

Evaluation of the 2006-2007 Students' Creative Response to Conflict Program

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### Abstract

A quasi-experimental pre- and post-test design was used to evaluate the Students' Creative Response to Conflict (SCRC) program, which is based on the principles of conflict resolution education and social-emotional learning. It is predicted that SCRC will influence students to reduce their approval of aggression and associated problem behaviors (fighting and bullying), help them manage strong emotions commonly experienced in conflict (anger), and increase the amount of caring/cooperation they show. An independent samples t-test reveals that students who completed the post-test showed reduced levels of approval of aggression and increased levels of caring/cooperation behaviors. These findings are explained in reference to an emerging theory of supportive relationships, and recommendations are made for future practice and research of the SCRC program.

### Evaluation of the 2006-2007 Students' Creative Response to Conflict Program

The Center for Peace Education (CPE) has articulated its mission as providing “youth and adults in school communities with the training, resources, strategies and experiences needed to value differences and resolve conflict constructively” (Nia-Azariah, Kern-Crotty, & Bangel, 1992, introduction). The Students' Creative Response to Conflict (SCRC) program has been one of the primary vehicles used to accomplish this mission by focusing on five major themes: affirmation, communication, bias awareness, creative conflict management, and cooperation. This program was first implemented by CPE in 1981, emerging from the early stages of development in the Conflict Resolution Education (CRE) field, which was guided by the following principles:

- Promoting a positive self image
- Critical thinking and problem solving
- Respectful communication
- Respectful relationships between students – teachers, administrators and all staff
- Providing effective alternatives to punishment based discipline
- Integrating the principles and values of conflict management into the curriculum

(Nia-Azariah et al., 1992)

SCRC's themes are also well aligned with the goals stated by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) for developing five competencies in social emotional learning (SEL): self awareness, social awareness, self management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Important outcomes have been associated with these competencies,

Specifically, social and emotional learning has been demonstrated to increase mastery of subject material and motivation to learn; to reduce anxiety, enhance attention, and improve study skills; and to increase commitment to school and the time devoted to school work. Social and emotional learning has also been shown to improve attendance and graduation rates, as well as constructive employment, while it reduces suspensions, expulsions, and grade retention” (CASEL, 2003, para. 2).

A theory of supportive relationships could be used to explain why SEL programming is repeatedly shown to produce such desirable effects. SEL competencies help students recognize that others care for them and it helps them to see how these vital, supportive relationships can be nurtured by managing their emotions and communicating with others more effectively, particularly in conflict situations where strong emotions may surface and lead them to aggressive behaviors they may regret later. Students who are exposed to SCRC programming in the areas of affirmation, communication, bias awareness, creative conflict management, and cooperation are more likely to develop such supportive relationships.

The theme of affirmation is supposed to encourage students to value others’ gifts, talents, and abilities. It teaches students to show appreciation or pleasure when receiving positive feedback from others so the other person can see that such displays of affirmation are welcome. Students can then feel safe expressing their ideas to promote interaction by opening the channels of communication. The theme of communication reinforces the expression of feelings and empathy. It encourages an increased attention to nonverbal cues that may signal potential relational problems. The theme of bias awareness teaches the importance of appreciating differences rather than attacking them by helping students understand how people are interdependent. The theme of creative conflict management encourages the use of respectful

communication and presents alternative methods to managing conflict. The theme of cooperation reinforces this with the simple notion of taking turns with others to help develop a sense of “we-ness” in conflict situations. Thus, the values of positive relationships promoted by SCRC will help students begin to see aggressive behaviors as destructive to the importance of developing supportive connections with others. Therefore, the theory of supportive relationships would predict:

H<sub>1</sub>: Students who have experienced SCRC will view aggression as less appropriate than those who have not yet experienced SCRC.

