

## **Conflict Resolution Education and Social Emotional Learning Programs: A critical comparison of school-based efforts\***

by Randy Compton

How are programs in Conflict Resolution Education (CRE) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) similar and/or different? Let's start with some history. The field of CRE developed from a variety of movements, including nonviolence, peace education, social justice, and mediation. It has recently been influenced by the school reform movement, which seeks to empower students and teachers both in the design and implementation of an education that is relevant and rigorous by using collaborative decision-making and problem solving skills.

The field of SEL, on the other hand, has been influenced by a number of movements, including progressive education, the Civil Rights, Women's and Affective Educational movements, and findings from child mental health and developmentally informed studies of resiliency that have focused educators and social scientists' attention on the importance of purposively enhancing social and emotional competencies. Each of these backgrounds has shaped the primary motivations and goals of each field. Yet as time has gone by, the fields have found increasing areas of commonality.

Initially, many CRE programs were brought into schools to specifically teach students nonviolent ways to handle conflicts and to reduce violence-related behaviors. Reducing violence was also a primary reason why many schools incorporated SEL efforts. However, SEL efforts have always sought to positively influence the culture of the school and promote psychosocial abilities that provide the foundation for effective citizenry and responsible behavior. As CRE programs evolved, they began to realize the importance and ability of CRE programs to positively change the culture of schools, rather than changing just individual behaviors.

It is important to note that there is not "one" kind of CRE or SEL program. For example, there are narrow as well as more holistic definitions and approaches to CRE efforts. The more narrow approaches to CRE focus on reducing the severity and intensity of conflicts within a school setting, often emphasizing the changing of individual behavior and implementing specific conflict reduction processes, such as mediation. The more comprehensive approaches seek to change not only individual conflict behavior but also to create a safer, more caring and just school culture—similar to SEL efforts.

Many of the more well known CRE programs use a comprehensive approach to CRE and easily see themselves not just focusing on conflict resolution, but also on SEL, anti-bias/diversity and student advocacy as well. For example, a comprehensive approach to CRE includes a variety of program components, including: 1) social competency skill training including conflict resolution for adults and students, 2) peaceable classrooms, 3) curriculum instruction and integration, 4) school-wide positive discipline systems, 5) diversity/anti-bias awareness, 6) parent/community involvement and training, and 7) peer mediation and peace leadership.

SEL efforts – by definition – seek to promote a wide range of social and emotional skills and understandings. There are many, many social and emotional skills/understandings that we need in life. Few programs seek to focus on all of them. Although all programs – in one way or another – explicitly focus on enhancing awareness of self and others, creating safe, caring and responsive relationships at school, problem solving/decision making, cooperative learning and

conflict resolution, there is variability with regard to which additional skills and related sets of understandings are emphasized.

One area that might distinguish CRE from SEL is the area of social justice. CRE has a long history of including the goal of social justice in CRE programs, yet it is one that not all practitioners pursue and one that is often difficult within public educational settings to implement. However, strong support exists within the CRE community to include this goal and, in fact, many see this goal as a key, even unique factor that defines CRE.

In the simplest of terms, SEL goals create personal and social “health;” diversity and anti-bias goals create personal and social “justice.” CRE works to bridge both of these goals. The specific conflict resolution processes of facilitated dialogue and problem solving links personal and social health with personal and social justice.

Both fields are invested in providing social, emotional and problem solving competencies. Where the goals diverge—such as emphasizing social justice and change with CRE, and emphasizing a healthy, whole child with SEL—each field can and are beginning to inform each other in helpful ways.

Depending upon one’s point of view, each field might be seen as an umbrella for the other. Rather than seeing one field as more comprehensive or complete than the other, we might see them as emphasizing a certain part of the overall spectrum of educational, social-emotional and social justice issues. As we have seen, these two fields are increasingly overlapping in their goals, content and methods. We believe that what is most important is to develop collaborative ways to learn from each other and to serve in collaborative and synergistic ways. In this way, both fields can work together to educate our youth to become healthy, productive members of a civil society.

Recently, a book describing the field of conflict resolution education has been published and includes further discussion on this topic. The book, [Kids Working It Out: Stories and Strategies for Making Peace in Our Schools](#), describes many of the program components of CRE and SEL. The book includes voices of educators and youth speaking about what really works in their school community.

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