THE SCHOOLYARD AS A STAGE

Missing Cultural Clues in Symbolic Fighting

INTRODUCTION

I was walking toward Mr. Stammer, a Mission Middle Academy School vice-principal, who was on his lunch duty in the school's upper yard. That day we had arranged an interview for a report on the school's academic and climate conditions. The sun was bright and the noontime felt transparent and balmy. Then I heard screams at the right corner of the yard coming from a group of about ten girls forming an ominous circle. In the middle of the circle two of them were piercing the calm of lunchtime, calling each other names and getting dangerously closer by the second. Each of the protagonists had her support group encouraging them to fight. They were all Latinas. I clearly heard a girl with long, shining dark hair shouting: "I'll beat the shit out of this bitch!"

Her tiny body, almost buried into her over-sized khakis and nylon jacket, defied gravity. Her supporters nervously cheered, clapping. Arriaza

Mr. Stammer approached the group, broke into the middle, and talked to the girl who seemed the most belligerent. He then gently, but firmly, asked this girl to calm down, and after a couple of minutes he persuaded her to accept a face-to-face talk with the other girl, who from a short distance was furiously hurling threats and demeaning words at her rival. The fighters calmed down and agreed to talk. The surrounding group stayed expectant, watching each expression from the protagonists, and observing Mr. Stammer's moves.

Mr. Stammer then asked each girl for an explanation, one at a time, "to clear things up," he stressed. He listened, standing in between the two, and each girl told her story. "She called me scrap!" said the most aggressive, her cheeks like red peppers, to the cheering approval of her crowd.

At this point Mr. Stammer intervened and asked the group to dissolve. They all reluctantly left the scene. Then Mr. Stammer continued the conversation with the fighters alone. He asked them to explain. The girl being accused responded, "That's what you get, for staring at people and laughing." There was nothing relevant to add to the exchange. Progressively the girls lowered their decibels, and the confrontation was deactivated.

Mr. Stammer asked each girl to think about the actual meaning of what each had said, and then to apologize to each other. After some uncomfortable silence they did so and promised not to escalate the conflict. Mr. Stammer demanded that they stay away from each other. The bell announcing the end of lunch break rang. Nothing happened later on that day.

Fortunately for these children, Mr. Stammer was on yard duty that day. Mission Middle Academy School assigns administrators like Mr. Stammer to a series of shifts patrolling the school's upper and lower yards. At times, some teachers and counselors join them. They deal with conflict using their own common sense, educated guesses, and whatever mediation skills they might have, since no institutional conflict mediation program exists. It was impossible to have known what had happened before the shouting match started. Mr. Stammer and I possibly saw only the culminating act of a process, a snippet of a series of events that came to a clash at that moment in the upper yard.

And yet, one wonders, was this a true violent incident? Or was it a carefully choreographed encounter acted out be-

Gilberto Arriaza is an associate professor with the College of Education at San Jose State University, San Jose, California.
fore a selected audience? This article explores some answers to these questions as it synthesizes key findings of a two-year ethnographic study at Mission Middle Academy, a school located in San Francisco, California.

The research looked at the ways social conflict was enacted, and tried to explain the reasons why the school’s staff was issuing enormous amounts of disciplinary referrals even when violent incidents—physical and verbal—had declined. A central point of this paper is to underscore the value that reading cultural clues—specifically those conveyed through what appears as a fight—might help teachers and educational leaders improve school climate, and thus create a better working condition for adults and children.

In the first section, the article discusses the meaning of symbolic fighting and its impact on school culture; in the second section, the article locates symbolic fighting within the specific context of Mission Middle Academy; and in the last section, the article proposes to redefine the socializing role that social conflict plays in the life of youngsters and adults in schools.

The article’s central idea is that climate will dramatically improve in schools once the staff understands the socializing functions of choreographed fighting, approaching it from a pedagogy that sees its potential for transformation, and less from a punitive standpoint.

