Articles

Student Conflict Resolution, Power “Sharing” in Schools, and Citizenship Education

KATHY BICKMORE
University of Toronto
Toronto, Canada

ABSTRACT

One goal of elementary education is to help children develop the skills, knowledge, and values associated with citizenship. However, there is little consensus about what these goals really mean: various schools, and various programs within any school, may promote different notions of “good citizenship.” Peer conflict mediation, like service learning, creates active roles for young people to help them develop capacities for democratic citizenship (such as critical reasoning and shared decision making). This study examines the notions of citizenship embodied in the contrasting ways one peer mediation model was implemented in six different elementary schools in the same urban school district. This program was designed to foster leadership among diverse young people, to develop students’ capacities to be responsible citizens by giving them tangible responsibility, specifically the power to initiate and carry out peer conflict management activities. In practice, as the programs developed, some schools did not share power with any of their student mediators, and other schools shared power only with the kinds of children already seen as “good” students. All of the programs emphasized the development of nonviolent community norms—a necessary but not sufficient condition for democracy. A few programs began to engage students in critical reasoning and/or in taking the initiative in influencing the management of problems at their schools, thus broadening the space for democratic learning. These case studies help to clarify what our visions of citizenship (education) may look and sound like in actual practice so that we can deliberate about the choices thus highlighted.

What does it mean to teach children to be “good citizens”? Through informal socialization, including the hidden curriculum of regular school practice, young citizens inescapably develop some understanding of their community and its needs, and of how (or whether) they should act in
relation to those needs. They learn how the people around them generally handle conflict, make
decisions, and relate to diverse people by observing and practicing particular roles in their social
worlds. Through planned programs of various kinds, such as conflict resolution and service
learning, educators often seek to supplement and redirect children’s socialization toward our own
concepts of “good citizenship.” Unfortunately, we often do not stop to clarify what we mean by
these goals, and if we did we would probably find out that we do not completely agree about what
is important. This study addresses that problem by examining the contrasting conceptions of
“good citizenship” that were enacted in several peer conflict mediation programs implemented in
urban elementary schools.

The paper presents a conceptual framework for engaging in and studying citizenship
education in schools, drawn in part from recent literature on service learning, and applies this
framework to a study of peer conflict mediation programs. After a brief discussion of research
context and methods, three elements of citizenship education are examined in relation to
contrasting case studies of the interpretation of a particular peer conflict mediation program
model at six elementary schools in one big-city school district in the northern United States. The
final section of the paper draws comparisons across case studies so as to discuss the possibilities
for democratic conflict resolution education in the context of urban violence and centralized
achievement testing in public schools.

OVERVIEW: “DEMOCRATIC” SCHOOL CONTEXTS?

The National Council for the Social Studies of the United States, among others, articulates a
common ideal of citizenship education—that democracy would be practiced as a “way of life” in
schools (NCSS, 1979). In this conceptual framework, democratic education has three central
components: modeling, critical reasoning, and sharing authority with students. Modeling for
democratization requires the “enactment of democratic principles” in the school community,
including the inclusion and protection of minorities and equitable (safe) opportunities for all to
participate, directly and through representatives, in collective decision making. Critical reasoning
requires learning to listen respectfully to alternative viewpoints and to analyze problems and
solutions. Shared authority requires involving students as a “part of the system of justice” in the school, rather than teaching them only to obey rules made and enforced by others. These democratic ideals continue to elude us in most public schools.

Conflict resolution education is a kind of education for citizenship in that it develops some of the skills necessary for citizen activity and imparts values regarding the ways citizens are expected to behave. A peer conflict mediation program is one type of conflict resolution education. Peer mediation also can be seen as a kind of service learning because it involves not only instruction (training), but the creation of active roles for students. The service learning analogy is useful for understanding peer mediation because service learning is one of very few other school-sponsored citizenship education initiatives that is organized around giving students nontraditional responsibilities outside the classroom. (Another interesting analogue might be student government.)

Service learning programs involve “thoughtfully organized service experiences that:

- meet actual community needs;
- enhance what is taught in the school by extending student learning beyond the classroom;
- help foster the development of a sense of “caring for others.” (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 1993, p. 2)

Unlike most service learning opportunities, the “community” served by a school-based peer mediation service is primarily the school itself. The “need” addressed is to build peaceful communities and relationships, to enhance students’ skills in managing their own conflicts, and to ameliorate problems of disruptive interpersonal conflict and violence.

Like the loose collection of initiatives known as service learning, peer conflict mediation programs provide extracurricular opportunities for some students to alter their social roles, from relatively passive learners to relatively active leaders and problem solvers. Also like well-designed service learning (although not like all school-sponsored service activities), good peer mediation programs involve the students in joint planning and reflection regarding their responsibilities and the problems that make their work necessary. However, the service learning orientation, like many student conflict resolution programs implemented in North America,
generally emphasizes modeling/building nonviolent community relationships more than modeling/practicing democracy. My purpose in this paper is not to claim perfect similarity of peer mediation to service learning, but to use service learning as an analogy that provides certain conceptual spotlights, illuminating the citizenship education elements of “extracurricular” conflict resolution programs such as peer mediation.

Mary Ann Raywid disputes the common notion that democracy can be modeled in schools, cautioning that classrooms and schools can never directly reflect the political democracy practiced in the adult world (1976). Unevenly distributed expertise plays a special role in classrooms: classroom “citizens” are not equal. Furthermore, students, unlike full democratic citizens, do not have the opportunity to choose their own leaders from among peers in the classroom, nor are they allowed to withdraw from collective activities of which they disapprove. This tension is amply evident in the schools I studied: the hidden curricular socialization derived from modeling and practice was (to some degree) contradictory to democratic citizenship. Nonetheless, leaders in these schools believe that they can model and teach certain ingredients of democratic citizenship, in part through their peer conflict mediation programs. The different schools examined below have achieved some success in implementing peer mediation, but each of these programs encouraged remarkably different kinds of “citizen” action by the student mediators and their peers.

Planned citizenship education programs, including peer mediation, co-exist somewhat uneasily with the hidden curriculum of prevailing interaction patterns in schools. Expectations for citizenship behavior are embodied in every aspect of school life. For example, while a special program might call for diverse students to take independent initiative or to use affirming language, prevailing discipline practice in the same school might exclude so-called bad students from participation or treat them disrespectfully. This paper examines the intersection between an extracurricular peer mediation program and the hidden curricula of the various elementary school contexts that shaped its implementation.

After a brief discussion of the research context, questions, and method, the paper examines three components of democratic education: modeling nonviolent community, critical reflection and analysis, and students sharing authority. Each theme is explored conceptually in light of relevant research literature, and then case studies of contrasting peer mediation programs
are examined to illustrate these elements in practice. The paper concludes with a discussion of the
democratic education challenges that are illuminated by these case studies.

