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Conflict Resolution & Violence Prevention:

Who is it Helping and Who is it Hurting?

Megan Boler writes in her 1999 book *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* about emotional intelligence, the abilities to “empathize and maintain optimism in the face of obstacles” (Boler 79). She also writes about emotional literacy, forms of curricula designed to teach the complexity surrounding emotions. Emotional literacy curricula can be shaped in many ways, but one example that Boler mentions is the category of conflict resolution education. Conflict resolution research and education began around the 1950s, and expanded over the course of several decades where it became very popular in the 1980s (Roy, Burdick, Kriesberg 348). Conflict resolution came to the forefront in large part because of the social movements of the twentieth century, and began to be practiced as a theory towards the end of the century. Today, conflict resolution and violence prevention programs can be found within the walls of schools and communities with the goal of giving people, and especially youth, the tools to avoid serious danger and/or confrontation. The question arises, however, of how these programs can infiltrate and challenge social and political dynamics and who they are aimed to help.

It should be noted that there is a wide array of opinions on the matter of conflict resolution and violence prevention. The two matters are not (according to the majority of authors, researchers, and educators) the same concept, but there is a lot of overlap. An overarching theory that can be found in journals of education and psychology is that violence prevention is a subcategory of conflict resolution, focusing primarily on physical factors related to conflicts. Conflict resolution itself is a subcategory of emotional literacy curricula, in the eyes of Megan Boler. One thing is clear, though, and that is that the three subjects of emotional literacy, conflict resolution, and violence prevention all revolve around the notion that emotions play a large role in our daily interactions, as well as the foundation of society and the prospect of societal change.

Conflict resolution education and violence prevention programs are introduced in schools as measures of cost efficiency (Boler 86). It is a fact that these programs are implemented as ways of saving money in schools as a preventative measure, rather than paying for extra security. With school programs, conflict resolution and violence prevention are not often differentiated. The two go hand in hand as a way to prevent altercations between students within school walls. Because violence and conflict are not separated, it is often taught that any form of conflict is a negative experience or that it should not be occurring. However, David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson write in their article “Why Violence Prevention Programs Don’t Work – and What Does” (1995) that not all conflicts are bad, and that they “can increase achievement, motivation to learn, higher-level reasoning, long-term retention, healthy social and cognitive development, and the fun students have in school” (Johnson, Johnson 64). Similarly to the discourses of race, culture, gender, religion, sexuality, and more found throughout academia and society, it is inevitable to run into conflict and confrontation. However, more learning occurs through discussion and interaction as opposed to shying away from these issues and avoiding the conflict that ensues. To teach students to avoid conflict altogether is to prevent productive conversations from happening within the classroom.

Johnson and Johnson go further to say that many violence prevention programs within schools do not properly address the issue of violence because they ignore the fact that “different people turn to violence for different reasons” (Johnson, Johnson 64). This introduces another complexity to the practice of conflict resolution education, as it questions when and why violence might be a practical or explainable occurrence. Sociologists Beth Roy and Louis Kriesberg and anthropologist John Burdick also address this issue in their article entitled “A Conversation Between Conflict Resolution and Social Movement Scholars” (2010). They write that often conflict resolution researchers and educators have difficulty seeing the power dynamics involved with conflict resolution, especially in regard to social movements. While they say that social movement scholars can learn more about organization and person-to-person strategies based off of conflict resolution teaching, they also say that conflict resolution scholars have a lot to learn about the dynamics of fighting for social change and how conflict is necessary.

Roy, Burdick, and Kriesberg write, “Conflict resolution ideas well delivered can deal with dynamics of culture and power, building stronger cadres for making needed social changes” (Roy, Burdick, Kriesberg 353). This idea works well when dealing with individual interactions, by giving people the tools to deal with conversations and arguments. On a bigger scale, society at large, individual strategies for conflict are not as efficient. The authors use the example of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, in which there were little “negotiation tactics” involved, as in rarely did the movement’s power come from one-on-one discussions. What they say, instead, was that the movement’s power came from the infiltration of images, stories, and ideas into the media and society that brought about new conversations and discomfort, but a discomfort that led to growing among certain sectors of society.

