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# Integrating School-Based and Therapeutic Conflict Management Models at Schools

Franky D'Oosterlinck, Eric Broekaert

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**ABSTRACT:** *Including children with emotional and behavioral needs in mainstream school systems leads to growing concern about the increasing number of violent and nonviolent conflicts. Schools must adapt to this evolution and adopt a more therapeutic dimension. This paper explores the possibility of integrating school-based and therapeutic conflict management models and compares two management models: a school-based conflict management program, Teaching Students To Be Peacemakers; and a therapeutic conflict management program, Life Space Crisis Intervention. The authors conclude that integration might be possible, but depends on establishing a positive school atmosphere, the central position of the teacher, and collaborative and social learning for pupils. Further implementation of integrated conflict management models can be considered but must be underpinned by appropriate scientific research. (J Sch Health. 2003;73(6):222-225)*

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Conflict inherently occurs in life.<sup>1</sup> Managing conflict constructively and developing conflict resolution procedures encourages the development of values, attitudes, knowledge, and civic standards.<sup>2,3</sup> Schools can teach students to approach conflict positively by providing proactive guidance for students, by elaborating school-based conflict management models, and changing schools into conflict-positive organizations.<sup>4,6</sup> The increasing conflict among children in mainstream school systems as a consequence of including children with emotional and behavioral needs, raised questions about expanding school-based conflict management models with a more therapeutic dimension. Therapeutic conflict management models were developed in treatment modalities for children with emotional and behavioral needs.<sup>7-11</sup>

This paper explores from a theoretical perspective the possibility of integrating school-based and therapeutic approaches. Two leading but somewhat different conflict management models are compared: Teaching Students To Be Peacemakers,<sup>4</sup> developed in a school system; and Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI),<sup>8</sup> evolved from institutes for children with emotional and behavioral needs.

The two models were selected based on research and literature by searching the scientific databases PsyINFO and Web of Science using the keywords: (effect) conflict resolution program, (effect) resolving conflict creatively, life space crisis intervention, and pedagogic crisis conflict. The two selected approaches represent the most elaborated and influential in their fields, but start from different theoretical backgrounds. Life Space Crisis Intervention is more clinical, while Teaching Students To Be Peacemakers is more scientifically underpinned.

## THE MANAGEMENT MODELS

### Teaching Students To Be Peacemakers

Teaching Students To Be Peacemakers, used at the University of Minnesota since 1960, was introduced by Johnson and Johnson.<sup>12</sup> Theoretically, it is situated within a social psychological context. It uses a cognitive approach

based on social learning theory.

The program is rooted in the work of Morton Deutsch.<sup>3,13</sup> Deutsch, who based his thinking concerning the social interdependence theory on Kurt Lewin,<sup>4</sup> maintains that conflicts occur inherently as part of social relations, and the manner in which people deal with conflict reflects social interdependence. Johnson and Johnson<sup>4</sup> use Deutsch's definition of "conflict:" "Conflict exists whenever incompatible activities occur. An activity that is incompatible with another activity is one that prevents, blocks, or interferes with the occurrence or effectiveness of the second activity. Incompatible activities may originate in one person, between two or more people, or between two or more groups."<sup>4</sup> The program contains three important elements: 1) cooperative learning, 2) negotiation, and 3) mediation.<sup>14</sup>

Cooperative learning only works with a conceptual approach toward structure, material, and plan of learning. It includes five basic conditions: 1) positive interdependence between children,<sup>15</sup> 2) individual accountability, 3) face-to-face promotive interaction, 4) social skills, and 5) group processing.<sup>16,17</sup> In the program, social skills are learned together, practiced, and improved. The program addresses leadership, decision-making, communication, confidence building, and other conflict resolution skills. Within cooperative learning, students can give attention to committed and caring relationships between pupils.<sup>18</sup>

Children learn about negotiation through six actions: 1) describe what you want and feel, 2) express why you feel as you do and the motives for your desires, 3) acknowledge the other person's perspective, 4) look for solutions, 5) choose one solution, and 6) put it into effect. After everyone learns the conflict procedure, they practice mediating or interceding in other's conflicts. Mediation proves an effective method because it involves a democratic and structured process that enables disputants to resolve their own conflicts, with assistance from trained peers.<sup>19</sup> A mediator is a neutral person who helps two or more people resolve their conflict through negotiation.<sup>20</sup> Children learn to take responsibility for their conflicts and for the way in which they deal with them, and to assume responsibility for their relations with others.<sup>21</sup>