RESEARCH METHOD

The paper is based on continuing research regarding a conflict resolution and peer mediation
training project in one large urban school district. The full study involves a range of qualitative
and quantitative information, collected between 1997 and 1999, examining the character and
effectiveness of Center for Conflict Resolution peer mediation training and program development
at 20 elementary schools. The overall research question was, “What processes of conflict
resolution learning are being facilitated at each school, and what are the observable effects of
these processes, among peer mediators and within each whole school community?” This paper is
drawn from case studies of six of the schools at the end of the project’s first year (fall 1998).
Qualitative evidence includes observations and interviews with administrators, program advisors,
other teachers, peer mediators, and other students at each school in May, June, and September of
1998, supplemented by several additional meetings with program trainers and advisors
throughout 1997–1998. To protect the confidentiality of individuals and schools, identifying
details are masked and schools are named only by pseudonyms. The only “real” name in the
paper (used with permission) is that of the mediation training program director.

The specific research questions addressed in this paper include:

- *Modeling nonviolent community*. What values do the various schools’ implemented peer
  mediation programs embody in relation to peacemaking, community, nonviolence, and
  the roles of diverse students?
- *Critical reflection and analysis*. How do diverse student mediators become involved in
critical thinking and problem solving?
- *Students sharing authority*. How do conflict resolution advisors, other school staff, and
school context factors facilitate and/or impede the active involvement and self-
determination of various students in conflict mediation related activities at each school?
RESEARCH CONTEXT AND PROGRAM BACKGROUND

Training and program development guidance for the elementary schools in this study was provided by the Center for Conflict Resolution at the Martin Luther King Magnet High School, in the Cleveland Public School district in Ohio, USA. The Winning Against Violent Environments (WAVE) mediation program has been operating at this inner-city high school for about 15 years. In addition to mediating conflicts at their own school, youth from the WAVE program have been leading training sessions in local and distant schools for about 12 years. Eventually, largely through the efforts of the director of WAVE and the Center for Conflict Resolution, peer mediation was added to the CPS district student handbook as an alternative to traditional discipline measures for handling certain kinds of conflict. At first, this peer mediation service was unevenly available in only a few of the district’s schools.

In the fall of 1995, WAVE’s training program was finally recognized by the leadership in its own school district: it was institutionalized and expanded into the Cleveland Public Schools Center for Conflict Resolution. The Center for Conflict Resolution (CCR) has a broad and expanding responsibility in the district, but a low budget and little administrative assistance. The program’s guiding light for most of the past 15 years, and its current director, is a specially assigned social studies teacher, Ms. Carole Close.¹

In 1997, the Cleveland Teachers Union contract with the Cleveland Public School (CPS) board created a new stipend-paid part-time conflict resolution advisor position, to be held by a certified teacher or guidance counselor in each one of the district’s 120 schools. The district charged the Center for Conflict Resolution with training teams of peer mediators and their advisors, and helping them to establish extracurricular conflict mediation service programs in their schools. A local foundation associated with the business roundtable, the Cleveland Summit on Education, helped support the CCR’s initial effort, in 1997–1999, to train the first of these new teacher-advisors, and to establish new peer mediation programs, in about a quarter of the district’s elementary schools. As part of that support, the foundation sponsored this research project.

Mediation is assisted interpersonal conflict negotiation, in which a neutral third party (mediator) facilitates a process of problem identification and resolution. In school-based peer mediation, the mediators of conflicts among students are literally peers—other students without
special disciplinary or judicial power. Mediators are expected to neither judge nor counsel nor offer suggestions regarding the content of conflict itself. They are responsible for guiding the process only—for assisting peers to communicate with one another and to negotiate a solution to their own problems. Peer mediation assistance is a voluntary alternative to fighting and/or to going through a formal discipline process with adult school personnel. Mediations may occur on the spot where the conflict arises, or may be postponed to a more private time and place after tempers have cooled. The first step is to establish each party’s informed independent choice to participate and to keep the proceedings confidential. The second step is for each party to tell his or her own view of what happened and what the problem is. Subsequent steps involve assisting the parties to communicate so as to understand the solvable parts of the problem, to invent possible solutions, and to negotiate a mutually acceptable resolution. Peer mediation sessions may be formal sit-down procedures resulting in signed paper contracts, but at the elementary school level they are typically short, informal discussions, conducted near where the original conflict occurred and ending with verbal agreements.

Typical of most North American school-based programs, the CPS Center for Conflict Resolution uses a “cadre” (rather than whole class or whole school) approach to peer mediation: only a small group of students per school are trained to provide the mediation service in their own schools. Beyond offering the mediation service itself, these student mediators meet and work together as a team to deepen their own skills and to promote the use of nonviolent conflict resolution (including mediation) in their school communities. This peer mediation cadre approach has spread widely in North American schools because it can effectively meet a range of conflict education and violence prevention objectives at low cost and with minimal organizational change (Jones, 1998; see also Johnson & Johnson, 1996; Lawton, 1994; Shulman, 1996 [AUTHOR: Please add Shulman to references.]; Stitz-Stomfay, 1994). What is most unique about the CPS Center for Conflict Resolution program is, first, that its mediation services are becoming available district-wide at a variety of grade levels, and, second, that it emphasizes leadership and training by the urban youth themselves (Close & Lechman, 1997; Day-Vines et al., 1996).

During the initial year (1997–1998) of the two-year study, the Center for Conflict Resolution (CCR) offered its standard training program to the first 20 elementary schools to appoint conflict resolution advisors, as specified in the teachers’ new union contract. A team of
20 to 30 students and one or two adult advisors from each of the 20 elementary schools received program development assistance and an intensive three-day peer mediation training by the CPS Center for Conflict Resolution. Trainers were diverse urban youth who recently had graduated from high school in Cleveland. Mediators, according to program guidelines, were to be children whose social leadership potential had been exhibited in “negative” as well as “positive” ways, and who were representative of the school’s entire racial, cultural, and gender populations—not only “good” students. The student mediators, grades 3–5, were guided to develop conflict resolution and mediation skills, and also to take initiative and make joint decisions in developing conflict resolution programs in their own schools. Skills were presented in simple steps, yet framed as flexible and evolving, adaptable to a wide range of gender and cultural identities. The program emphasized both the creation of peer mediation services in each school and the engagement of the young student trainees as peer leaders, responsible for spreading nonviolent conflict management knowledge and practice throughout their school communities.

Because of the Center for Conflict Resolution’s emphasis on empowerment of diverse students and responsiveness to context on a local level, the programs were able to take different forms in the various elementary schools. This created, in effect, a natural experiment: the same basic training and program development package was given to a range of elementary schools in one city school district. This paper describes the contrasting ways that “same” program was actually interpreted and implemented at each school.

