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ABSTRACT

Violence is escalating nationwide. There is a corresponding escalation in aggressive and violent behaviors. Culture inadvertently supports violence through advertising, social relationships, and politics. There is a serious and continual breakdown in the nuclear family and often the job of parenting is left to the nation's educators. A number of schools are developing conflict resolution programs to combat and reduce these problems. The impact of conflict resolution has been positive. Individual schools and school systems in 30 states are using the San Francisco Community Board Program. Students in some of the major cities are learning how to handle problems in a more constructive manner. Educators hope that by initiating mediation in the early grades, there will be less violence when students reach high school. Students are learning ways to handle conflict, thus paving the way for a more successful future for themselves and the nation. It will be necessary for the education system to radically redefine its purpose if change is going to occur. It can no longer serve as merely an institution which provides information, facts, and formulas for growing minds. It must also embrace the notion that it has become an absent parent as well. It has become the training ground and source of ethics and moral preparation for children, and thus must provide strong models and programs for social behavior. (Author/ABL)

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ED 341 637

CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES:  
ANGER AND AGGRESSION IN SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN

BY

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A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Dominican College Department of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in  
Education: Curriculum and Instruction

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	5
Introduction	5
Statement of Problem	5
Rationale	6
Background and Need	6
Literature Review	7
Violence in Schools	7
Culture of Violence	9
Redirecting Aggressive Behavior	10
Summary	15
References	17

**CHINESE PROVERB**

If there is righteousness in the heart, there will be harmony in the home. If there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation. When there is order in the nation, there will be PEACE IN THE WORLD.

### ABSTRACT

Studies and literature reviewed reported an increase in violent and aggressive behaviors in our nation's youth. This has an effect on the educational environment, making it unsafe. Educators are spending instructional time dealing with these disruptive behaviors. Literature reviewed reported there are promising programs in some of the nation's schools where students learn conflict resolution strategies as a solution to these behaviors.

### INTRODUCTION

A father was struggling with putting a puzzle of the world together. His son was watching his father struggle and asked if he could try and put the world together. His father left, returning a half hour later. His son had put the puzzle of the world together. "How did you put the puzzle together in such a short time?" asked the father. The son replied, "I noticed that on the back of one puzzle piece there was part of a hand. As I turned over other pieces, I noticed other parts to a human being. Once I put the person together, the world took care of itself." (*Insight*, 1988).

Aggressive and sometimes violent behavior is exhibited in school age children in our society with alarming and increasing frequency. This behavior affects everyone in that environment and eventually permeates itself into the society at large. Students are not being taught conflict resolution techniques that will assist them in handling the aggressive and sometimes violent behaviors they exhibit or are confronted with.

### STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways educators can redirect aggressive and violent behaviors in school age children by the use of conflict resolution strategies.

### RATIONALE

The front page of a local newspaper reads: "14 and 16 Year Old Boys Gunned Down Grandmother" (*Press Democrat*, 1992). The same newspaper page also included an article on the trial of the boy who gunned down an elderly couple last summer. On the playground at a local elementary school, a boy takes and knocks the heads of two girls together. The same boy writes profanity on the window of the school bus as well as fights with another boy. The reports go on. Not all schools are affected by violence and some are worse than others. In too many schools the level of disruptive behaviors is high and dangerous (David, 1989). Each day this author observes some form of aggressive behavior such as starting fights, getting angry, and being mean toward others at school, especially among the male population. Teachers speculate about the students who may someday make the headlines of the paper as the result of uncontrolled violence; forcible or destructive acts against another human being.

Researchers seem to disagree about the degree and severity of violence in schools. Some hold that most schools never experience incidents of crime or violence, and those that do seldom experience them frequently or regularly (Wayson, 1985). Yet other reports indicate that the problem extends across the board, affecting middle income and affluent suburbs and even farm communities (David, 1989).

### BACKGROUND AND NEED

In a 1975-76 survey conducted by the National Institute of Education, 23,895 teachers in 642 public secondary schools throughout the United States documented appreciable violence directed at teachers, particularly in big cities. More frequent than actual violence was pervasive disrespect. Violence is not limited to teachers.