### Life Space Crisis Intervention

Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI)<sup>7,9</sup> uses a methodology originating from the work of August Aichorn<sup>22</sup> and from Fritz Redl and David Wineman.<sup>23</sup> Theoretically, it is

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situated within the ego-psycho-analytical model.<sup>11,24</sup> Nicholas Long further elaborated the current program in a close collaboration with Mary Wood and Frank Fecser.<sup>7,9</sup>

To define the concept of "conflict," one must examine the discrepancy between needs of the individual and possibilities of the environment. Painful areas from a person's past are taken into account.<sup>8</sup> The current model is based on the cycle of conflict. An event precipitates stress in the child, which leads to feelings of anxiety. The definition reads as follows: "We prefer to call it a Conflict Cycle because this term includes the idea of conflict between two opposing forces: needs within the student clashing against the expectations of others. Healthy adjustment results when these two opposing forces are minimized or resolved; maladjustment results when these two opposing forces continue to conflict."<sup>8(p.33)</sup> This cycle leads to (often negative) behavior on the child's part which, in turn, precipitates (negative) reactions from others, which then create a new source of anxiety. If the cycle is repeated several consecutive times, it can generate a crisis.

Life Space Crisis Intervention, a therapeutic and verbal strategy, intervenes with children in crisis. A crisis affects the immediate life experience of children and damages their sense of well being. This is a propitious moment for intervention. The personal interpretation of the children is central. The adult adopts a neutral and caring position. From here a relationship based on trust can be developed, and power struggles and counter aggression avoided. LSCI promotes pursuit of the following stages: 1) Drain off: De-escalate the crisis. 2) Timeline: Students in crisis need to talk. 3) Central issue: Select the appropriate reclaiming intervention. 4) Insight: Set the goal for the reclaiming intervention. 5) New skills: Plan for success. 6) Transfer of learning: Get ready to resume activity.<sup>9</sup>

