What adolescents say about conflict in secondary schools

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During 1997 researchers at the University of South Australia conducted qualitative and quantitative research with 663 students from a diverse range of secondary schools in the Adelaide metropolitan area. The research focussed on how 13 to 15 year old adolescents view and handle conflict with their peers and conflict with adults at school, such as teachers and counsellors. This paper reports on Phase 1 of the research, and on comments gathered from adolescents in Focus Groups about their experiences of conflict. Comments about the high level of aggression and violence in some secondary schools would indicate that broader, community-centred approaches may be needed before conflict management strategies, such as peer mediation, can work.

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The Drama and Conflict Resolution (DRACON) Project is an international project involving researchers from universities in Sweden, Malaysia, the Philippines and Australia. The Project is interdisciplinary and comparative and involves four cooperating but independent teams, each responsible for studies in their own country. In 1997 the two chief researchers for the South Australian DRACON Project[1] received a University of South Australia Development Grant to investigate the nature of adolescent conflict in a range of South Australian schools[2]. This paper reports on some aspects of Phase 1 of the research.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Conflict can be defined as 'a state of incompatible behaviour or goals' (Laursen & Koplas, 1995:537). Conflict occurs when there is 'an opposition of ideas, interests, or actions that result in a struggle over status, power and resources' (Opotow, 1991: 416).

It is not known whether violence in Australian schools is increasing but there has been mounting concern with the issue in recent years. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that there is an increase in serious behaviour problems that teachers are having to deal with, including bullying and sexual

harassment (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, 1994). The increasing concern for children whose behaviour is problematic for teachers has been described as an international and national problem (Widdows, 1996). In 1994, the House of Representatives 'Sticks and Stones' Report identified the 'enormous impact' violence has on students, with school suspensions increasing rapidly (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, 1994). To date, the only aspect of school-based conflict that has been researched in a detailed, systematic way in Australia is bullying (for example, Rigby & Slee, 1991; Owens, 1996; Rigby, 1996).

Earlier studies have suggested that destructive conflict is occurring in schools between students and students, and students and staff. It can be caused by and/or involve parents or other 'outside' forces not directly connected to the school (Martin, 1994). In a recent South Australian study, Johnson and Oswald (1994) found that 48 per cent of teachers in disadvantaged schools reported 'serious' or 'very serious' discipline problems at their schools compared with 16 per cent at other schools (56 per cent of schools in the northern area of Adelaide with a concentration of such schools). Teachers reported that they did not know what to do about the problem. Other evidence suggests that racial abuse, sexual and sex-based harassment, some verbal abuse, physical aggression and physical assault are common in Australian schools (Adey, Oswald & Johnson, 1991; Deschamp, 1992; Milligan,

1992; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, 1994; Martin, 1994; Kenway & Willis, 1997). The *1995 Report into Youth Violence in New South Wales* (NSW Standing Committee on Social Issues, 1995) highlights sexual harassment, bullying, racist violence, and the victimisation of homosexual and lesbian students as major issues for NSW schools.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The central research question addressed in this study was 'what is the nature, incidence and the perceived sources of conflict at school for students in Year 9 in secondary schools in metropolitan Adelaide?' It was hypothesised that many adolescents lack the skills to handle conflicts in a satisfying and constructive way, resorting to 'fight or flight' solutions. It was also hypo- thesised that bureaucratic, hierarchical and authoritarian reactions to adolescent conflict by a school system will exacerbate the problem. The influence of the social and cultural context is central to the international and cross-cultural aspects of the research.

Despite the interest in the area of adolescents and conflict there has been little systematic inquiry in Australia about the nature and relative incidence of particular issues over which there is conflict, and about the way conflicts are handled by students, teachers and counsellors in schools. Initial consulta- tions with teachers and administrators identified Year 9 (often the last year of middle school) as a relatively conflict- ridden year in most Australian schools[3].