The same study documented that violence directed toward students was even more frequent. Nationwide, 4% of secondary school students reported truanting from school at least once in the month preceding the survey out of fear for their safety, and greater proportions reported this in central-city schools (Toby, 1984).

In New Jersey, the Department of Education studied the effects of violence in the New Jersey schools. It was a two year study that has become an essential barometer in determining current and future department initiatives. In June of 1985, the department established a Grant Program to Reduce Student Disruption in School, a program that would provide resources to schools where there were chronically disruptive students (Bloom, 1990).

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

At Stockard Middle School in Dallas, Texas, students had finished final exams and were moving toward the exits. Watching them leave was a physical education teacher. As the students milled and jostled toward the doors, a large rock struck the teacher on the temple. She slumped to the floor semiconscious (David, 1989). What happened at Stockard Middle School is just one pervasive example of the incidence of violence that has occurred in American schools across the nation.

#### Violence in Schools

Violence is not only a physical act of destruction, but can also be an obscenity directed at others. Smaller proportions of teachers in small cities, in suburban schools and in rural schools reported such verbal abuse. Even in rural schools, 40% of the teachers reported being sworn at or being the targets of obscene gestures (Toby, 1984). Obscene language and gestures are not limited to secondary schools. Often



aggressive behavior in elementary school age children is exhibited in this manner, though usually toward a peer.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC), reported that about one of every five high-school students has carried a firearm, knife or club. A study by CDC was conducted in 1990, using the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. CDC canvassed 11,631 students across the country. Nearly 20% of the students surveyed stated they had carried a weapon at least once in the 30 days prior to the survey. Of those, 25% said they had carried a weapon only one time. However, 35.5% said they had done so six times or more (Ruffenach, 1991).

The Commissioner's Report on violence in the New Jersey schools reported that in 1988-89 there were 7,274 incidents of violence, which was a reduction of 10% from the previous year's total. An incident is defined "as an act of malicious intent to injure another individual or to willfully destroy property" (Bloom, 1990, p. 8). The reduction in violent incidents might be attributed to the implementation of a two year intervention program.

The problem is not limited to the inner city schools, but extends across the nation affecting all communities. Educators are concerned that unless the trend is reversed, and quickly, the nation is headed for trouble in the next century (David, 1989). The problem of violent and aggressive behaviors will get worse unless something dramatic and decisive is done.

Wayson (1985) writes that when actual statistics on crime and violence in the schools are mentioned, they are often drawn from sources of questionable reliability. He believes that what is sometimes reported as violence is really disruptive behaviors.

### Culture of Violence

Human violence is not a new phenomenon. The alarming aspect of violence today is its rapid escalation (Monez, 1973). Within the framework of our culture, violence is glorified in advertising sports, social relationships, and politics. Violence is big money in the United States. During the 15,000 hours American students spend in high school preparing for the future, their parents will spend approximately \$506,250,000,000 preparing for war. The media also contributes to the amount of violence that school age children are exposed to throughout their life. It is estimated that by the time a student graduates, the student will have seen approximately 18,000 murders on television (Molner, 1987-88).

What are the causes of this increase in violence and aggression among our youth? Does the violence begin in the home or does it begin in the schools? It is believed by some that the important source of violence by and among children is an outcome of the breakdown of the family and the displacement of the extended family. There appears to be broad agreement that family disintegration is the root of many of the social and economic problems of today. More than 60% of all children born today will spend at least some time in a single parent household before reaching the age of eighteen (Zinsmeister, 1990).

Aggressive and violent behaviors often originate early in life. Children who have been abused either physically, emotionally, or sexually will often bring behaviors to school that are a product of their upbringing. It is now well documented that being an object of physical harm by an adult is a risk marker for the development of violent behavior toward others later in life (Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990). These children may be aggressive, disruptive, and defiant, causing their peers to act in the same way

or to reject them. The emotional scars formed at an early age may remain for a lifetime (Manning, 1986).