**Methodology**

This study went through two main phases. The first phase took place while I taught at Mission Middle Academy. This experience provided me with the most important entry points into the daily school life of teachers and students, and provided me with lasting professional and personal relationships amongst the staff.

The second phase took place when I came back to Mission Middle Academy as a coach to aid the leadership in navigating the difficult change process on which they had embarked since the days I was a teacher there. As a coach I conducted data analysis as a key strategy to help the leadership make decisions and move the change process forward. This methodology of researching for the specific purpose of aiding change is called action ethnography.

Coaching—conducting action ethnography—mediated my constant crossing of class, gender, age, and linguistic borders in my relationships with adults and children. While researching, I reminded myself of my position as an adult working for the school. I tried to understand children’s symbolic engagement within the context of their own cultural norms. The role of coach and researcher presented, nevertheless, a very important challenge. My desire to register the detail of events and follow the aftermath of symbolic fighting was not always coherent with my role as external support. A key research concern always centered around the extent of my affecting outcomes, which often led me to limit my involvement to being more an observer than a participant.

**SITE**

The study took place at Mission Middle Academy, a school with a student population below 600. Over the second half of the 1990s, the school had a stable majority Latino population (42 percent), about one quarter African American, one quarter White and other Non-white, and the rest Chinese and Filipino. Most students were bused from the city’s low-income neighborhoods. The staff’s racial makeup is typical of most California schools: over 70 percent White, 15 percent African American, 10 percent Latino, and 5 percent Filipino and Chinese.

**Symbolic Fighting**

In symbolic fighting, body language speaks louder than words, particularly in settings—such as public places—that make individuals more vulnerable than usual. Public settings are open to an audience to watch and to judge.

Mr. Stammer ran into the most generalized form of fighting in secondary schools, where apparently simple gestures, such as staring, play critical roles. Staring at another person is a clear indication that the person stared at represents something the one staring knows and who, through that seemingly innocuous act, wants everybody to know. Staring then becomes an accusatory exercise.

Such a way of looking might trigger uncomfortable feelings in the receiver who, as happened in the story above, read the staring as defiance, an invitation to measure which of the two had stronger standing before their respective friendship groups, and the multiple hubs of social networks around them. Thus, laughing or any utterance would, in this context, confirm each other’s suspicion.

The story also suggests deeper issues of social identity. A “scrap” identifies the person thus labeled as belonging to a group that engages in gang activity. It appears that this kind of suggested gang affiliation is closely linked to a low and controversial social status, hence the harsh reaction from the girl accused of such a status. Her reaction appears more as a strategy to categorically deny and establish a distance from gang activity, than a desire for a wrestling match.

Children seem to forge an image around group affiliation, or around the rejection of certain affiliations. Being “down” with certain activities or with certain individuals might provide a younger the edge she needs to command a kind of social space and respect from her social networks. It enacts a claim to a status. Thus, by rejecting the “scrap” affiliation, the student in this story is making sure that the audience knows that her identity is much more “cool” than being a “scrap.”

The opponent who used “scrap” as an epithet and accusation probably had a good sense of the possible outcomes once she uttered the word. She labeled the other girl before their friendship groups as well as the rest of the networks that might have heard the epithet. She intended to condemn the girl to a reputation of low social status. By calling her opponent “scrap,” in a very loud voice in the open space of the school yard, during lunchtime in front of all their peers, and among them their social networks, the girl acted at the moment and place where the girl thus called appeared most exposed. That degree of vulnerability triggered an equal violent reaction.

Given all these factors playing simultaneously in symbolic fighting, one wonders how an external, institutional agency can prevent and influence the outcomes of symbolic fighting.

Both girls showed how difficult it is to control their feelings, particularly anger, and how arduous the process of internalizing principles, such as respect, can be. Schools can definitely exert some degree of agency in educating and enforcing some modifying-behavior values.