The project was conducted in two phases during 1997 and directly involved a total of 663 students (146 in Focus Groups). Year 9 students were selected from seventeen selected single- sex and co-educational schools from the State, Catholic and Independent secondary education sectors in South Australia. In the first phase of the research, information was obtained through Focus Groups with students

from Year 9 in one set of schools. This contributed to the subsequent develop- ment of a questionnaire, administered to groups of Year 9 students in a further set of schools. This paper will report on some of the findings of the Focus Group research.

PHASE 1 FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH.

The schools selected by the adminis- trators from the three education sectors for the Focus Group research included at least four (two State and two non- government) known to have 50% or more students receiving government assistance[4]. These four schools are located in Adelaide areas where there are high numbers of:

• low income households;

• young people as a percentage of the total population;

• people born overseas (in particular South East Asia);

• people who are unemployed; or workers in trade occupations and

• one parent families with dependent children. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997: 7-23).

The other two schools were non- government schools with students drawn from middle class families in the main. All schools had a mixture of students from culturally diverse back- grounds, including Aboriginal students.

To ascertain students' perceptions and experiences of conflicts in schools, the researchers conducted seventeen single- sex and mixed-sex Focus Groups (N = 146 students) in a total of seven schools. Five co-educational schools were drawn from each of the educational sectors – State (2), Catholic (1) and Independent (2), and two single-sex schools from the Catholic sector.

From interviews with a school counsellor or Year 9 coordinator from each of the schools involved, back- ground information was subsequently

gathered about the demographic characteristics of the student population and the types and nature of disputes presenting to counsellors and/or teachers for assistance[5]. These reports were consistent with those of the students.

The students were chosen at random for participation in the Focus Groups, with an average of 10 - 12 students in each group[6]. There was an attempt to reflect an equal balance of gender in the mixed-sex groups and across the single sex groups within a school. The group sessions were recorded using a combination of audio-tapes, which were transcribed, and two observers who made detailed notes.

Each Focus Group session ran for 90 minutes with the facilitator using a structured list of questions. The purpose was to ascertain from students' experience their perceptions about:

• the sources or causes of conflicts at school;

• the nature of the conflicts;

• the level of seriousness of the conflicts;

• the frequency of the different types of conflict;

• the bases and balance of power between the parties to the conflicts;

• the fairness of conflict management approaches and outcomes;

• the feelings generated by the conflict – type and intensity;

• whether the conflicts were resolved and how;

• the nature of the outcomes;

• gender and cultural differences in the management of conflict; and

• what could be done at school to improve the handling of conflict by students and others, such as teachers and school counsellors.

The focus of the group sessions was on conflicts that have occurred this year (1997) at school, to increase the

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[3] This is reflected in a play written by Tulloch, Richard (1981) *Year 9 are Animals*. Toe Truck Theatre, New South Wales.

[4] Information obtained from interviews by Lisa Dolman (DRACON research assistant) with the school counsellors and Year 9 co-ordinators in Adelaide metropolitan schools.

[5] Ibid.
[6] Parents and students were provided with information about the project and the methodology and were required to sign a consent form before being allowed to participate.

accuracy of recall. The observers' notes and audio-tapes of each session were analysed, using a combination of an ethnographic summary and systematic coding via content analysis, identifying patterns or themes (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Kreuger, 1994; Morgan, 1998). Typical or illuminating quotes were noted. The content analysis was used as a guide for formulating a more structured questionnaire which was implemented in a further six schools from each of the educational sectors.

In all schools, students viewed and discussed conflicts in negative terms with the most common reactions to conflict being to avoid it or to fight it out, either verbally (girls) or physically (boys). The conflicts varied in severity and intensity between the different schools, but there were elements in common across all schools, regardless of the socio-economic and cultural background of the student population.