## INTEGRATING THE MODELS

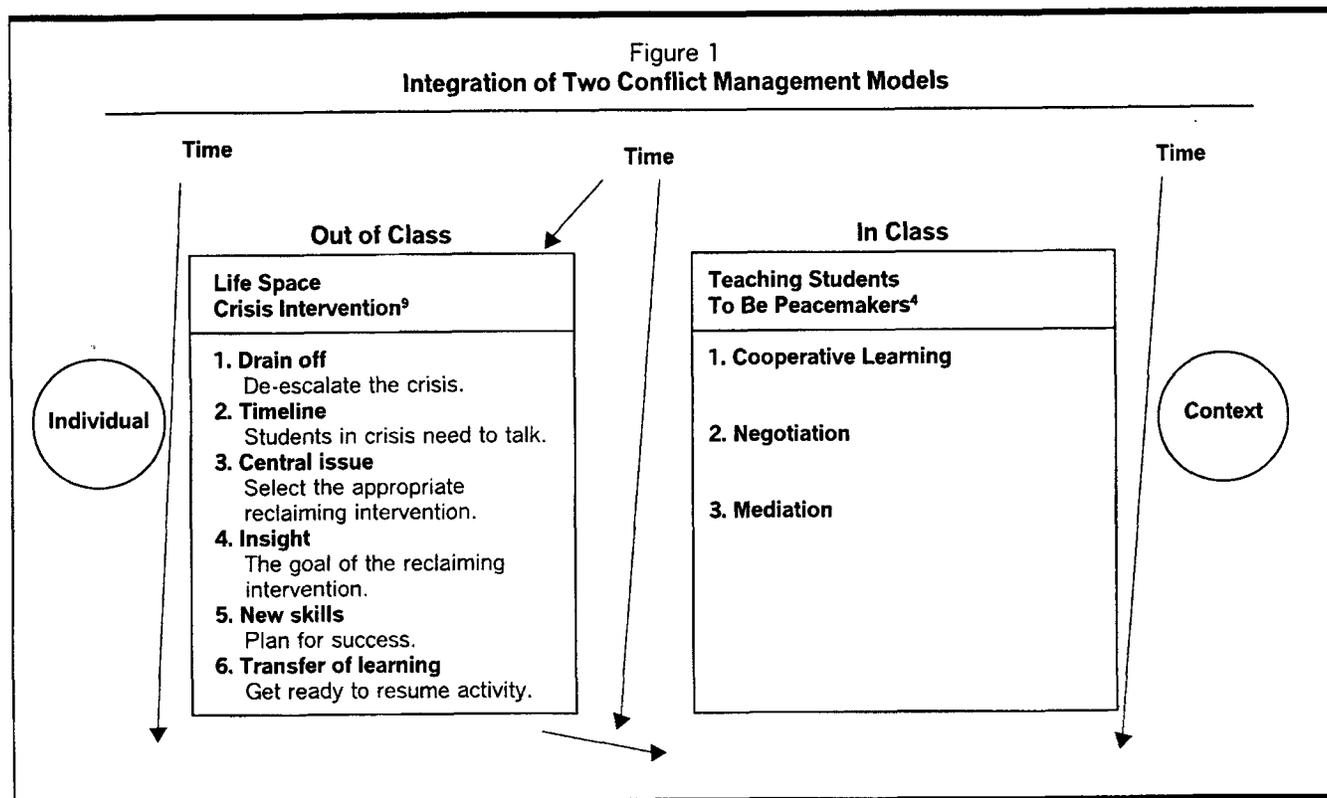
"Integration" derives from the Latin "integer" or "whole," and "integrate" or "renewal." It pursues new unity and can be considered as "alternatively going together where unity is pursued."<sup>25(p.218)</sup> Integrated conflict management refers to alternatively going together with aspects of a school-based and a therapeutic conflict management. Both models can be viewed as complementary, such as a school system seeking to include children with behavioral and emotional needs. In an integrated approach, the guidance is based on the needs and well-being of pupils. It is incorporated into the daily class activities of general education.<sup>26</sup> Yet, it interconnects with the quality of school management in general, such as continuity of care and schooling, cost-benefit, and efficiency.

The two conflict management models seek the same goal: learning to deal constructively with conflict, and reducing future conflict. This goal entails finding satisfactory solutions for pupils as well as teachers, and leads to mutual growth of trust and respect.<sup>7,8,12</sup>

The school-based program maintains that children be trained systematically in how to deal with conflict on three levels – acquisition of social and emotional skills, negotiation, and mediation – all on a cognitive and social learning level. It applies to all children in the classroom. It is mainly a group approach.

The therapeutic program, a verbal strategy, provides a meaningful way of talking with children in crisis. The extreme emotional experience, and accompanying personal interpretation of the conflict, provide a starting point.<sup>7(p.425)</sup> It requires a skilled and understanding adult.<sup>8</sup> The program interferes with emotional problems and aims at insight and change of behavior. It is mainly an individualized approach.

Integration of the two approaches could combine an individual working through emotional conflicts with an



experienced adult, and at the same time, train all children in 1) the acquisition of social and emotional skills, 2) negotiation, and 3) mediation. Figure 1 illustrates commonalities of the two approaches, where children with problems work through crisis, and acquiring social skills can receive specific attention. All children can benefit from acquisition of social and emotional skills, conflict negotiation, and mediation.

## IMPLICATIONS

Deutsch<sup>13</sup> regrets the appalling lack of research into conflict management programs, and stresses the importance of further action. He refers to studies by Johnson and Johnson, Jones' evaluation of the Comprehensive Peer Mediation Evaluation Project, and Aber et al's evaluation of the Resolving Conflicts Creatively Program, 1996, 1998, 1999. Those studies confirmed that implementing an integrated crisis management program works cooperatively with creating a positive school atmosphere, training of the teacher as a central figure, and empowerment of the child as a responsible co-trainer.