Children are arriving at school with some of the aggressive and violent behaviors learned at home. Parental example and the general mode of interaction within the family are also important contributors to children's aggression. In some families, aggressive coercion is a dominant mode of relating among members, so that children learn to regard aggression as normal and even necessary for self-defense and for influencing others (Staub, 1988).

Studies suggest that the students themselves will be less likely to engage in acts of violence or crimes in their schools if they enjoy positive interactions with school personnel, academic success, or productive participation in school activities (Wayson, 1985). Ultimately, it has become the task of education to help individuals learn what it takes to shape a society which is sustainable, which creates the fullest possible condition for human growth (Monez, 1973).

The statistics mentioned have focused on violence in middle schools and high schools, yet educators in elementary schools are also constantly breaking up both verbal and physical fights. The aggressive and violent behaviors happen well before the teenage years. Intervention needs to occur before students begin carrying weapons. This task is the challenge of elementary school teachers, administrators, parents, and support staff.

#### Redirecting Aggressive Behavior

Educators often adopt the role of change agent since the positive behaviors and role models necessary for growth into a healthy, mature being are not being taught at

home. A child's socialization process often takes place in the classroom and on the playground.

The classroom teacher is often the one who deals with an aggressive or violent child. Ginott (1972) came to a frightening conclusion:

I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that created the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or de-humanized (p. 1).

A critical ingredient in guiding children to act in a positive manner is the classroom teacher. The use of positive discipline practices by teachers was found important in promoting prosocial behaviors. The classroom teacher can promote social harmony and a sense of peace or create just the opposite, but the teacher is not the only person responsible for creating an atmosphere of cooperation. The entire school population must offer opportunities for students to engage in behaviors that benefit others, and thereby promotes helpful, responsible behavior through learning by participation (Staub, 1988).

How do educators go about redirecting aggressive and violent behaviors in school age children? There needs to be a program that will have the endorsement of all school staff as well as parental support. School should be a reinforcing experience for children; its positive effects then become more powerful (Guetzloe, 1989). School needs to be a place that children want to be, where self-esteem is enhanced.

Across the nation a number of schools, concerned about the increase in violent and aggression in their students, have implemented programs that teach students conflict resolution strategies. Students are taught how to problem solve in a nonviolent way. Conflict is viewed as positive and as a behavior that can serve to enhance important relationships (San Francisco Community Board, 1987).

The San Francisco Community Board is a nonprofit corporation that established one of the nation's first community conciliation services in 1976. In 1982 it began its work within the San Francisco schools. Trained by the Community Board members, teachers are instructed how to handle conflict in the school environment. They return to their schools and then proceed to train students how to act as conflict managers. Program materials point out that conflict is a part of growing up and is, in fact, often a creative opportunity if handled with skill (Graves, 1988).

In the Los Angeles, California Unified School District, Richard Mills, a consulting psychologist, has been training teachers how to teach students conflict resolution strategies. Students are being taught to solve their own disputes by learning to listen to one another. Students are called "Conflict Busters" and even bullies are taught to channel their aggressive behavior into a more acceptable social framework (Gordon, 1990).

William De Avila, a K-5 elementary school in San Francisco, implemented a Conflict Manager Program in 1982. During this year, about eight teachers attended a one-day training session presented by trainers from the San Francisco Community Board. Teachers went back to the school and recruited students to be Conflict Managers. By the second year, problems on the playground had diminished, and student conflict management had become established as part of the school.

Conflict managers need to possess good verbal skills, leadership potential, ability to sustain a commitment, take initiative and try new things, and should be respected by their peers. The training that the students receive encompasses leadership and communication, problem solving, how to improve the school environment, and responsibility for their own actions. Benefits that the Conflict Managers receive are a greater sense of confidence in their ability to help themselves and others, getting along better at home as well as school, and often grade improvement.

At William E. Ferron Elementary School in Las Vegas, Nevada, each teacher selects two students to be mediators for their classroom. In addition to being mediators in the classroom, they also work in the cafeteria and on the playground. Orientation is given by the principal, where she stresses the concepts of being kind and working hard. She reminds the mediators that problems must be solved with the head and the heart and not physically.

