures the program’s quality and sustainability. It also helps bring in the extra funding needed through grants.

3. The work is viewed as a basic part of children’s education, not as an add-on. No long-lasting change is going to happen unless the RCCP principles become part of the entire school’s as well as the district’s culture. These skills and concepts, once integrated into the curriculum framework of a district, will become institutionalized.

4. RCCP is as much about issues of diversity as about prosocial skills and conflict resolution. These three areas are often on separate tracks in the educational community, causing efforts to become fragmented in schools; it is best to view them as part of the same pie.

5. RCCP components and curricula were developed over the course of many years with input from the people RCCP serves. It is important for the work to be based on sound pedagogy and child development theory.
6. RCCP staff members are educators, practitioners with long-term experience in schools. They are familiar with the culture of public schooling. It is helpful to know the place in which you want to try to effect a change—schools have their own distinct cultures.

7. The RCCP model involves all levels of the school community, providing training and support to students, teachers, administrators, support staff, parents, custodians, and secretaries. RCCP is not just about youngsters learning conflict resolution. All the adults in the school community learn to be more socially conscious and ethical. It is common to hear young people and adults in RCCP-participating schools speak a common language that guides the decision-making process and the resolution of conflicts.

Finally, it is important to evaluate the work constantly. Ongoing formative evaluation, as well as more outcome-based evaluation, is essential to effect wonderful, transformative changes in teachers' and students' senses of themselves and their world.

CONCLUSION

It becomes clear that the skills and concepts that are taught in a program such as RCCP are the competencies needed to bring us into the 21st century. And as we take part in preparing young people to play a role in our future, we need to reorder our priorities. Currently, we spend $30 million an hour on national security—enough money to implement a comprehensive school-based program that would teach young people these skills in 600 schools for an entire year. These 600,000 youngsters would then actively engage in the process of changing our schools, communities, and larger society.

Which way will we go? How will future generations judge us? How will we be remembered? Several Nobel Peace Prize laureates are urging the United Nations to declare the year 2000 the “Year of Nonviolence.” This is exciting news for all of us who are committed to finding nonviolent solutions to society's most urgent problems. We will need young people who are emotionally intelligent to carry this task forth.

NOTE

1. The principal investigator for the child impact study is Dr. J. Lawrence Aber, director of the National Center for Children in Poverty. The teacher interviews were conducted and analyzed by researchers from the Center for Children and Tech-
nology (now also the New York City Office of the Education Development Center) under the supervision of Dr. Jan Hawkins, director.

REFERENCES


