Violence Prevention Through Cooperative Learning

Lorenn Walker

The author combines principles of cooperative learning where older students at risk of dropping out are recruited to teach violence prevention to younger learners. The secondary students learn problem solving and conflict resolution skills while providing a positive model through cross age peer tutoring.

Introduction

"Why didn't Ferdinand want to fight when he went into the bull fight ring?" asks Erin, a tan, athletically fit, sixteen-year-old girl. A room full of eager looking second graders raise their hands in unison, but one child does not wait for Erin to call on him and instead blurts out excitedly, "Because Ferdinand likes to sit and smell the flowers!"

Erin has just finished reading *The Story of Ferdinand* to this second grade class at Leihoku Elementary School in Wai'anae on the island of O'ahu in Hawai'i. The story is about a bull who refuses to fight. Erin is asking the second graders questions about the story. She has read Ferdinand many times before and carefully thought out questions to ask the children about the story, but this is her first time reading it before her intended audience.

Erin is participating in the Violence Prevention Through Cooperative Learning project. She is a ninth grader at an alternative learning center at Wai'anae High School for teenagers at risk of dropping out of school. Erin, like most other teens in danger of dropping out, has academic and social problems. Giving her a positive school experience and putting her in a leadership role is empowering. She has transformed from a marginal student to one who now plans to go to college.

Violence Prevention Through Cooperative Learning provided an opportunity for Erin to learn that she can make a difference in her community and that she is a positive role model for younger students in her neighborhood. Erin recognizes that this has boosted her self-confidence and motivated her to learn. "Being in the program gave me more responsibility and I learned better speaking skills," she says with a bright smile.

Program Development

The Violence Prevention Through Cooperative Learning program was developed in 1999 by the Hawai'i Friends of Civic and Law Related Education (Hawai'i Friends), a 24-year-old nonprofit organization run by volunteers. The program was developed to assist at-risk secondary school students in learning problem solving and conflict resolution skills. These cognitive skills are protective factors for developing resiliency and preventing violence (Werner & Smith, 1992).

The program was originally based on an annotated bibliography, "Literature for Children and Young Adults: Examining Issues of Violence and Conflict Resolution" (1996). This bibliography was prepared by Alita Zurav Letwin with the Center for Civic Education pursuant to a grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Office, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Letwin designed the bibliography for teachers "to tap the rich resource of children's literature to stimulate discussion of violence and of alternative,

peaceful ways to resolve conflict." The Violence Prevention Through Cooperative Learning program shares this intent but does not use teachers to accomplish the goal. Instead, secondary students are recruited to read to elementary classrooms and to facilitate discussion with the younger students on the themes of the books. The goal of the program is to assist the secondary students at risk of dropping out of high school in developing problem solving skills including non-violent responses to conflict.

Program Design

Schools and teachers with students at risk of dropping out of school are contacted about the program. If there is interest, a Hawaiʻi Friends coordinator comes to their classroom and gives a forty-five minute presentation about the program. The teens are told that the program is an opportunity for them to influence younger students in their neighborhoods to practice non-violent conflict resolution and how to deal with problems in a positive way. The presentation includes a modeled interactive session showing the teens what they will do if they enlist in the program (basically read story books and facilitate discussion about the books' themes with elementary students).

The program is voluntary but has requirements for the self-selected participants. It requires the teens to commit to reading out loud selected picture books for at least 20 hours before going to an elementary classroom in their neighborhood to read to young students. The reading practice is done in a cooperative group setting in the classroom. Some of the teens are at the reading level of the books that they read. The teen readers are coached in dramatic story telling. The teens also tutor each other with word pronunciation and in understanding the meaning of words. The teens work in pairs when they go into the elementary classes, each taking turns reading a book or two and facilitating discussion of it with the youngsters. The team approach to reading to the elementary classes was suggested by the first group of teen readers.

During the 20-hour practice period, the teens also learn facilitation skills. They are asked to think about the problems addressed in each book and to prepare questions that they can ask the elementary students after they read the books. The teens are coached in using open-ended questions (e.g., what, how, who, why) for generating interactive discussion with the elementary students.

After reading each book, the teens give it to the elementary school. The teens sign their names and may write a greeting on the inside of the book when they give it to the class. This feature was also developed by the first group of teens that participated in the program.

Teens who complete the program and read to at least two classrooms are given a gift certificate to a local book and music store, the value depending on the funding for the program and the number of teens participating.

After the teenagers are informed of the program requirements at the introductory presentation, they are told, "We'll check with your teachers next week and see if any of you want to participate." Approximately 90% of all the teens introduced to the program have chosen to participate.