Conflict is wrapped up in relations of social power, and conflict resolution is a crucial component of democratic participation. This study’s examination of how the power to manage conflict was (and was not) shared with diverse students in these urban school programs illuminates the contrasting meanings of citizenship education in practical terms. The three dimensions of citizenship education examined in this paper have a cumulative relationship to one another. Building peaceful community is the necessary condition for citizen action that is typically emphasized in service learning: it is a base upon which the more obviously democratic elements of citizenship education can be (but often are not) anchored. Inclusive critical reflection and problem solving, which arguably develops participants’ capacities for democratic participation, is extremely difficult without a peaceful community context. Sharing authority with students (implementing democratic processes) requires both a peaceful context and reflective problem
solving. By analyzing the roles of various actors in each school in relation to these three dimensions, these case studies begin to point out the elements that would be required to support sustainable change toward nonviolent and democratic school climates.

These particular cases were selected: (1) because their mediation programs had been implemented far enough to develop noticeable adaptations to their own school contexts and (2) because these cases contrasted sufficiently to serve as good illustrations of different approaches to citizenship education. The three dimensions of citizenship education listed above took on significance in the framing of this paper when it turned out that each emerging school program clearly appeared to emphasize one of those dimensions. Of course, none of these complex human organizational processes is really unidimensional, but these dimensions of difference were sufficiently strong to serve as an organizational framework for this paper. The remainder of the paper discusses the three citizenship education dimensions in turn, each in relation to two school cases that highlight that dimension. The discussion at the end of the paper transcends these categories to draw some comparisons and insights across all six cases.

FINDINGS: PREVIEW

The following chart serves as an advance organizer for the sections that follow, by introducing basic information about all six case study schools, in the order they will be presented.²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL</th>
<th>STUDENT ENROLMENT</th>
<th>GRADE 4 ACHIEVEMENT TEST PASS RATE</th>
<th>DIMENSION OF CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION AND DETAILS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atlantic</td>
<td>260 (mainly black and white)</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Modeling nonviolent community: traditional mediator-on-duty process (mostly girls active)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Key Note</td>
</tr>
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<td>----------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Browncroft</td>
<td>350 (black, white, Hispanic)</td>
<td>Above average</td>
<td>Modeling nonviolent community: mediation meetings during school but little mediation service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clover</td>
<td>670 (black, white, Hispanic)</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Critical problem-solving: mediation in two languages, only grade 5s active as mediators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixon</td>
<td>560 (black, some Hispanic)</td>
<td>Above average</td>
<td>Critical problem-solving: “good” students only are active as mediators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellison</td>
<td>480 (mainly black)</td>
<td>Below average</td>
<td>Sharing authority: mediation duties and meetings in regular school schedule, integrated as discipline option</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairview</td>
<td>330 mainly black, some white, few Hispanic, large special ed. pop.</td>
<td>Below average</td>
<td>Sharing authority: mediation in two languages, principal supports and refers to program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Modeling Nonviolent Community: Conceptual Framework

Recently, Kahne and Westheimer examined the citizenship education values that were implicitly modeled in several service learning programs (1996). They found that many such programs avoided controversy and critique, emphasizing instead the development of altruistic values or “charity.” Sometimes these programs even advocated service as an alternative to political action. I prefer to frame the goal Kahne and Westheimer call “charity” in terms of schools’ mission to model and reinforce nonviolent community values. The beliefs and values that surround conflict resolution are rooted in various cultures and social locations. Conflict resolution education is more than skill development: it is built upon real social relationships, and on values that are culturally bound. Teaching nonviolence, for example through a peer mediation program, is an attempt to change the values of a (school) community and to change the ways its members relate to one another. Kahne and Westheimer’s caution regarding service programs does apply to peer mediation: these programs may sometimes function much like 19th century monitorialism, using peer mediators to reinforce existing implicit (cultural dominance) and explicit (adult power) hierarchies. Clearly such uncritical and conformist community building is not democratic (Bottery, 1992). However, some kind of community building and safety is still a necessary condition for democratization, especially in post-modern urban contexts.

It is not surprising that conflict resolution education has become increasingly popular in North America during the last few decades. It is a paradox of post-modernity that pluralist diversity is ubiquitous and makes conflict resolution essential, while at the same time technological and economic developments encourage individualism and fragment social relationships, thereby making community building and conflict resolution more difficult.

In the late ‘80s, individuals found themselves increasingly disconnected from public life and civic discourse. Partly because of the complexity of the society, partly because of the busy worklife, partly because of our “couch potato,” TV-dominated home lifestyle, people have increasingly become detached from the community. . . . In recent years, policymakers and educators alike have expressed the necessity of involving young people in community service and public problem solving as a means of advancing reengagement in the community. (Hepburn, 1997, p. 140; see also Conrad & Hedin, 1977)
In the past, community might have been assumed, not identified as a major goal of citizenship education. Now, in the context of social fragmentation and casual violence, urban educators often must work very hard at fostering community (including nonviolent conflict resolution norms and processes) among their diverse students and staff. This concern for building peaceful communities has been presented as a rationale for school-sponsored service learning and equally could be applied to peer conflict mediation programs.

Thus community building is an essential component of democratic citizenship education in urban schools today. I investigate, in the case studies below, how each peer mediation program embodies and seeks to promote community building values such as reengagement, responsibility, recognition of shared interests, and nonviolent management of conflicts. Service-oriented experiential learning can give meaning to students’ lives, strengthening their sense of self-confidence and efficacy, and freeing up their motivation to engage in school learning (Battistoni, 1997; Williams, 1992). Meta-analysis of several service learning studies shows that, contrary to popular belief, the time spent away from regular classroom tasks for such active learning experiences has no negative impact and, in some well-designed programs, has a positive impact on students’ academic achievement (Williams, 1992, pp. 38–39). Community engagement and nonviolent values can be powerful partners and even facilitators of academic learning, and thus deserve some prominence as educational goals.

At the same time, it is important to understand the social hierarchies underlying citizenship education’s emphasis on common values for community building. First, which populations of students generally receive the opportunity, through participation in these peer mediation programs, to see themselves as capable social actors—a diverse range of students that reflects the school’s whole population, or only those whose backgrounds and values match those of the school’s adult leadership? Second, how do the children who participate as peer mediators come to see their fellow students who are involved in escalating conflicts and violence? Is conflict seen as natural and relational, or are those who get in trouble blamed individually for their problems and marginalized as somehow bad (see Merelman, 1990; Slee, 1995)? Community building efforts could reinforce a narrow range of dominant values and behavior patterns. However, since nonviolent beliefs and practices are rooted in a wide range of cultures,
community building could also involve culturally inclusive and no-blame problem-solving efforts.