WHAT ADOLESCENTS SAY ABOUT PEER MEDIATION

In recent years peer mediation has been promoted as an effective approach to helping students to handle conflicts constructively in Australian schools. We were therefore initially surprised by the feedback from many of the Year 9 students in the Focus groups that peer mediation does not work for them, until we got a grasp of the serious nature of some of their conflicts.

Some students in the Focus Groups had been trained as peer mediators in Primary School. *School A* has a long history of implementing and encouraging peer mediation and anti-bullying strategies. Boys from this school, however, did not think peer or teacher mediation appropriate in Year 9 for different reasons.

Programs don't survive...

• *Programs like anti-bullying, peer mediation – you don't worry about them. They might work for a term but not for long.*

The fights are too serious...

• *It's OK for little kids – but if two boys have just had a fight and we have them in the same room we would not be able to hold them back, and with girls you would just get into a big argument.*

They want to retain control...

• *We're past it now, we're getting too old for that – we have our different ways of dealing with conflict.*

• *We (boys) don't like talking about the problem, especially when we've just had it out on each other.*

• *You might want to sort it out yourself – when it's serious the teachers take it over, like you don't get the chance.*

• *We prefer as students to sort it out by ourselves, face-to-face, with no suspensions or anything, without anyone interfering, like teachers. The teachers make the rules, like 2 detentions, etc – but it makes people do it more. The fight goes outside the school and it is worse outside the school.*

Trust is important...

• *When it's too serious– we need an older teacher that we trust, not one of our peers.*

• *Sometimes you don't want a teacher to come in and help you because you might get into trouble, especially if the teacher doesn't like you.*

• *I would rather a friend try and help me.*

• *If you say something and a teacher hears it they will just change it all around and do their own thing anyway – it's one person's word against the other.*

A group of girls who were trained as peer mediators in a similar State school (*School C*) in the same region shared the boys views of peer mediation in secondary school:

• *Not many people went to it, they went to the counsellors.*

• *No, it made it worse. One person didn't come. It was pretty hard. The next minute they're all fighting. It got physical.*

• *They (the disputants) seemed not to listen to you much 'cos you're their age. If it was an older person like a teacher they'd respond more, but when you're their age you're their equal, it doesn't really matter.*

• *It didn't really work that well. Most people that came didn't really listen.*

These views were reiterated by the boys in *School C:*

• *Peer mediation doesn't work because people just make up shit to get out of class.*

• *The school put on a performance about peer pressure. No use – everybody sat there for something to do.*

Similar comments were made by a mixed-sex group from *School B:*

• *Peer mediation? We have done it at school – students when they are mediators take sides. Sometimes the kids would pretend to have a play fight in front of one of the peer mediators and the peer mediators would get really annoyed and sent them to the teacher and they got detentions.*

Some girls from *School B*, however, thought there was a place for mediation in secondary school.

In a non-government middle-class school in a different area a group of girls also outlined their reasons for distrusting peer mediation:

• *trust issues are a problem amongst peers.*

• *you need someone a bit older, you know, you need that gap 'cause the people a bit older have already been there, so they've seen it ... but if they're someone our age they wouldn't know what's going on, and someone too old has probably forgotten anyway.*

• *no-one ever listens – it's silly.*

• *I think they've pushed the conflict stuff too much, so everyone thinks it's a joke.*

When asked to describe what they thought could be done at school to improve the handling of conflict by students and others at the school, the responses of students in schools in disadvantaged areas reflected feelings of resignation and powerlessness because of the influence of the social context within which the school conflicts were occurring.

• *The school can't change anything – the problems are always going to be there. The outside pressures are too much – a lot goes on outside of the school.*

• *Relatives, friends of relatives and families get involved – its all organised. In the area every school gets involved in fights through family connections. The bigger racial groups are more powerful – one group gets all their friends in Adelaide onto you. Cousins stick together. It's not a racist thing it's a group thing.*

• *Better to sort it out in the school 'cos it's safer in the school and gets broken up a lot easier than outside the school. There's always a teacher on yard duty. Security guards are around at the end of the day.*

Teachers were seen by some to be powerless to protect them or to effect change.