Research shows that those schools explicitly embracing principles such as “concern for others, respect for diversity, devotion to the common good, and self-respect.” (Johnson, et al., 1997, p.7) as part of their core values tend to be more successful in creating a safe and nourishing school climate. Those schools that promote cooperative learning and multicultural curriculum seem also to be more likely to promote a climate where conflict promotes growth (O’Neil, 1993).

Mission Middle Academy’s recent history has been one of struggle to create a school climate based on principles drawn from diverse sources such as the Coalition of Essential Schools’ ten common prin-
ciples. Nonetheless, symbolic fighting characterizes the everyday drama of schoolyard theater. Later in this article, I explore some of the factors that explicate why it is that, in spite of consistent and considerable efforts to implement principle-based discipline, students still engage in constant symbolic fighting.

In the story above, Mr. Stammer, the adult mediating the conflict between the two girls, showed how important conflict mediation skills are. Dealing with these conflicts in a systemic and consistent manner might be the key to creating a sustainable and transformative experience of social conflict in schools.

Mr. Stammer single-handedly made the two girls talk in ways that allowed them to hear each other. Led by Mr. Stammer, the girls talked their problem out at a decent level; their audience calmed down, and the girls made their promises. After Mr. Stammer mediated the situation, the audience disbanded, both girls went their ways, and the performance was over. However, nothing happened afterwards, leaving the follow-up to the will and understanding of the protagonists, with no clear enforceable process to follow through.

The two protagonists and their audience only exposed themselves to the negotiating protocols of most school-based conflict resolution programs, such as calming down, talking face to face, expressing feelings. But the process did not include the content of the conflict itself (i.e., name calling, use of demeaning language, anger, identity, social contact, power and status).

The teaching moment for this performance's three central actors was partially lost. Without a system to follow up the conflict, the transformative effects of conflict were lost. As I show later, no formal structures for learning, coordinating following-up, and further developing mediation skills and understanding exist at Mission Middle.

ILLUSTRATING SYMBOLIC FIGHTING

To further illustrate how symbolic fighting is enacted and negotiated by the protagonists, I narrate another incident between a Latino and an African American boy. I use these racial descriptors as a way to examine some racial dynamics in social conflict.

While I am observing a Physical Education class, a Latino boy accidentally hits an African American boy with his racket. The African American boy immediately walks over to the Latino boy, who at that point appears visibly afraid of what might happen but remains in his place. Towering before the Latino child, the African American boy shouts: "I'll beat the sh... out of you, n...!!" The Latino boy all of a sudden seems to grow wide, and puffing his chest screams back: "Sorry, but I didn't do it on purpose!" Both boys appear to be gulping each other's air, almost touching each other's chests. Unexpectedly, the initial menacing scene dissipates as the African American child walks away back to meet his partner and continues practicing.

The location of learning and language use frame crucial social interactions for students. Youngsters appear to learn how to behave in ambiguous situations where, if misunderstood, they might provoke violent reactions against them. Certainly, understanding and quickly reacting to the cryptic messages conveyed in body language, voice tone, and verbal expression might simply mean social survival for youth.

In the story, the Latino boy seemed to have understood that the African American boy meant a serious threat, and instead of confronting him using the same body language and tone, he quickly apologized and seemed to have chosen to ignore the epithets and his opponent's physical proximity. Accordingly, upon hearing the apology from the Latino boy, the black boy also shows quick understanding of the situation and goes back to his practice. The audience following the incident remains all ears, and also goes back to playing once they realize the contenders resolved what could have been an ugly confrontation.

When the situation calmed down, I asked the Latino boy about the incident. And matter-of-factly he replied "He called me N...," I then asked him, "What did you say back to him?" "Nothing. I just ignored him 'cause I'm not."

As this event suggests, these youngsters apparently knew how to read and respond to conflict according to the specific context. In this story, the African American boy reverses the use of a racist slur by attributing its meanings to a boy from another racial group. Even if the intent of this particular action might still be rooted in its very origin—hurtful and demeaning as used by individuals whose beliefs and values reflect their interpersonal repertoires—the reaction of the Latino boy suggests that the utterance lost the intended effect. He simply ignored the word, and no violent reaction followed.