**Modeling Nonviolent Community: Case Studies**

Two of the schools emphasized peacemaking as part of community building, without involving the student mediators in much critical thinking, problem solving, or autonomous action. Atlantic and Browncroft Schools had active peace and conflict education programs led by the adult conflict resolution advisors, with relatively little substantive input from the peer mediators themselves. In Atlantic School, the children did provide fairly active mediation services, although the approach to mediation sometimes emphasized helping adults to control other children more than empowering young people to resolve their own conflicts. In Browncroft School, student behavior was managed primarily by teachers and principals, and trained peer mediators really did not have opportunities to provide much service. Peace-related programming led by the adult advisors emphasized approaches to conflict management that retained traditional authority roles—student skill development and norms of polite behavior, rather than student-centered peer mediation.

Atlantic School had about 25 active student mediators, whose service roles were recognized by many in their school community. Here, mediators were pulled out of regular classes to meet once or twice per month. The advisor coached students on their skills, invited them to report on mediations they had conducted, and led lessons on peace and conflict education. These were mainly teacher-centered sessions: for example, two mediators who were placed on duty together (during a May observation) introduced themselves to one another, because they had not interacted enough in group meetings to learn each other’s names.

Atlantic School’s advisor believed that her mediators did not adequately follow the step-by-step mediation process, so she had written out a simplified “script” (her word) for them to follow during mediations. It seems clear that such control by the advisor, although offered with intent to help, limited the independent initiative and the cultural/language adaptation that could emerge from the young mediators themselves. Several of Atlantic’s mediators, who were disproportionately white/Anglo and female, had become quite skilled and confident in carrying
out the designated process. These active mediators were not necessarily more nonviolent than their peers. School disciplinarians tend to notice and sanction behaviors more often associated with boys, such as physical fighting and disruption, rather than equally hurtful behaviors often associated with girls, such as covert mockery or exclusion (Bergsgaard, 1997; Slee, 1995). Other student mediators remained somewhat less involved and less comfortable with their responsibilities, perhaps because the cultural or gender identity implicit in the advisor’s designated script did not feel comfortable to them.

In Atlantic School, a few mediators were scheduled each day to be on duty as monitors in the school lunchroom and on the playground during lunch recess. In the lunchrooms, the mediators assisted the adult lunch supervisors by monitoring peer behavior, and also by picking up garbage and wiping tables. Other children knew who these mediators were, and the mediators certainly felt important. However, the mediators in Atlantic School had little opportunity to think critically together or to take autonomous initiative, and their peacekeeping seemed considerably less than democratic: mediators often helped adult staff to limit the autonomy of their peers.

In Browncroft School, the adult conflict resolution advisor took considerable responsibility for different kinds of conflict-related activity. The mediators, however, took on little visible leadership. Most of Browncroft School’s mediators had a scheduled meeting with their advisor during the last 25 minutes of school once a week, but it frequently was cancelled in favor of competing activities, especially preparation for the state-mandated fourth grade proficiency test. At both Atlantic and Browncroft, teachers were reluctant to allow mediations to occur in the mediators’ classrooms or during class time. The stakes for improving scores on these tests are very high under Cleveland’s new superintendent, even for Browncroft School, which had a 1997–1998 pass rate above the district average. In spite of evidence to the contrary (such as that of Williams, 1992), there is a widespread perception at these (and many) schools that service activity, even conflict resolution, is an “extra” that competes with, rather than enhances, academic achievement. When the pressure to perform on these standardized tests is strong, there is very little space for any student roles other than the standard role of obedient learner. As one principal put it while her school was preparing for the proficiency test, “we didn’t have time for conflict!” Conflicts involving students at Atlantic School and, even more especially, at Browncroft School were generally perceived as “discipline” problems to be handled by adults.
Browncroft School mediators used mediation more at home than at school. When I asked
them to show and tell what they did, mediators told me “we tell students not to fight” and role-
played an abbreviated process that eliminated the problem-solving steps, substituting peer
pressure to apologize and shake hands (May 20, 1998). This advisor had a set of “assertive
discipline” expectations and consequences for infractions prominently displayed on her own
classroom wall. Assertive discipline’s emphasis on inflexible rules and teacher control seems
quite contradictory to the spirit and practice of peer mediation, but no student, teacher, or
administrator remarked on any such tension during observations or interviews: all assumed that
this program’s emphasis should be on changing children’s behavior, not on changing adults’
behavior or authority relations.

The peer mediation programs, as interpreted at these two schools, did seem to help make
the schools more peaceful, at least on the surface. However, they did not tap the potential of peer
mediation to help diverse children develop their confidence as active contributors to democratic
problem solving. Citizenship education was interpreted in these programs in much the same way
it was practiced in their surrounding school contexts: it emphasized student compliance, the
dominant culture’s middle class manners, and students’ acquisition of narrow skills more than the
development of democratic initiative or organizational change.

It is important to consider these cases in the context of the potential violence—and the
even more pervasive fear of violence—of the U.S. inner city at the end of the 20th century.
“Citizenship” education that relies upon and does not question “common” (dominant) values is
not itself “democratic.” At the same time, these educational efforts reach toward a goal of
equilibrium and nonviolence in community relationships that may be a necessary precondition to
true democratization.

Critical Analysis and Problem Solving: Conceptual Framework

Kahne and Westheimer (1996) critique the simplistic notions of empowerment that
underlie some service programs—increasing students’ self-esteem through serving “those less
fortunate,” without helping them to understand and reflect critically on the reasons for these
people’s troubles—as possibly reinforcing relatively privileged students’ unearned sense of
superiority and bypassing important learning opportunities. Student mediation services avoid part of this pitfall by serving not a distant lower-status “other” but their fellow students. Still, to what degree might peer mediation serve as an unintended disseminator of culturally loaded and unproblematic “good behavior” models? Alternatively, to what degree might student mediators act as critical problem solvers who come to understand and respond to the underlying causes of violent behavior in schools?

Enactment of community building and nonviolence principles, even where culturally inclusive, is necessary but not sufficient for enacting democratic principles. Democracy also requires structured opportunities for investigating problems, for airing and substantiating different viewpoints, and for discussing solution options. As Raywid (1976) points out, not all decisions can be made democratically in schools, in the narrow sense of majority rule by students: there are other stakeholders, such as parents and teachers, whose depth of experience and knowledge legitimately influences many decisions. However, children certainly can and should learn some kinds of analysis and decision making in school. Students learn democratic problem-solving skills by using them—including guided practice in diverse contexts, feedback, self-evaluation, discussion, and problem solving (Battistoni, 1997; Burns, 1998; Hedin & Conrad, 1992). Programs such as peer mediation can provide active students with opportunities to test the consequences of their own decisions as implemented in their school communities.