• *We have 2 big ovals and there's always one not covered by a teacher. Fights happen whether or not teachers are around. Teachers have a hard time breaking up fights – everyone blocks the teacher's view and they can't get into the middle. A couple of years ago a student actually hit/assaulted a teacher and he fell down and another teacher came in and got hit by the kid who was actually fighting. If it's a teacher everyone knows will get the kids into trouble they won't let them in.*

A similar comment was made by a group of boys in *School C*. One boy went on to empathise with teachers:

• *Teachers can't do much. Most of the kids don't care a rat's a..e if they are suspended. Can you imagine one person trying to control twenty people like us? In one room?*

.. NOW COME ON YOU TWO... SAY YOU'RE SORRY AND SHAKE HANDS...

SCHOOL CONFLICT RESOLUTION SYSTEM...
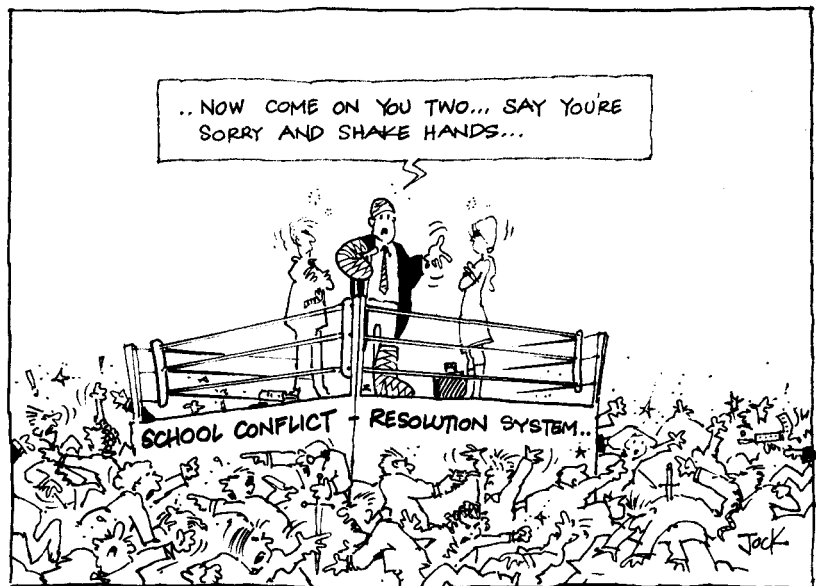
One group of girls (*School C*), when asked what they thought could be done at school to improve the handling of conflict by students and others, reflected a view, supported by a number of students, that physical fighting is inevitable and perhaps *fun* for this age group:

• *have a boxing ring and sort it out as a fair fight.*

• *have bumper cars and bump into each other or water pistols – boys fight for fun – play fights.*

• *make the fights safer so they don't get into as much trouble.*

Most students in all schools admitted to enjoying watching a physical fight as long as the people involved were safe. However in some schools it was apparent that students were concerned and fearful about their personal safety, in particular when outsiders, weapons and drugs were involved.

WHAT ADOLESCENTS SAY ABOUT AGGRESSION AND VIOLENCE AT SCHOOL

Students in four schools located in poorer, relatively disadvantaged areas reported high levels of aggression and violence at school and of involvement of others from outside of the school in conflicts at school. They also conveyed a sense that teachers and students were powerless to control the high levels of aggression and violence, given the

nature of the social context. This view was supported by counsellors in these schools.