Children appear to identify the meaning of language, identify the cause of the utterance, locate the person, assess the moment, and react accordingly. Under the pressure of the moment, the analysis ought to take a few minutes, since failing to do so might result in unfortunate violent confrontations.

Later, I talked with the P.E. teacher about the incident.

Teacher: "It depends who the kids are. Can you tell?"
GA: "I don't know them, but it was an African American kid calling a Latino kid the 'N' word."
Teacher: "I guess the black kid is Sahid?"
GA: "I have no idea, but it was the same kid we just saw in the locker room playing with his shoes on our way to this office."
Teacher: "OK. You know, he's a special case, and all kids know him. They have made allowances to accommodate him."
GA: "How about the use of hurtful language?"
Teacher: "[I know that] this young man needs a lot of attention. [But] all these words are common today. You cannot overreact. It depends who is talking to who. It depends how I address you, the tone and the body language."

The PE teacher's reaction points in two directions. On the one hand, the teacher dismisses the social nature of the conflict when he suggests Sahid's behavior is a mental dysfunction (i.e., "he is a special case") to the extent that everybody knows already about it (i.e., "they have made allowances to accommodate him.") In the teacher's analysis, the social dimension of conflict is lost and becomes pathologized. As a consequence, Sahid's socialization becomes a clinical issue, not the school's. On the other hand, the PE teacher clearly shows some degree of understanding of language usage, context, and conflict (i.e., "It depends who is talking to who. It depends how I address you, the tone and the body language.")

BODY LANGUAGE

As shown in the stories, body language and tone play a key role for both boys and girls. Indeed, yelling—or the act of talking in the highest decibels possible at a peer—precedes all other forms of communication, and functions as a strategy for the claiming out loud of a social space within the friendship group. It tells the audience, more than the opponent, that one is not willing to take abuse.

In this story, yelling is the best expression of a belligerent attitude that youngsters involved in symbolic fighting embrace. As for those hearing, the codified message seems to be not to mess with the protagonists. Once a yelling match ensues,
the fighters are more interested in demonstrating an unyielding will to each other and their audience, than in engaging each other in actual physical aggression—even in cases where hurtful, racist language is used.

Symbolic fighting, in sum, plays a critical role in youngsters' daily wrestling with social status and power relations within and across social networks. Mediating these conflicts demands flexibility and understanding of the complex ramifications of the conflict prior to, during, and after it is negotiated. That is why understanding that one, as the mediator, sees only a snippet of reality becomes a crucial premise. Moreover, the redress mechanisms available to youngsters must include clear and precise paths to follow through on the agreements, as well as the appropriate context for understanding.

LOCATION OF SYMBOLIC FIGHTING

Kiang and Kaplan's (1994) study of conflict between Vietnamese and black/white students found that struggle over space, including classrooms, hallways, the cafeteria, the gym, and the bathrooms, was a daily experience for these students. The Vietnamese students, as part of their adjustment as immigrants, constantly demonstrated a total commitment to the school and expressed a desire to be part of it, in an effort to improve race relations and quality of life within the school.

Schools are indeed rich and active scenarios for social contact (Johnson, et. al. 1997; Stevahn, et. al., 1997; Lam, 1989; Deutsch, 1973, Allport 1954). The intensity of this contact increases during two moments of the daily schedule—lunch break and Physical Education (PE). Lunchtime is one of relentless conflict amongst students and of intense intervention for adults. After shadowing the school's principal several times, from 7 in the morning to 1:30 (one period after lunch), I tabulated and summarized the data on the number of minutes he spent dealing with different issues. The three main areas were:

+ Conflict mediation between student and student.
+ Administration related issues
+ Conflict between adults and children

Most conflict intervention took place during lunch at an average of 4 minutes each. All these were symbolic fights of the hearsay, pushing, and shoving type. This fact mirrors what research findings on the subject depict as a normal occurrence on school campuses (Oliver & Johnson, 1984; Opotow, 1989; Kiang & Kaplan, 1994; Noguera, 1996).