When students discuss and resolve community problems in a democratic context, they practice listening to and talking with persons who hold different viewpoints.

They come to recognize that conflict is part of public life. . . . They consciously analyze positions, interests, and power relationships. As they develop skills in perspective-taking and data-gathering, they experience firsthand the complexities of public problem-solving. (Avery, 1994, p. 49)

The underlying values and beliefs about self and others are most readily internalized when they are embodied in tangible action.

At the same time, however, recall that any citizenship education program co-exists with the hidden curriculum. That is, implicit modeling and practice in regular school activity may enhance or contradict the intended outcomes of a planned program such as peer mediation. Diverse students in these programs draw upon different personal histories and strengths, and they
experience different models and structures of opportunity for people like themselves in their “real life” communities.

[A citizenship education program should cultivate] the talents, ideas, and experiences of groups that have been marginalized in the formal political structure. . . . A program would need to address current political inequities in an open and honest manner. (Avery, 1994, p. 51).

In a political world that has so often excluded many social groups from full participation, citizenship education has an important but paradoxical role to play. On the one hand, a program such as peer mediation can give a much wider selection of young people opportunities for skill development and reflective action. At the same time, a program cannot effectively ignore the ways gender, race, economic inequality, and other factors have influenced the opportunities that various individuals may (or may not) have to exercise their skills and to carry real citizen influence in the wider society. Genuine critical reflection involving diverse students would inevitably bring such difficult questions to the surface.

Conflict resolution programs highlight this paradox because conflict and control in school and society are often closely associated with gender and racial identities. School discipline policies and conflict resolution programs often focus implicitly on males, especially visible “minority” males, because data on (punished) school violence, vandalism, and suspension highlight the involvement of these populations (Bettman & Moore, 1994; Leal, 1994). Working-class and minority youth are disproportionately blamed and labeled “difficult” by educators and even by their peers; they often suffer the most severe negative consequences of traditional discipline practices (Brantlinger, 1994; Larson, 1991; Noguera, 1995). The less-disruptive resistance that is more commonly associated with female students, such as absence from school or nonparticipation in activities, is often disregarded in such policies (Bergsgaard, 1997; Slee, 1995). Less-visible violence problems that contribute to girls’ exclusion, such as sexual harassment, also are often ignored by school personnel (Mahaffey, 1992; Stein, 1995). Peer mediation programs can help overcome some of these equity and access problems, but not automatically—only through careful inclusivity and collective critical deliberation and problem solving.
Critical Analysis and Problem Solving: Case Studies

Some of the peer mediation programs studied here were able to recruit and foster positive involvement of both girls and boys from a variety of racial and economic backgrounds. In these cases, critical joint reflection had the potential to truly identify and analyze the particular challenges of conflict, violence, and discipline in those school communities. Although not perfectly inclusive or constantly critical in their problem-solving work, the cases of Clover and Dixon Schools demonstrate the potential power (and challenges) of such opportunities for youth involvement in democratic discussion and decision making. In these schools, some young mediators were beginning to take some leadership initiative, in their own groups and in their schools. Advisors took a facilitative role, rather than a traditional “teaching” stance. Mediators took time together for self-critique and peer feedback regarding their successes and difficulties in handling the particular conflicts with which they had become involved.

Compared with the schools discussed earlier, the young people in Clover and Dixon had more self-directed opportunities to discuss both their own work as peacemakers and broader problems with conflict in their school communities, and to have input regarding their own service activities in relation to those problems. Dixon School involved some of its mediators in some critical reflective work and decision making, but limited the students who could participate in their programs. Clover School’s program was more inclusive in its mediator group membership, but most of these student mediators were prevented from participating actively in their school communities beyond the prescribed and limited roles of “regular” elementary students.

Clover School’s administration demonstrated a certain commitment to the program by allocating regular school hours for weekly “conflict classes” between the mediators and program advisor. These sessions involved some critical discussion and decision-making exercises regarding school conflict and violence problems, as well as community education activities such as making posters. Mediators shared some responsibilities with overlapping groups of “student leaders” associated with the school’s guidance program. Clover School’s advisor allowed some mediations to be conducted in her classroom during her planning periods. The mediator groups in this school included a wide selection of diverse students, including some just learning English (and mediating in other languages). However, only the oldest students, the fifth graders, were
allowed to exercise their mediation skills outside their classrooms. Many mediators and most adults at these schools assumed that younger students were less capable, and that the positive liberty to take peer leadership roles was a privilege to which access should be limited. As one mediator at Clover School explained (May 19, 1998), “I think the program’s perfect, except we don’t get to do much.”

Clover School was typical of most North American peer mediation programs (Opffer, 1997; Carruthers et al., 1996) in that several adult staff were reluctant to allow mediators time or support to offer their services (either in their own classrooms or beyond), except during lunch and recess periods. This resistance was particularly strong around the time of proficiency test preparation, causing both programs to be scaled back during the late-winter months. In common with the schools discussed earlier, several staff members here viewed peer mediation activity as a privilege—merely an extracurricular club or a special student monitor role—not a core learning activity. For example, in Clover School, the principal described peer mediation as one of the “intermediary steps on the way up to my office.” He believed that mediators would counsel their peers “that [violence] is not the cool thing to do” (May 19, 1998). This shows some misunderstanding of the mediation process: assisted negotiation should be quite different from counseling. At the same time, some mediators were beginning to initiate their own involvement in helping peers solve problems. Although the whole school staff had not been particularly supportive, the conflict resolution advisors at Clover School had helped these children to gain a sense of responsibility, confidence, and efficacy. One by one, a few adults observed these young mediators’ successes and thereby became informed and persuaded to support their work.

The case of Dixon School highlights a major dilemma in balancing the competing priorities of schools—the relationship of active service learning to unequal student status and to academic learning. There were about 24 peer mediators at Dixon, providing mediations every day by late spring of the program’s first year. Mediators had demonstrated and explained their new service at two of the regularly held school meetings. The principal supported and promoted the program and used the service regularly:

If a kid comes in and says someone’s going to bother me, I think someone’s mad at me, or they’re going to fight me . . . . I say let’s get a conflict manager or mediator and we’ll get you together and talk. . . . [The peer mediation service]
frees me up because instead of taking care of all the problems, I say OK, you take care of this. . . . It helps solve problems. (May 21, 1999)

About a third of the teaching staff were also referring conflicts to the peer mediators, and students themselves often requested mediation assistance. Teachers described being surprised and delighted at how effective the newly trained student mediators were in assisting their peers to resolve conflicts.