It is reasonable to maintain that students who have experienced the SCRC program will display more of the supportive behaviors that are modeled in the presentation of each of the theme areas. The theme of affirmation aims at increases caring behaviors and empathy by demonstrating an understanding of others and explicitly supporting them with verbal and nonverbal strokes. The theme of communication develops the ability to listen patiently to others and recognize their feelings, as well as to state problems in clear and concrete terms that encourage cooperation. The theme of bias awareness helps students recognize commonalities they share with others. The theme of creative conflict management promotes a willingness to hear the other side of an issue and a set of steps to assist in the problem solving process that shows concern for satisfying the needs of all the parties involved. Of course, the theme of cooperation is also essential to the display of supportive behaviors, in part, because it encourages praising others’ contributions. All of this leads to the prediction that,

H<sub>2</sub>: Students who have experienced SCRC will exhibit more supportive behaviors than those students who have not yet experienced SCRC.

In order to maintain supportive relationships, it is important that students learn how to deal with strong emotions that may inadvertently push away those who are perhaps in the best position to provide them support. The theme of affirmation offers some assistance to the extent that it helps students feel more comfortable expressing their feelings. The theme of communication helps students develop the ability to summarize and restate what they hear others saying so that the intended message does not become distorted through the individual's perceptual filters that may construct strong emotional reactions. Teaching students about bias awareness helps them demonstrate pride in their individuality while respecting and accepting differences in others and, as a result, develop the confidence needed to exhibit self-control. Creative conflict management helps students separate people from problems to help remove ego involvement. The theme of cooperation teaches students to demonstrate awareness of the needs and feelings of others to checking their understanding of others' ideas and opinions. The theory of supportive relationships would then also contend that,

H<sub>3</sub>: Students who have experienced SCRC will be better able to handle strong emotions that could be destructive to relationships than those who have not yet experienced SCRC.

Ultimately, the goal of any prevention program is to reduce the occurrence of problem behaviors. In the case of a conflict resolution education program, the goal would be to reduce the levels of destructive conflict. SCRC's theme of affirmation advances the opposite of destructive conflict behaviors such as blaming and name calling. The theme of communication helps students develop a confident speaking voice and appropriate eye contact, which are non-threatening to help promote more constructive interactions. Teaching students about bias awareness involves discouraging the use of put-downs based on difference. Creative conflict

management asks students to examine their own behaviors and determine whether it is productive or destructive. Finally, the theme of cooperation promotes the value of sharing and helping students see how they need to work together to create a peaceful environment. The last hypothesis presented by the theory of supportive relationships is accordingly posited that,

H<sub>4</sub>: Students who have experienced SCRC will show less problem behaviors than those who have not yet experienced SCRC.

### Method

Surveys were supposed to be distributed to all of the students participating in SCRC both before the program began, and once again after the conclusion of the program. Ideally, these surveys were to be administered by CPE representatives, but accommodations were made to allow for surveys to be delivered by classroom teachers and subsequently returned to CPE. The surveys were then submitted to the author for analysis.

The students were intended to be essentially anonymous, yet data were collected on the school, grade, classroom teacher, and CPE trainer associated with each student to conduct analyses that would permit pre-test and post-test comparisons at these levels. There were 733 pre-tests and 763 post-tests submitted for analysis. The surveys came from 10 different schools with grades K-8 represented, although 80% of the surveys were completed by students in grades 4-8. Unfortunately, the surveys submitted for analysis appeared to come from different classes, which makes it impossible to match the surveys for the calculation of change scores that would permit the desired pre- and post- comparisons. Equivalence between the groups of students who responded to the pre-test and those who responded to the post-test can be assumed, though, since virtually all of the schools represented share a highly similar demographic composition. Most of the students responding came from schools that were predominantly African-American (90% or

higher) with most of the students eligible for free/reduced lunch (75% or higher). There was only one school that did not match these characteristics, and was therefore dropped from the present analysis. There were 475 remaining students who were identified as being male and 407 students identified as being female. The respondents to this group of surveys report that the program was delivered by five different CPE trainers, but 78% of these were accounted for by just two trainers.