Children at Mission Middle Academy appear to be less and less interested in using physical assault and violent aggression to deal with their conflicts. Instead, children seem to be more inclined to use symbolic fighting to settle their disputes. As a result, physical assault and violent aggression have consistently declined at Mission Middle. From 1997-98 to 1998-99 fighting declined by 8 percentage points (see table in the appendix).

Through the early 1990s, physical assault and violent aggression used to be the two main sources of disciplinary action and concern for the staff. Worse even, these confrontations often involved group against group. "We had at least one quasi-riot type of situation every week," noted Ms. Wilson, the most senior faculty member. "Once a fistfight started," she continued, "kids would run from wherever they were in the two yards, to where the fighting was taking place." Such congregations often ended in mass fighting. Today, these are unheard of. As Mr. Andres Peres, who has taught at Mission Middle for 25 consecutive years, states:

"We now have individual conflicts that do not result in group conflicts. [Students] rather than piggy backing and jumping in on the posturing of one group and another; they see it as individual confrontation and that's it. (Mr. Andres P. Teacher interview series)"

Recalling these events during an interview with a group of teachers one observed: "We used to have those [group fistfights] weekly and biweekly." Another added:

"It's like more playful [now]. The kids are still doing things that are not right. Like they're running around tagging or they're doing this or they're doing that. But it's more on a playful kind of edge than on a vindictive, mean-spirited... When I first came here, I was scared sometimes, and I don't scare easy."

Although youngsters still create groupings along racial lines, group and inter-racial confrontations seem to be more an occurrence of the past. Even though at first sight during lunchtime one still sees racial groups together, there are active inter-penetrations particularly during sports activities (e.g. basketball) where students of practically all racial denominations play together, both boys and girls. Noguera (1995) made similar observations in his Berkeley High study. The researcher states:

While the social landscape appears well defined and the boundaries separating each ethnic enclave seem to be definite and quite rigid, a closer look reveals a good deal of interaction between and across racial groups [...] Even if they do not speak to one another, many of the teenagers have known students in other racial groups for a long period of time. Most of the students have gone to school together since kindergarten. (p. 26)

What accounts for such changes at Mission Middle Academy? Explaining the tightening of discipline as a reason for this change, Ms. Wilson stressed: "I think the discipline is much better in this school." And then she asked a colleague sitting next to her: "When was the last time we had one of those rumble out in the yard that we used to have weekly?"

Additionally, demographic shifts and school reform can be listed as two concurrent and critical factors as well. The school restructuring and introduction of innovative curriculum and pedagogical approaches attracted a more diverse population from the city. Although an open enrollment school, by 1999 for the first time a large number of families petitioned to enroll their children at Mission Academy. By the end of that school year, about one quarter of all students were there because of their choice.

From 1989 to 1995, the school leadership was engaged in transforming its governance from a one-person show—the principal—to a more inclusive, committee-based leadership. The faculty integrated the curriculum into core teaching, which meant one teacher taught mathematics and science, another language arts and social studies, and both teachers collaborated on daily bases since they would share the same students, and often had the same prep period. Collaboration was structured both at the level of subject matter across all grade levels, and in family grade levels (e.g. sixth grade family). These changes altered the school's organizational structures.

During the second part of the decade, changes moved deeper into curriculum and assessment. Among the innovations, the school adopted the use of portfolios, a writing rubric system, and new mathematics and science strategies. Students increased
their standard based performance in all subjects even above the whole district's average in subjects such as writing.

Yet throughout the 1990s, the allocation of human, financial, and material resources was uneven, and when these dried out the restructuring efforts, the changes in curriculum and assessment, and deeper cultural transformations were all seriously impacted.