Dixon School’s mediation meetings were held after school every other week, with a late bus provided. About two thirds of the mediators were also safety patrol guards, who met with the same advisor after school on the opposite weeks. Meeting agendas involved the student mediators in evaluating their responses to their own conflicts, their skills and strategies for handling mediations they were conducting, and “a little personal training, too, about how to speak to the children—your voice tone, body language, and being as kind and courteous as you possibly can with the other children” (Advisor, May 21, 1999). The critical reflection in Dixon School’s mediator group was mainly confined to self-evaluation, not self-regulation or deliberation on larger community problems, although some collective deliberation did occasionally occur at school meetings.

By all accounts, this was already a very successful extracurricular program. However, the group of students at Dixon School who had the opportunity to participate in this program were not typical of the school’s student population. The advisor gave her teacher colleagues the following direction regarding which students in their classes should be invited to join the mediation team:

Choose “someone who is able to keep up with their work, someone who is able to communicate with other children, and, you know, someone who is interested in doing this.” (May 21, 1999)

Mostly academically successful students who rarely got into trouble were chosen to be mediators. The four (of 25) who were to some degree “negative leaders” showed the most marked change in attitude and skill development as the program began, but one of these was “fired” from the program soon after the training and the others were not allowed to be very active mediators. The advisor explained that “a lot of the negative leaders are . . . behind in their [academic] work as
well, and I don’t know if it would be helpful or harmful to [such students] to be part of this program” (May 21, 1999).

Even the teachers who supported the mediation program viewed it as irrelevant to academic success and were reluctant to sacrifice any classroom time for conflict resolution activities. Mediators met as a group only after school and offered mediation services during lunch, recess, and after school. A teacher who enthusiastically told me that “Every school should have [this peer mediation program] and no school should be without it,” described the active mediator in her classroom as an unusually committed and talented student who took responsibility for her own “make-up” work: “I mean she can keep up. She talks to me after school. If she doesn’t understand, she will hunt me down and she will ask questions, she’s intelligent. I think for the initial training of any conflict mediator, any class, they need to be able to keep up” (May 21, 1999). Although there were peer mediators in every grade 3–5 classroom, even these academically successful students were generally discouraged from mediating conflicts during class time.

Understandably, academic work is framed as the primary responsibility of all students in most schools, and Dixon School’s mediators (even more explicitly than mediators in the other schools) understood that they could not participate unless they kept up academically. The question is one of balancing priorities. There is evidence that service learning activity (and, by analogy, probably peer mediation) can help re-engage students in schoolwork and enhance academically relevant skills, overcoming the challenge of reduced time for academic tasks (Battistoni, 1997; Williams, 1992). However, this is neither well known by educators nor perfectly substantiated in every age group and context. Thus, there is a temptation to limit access to mediation activity to the part of the school population that may need it the least—those who are already positively engaged and successful in school.

The case of Dixon School demonstrates how quickly such a program can take off, and how much easier it is to include the students in critical reflection and autonomous problem-solving, when such a program does select high-status students. Before the program began, most of these students already had relatively strong self-confidence, and the school’s adult staff was already open to giving such compliant students responsibility and liberty to pursue their special activities. However, limiting program access to these high-status students does not resolve the
basic problem of viewing conflict resolution as extracurricular while the core academic curriculum (narrowly interpreted and tested) is seen as the highest priority activity. It also may limit lower-status students’ access to program benefits if their peer friendship groups or subcultures do not intersect much with the lives of the active student mediators.

None of the peer mediation programs observed seemed to make critical reflection or problem solving a priority. Peer mediation teams had very little time to meet, and so rarely had the time for much careful reflection. Connections between peer mediation and classroom lessons, where such time for critical analysis might have been available, were extremely limited and marginal. Classroom conflict resolution “lessons” consisted of rare, short presentations by student mediators to classmates regarding their program, and the implicit curriculum in which teachers (or peers) referred student disputes to peer mediators for assistance. Meanwhile, conflict is an important theme in virtually all literature, science, arts, and social sciences. Thus, the academic curriculum seemed an untapped resource for conflict mediation, and conflict mediation seemed a nearly untapped resource for the academic curriculum.

**Students Taking Responsibility, Sharing Authority: Conceptual Framework**

A third crucial element of democratic education is to foster students’ development of autonomy by allowing them to share some power with adults in the school. Community and critical thinking are necessary conditions for democracy, but even combined they are not sufficient. By definition, democracy requires collective *decision making*, in which any citizen has the power to influence some of the rules by which he or she is governed. Critical discussion and problem solving regarding social issues can help young people to develop citizenship-relevant capacities for autonomous thought (Battistoni, 1997; Hahn, 1996). The most difficult and potentially powerful challenge of experiential citizenship learning is to combine such critical thinking with *action*, right in the school context: to democratize authority relations in certain areas of school life, so that young people can take initiatives that share their competence on behalf of themselves and others.

A peer mediation program can provide opportunities for active students to develop their democratically relevant inclinations and capacities well beyond taking responsibility for their
own behavior. Peer mediation is a way for students to share authority for solving real problems in their schools—challenges that also arise outside in the adult political community.

Schools, like society, have a system of justice and notions of equity. Some of the issues facing them are manifestations of problems confronting society as a whole. Examples of such problems are the need to eliminate racial injustice, crime, and inequalities of treatment toward men and women. Students need to feel a part of the system of justice, and they need to tackle the problems within the school setting in order to gain experience in the agony and frustration of democratic decision making. (National Council for the Social Studies statement, 1979)

Problems of violence, including intolerance and racial, homophobic, and gender-based harassment, are clearly evident both inside and outside schools. The system of handling such problems in school is certainly a context in which students learn something about justice and about themselves as members of political communities. Under what conditions, and in what ways, could some measure of the responsibility for confronting such violence problems be shared with elementary school children?

Schools traditionally emphasize adult control more than development of students’ autonomous self-control. Discipline is usually managed by adults in ways that may foster neither learning nor democracy (Schimmel, 1997). In this context, one powerful instance of democratization is to give students significant input in creating codes of conduct, and in deciding how to handle infractions of group norms (Hess, 1997; Penrock, 1997). Cleveland’s Center for Conflict Resolution encourages peer mediators to decide together (autonomously in each school team) what the consequences should be when the mediators themselves engage in violent behavior. This kind of problem solving is an opportunity to take tangible responsibility in applying values of nonviolence to oneself and others. Everybody who is alive has conflicts, and none of us handle those conflicts beautifully 100 percent of the time. Especially where school staffs do choose mediators representing the whole school population (following CCR program guidelines), including children whose peer influence sometimes has been “negative,” it is inevitable that the student mediators will sometimes get into conflicts that they do not resolve nonviolently. Consulting with peer mediators regarding the consequences of these human mistakes helps them to think critically about their own actions and the complex reasons for those
actions. This helps to avoid simplistic analyses of school conflict that blame and marginalize “violent” individuals and ignore underlying social problems.