The students were asked to respond to the Normative Beliefs about Aggression scale (Huesmann, Guerra, Miller, & Zelli, 1992, cited in Dahlberg, Toal, & Behrens, 1998) and the Modified Aggression Scale (Bosworth & Espelage, 1995, cited in Dahlberg et al., 1998). These measures provide indications of both the attitudes and behaviors of respondents, pertaining to their approaches to conflict interaction. Together, these aggression scales provide important outcome indicators of future risk, as well as an assessment of current problems. The Modified Aggression scale provides an additional advantage of looking at both positively and negatively valenced behaviors, which is uncommon among other similar measures. Although it may have been interesting to include other measures that assess related constructs (e.g., a social problem solving measure), it was considered impractical to include any additional scales due to concerns of respondent fatigue.

The internal consistency of the Normative Beliefs about Aggression scale is reported to be .90, but it was calculated to be .75 in this data set. The Modified Aggression scale contains four subscales: fighting ( $\alpha = .73$  reported,  $\alpha = .34$  calculated), bullying ( $\alpha = .83$  reported,  $\alpha = .63$  calculated), anger ( $\alpha = .75$  reported,  $\alpha = .66$  calculated), and caring/cooperation ( $\alpha = .60$  reported,  $\alpha = .67$  calculated). Students in the third grade and below (with the exception of one third grade class) were not given the Modified Aggression Scale and they responded to a version



of the Normative Beliefs about Aggression scale that limited the response choices to: It's Perfectly OK, It's Really Wrong, and Not Sure. The author of this report was not consulted on this revision and decided to exclude these data ( $n = 251$ ) from the present analysis since they would be invalid for the purposes of comparison.

## Results

In order to test the first hypothesis, an independent samples t-test was conducted to examine how students responding to the pre-test scored on the Normative Beliefs about Aggression scale in comparison to the scores acquired from students who completed the post-test. The variances of the two samples were found to be unequal, so all of the results reported below were obtained from a version of the test that accounts for this issue. The Normative Beliefs about Aggression scale ranges from 1.00 to 4.00 and is divided into a mean score for the General Approval of Aggression sub-scale and a mean score for the Approval of Retaliation Aggression sub-scale. All of the items on these two sub-scales are also combined to provide a mean score for the Total Approval of Aggression score. The lower the score on these approval of aggression scales, the less appropriate that students consider the use of aggression against others.

Partial support was found for the first hypothesis. Students taking the pre-test ( $n = 389$ ) scored significantly higher ( $M = 2.35$ ,  $SD = .46$ ) on General Approval of Aggression than students ( $n = 577$ ) who completed the post-test ( $M = 1.84$ ,  $SD = .64$ ),  $t(960) = 14.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .16$ . The decrease in Approval of Retaliation Aggression was not significant, however, a significant difference continued to be found for the Total Approval of Aggression where students taking the pre-test ( $M = 2.33$ ,  $SD = .33$ ) scored significantly higher on this overall measure than students who completed the post-test ( $M = 2.11$ ,  $SD = .47$ ),  $t(984) = 8.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ . In order to control for the possible influence of age differences in the sample, the test was repeated

with only seventh graders, who completed the largest number of pre-tests and post-tests combined. The same pattern of results emerged. Seventh graders taking the pre-test ( $n = 104$ ) scored significantly higher ( $M = 2.48, SD = .39$ ) on General Approval of Aggression than seventh graders ( $n = 158$ ) who completed the post-test ( $M = 1.85, SD = .59$ ),  $t(242) = 10.04, p < .001, \eta^2 = .25$ . The decrease in Approval of Retaliation Aggression was not significant, but once again a significant difference continued to be found for the Total Approval of Aggression where seventh graders taking the pre-test ( $M = 2.42, SD = .28$ ) scored significantly higher on this overall measure than students who completed the post-test ( $M = 2.13, SD = .40$ ),  $t(255) = 6.68, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13$ .