**SYMBOLIC FIGHTING AS A SOURCE OF TRANSFORMATION**

The following six premises stem from the notion that social conflict is simultaneously a key part of socialization, and that it is a moment that carries the potential to trigger personal transformation and thus, be a source of growth. These notions are informed by contact theory which identifies conflict as a phenomenon deeply embedded in social interactions (Allport, 1954; Lederach, 1995; Scheher & Milovanovic, 1999).

Accordingly, schools are settings where students and adults shape one another's social positions through the constant negotiation of their relationship in classrooms, halls, yards. These premises provide a framework for understanding symbolic fighting, as the first step in creating an environment where the paradoxical nature of conflict as a source of transformation (Charmaz, 1983; Lederach, 1995) forms the core belief of all interactions, from the moment a conflict occurs, the follow up, and system of redress and prevention.

*The first premise is about the meaning of symbolic fighting itself.*

As I suggested earlier in this paper, students wrap their negotiation of power and social status in heated and belligerent rhetoric that most of the times does not transcend verbal aggression. That is how this type of conflict takes a symbolic form. For eyes not accustomed to seeing youngsters engaged in symbolic fighting, it might be shocking to observe these displays. When the fight starts, issues appear impossible to resolve; children seem to consider them grave and final at the same time. But the gravity and finality of the issue in dispute is only a veneer covering an event that is, in fact, more a form of performance than actual desire to assault one another.

Symbolic fighting becomes, therefore, a metaphorical strategy that students use to negotiate their personal space within their friendship groups, gain respect from the larger group, and go through the rituals of growing up in school. As Mr. Andres Peres, puts it: “students seem to enjoy acting like little roosters learning to spread their feathers.” For a seasoned educator like him symbolic fighting is indeed all about saving face, negotiating power, and a quasi-symbolic event that most students go through. According to his experience, instead of punishing those involved in symbolic fights, school staff ought to arbitrate and help resolve them in a constructive manner. Mr. Andres Peres said:

> You know, a lot of kids are posturing. They get very close to fighting, but they don’t wanna fight. They’re looking for a way out to save face; as long as they can posture. They know somebody is going to break it up before it comes too close, [that way] they’re satisfied; they’ve been able to save face, and that’s what they’re looking for.

*The second premise is about the seriousness of symbolic fighting.*

Youngsters are not playing, even when performance might be the form. They know the event counts as a crucial communicator to three actors—themselves, the opponent, and the audience. Thus, in a symbolic fight youngsters are expressing themselves as clear and directly as they can, not only to the opponent, but also particularly to their audience. They need to show their willingness to push the limits of the event to its very edge, so that no doubt about their determination to use their fists exists amongst those who care to hear.

Yet students are not willing to go beyond the posturing. Deep in their mind there is the hope that somebody will arrive on the fight scene and break it up, in ways honorable to them. Again, Mr. Andres Peres places symbolic fighting clearly into perspective:

> They don’t want the physical part of it. They just want to go through the posturing and pretend they were ready to go [physically against each other] but, you know, they don’t want to really get into a fight. As soon as an adult steps in they back off and go in their way, which is good. It allows a time to express their feelings and concerns.

*The third premise is about the role of language.*

As the two cases above illustrate, language functions as a central mediator. Indeed, the most innocent gestures can trigger full-scale verbal confrontations delivered in a high, dramatic, and menacing pitch. It is crucial for the mediating adult to separate form from content. Thus, the mediator needs to understand the use of hurtful language and the distinction between the instrumental and expressive forms of it (see appendix).

Troya and Hetcher (1997) differentiate between the content of what is said in racist contexts and the beliefs and attitudes that accompany the utterances. The authors define the instrumental function of a racist utterance (or, in this article, demeaning language) as the ultimate hurtful results it seeks; and the expressive function as the actual beliefs that inform and nurture what is being said. Therefore, what is being expressed (behavior) might or might not reflect true individual beliefs.

For mediators to reach a clear understanding of the true beliefs behind language they need a solid support system that provides the context for sustained and systematic probing. Any racist, sexist, or any other discriminatory remark not always directly corresponds to an equally racist, sexist, discriminatory belief system. In schools the challenge comes from a lax use of language that allows frequent mutations in meaning and in form. To understand the issue, time and context for consistent follow up play a crucial function.