For example, a group of boys from one school (*School A*) with a high percentage of students from low income families (> 60% receiving government assistance) and from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, described conflicts at their school as follows:

• *Maybe people are not game to stop fights – if you stop a fight then everyone will say you are a 'wuss' or something like that, so everyone stands around and does nothing – just watch – even if their friend's getting hurt on the ground. Even if a boy tries to break it apart then other people will try to bash up him. If there's a girl fight it's normally heaps serious ... they don't care – if someone's got a broken arm they won't stop or anything ... they keep going. Last term a girl was on the ground and had a blood nose and the other girl was still beating her head. Girls haven't learnt the rules – boys will stop and wait until the other boy gets up again.*

• *Girls do a lot of yelling and name-calling. Girls start off screaming at each other in the classroom, they'll both be sent out and then the teacher will ask what is the problem. Boys won't say nothing till they get out of the class and then they fight. Sometimes it might be an organised fight – I'll meet you out on the oval*

at 2 o'clock. If you are not fighting you wait for the fight. If you are fighting, you wait for the other person to get there. If you don't really want to fight your friends will push you into it – those who are already there preparing for the fight. Sort of like you have to fight whether you want to or not. Some of them get really hurt.

• *Last term there was a really big fight between two different races like and Security were brought in. There's always Security guards at our school – like there's always one culture against another culture. The ...s [an ethnic group] bring on the heavy artillery like numb chucks, knuckle busters. One guy got caught with a gun, yeah like guns. There's other ones that just bring a lot of friends. We see people fighting with knuckle busters on a lot and we see knives used in fights. Someone brought a gun to school and got busted with it. It is pretty scary. Someone said it is as bad as America.*

• *Normally in a fair fight with boys it is one-on-one and the gang watches real quiet until someone is losing and then they might jump in. If one jumps in they all jump in. If it's a fair fight and no one is losing they will all stay out of it. With girls it's a group thing. There was a fight recently and one of them got a girl down and some other girls started kicking her. With boys it's hardly ever a gang against one person – they at least have someone there with them. They normally ring up someone outside the school to come and do it 'cos they can't then get into trouble. All cars come with, like kids that didn't even go to the school, and adults, come into the school to help out in the fight – family included.*

• *The fights are fair dinkum, they are not for fun. You get into trouble for play fights. Mostly play fights turn into a real fight, like if one hits the other.*

At a non-government co-educational school (*School B* - with over 50% of students receiving government assistance) in the same area, there were similar stories from participants in a mixed-sex Focus Group about the impact of the broader social context on the conflicts at school. They commented on the involvement of the whole school and 'outsiders' in conflicts and elaborated on the use of weapons.

• *If someone starts fighting, that's where the whole school is. People from outside the school often get involved.*

• *We all usually follow the crowd and look for the fight. Teachers come and just yell and pull people apart – drag them to the office and try to talk to them separately. They give a detention to the offender and say do not do it again. The fight usually continues after school at the railway station. Other people join in from outside – anybody who wants to fight. Usually one person gets off the train and tries to stop it. Most of the time its one-on-one fighting – punching, kicking, head-butting. It involves weapons, whipping with chains. People do get hurt – depends on how quickly its broken up – there can be pools of blood. There are about two huge fights a year and lots of little ones.*

• *Fights at the train station involves people from other schools – there are a lot of people involved including people from the pub, lots of outsiders get involved, weapons are used. Teachers and parents are not there. Having a teacher around offers safety. At school a teacher usually comes in the early stage of the fight and breaks it up. People enjoy the fight but get frightened if a friend is involved, eg, a girlfriend of one of the parties will start crying.*

• *Occasionally people will show you a weapon at school but they don't use it at school. It is scary though.*

In *School C* students also talked about the prevalence of weapons and drugs in the school. They gave many examples of outsiders bringing weapons into the school grounds, and in one instance outsiders walking in and stabbing a student in a class room in front of the teacher and the class. Weapons frequently seen at school included knives, broken bottles, chains, machetes, knuckle-busters, guns (including a rifle), some brought in by outsiders, some belonging to students.