This program was initially implemented because an inordinate amount of instructional time was spent every day dealing with aggressive and violent disruptions. After two years of the Mediator Program, the number of discipline problems, both major and minor, referred to the principal's office has declined. Students at Ferron Elementary School are learning that issues can be resolved more effectively by talking them out rather than by fighting. The Mediator Program makes students active participants in enhancing a school environment that is friendly, safe, and happy.

Staub (1988) studied the factors of creating connection and caring which he believes fosters nonviolent behaviors. He states that if there is a concern for another's welfare, and a feeling of personal responsibility for others' welfare, there will be more

cooperation and nonviolent resolution of conflict with others. A critical ingredient within this philosophy is guiding children to act positively toward other people so that they learn by participation.

George McKenna, principal of George Washington Preparatory High School in Los Angeles, California, believes that schools should teach student nonviolent solutions to conflict. "We need to institutionalize nonviolence. Schools are the one place that children must be every day. We've got them captive for 12 years. Kids learn what we teach" (Roberts, 1988, p. 56).

Teaching children about advocates of nonviolence is one way to show positive role models. Mahatma Gandhi's "experiments with nonviolence" and the use of nonviolent protest in the American Civil Rights Movement showed that conflict could be a creative force and that nonviolent approaches could be effective in struggles against oppression (Roderick, 1987-88).

The roots of conflict are ageless, but the field of conflict resolution is relatively new. One of the pioneers in this area was Mary Follett, also one of the first modern business consultants. In 1924, she wrote *Creative Experience*, instructing business managers how to deal more effectively with interpersonal conflicts. She was the first person to articulate the idea of the "win-win solution," although she did not call it that. She had the insight that many conflicts can be solved in mutually satisfactory ways, if the parties can avoid bickering over positions and can instead focus on finding creative ways to fulfill their underlying needs or interests. This is what is commonly now referred to as the "win-win solution." Conflict resolution strategies are more recent to the field of education than business, yet the movement toward conflict resolution strategies in education is steadily increasing (Roderick, 1987-88).

All students in Chicago's 76 public high schools take a course in dispute resolution as part of the ninth or tenth grade work in social studies. In San Francisco, it is estimated that 75% of the city's public schools will implement a student mediation program, and in New York City's School District 15, more than 75 teachers and thousands of children participate in the Model Peace Education Program, which focuses on creative conflict resolution (Roderick, 1987-88).

In 1985, Vivian Einstein-Gordon, a law professor, developed a dispute resolution curriculum for high school students because she wanted youngsters to understand how the legal system really works. Through role-plays, discussion, and work sheets, students learn how to use the dispute resolution processes of negotiation, mediation, and arbitration to tackle interpersonal and global problems. A real joy, says Einstein-Gordon, is going into a school in Chicago and seeing hundreds of kids walking through the hallway carrying their dispute resolution books and overhearing them talk about negotiation (Roderick, 1987-88).

#### SUMMARY

Nationwide, violence is escalating. There is an corresponding escalation in aggressive and violent behaviors. Culture inadvertently supports violence through advertising, social relationships, and politics. The daily papers are filled with stories of violent acts, usually perpetrated by the males of our society. Women and children continue to be abused, physically and emotionally, and our political system continues to support violence by not addressing the social and economic inequities of our society. There is a serious and continual breakdown in the nuclear family, and often the job of parenting is left to the nation's educators. A number of schools are developing conflict resolution programs to help combat and reduce these problems.



The impact of the conflict resolution programs has been positive. Individual schools and school systems in thirty states are using the San Francisco Community Board Program. Students in some of our major cities are learning how to handle problems in a more constructive manner. Educators hope that by initiating mediation in the early grades, there will be less violence when students reach high school. Students are learning ways to handle conflict, thus paving the way for a more successful future for themselves and our nation.

It will be necessary for the education system to radically redefine its purpose if change is going to occur. It can no longer serve as merely an institution which provides information, facts, and formulas for growing minds. It must also embrace the notion that it has become an absent parent as well; it has become the training ground and source of ethics and moral preparation for our children, and thus must provide strong models and programs for social behavior.

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