### A Positive School Atmosphere

Implementing conflict management programs in schools directly or indirectly affects the school's social climate. Peterson et al<sup>27</sup> define school climate as feelings of students and staff about the school over time. These feelings may be influenced by how comfortable individuals feel in this environment, and experience it as supportive. Implementing conflict management programs constitutes a process that affects the entire school. It results, over time, in an improved school atmosphere.<sup>12</sup> Peterson et al<sup>27</sup> identify peer mediation as an important factor for enhancing the climate. Mediation 1) improves the atmosphere; 2) enhances self-esteem and increases skills; and 3) resolves disputes.<sup>19</sup> Interventions for students with emotional and behavioral needs constitute an integral part of the process. When working with high-risk populations, a need exists for installing prevention programs that support implementation of crisis management programs.<sup>28</sup>

### The Teacher as the Central Figure

Teachers must be trained in dealing with conflict and crisis situations.<sup>6,29,30</sup> An analysis<sup>7</sup> of more than 600 student/staff conflict cycles revealed at least four categories of inappropriate responses by teachers toward student behavior: 1) counter-aggressive reactions (68%); 2) rigid and unrealistic teacher expectations (7%); 3) negative teacher moods (20%); and 4) prejudicial attitudes toward troubled students (5%).

Teacher interventions often privilege some groups of children and amplify disturbing interactions.<sup>31</sup> Lovejoy<sup>32</sup> investigated teacher reactions toward inattentive, hyperactive, and aggressive pupils. She found that teachers consider inattentive and hyperactive children as exercising less control over their behavior and, therefore, as less responsible. Yet, they react more affectively and negatively toward aggressive children, and consider punishment appropriate. Aggressive pupils soon learn that adult interventions include alienation, rejection, and counter aggression.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, they react negatively toward their teachers. Disruptive behavior becomes part of a chain of

interactions, and 35% of students with behavioral and emotional needs spend 60% of school hours outside the classroom.<sup>30,31</sup>

### Children as Co-Trainers

School systems report positive effects of conflict management with students. Parents and teachers report positive effects on their self-esteem and conflict resolution skills, both in and out of school. Johnson and Johnson's<sup>13</sup> quasi-experimental follow-up research on effects from implementing the Peacemaker program in classrooms (from nursery school to 10th grade) compared pupils before and after the program. Some 75%<sup>33</sup> to 90%<sup>12</sup> of pupils learned to master the negotiation and mediation procedures, and to apply what they learned.<sup>33,34</sup> Some 75% of pupils transferred their insight throughout the school year to the following academic year.<sup>12</sup> In the experimental group, "force" was the most commonly used strategy before training, while "negotiation" was most often selected after training. The most commonly used negotiation strategy in the control group was "compromise." The pupils searched for and reached agreement when confronted with conflict.<sup>35</sup> In 84% of cases, they agreed to avoid each other in the future.<sup>36</sup> Pupils also spontaneously applied the procedures outside the school context,<sup>4,34</sup> for example in their families and to achieve higher academic results.<sup>37</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Theoretical study of the possibility of implementing integrated crisis management programs in schools, including children with behavioral and emotional needs, show hopeful results. Experience suggests therapeutic and school-based crisis management can become complementary. Special attention must be given to teacher training. Creating a positive environment, and accepting students as co-trainers, negotiators, and mediators, will facilitate positive implementation.

Yet, no example exists of practical realization of integrated crisis management. In the region of Ghent (Flanders, Belgium), the Orthopedagogical Treatment Center, which includes a school and a day treatment center for about 70 pupils with emotional and behavioral needs, will conduct such an experiment. Several staff members have received training. Implementation will take three years. The project will be conducted in collaboration with schools in the City of Ghent, and the East of Flanders Institutes for children with emotional and behavior needs. The experiment will receive a scientific underpinning, evaluation, and follow-up by the Department of Special Education at Ghent University. ■

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## Statement of Purpose

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The *Journal of School Health*, an official publication of the American School Health Association, publishes material related to health promotion in school settings. *Journal* readership includes administrators, educators, nurses, physicians, dentists, dental hygienists, psychologists, counselors, social workers, nutritionists, dietitians, and other health professionals. These individuals work cooperatively with parents and the community to achieve the common goal of providing children and adolescents with the programs, services, and environment necessary to promote health and improve learning.

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