Conflict resolution skill development goals are wrapped up in something bigger—a set of value-laden beliefs and self-concepts that would incline a person toward actually applying those skills voluntarily in specific situations. Skills can be developed through demonstration and practice with feedback. In contrast, beliefs and inclinations are values that are influenced by context and internalized over time. Catherine Lewis describes a Japanese preschool context that helped children to internalize the “will” to take peace-making initiative by delegating real responsibility to them for managing conflicts and by critically discussing with them particular classroom conflict episodes in which they had been active or passive participants. Peer mediation, if it involves the delegation of authority for active problem-solving responsibilities, goes well beyond skill development. The mediators, and the peers they assist, are more likely to internalize the values—such as nonviolence and a sense of themselves as citizens who are capable and responsible—that they find themselves practicing autonomously.

**Students Taking Responsibility, Sharing Authority: Case Studies**

In Fairview and Ellison Schools, diverse and inclusive groups of peer mediators were beginning to take tangible responsibility for making decisions and for helping to resolve problems in their school communities. At Ellison School, some staff referred conflicts to mediation, especially using mediators enrolled in their own classrooms, but more often the mediators initiated their own involvement in conflict mediation by walking up to peers during disputes and offering to help. Ellison School’s principal highlighted the program during whole-school meetings with students and parents. He often reminded the mediators that they played an important role in improving the school’s attendance record by helping their peers to solve problems so that nobody would be suspended. The conflict resolution advisor served on the school’s discipline committee, and had the agreement of most staff and parents to incorporate mediation into the school’s discipline process.

Mediation team meetings were held during regular school hours at Ellison, with parents invited to attend at any time. Mediators and teachers both reported that virtually 100 percent of
conflicts in which mediators assisted were resolved completely, so that those problems did not resurface. A teacher reflected, “Some [students in conflict] that I didn’t send to mediation, I probably should have, because they went right back to bickering the next day” (May 21, 1999). Besides offering mediation services, the mediators led conflict education activities with younger children. One mediator explained, “I like working with the kindergartners, because they look up to us” (May 21, 1999). Teachers described the remarkable changes they had observed in their shyer students and so-called negative leaders after they became mediators. For example, “You can tell that he feels proud to be a mediator. . . . Over all, he’s a lot more mature and responsible” (May 19, 1999). Given tangible responsibility, these students became more responsible people, more of the time.

In Fairview School, mediators met weekly for discussion, self-evaluative skill development, and joint planning. For example, the group negotiated a policy for handling mediators’ infractions of school norms regarding conflict behavior (suspension from mediation activities for two weeks), and the principal actively supported that policy. The principal illustrated the impact of this self-regulation on a student she had seen recently: “I know that a boy who did hit some difficulty backed off very rapidly because he was scared that he was going to be removed from the team [temporarily]” (June 5, 1998). Fairview School’s mediation team offered mediation both in response to teacher or principal referrals and by directly offering help to peers when problems were observed. Teachers were beginning to support the authority of the peer mediation process by discussing it directly, for example, by asking students whether their problems had been solved rather than either asking them to repeat confidential details or prescribing their own solutions. Mediators prepared a presentation for the school’s parent organization, and planned and carried out a bake sale to raise money for badges that would identify them as mediators. They went on a field trip to meet peer mediators at another school, and were considering for the following year a joint peace project to be conducted with parents in the community. The conflict resolution advisor met regularly with the guidance advisor: together, they arranged for mediators to make presentations in all of the school’s classrooms during the time normally allocated to guidance lessons.

Ellison’s and Fairview’s programs were able to be more inclusive than some others because they met during school. This meeting time was itself an indication of support from the
building [AUTHOR: What are building principals?] principals and union representatives who created the timetable, and with this leadership the programs had the support of others on the staff. Students who became mediators came from all sectors of these school communities, and had engaged in the whole spectrum of compliant, resistant, and conflictual behavior. At Fairview School, for example, hearing-impaired students who used American Sign Language were included in the program. At first, it was difficult for these students to completely catch on to the process, since it had been taught in spoken English (albeit with sign translation) in ways that emphasized verbal skills, but their teachers provided extra support during and after the training. These children were given responsibilities, like the other mediators, to make (supported) presentations to students in other (hearing-impaired) classrooms. Eventually, these children engaged in a conflict among themselves and, finally, the lights really went on. The teacher encouraged them to get their notes from the mediation training and to sit down and work through their problem. When they came back to the advisor to debrief, it was clear that they were very pleased with themselves and had come to understand the process more deeply in terms of their own modes of thinking and communicating.

Advisors and other staff at these two schools were taking the risks and doing the work to keep so-called negative leaders involved in their mediation programs. Fairview School’s principal explained that without access to such a program:

some of the more negative kids stay negative because they figure they can never get to the top. “No matter what I do, the teacher’s never going to pick me anyway,” sort of thing. . . . Because some of these kids are more eloquent in their speech, I mean they really have the ability. . . . We find it’s primarily boys, for some reason, that’s what I get in the office here. . . and so we can turn that around. (June 5, 1998)

At Fairview and Ellison schools, the most active mediators were boys as well as girls, and they reflected the range of populations in their schools. Thus, when mediators got involved helping their friends and classmates with conflicts, they were reaching a similarly wide-ranging population. As they began to take actions with which their friends and associates were unfamiliar (mediating conflicts), they did encounter some resistance. In both schools, mediators told me that some students thought mediation was “weird” or “a joke.” However, once these other children
actually saw the process work and understood that it was an alternative to getting into trouble with adults, most of them decided they liked it and often soon came back for additional services.

At these schools, diverse groups of student mediators were treated as leaders and given tangible responsibility. They were guided and coached by adults, but they made quite a few decisions for themselves, including decisions about how to interpret and adapt the mediation process in their community/cultural context, and how to confront some important problems in their communities, such as school attendance and violence. These schools come the closest to implementing the mediation program designed by the Cleveland Public Schools Center for Conflict Resolution—involving diverse children in democratic deliberation and in taking autonomous action to help improve their school communities.

DISCUSSION

This paper has examined six peer mediation programs in urban public elementary schools in the United States, analyzing these cases in light of democratic education principles. All of the peer mediation programs examined here embodied notions of “citizenship,” but only a few of them embodied “democratic” citizenship by including critical reflection, decision making, and autonomous action by the diverse young people in these schools.