Selection of Books

All of the picture books that the teens read deal with problems and conflicts (see Appendix A for book list). Each story illustrates a different conflict and way of handling a problem. Each teaches problem solving skills in subtle ways. In *Ferdinand the Bull*, Ferdinand refuses to fight, which ultimately saves him from being slaughtered by a matador. In *Swimmy* a fish convinces his fellow fish to work together to save the whole group. Although Swimmy and his friends are small fish, they swim together in a group to become what looks like one big fish. This cooperative strategy protects them from the bigger hungry fish. The issues of belonging and finding support in relationships with others are also important issues addressed in *Swimmy*.

The Butter Battle Book shows what happens when individuals choose to engage in conflict and how violence can escalate. In Dr. Seuss' mythical world of the Zoots and Yoots, the conflict stems from distrust of others who are different. The Zoots butter their bread on the bottom, but the Yoots butter their bread on the top! A wall divides them because of this difference and a slingshot starts a war. The story ends with aircraft carrying weapons and all of the Zoots and Yoots retreating to bomb shelters for underground safety.

After reading each book, the teens facilitate discussion of the story's theme. Kekoa, a tenth grader in the program, reads *The Butter Battle Book* with a gravelly voice that sounds like the cartoon character *Scooby Doo*. Kekoa engages the younger students in an interactive and animated discussion after reading the book. He asks the second graders a series of open-ended questions, "What is the problem in this story?" "Why don't the Zoots and the Yoots like each other?" "How are people you know different from you?"

Program Application

Between 1999 and 2003, approximately 50 students from four classrooms at three secondary schools on the island of O'ahu participated in this program. The teens read to approximately 100 classrooms and over 2000 elementary students. Approximately 200 storybooks were distributed to the elementary classrooms. The five-year program was funded by grants roughly totaling $10,000 from the State of Hawai'i, Public Housing Drug Elimination Program, and the Chamber of Commerce of Hawai'i Public Health Fund.

Results of the Program

Although an in-depth evaluation of the outcomes of the Violence Prevention Through Cooperative Learning program was not conducted, qualitative data shows positive results. First, a focus group of 17 teens was held at Wai'anae High School after two semesters of participating in the program. The consensus of the group was that it was one of their more meaningful school learning experiences. They all agreed that they increased self-confidence and gained an appreciation of what it takes to be an effective teacher. "Whoa, I never knew it could be so hard!" said one girl.

All four secondary teachers, whose students participated, believe that the program positively influenced their students. Leilehua High School teacher Johanna Matono said that she found her students "were able to do something they thought they could never accomplish, READ in front of a group! This experience was priceless for all. The students were able to handle themselves as young adults and a feeling of success was felt; something new in their lives."

Ann Van Etta, whose two classes from Wai'anae High participated in the program, found: "The Violence Prevention program gives our students a chance to

use the reading skills they do have in a very positive way. When the students sit at the head of a classroom reading children's stories to elementary school students and interacting with the children as role models, they are given a feeling of success and self-worth. Rather than feeling like poor readers, they discover that they can use reading to bring pleasure and information to others. This gives them a sense of empowerment and perhaps takes away a bit of the negativity they feel toward reading."

The elementary teachers were also surveyed after each teen reading and almost all responding found the program taught their students valuable lessons about conflict resolution. One teacher reported an elementary student said, "We should watch what we say so we don't hurt each others feelings." The elementary school students also indicated that they learned to value reading from the program. "When you read, you get smart at reading, so I will read all the time and in high school I will be smarter in school," observed a first grader.

Kekoa explains what he thinks the elementary students learned from the program: "Doing this is an example of what they can do when they grow up." And what does Kekoa think he got out of the experience? "I learned patience from doing this program," he says. His teacher, Ann Van Etta, agrees. "Kekoa has blossomed from this program." A classroom of the students to whom Kekoa read sent him thank you letters overwhelmingly recommending: "You should be a teacher!" "I don't know about the pay to do that job," says Kekoa, but at the same time he smiles with a twinkle in his eyes that tells us someday he may become a teacher.

Benefits of Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning programs have been extensively examined by many researchers and determined to be a universal *primary prevention* strategy for youth violence prevention (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

Cooperative learning involves student interaction that "is characterized by positive goal interdependence with individual accountability" (Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne, 2000). At the heart of cooperative learning theory is the assumption that people learn best from direct experience rather than simply being told information. Unfortunately, most school

based violence prevention programs (78 out of 149 studies reviewed) relied on telling students what is right and wrong (an instruction based method), which has been shown to be one of the least effective ways to change behavior (Gottfredson, 1997).