All students admitted to being fearful about the presence of weapons in the school and the use of weapons in fights. They were also fearful of the drug culture:

• *People who use drugs don't care what happens to them – they'll do anything.*

• *Drugs give people power. If you share your drugs, all the druggies will be your friends and that gives you power.*

One experienced school counsellor from one of the troubled schools reiterated much of what the students in her school had told us, including the fact of outsiders coming into the school with weapons. After 24 years of counselling she described Year 9 as being consistently the worst year in every school she had worked in. She was also concerned about the increase in physical violence in schools, especially among the girl students. She emphasised that many of the students were contending with a lot of instability and violence at home. She noted that teachers felt impotent in the face of the increased emphasis on student rights. To quote:

• *We've gone overboard with all this harassment and feeling free stuff. You've only got to look sideways at a kid and it's you're harassing me ... they'll accuse and abuse staff. The minute there's a hiccough or a slight problem it's everyone rushing out to do what's supposedly legally right....So what we've got now is great lines of kids with grievances about staff, other kids, other kids' parents, we've got parents coming in with all these grievances and no-one's talking to each other.*

The counsellor also noted the high numbers of students who are going home to insecure environments, many involving violence or drug abuse, some requiring mandatory reporting.

• *There is no stability – they just come here and bring their disadvantage with them ... I just do what I affectionately call 'rape, pillage and disaster'.*

She commented at length on the powerlessness of school staff to handle the conflicts, for example:

- *I'd say the general attitude amongst the staff is that we've lost our clout ... that why try, it's not going to work. They feel they've just got to go in, put their blinkers on, shove on their ear muffs and get on with it and just thank God they're going home at the end of the day ... we're totally powerless.*

- *You can't resolve conflict often when it occurs in the classroom – it doesn't work because you've got some of them all falling out of their chairs laughing themselves stupid, you've got others in the back getting into it. The difficulty with resolving conflict isn't so much the people you need to be concerned with, but it's the audience. There's nothing more exciting than knowing there's going to be a brawl at lunch time – it's like going to the footy or something, And the worst thing that can happen is if someone finds out there's going to be a fight or a brawl or a screaming match, and stop it. It's like taking their tickets away – they get really shitty.*

CONCLUSIONS

Adolescents report a preference for dealing with their own conflicts at school, reflecting a desire for independence which is characteristic of this stage of development. However, the prevalence of aggression and violence amongst adolescents in some secondary schools in Adelaide makes some conflict management strategies, such as peer mediation, difficult. Where conflicts are serious and their safety is threatened, students also report that they need constructive assistance from adults such as teachers and counsellors.

There is evidence emerging from the survey to indicate that conflict handling strategies differ between the sexes, and between members of different cultural groups, and that aggressive and violent behaviours are more acceptable in certain cultures and sub-cultures. In our Focus Group study these cultures tended to be located in areas that are characterised by poverty and disadvantage.

We need to pay attention to adolescents' comments about their experiences of conflict at school and the sort of helping strategies they need. Many adolescents

report that they enjoy watching 'a good fight', as long as they are safe from harm. Adolescence is a time when young people begin to form intimate relationships with their peers and strive to create an independent, adult identity (Stern, Van Slyck & Newland, 1992). It is typically a time when the adolescents test themselves, their relationships with other people, and the boundaries of those relationships (Hayman, 1998). However, it is important to provide early intervention and prevention strategies that will assist them to deal constructively with conflicts that arise in these relationships. A range of strategies are needed.

Peer mediation may be helpful for less serious conflicts involving adolescents in schools. There is no doubt that teachers, counsellors and students would benefit from learning conflict management skills. However, some schools are located in communities where there are high levels of aggression and violence, and where extended family members and other members of the community actively participate in the conflicts at school. These schools cannot be expected to implement conflict management strategies and programs in isolation. Macro-level strategies for conflict management, involving families, the whole school and the broader community, may be more appropriate in these areas. In the current political and economic climate, which is contributing to the increasing marginalisation of some schools and communities, this will be both challenging and difficult.

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