An independent samples t-test was again used to test the second hypothesis of whether students who have participated in SCRC exhibit more supportive behaviors than those who have not yet participated in SCRC. Specifically, this test examined how students responding to the pre-test scored on the Caring/Cooperative sub-scale of the Modified Aggression Scale in comparison to the scores on the same sub-scale acquired from students who completed the post-test. This scale uses a sum of eight items that generates scores in a range from 8 to 32. More supportive caring/cooperative behaviors are indicated by higher scores on this scale. Students taking the post-test scored significantly higher on Caring/Cooperation ( $M = 18.76, SD = 5.09$ ) than students who completed the pre-test ( $M = 16.39, SD = 4.44$ ),  $t(896) = -7.56, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$ . When looking at just the seventh graders, the same pattern of results continue to be found. Seventh graders taking the post-test scored significantly higher ( $M = 18.40, SD = 5.16$ ) on Caring/Cooperation than seventh graders who completed the pre-test ( $M = 15.99, SD = 4.22$ ),  $t(238) = -4.04, p < .001, \eta^2 = .06$ . Thus, the second hypothesis was supported by the data.

The third hypothesis predicted that students who have experienced SCRC will be better able to handle strong emotions. In conflict situations, one of the most intense emotions expressed is anger; so this hypothesis was tested by using the Anger sub-scale of the Modified Aggression Scale, which has sums that range from 5 to 20 with higher scores showing more anger. Students who took the pre-test ( $M = 9.92$ ,  $SD = 3.24$ ) scored slightly lower on this dimension than the students who completed the post-test ( $M = 10.20$ ,  $SD = 3.65$ ). There was no significant difference found between these scores, though, and thus no conclusion can be drawn in regards to the third hypothesis. Although the means go in the predicted direction when looking at just the seventh graders ( $M = 9.70$ ,  $SD = 2.95$  for the pre-test; and  $M = 9.62$ ,  $SD = 3.39$  for the post-test), these differences also fail to show statistical significance.

The fourth hypothesis predicted that students who have experienced SCRC will demonstrate less problem behaviors. Bullying and fighting are two central problem behaviors that would ideally be reduced by a program teaching creative responses to conflict, and they are both included as the final two sub-scales of the Modified Aggression Scale. The Bullying scale ranges from 4 to 16 with higher scores showing more bullying behaviors; and the Fighting scale ranges from 5 to 20 with higher scores showing more fighting behaviors. The Bullying scores for students who completed the post-test ( $M = 8.63$ ,  $SD = 3.40$ ) were slightly lower than the Bullying scores for students who completed the pre-test ( $M = 8.78$ ,  $SD = 2.55$ ), however these differences were not statistically significant. The Fighting scores for students who completed the post-test ( $M = 12.00$ ,  $SD = 3.41$ ) were actually a bit higher than the Fighting scores for students who completed the pre-test ( $M = 11.73$ ,  $SD = 2.62$ ), but these differences were not statistically significant either. The same pattern is found when looking at just the seventh graders' Bullying scores ( $M = 8.64$ ,  $SD = 2.34$  for the pre-test; and  $M = 8.12$ ,  $SD = 3.21$  for the post-test), but the

means of the seventh graders' Fighting scores revert to the predicted direction ( $M = 11.63$ ,  $SD = 2.61$  for the pre-test; and  $M = 11.33$ ,  $SD = 2.85$  for the post-test). Yet, once again these differences fail to reach a level of statistical significance. Thus, the fourth hypothesis was not supported by these data.

### Discussion

There is encouraging news to be taken from the findings listed above. It appears that students leave the SCRC program with attitudes that generally discourage the use of aggression in conflict situations. However, students may still feel that it is justifiable to retaliate with aggression when others have provoked them in some way. It is possible that the prevailing norms that come from a student's family and culture of origin may contradict the message conveyed by SCRC, which would likely inhibit any potential effect that this program might otherwise have. Additional lessons could perhaps be incorporated to demonstrate the importance of disrupting the cycles of violence that result from continual retaliation. However, it seems more important to embrace the institution of comprehensive conflict management programs to incorporate involvement from all of the influences in a child's life to ensure a consistent and coherent message, and to develop a more resolute sense of community peace.