Cooperative Learning Is Activity Based

Cooperative learning is active learning. Dr. Maria Montessori, the first woman medical doctor of Italy and the founder of the Montessori Method of Education, was the first well known educator to develop and apply an activity based theory of learning to classrooms. Indeed, Montessori recognized early in her education career that children crave activity and should not be expected to be passive receivers of information (Montessori, 1971).

Montessori students are engaged in learning experiences. Montessori even used the term "director" to describe the teacher because she felt so strongly that students learn from their own experiences and not from lecturing or telling them what to learn (Montessori, 1971). According to Montessori, "a man's accomplishments do not depend upon his teachers, but upon what he himself has done" (Montessori, 1967, p. 178). A Montessori class is also group oriented with older and younger children placed together in classes to learn from each other.

The positive results of working together are seen in the following comments of one teen after her first reading at an elementary school: "Hey Kekoa, that was good how you told that little boy 'good point' after he answered your question. We should all do that when the kids say stuff—it makes them feel proud and keeps the conversation going." This comment led the group of twelve teen readers to discuss how difficult it is to be an effective teacher.

Each teen is accountable for her or his group and individual participation in the program. Upon completion of the program, each teen earns a gift certificate to a bookstore. The program is a true cooperative learning experience and one that has positive results.

Peer and Cross-Age Tutoring Benefits

Peer tutoring occurs when a student at the same grade level tutors another student at the same grade level, and cross-age tutoring occurs when older students tutor younger ones (Thomas, 1993). Both situations happen in this program. Teens engage in peer tutoring in their high school classroom while they practice and prepare for their cross-age tutoring with the elementary classes.

Research into the effectiveness of peer tutoring programs finds benefits both for those students who are tutored (the tutees) and the students doing the tutoring (the tutors) (Kalkowski, 1995). Research into the effectiveness of at-risk teens tutoring others has likewise shown positive results including reduced disciplinary referrals and increased self-confidence (Duckenfield, undated).

Benefits to Elementary Students

While the teens gained valuable experience in the program, it is likely that the younger students learned more about violence prevention from the teens than they would from their teachers. In an experimental study conducted by Northwestern University Medical School, teen mentors were determined to be more effective than adults at educating younger children in non-violent responses to conflict (Sheehan et al., 1999). In this study, teens living in a notorious Chicago public housing community were paid $4.50 an hour to design and implement a violence prevention program for younger children. The teens mainly designed activities, including games, to successfully teach the children about violence prevention.

Conclusion

This simple and inexpensive program had various positive results. First, it helped build social capital between the secondary and elementary schools. The elementary schools also obtained some beautiful storybooks for their students. Second, the secondary students worked on their reading skills, they gained self-confidence, and they benefited from the lessons taught by the books that they read. As one teen said, "Reading to an audience was scary at first, but I gained more confidence after each visit. As I was teaching the kids, I was also teaching myself how to handle my own problems." This program is consistent with existing research on the efficacy of cooperative learning, peer and cross-age tutoring, and active learning. It should be replicated with its effectiveness for preventing violence more rigorously evaluated.

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APPENDIX A

Books used in Violence Prevention Through Cooperative Learning Program:

The Butter Battle Book, Dr. Seuss

The Gold Coin, Alma Flor Ada

Pink and Say, Patricia Polacco

Luka's Quilt, Georgia Guback

A Picture Book of Rosa Parks, David Adler

A Picture Book of Anne Frank, David Adler

The Story of Ferdinand the Bull, Munron Leaf

Grandfather's Journey, Allen Say

Papa Piccolo, Carol Talley

Nettie's Trip South, Ann Turner

The Big Orange Splot, Daniel Pinkwater

Tiki Tiki Tembo, Arlene Mosel

The Little Engine that Could, Watty Piper

The Secret of the Peaceful Warrior, Dan Millman

Swimmy, Leo Lionni

The Sneetches and Other Stories, Dr. Seuss

Death of the Iron Horse, Paul Goble

The Grinch Who Stole Christmas, Dr. Seuss

Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel, Virginia Lee Burton

Good-Bye, Daddy, Brigitte Weninger

A Picture Book of Martin Luther King, Jr., David Adler

A Picture Book of Sojourner Truth, David Adler

Maybelle the Cable Car, Virginia Lee Burton

Curious George Goes to the Beach, Margret Rey

The Gift of the Magi, O. Henry, illustrated by Lisbeth Zwerger

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