In the case of the African American student hurling a racist remark to another student of color, the PE teacher clearly understood the utterance as a more generic attempt to offend rather than as a specific racist commentary. His comment underscores the displacement of meaning from the personal to the impersonal of the racist remark.

*The fourth premise is about fighting as just a snippet of reality.*

What mediating adults often encounter is a blip that is linked to a map of events. Tracing the lines from dot to dot, and creating a whole picture is an impossible task right there at the heat of the confrontation. This is a task that demands a redress system that allows adults and children to unfold the story of what, how, who, and why something happened. Therefore, mediating symbolic fights requires the mediator to stay with what is happening and to suspend judgment so that the follow up can yield better understanding.

Hence, the event unfolding before the mediator’s eyes ought to be conceived as one episode that needs immediate care. That is, to calm down the parties involved, make them engage their dispute in a constructive, win-win manner, and send a message to the audience that conflict is an opportunity for growth and transforma-
tion. There is an obvious need to follow up such incidents, and move beyond emergency treatment.

The fifth premise is about re-conceptualizing the role of the counseling office.

Counselors at Mission Middle had no time for anything but scheduling, serving as the last stop for discipline problems, calling home, filing referrals, take care of sudden illness, contacting all sorts of agencies in charge of special needs, and protection of children. Counseling as a professional work was always postponed. The counselors themselves likened their office to "an emergency room," where there always were between 4 and 6 students sitting sometimes for hours on the adjacent chairs, waiting for a counselor to take care of their problem. Getting to know each child and keeping track of their needs, issues, dreams becomes, in such a context, a daunting task.

Absorbed by so many daily conflicts and with less and less support, the counseling office at Mission Middle always seemed to be quickly disappearing as a guidance center and becoming instead a discipline headquarters, an office in charge of filing and documenting incidents to protect the school from liability. As a result of these conditions, counselors cannot offer leadership in terms of educating the staff around critical issues such as social conflict. All of these day-to-day filing and referral operations need appropriate clerical personnel, not counselors. Furthermore, when counseling social conflict is done, it is traditionally focused on the individual and not on the group's status, and in so doing conflict loses its social dimension (Kiang & Kaplan, 1994; Raider, 1995; Clark, 1994; Benson & Benson, 1993; Johnson & Johnson, 1996).

Thus, if there is a counseling function focused on social conflict in schools it must be around utilizing social conflict as a positive socializing phenomenon. Equally important, students ought to be viewed as articulated to hubs of social networks, and their actions connected to group status and power relations. Additionally the use of pedagogies that allow the development of social skills and proximity among students must form part of the school's life, such as cooperative learning, and embedding issues of conflict—racial or interethnically throughout the curriculum (Coleman & Deutch, 1995; Henze, et al., 2001). In other words, the school as a whole ought to embrace counseling as a necessary social activity that can give to conflict its social nature, and create a preventive and less clinical approach to students' conflict.

Lastly, the sixth premise refers to the centrality of school reform as an articulated effort between schools and school districts.

Reforming schools is always a work-in-progress that requires a long-term vision and commitment from faculty and leadership at the school and school district level. Any shift on the school or the district's priorities must obey to the sharpening of the school's focus in order for the faculty and the leadership to address new challenges on the road to deep change. Mission Middle School is an illustrative case. The reforms implemented throughout most of the decade (practically up the year 1996-1997), almost came to a halt. In August 1998, at the opening of the first faculty meeting for the new school year, Mr. Angel, the school principal, welcomed teachers in these terms:

We have lost 3 positions for this year, which will affect what we do. I've asked the district for 1.5 back because this affects the school core services. [...] Chances are class size is going up, close to 30 this year.

Up to 1996-97, there were three counselors, a dean of students, one vice-principal, a principal, a peer resource in charge, among other things, of the conflict resolution program, and several resource personnel that took care of coordinating the curriculum, testing, and education of children with special needs.