It is particularly heartening to see that students who have completed the SCRC program demonstrate a higher level of caring/cooperative behaviors than their peers who had not yet entered this program. This provides a great deal of credence to the theory of supportive relationships posited above to explain the basis for the effects produced by the SCRC program. Each of the five themes incorporated in SCRC address important principles of conflict resolution education and social emotional learning. These principles are vital to the growth of emotional intelligence, which can guide students towards the healthy maturation of life skills essential for

future success and prosperity. The central tenet of the theory of supportive relationships is that students develop a sense that others care for them and they start to see how such relationships can be nurtured through effective communication and conflict management. The fact that students who have completed SCRC exhibit higher levels of caring/cooperation behaviors suggests that they are embracing the type of support offered by this program.

Of course, the results did not find any differences in the ways that students deal with anger. Anger is thought to be an intense emotion commonly elicited in conflict interaction. Strong feelings can produce an effect known as emotional flooding (Jones & Bodtger, 2001) that prevents adults from being able to function effectively. It seems that such intense emotions would be even more likely to overwhelm children since they do not have as much life experience to draw on that might help them process these experiences. It was hypothesized that SCRC would help students deal with strong emotions, but this was only assessed by the anger scale. Surely other strong emotions could have been assessed (e.g., envy, fear, etc.), but these did not seem as directly relevant across a broad range of potential conflict situations. Also, consider that there is no direct assessment of how intense anger should be considered relative to other emotions (e.g., caring). It is important to also point out that the anger scale employed focuses primarily on how students react after this emotion has been activated rather than the circumstances that led to this arousal. Yet, SCRC is focused primarily on the prevention of strong emotions through increased awareness and understanding of the implications associated with the actions of self and others.

As far as the absence of effects related to the hypothesized reduction of problem behaviors is concerned, it is important to keep a few other measurement issues in mind. First of all, both of the assessments of problem behavior rely on self-report measures. Considering that

some of the surveys were administered by classroom teachers, it is possible that students under-reported the extent that they engaged in this sort of behavior. Secondly, the Fighting sub-scale did not demonstrate sufficient reliability. The reports for this score should perhaps be disregarded and focus given exclusively to the results related to the other problem behavior being investigated (Bullying). It is unclear why the Fighting scale has demonstrated adequate reliability in previous research, yet was unreliable in this data set. Additional research is needed to explore the stability of this sub-scale.

### Conclusions

There is evidence to suggest that SCRC is a promising program with desirable effects on students' approval of aggression and the amount of caring/cooperative behavior that they exhibit. Previous research has shown how these sort of variables are related to important outcomes for student success (CASEL, 2006). It may be possible to directly demonstrate the relationship to relevant outcomes in future research with some methodological refinements. It will be particularly essential to acquire data from a control or comparison group. Also, it would be ideal if students could be tracked to not only compare how they change from the time they take the pre-test to the time of the post-test, but also to see how any effects might persist over time (i.e., anywhere from one year to five years later). Of course, the likelihood of any effects would be enhanced by exposing the students to some additional SCRC booster sessions over that time period. The obvious challenge associated with implementing this sort of design comes from tracking the relatively large number of students in this population who transfer from one school to another, and then subsequently identifying when students have been exposed to SCRC and how much exposure they have received. Future research will also need to address the selected instrument's utility for various age groups. Based on the data collected for this report, it seems

reasonable to continue with the current instrument since the vast majority of surveys were completed by students in the middle grades (4-8). It is unclear if it is worthwhile to continue using this survey to collect data from the primary grades given the present constraints related to survey delivery and data entry. However, it is important to continue to evaluate the quality of the program being delivered to these grades, perhaps with a new version of the survey instrument. It may ultimately be more helpful to develop a new assessment instrument that relies on some sort of observational measure and perhaps collects data from the classroom teachers. Any of these methodological refinements will clearly require additional resources to enhance the ability of CPE to evaluate the effectiveness of its programs.

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