The reason that social movements rely less on conflict resolution strategies is mainly due to the idea within conflict resolution and violence prevention education that there is an “equal playing field,” or that both actors in a conversation have equal voices, equal education, and equal experiences. For conflict resolution, conversations occur between two people who share similar vocabularies and have the abilities to articulate their needs and opinions. This also assumes that both parties will listen. Social movement scholars look at conflict through a much different lens, where there is inherently an unequal playing field, because “the main premise of social activism is that some actors enjoy greater social power and privilege than others” (Roy, Burdick, Kriesberg 356). In all likelihood, face-to-face conversations within social movements and activism are often had by those in power who have a voice, whereas those who do not have the same privilege and social status often are pushed to the side and their voices unheard. Focusing on face-to-face communication strategies in conflict resolution and violence prevention does not help to combat the social hierarchies in place.

Another issue, as stated by both Roy, Burdick, and Kriesberg as well as Johnson and Johnson, is that violence prevention is likely to focus on anger management, or as Boler might define it, a policing of one’s emotions. Anger management, used by schools as a preventative measure to violence, introduces ideas to students about controlling their emotions. This once again goes back to the question of who is being told to control their emotions, to silence their objections. In Boler’s book, she recounts an interview she had with the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program, in which a teacher remarks on her experience in a classroom where the students participated in a “feelings barometer.” The students were asked, on a scale of rage to irritation, how they would feel if they were called names on their way home from school. After the students aligned themselves, they noticed that there were “more African-American students under ‘rage’ and more white students under ‘irritated’” (Boler 82). In response, one student said she would feel rage, because it wasn’t just a pretend scenario for her, but a daily occurrence. This led to a discussion on how emotional responses and social interactions are greatly intertwined with social hierarchies and the dynamics of racism, sexism, and more. This is just one example of how anger management classes may fail to address power dynamics and emotions in a productive way, but also how emotional literacy curricula can help to talk about these issues.

While these authors have all addressed various problems associated with conflict resolution and violence prevention, especially in the context of social movements and schools, other researchers and educators have found these programs to be beneficial to students. In an article in the Journal of School Health, entitled “Optimizing Violence Prevention Programs: An Examination of Program Effectiveness Among Urban High School Students,” researchers Amanda C. Thompkins, Lisa M. Chauveron, Ofer Harel, and Daniel F. Perkins review two decades worth of data that questions whether violence prevention programs implemented into urban high schools is worth the time and money. They question whether, as very busy high school students, these teenagers truly benefited from conflict resolution education. They looked at thirteen New York City public schools, with violence prevention programs for ninth and tenth graders. The participants in the study were 41% black and 42% Latino/a, reflecting the population of the schools they were working with. They used student surveys over the course of several years in order to gain reflections by students on the programs, how they were being implemented and how engaged the student were (Thompkins, Chauveron, Harel, Perkins 436-8).

These researchers found that school programs that allowed “flexibility in implementation” and saw “high levels of student engagement” were the most effective in schools. They saw, as an implication from their work, that creating efficient violence prevention programs in schools would help to allow students to have this opportunity without constricting their daily schedules (Thompkins, Chauveron, Harel, Perkins 442). One aspect of conflict resolution education that these researchers did not address is the concept that any curricula can contain the ideas of conflict resolution. There are teachers who use these theories and practices within their classrooms to talk about history, modern society, and more. Not only does this not conflict with students schedules, but it also shows students complexity in the various subjects they are learning about, and it would be an interesting subject to further research for school health specialists.

In another article, entitled “Evaluation of Comprehensive Violence Prevention Education: Effects on Student Behavior,” researchers looked at violence prevention programs in schools as a preventative measure for the many health implications that violence can produce, both physically and mentally. They looked at three Boston high schools in the 1980s and recorded their exposure to violence prevention programs and their school suspension rates. Despite many internal and external factors such as different types and amounts of exposures to the programs, the researchers concluded that the programs were likely helpful as suspension rates among the students who attended the programs went down (Huasman et al. 110) The researched acknowledged the limitations and complexities of the implications of race, gender, and more in their research, but were unable to account for them.

It can be seen that conflict resolution is an area of education that overlaps with several other theories and practices. Conflict resolution and violence prevention, while different concepts, ultimately both deal with emotional intelligence and work towards allowing students to gain full control and understanding of their own emotions, and the emotions of those around them. There are many intricacies of conflict resolution and violence prevention, many of which deal with the social hierarchies found in modern societies. To teach conflict resolution and violence prevention without addressing these complexities is to do a disservice to students, who all come from unique backgrounds with their own experiences with emotions and conflicts. Similarly, to teach conflict as inherently negative further perpetuates stereotypes and ignorance in the face of power dynamics which teachers and students should be challenging. When implemented with social awareness, conflict resolution education has the potential to spark new conversations and change.

Sources

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