During that period, the school had implemented a program addressing social conflict focusing on training students as "conflict managers." Students learned communication skills that included active listening, respecting airtime, and controlling tone. In addition, they learned the most popular conflict resolution process that includes consensual agreement to resolve the problem, and reaching win-win solutions for all those implicated in a dispute. The program also included some training sessions for teachers as a way to make them part of the conflict resolution approach to social conflict.

Mirroring what research indicates about this topic (Jorgensen, Brown, & Stokes, 1992; Morse & Andrea, 1994; Stomfay-Stitz, 1994) this program was implemented and stayed as an add-on, after-school, or lunchtime activity. As Mr. JR, a veteran teacher who participated in those efforts, recalled:

We had a bunch of conflict managers who wore jackets and walked the halls. But the whole school didn't buy-in to this system. If a student had a conflict, they had the choice of either resolving it with a student conflict manager or going to the office. Teachers sent students to the counseling office anyway. (Mr. JR. teacher interview series)

In spite of the unevenness of the changes above discussed, the school as a whole had improved and promoted its efforts to allow a learning climate for adults and children. However, changes in the district's priorities led to the reallocation of resources in schools such as Mission Middle, which, in turn, affected the school's climate. The school district placed more emphasis on increasing aggregated norm-based test scores, particularly in mathematics. This emphasis represented a change in the distribution of time and human resources at the school level. By 1998 Mission Middle lost the peer resource position in charge of all conflict resolution training. Without the program, all that remained was the staff's individual agency—and the staff was, for the most part, unprepared for the task.

To make things worse, the chances for students and teachers to personalize their relationship was further eroded when the advisory period (which connected small groups of students to one adult in a mentoring relationship), the unified arts class (which teachers used to involve students in community service learning activities), and one counseling position were all eliminated.

The elimination of one counseling position hurt the school in many fronts, but especially on the school's capacity to address social conflict. For such a small staff (2 counselors for about 600 students), keeping track of data, implementing conflict mediation programs, one-on-one counseling needs, family outreach, scheduling, and articulating the diverse programs offered by grassroots initiatives, represented a tremendous challenge, if not an impossible task.

Ms. Robinson (a mathematics and science teacher) captured the general uneasiness, and concerns the district's shift created among teachers who like her, conceived climate an integral part of educating the whole child. She stated:

I think we've forgotten all the affective part of our mission [...] we don't pay attention to the whole child anymore. All is academics, standards, and standards. And guess what, standards is a new sorting device. (Teacher interview series)
A clarification is, however, necessary here. Some of the data from the counselors’ records were confounded by the fact that most teachers reported “play-fighting” at the same level of “physical assault and aggression.” Furthermore, staff reporting a referral entered more than one category as the cause for such disciplinary action. For instance: “refusing directions, play fighting, physical assault” are reported in a referral form. Which of these actions caused the referral? Refusing directions might be classified differently (i.e. defiance), while play fighting might not even warrant such harsh punishment as a referral. The decision was to tabulate “play fighting” as a disciplinary action. For instance: “refusing that Divide: Berkeley High School and the Challenge of Integration.” USF Law Review. Vol. 29. Spring.


### Appendix

The following tables show data on incidents of referrals and changes in referral practices from 1997-1998 to 1998-1999 for Mission Middle Academy School.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incidents</th>
<th>1997-1998 Number of Referrals</th>
<th>% Change of Referrals</th>
<th>1998-1999 Number of Referrals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Defiance of authority</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Rep. Disruption</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Verbal Abuse</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Fighting</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Unprepared for class</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Vandalism</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Theft</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Weapons (knife)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Unspecified</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>410</td>
<td></td>
<td>402</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: counselor action records

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Troyana &amp; Hatcher Model (1997)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>RACIST</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>II</strong> Use of racist name calling which expresses racist attitudes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>III</strong> Use of racist name calling by children who holdracially egalitarian beliefs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>