The strongest element of these peer mediation programs was their emphasis on strengthening communities. Urban youth were autonomous leaders in their peers’ skill development for conflict management. However, communities are not always democratic, or even inclusive: the community building values reinforced by peer mediation programs at some of these schools—in particular Atlantic, Browncroft, and Dixon—reflected fairly narrow dominant gender/cultural viewpoints and thereby reinforced existing structural hierarchies. By itself, nonviolent community is necessary but not sufficient for the development of democracy.

The Cleveland Public Schools Center for Conflict Resolution peer mediation program model called for schools to delegate meaningful authority to student mediators to take autonomous action outside of traditional student roles, to apply and demonstrate their skills for the benefit of others in their communities. School leaders at Clover and Dixon limited the types
of students who were allowed to expand their horizons in this way. At Ellison and Fairview, in contrast, mediator participation was “democratized” to include students representing a broader range of ages and academic skill levels. Student mediators at Clover, Ellison, and Fairview Schools included children whom teachers had seen as “negative” peer leaders. These programs delegated a certain amount of positive power to these children, allowing them to retain but redirect their peer influence. Diversifying student mediator teams opens democratic space by giving voice and learning opportunities to students with various viewpoints and school experiences, including those whose views may differ from the dominant cultural approaches of school leaders.

A weak link in nearly all of these programs was the attention to critical reflection and problem solving (beyond individual self-evaluation for skill development). To facilitate allocating time and guidance for analysis and reflection, these programs would benefit by strengthening their links to the formal classroom curriculum, with which students and teachers occupy most of their time.

What is the capacity of a democratic education program, such as peer mediation, to grow and develop in the context of a school timetable, especially in the age of high-stakes standardized achievement testing? The vast majority of time in an elementary school day is classroom time. Mediators, just like other children, need some time to relax. How far can a mediation service develop, and what kinds of thinking/learning can it facilitate, if the program remains resolutely extracurricular, squeezed into 25-minute lunchtimes, 10-minute recesses, and, sometimes, after-school activity periods? All six school programs were severely constrained by the pressure of centralized curriculum, and especially by the grade 4 achievement testing. The programs’ extracurricular nature meant that when high-stakes testing pressure hit (which it did for several months each winter), the programs were squeezed or even completely stalled. Sustainable and transferable learning requires frequent opportunities for guided critical reflection and problem solving (Battistoni, 1997; Bickmore, 1997 & 1999b; Carruthers et al., 1996; Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). In North American schools the time, the allocation of teachers’ main responsibilities, and the conceptual frameworks to facilitate such deliberation and practice are embedded in what is taught (and how) in the classroom, especially in language arts, social studies, classroom human relations, and discipline procedures. It would be difficult for any school
to overcome the typical hidden curriculum of passive citizenship unless it built conflict management activity, and critical reflection about conflict, into the timetable, into the core curriculum, and into the lives of the whole range of students.

Inclusivity is a crucial challenge for “citizenship” programs such as peer mediation in urban public school contexts. The first reason is fairness. The Cleveland Public Schools CCR program is extremely popular with virtually 100 percent of its active peer mediators. As in many service learning activities, those offering the (mediation) service get the most sustained, frequent, and satisfying opportunities to practice new skills and roles, and thus gain the most competence and self-confidence from the program (Day-Vines et al., 1996; Metis Associates, 1989; Shulman, 1996). It would be a pity if such opportunities were not available to a wide range of children.

Besides the educational benefit to individual students, inclusivity in peer mediator teams influences the capacity of mediation programs to serve (that is, to create safer environments for) the whole “client” population of the school. It is worth remembering that conflict resolution education, like any democratic education, inescapably affirms certain values and cultural styles, and (implicitly) tries to change or replace others. It is not clear that a group of compliant and academically successful students, like that at Dixon School, or a group of children seen by their teachers as peaceful (such as at Browncroft or Atlantic Schools), would necessarily be able to establish a rapport with more diverse peers sufficient to influence whole school populations to change the way of handling conflict. For both practical and ethical reasons, it is problematic to limit extracurricular democratic learning opportunities to only those students who are already seen by adult educators as “good citizens.”

How might diverse students learn the basics of democratic citizenship in a less-than-perfectly democratic system? To what degree can a voluntary peer-assisted process for handling conflict flourish within a basically coercive system? For example, peer mediation at several of these schools was an alternative to disciplinary suspension from school, and it is well known that such punishments are not always equitably administered (e.g., Noguera, 1995; Slee, 1995). Critical thinking and participatory problem solving simply cannot be learned without opportunities to practice—critique and address meaningful problems, such as the reasons for violence and the system of justice for handling it. Urban public schools, especially at the elementary level, often seem to create safe and nondisruptive (but consequently unstimulating or
exclusionary) environments at the expense of these critical learning opportunities (Houser, 1996). It can be terrifying to trust a wide variety of children, especially to share power with those who are sometimes resistant to teacher authority, even more so in stressed urban environments. Yet children are unlikely to become responsible people unless they are given responsibility (Kamii, 1991; Lewis, 1996). The young student mediators in many of these Cleveland elementary schools have shown that they can indeed rise to our expectations if we respect their potential and give them a chance to help their communities.

The training these young mediators and their advisors received from the youth leaders of the Cleveland Public Schools Center for Conflict Resolution both demonstrated and coached them to develop autonomy by sharing authority and making joint decisions. However, as of fall 1998, the individual school programs had not generally implemented this aspect of the program. There is a heavy weight of tradition and habit in schools, exacerbated by the newly strengthened demands for centrally controlled academic achievement testing, that can get in the way of democratization efforts. By being explicit about the cultural and political goals underlying peer mediation programs, educators may be more able to focus their energies on the important challenges, thereby helping to displace this weight to some degree and making a little more space for learning democracy.

NOTES

The author thanks Curriculum Inquiry’s editors and reviewers for helpful feedback on an earlier version of this paper. A still earlier version was presented at the American Educational Research Association in Montreal, April 1999.

1. For further information about WAVE and the Center for Conflict Resolution in the Cleveland Public Schools, please see C. Close and K. Lechman (1997), in the References, or contact the director, Carole Close, CCR, c/o Martin Luther King HS, 1651 East 71st Street, Cleveland, Ohio 44103 USA (cclose@aol.com).
2. Information regarding test scores and demographics is general, and pseudonyms are used, to protect the confidentiality of participants. All six are elementary schools, with racially mixed and mainly working-class populations, in the same urban district. Enrolment information is from building profiles (CPS, 1997); achievement results are from the accountability report (CPS, 1998), based on a district average pass rate (for grade 4) of 17 percent in spring 1998.

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[AUTHOR: Quite a few of these references are NOT mentioned in the text. So neither of has to read the same author query over and over, I have just put two asterisks (**) beside each reference that is NOT mentioned in the text.]


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