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Exploring conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Maine schools

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Opening Remarks *By Barbara Blazej*

My daughter reminded me recently about the importance of perspective-taking in working out conflicts. Lindsay and a good friend had had a misunderstanding that caused a serious breach in their relationship. When they were finally able to sit down and talk about it, Lindsay explained that she had honestly tried to see the situation from her friend's point of view, and in doing so, had gained a better sense of what her friend was thinking and why she was angry. Lindsay also encouraged her friend to do the same perspective-taking exercise so she would understand Lindsay's thoughts and feelings. Using this powerful tool to sort through their misunderstanding, these two young women transformed a potentially destructive conflict into an experience of truth-telling, healing and reconciliation. And they were clearly transformed in the process as well.

Indeed, in this International Year for the Culture of Peace, and in the coming Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World, perspective-taking will play a critical role in furthering personal and social transformation globally. "To see a problem in a new light, we need to analyze it from perspectives other than our own."¹ Roger Fisher and colleagues from the Harvard Negotiation Project consider this skill essential to the process of managing conflicts at all levels. From interpersonal disputes such as Lindsay's to international clashes in the Middle East, Africa, Europe and elsewhere, stepping into the shoes of the "other" broadens our view of those with whom we are in conflict, opening us to new insights that empower us to move forward.

Fisher et al. make another very important point about perspective-taking: "Understanding is not simply an intellectual activity. *Feeling empathetically* how others may feel can be as important as thinking clearly about how others may think."² If we reflect on what happens when we have an argument with someone, or try to imagine the dynamics around a negotiating table with Israelis and Palestinians, for example, we can be certain that all parties to a conflict experience a variety of strong feelings such as anger, sadness, mistrust, frustration, insecurity, rage, despair. In the process of working through conflicts, gaining empathy for another—"recognizing and respecting the integrity and feelings of the other"³—leads to greater understanding and the possibility of moving to a deeper level of interaction and, hopefully, connection.

In his fascinating book *Rambo and the Dalai Lama*, Gordon Fellman mentions a simple, yet powerful exercise for practicing empathy in our daily lives. "By its nature," he says, "empathy is inclusive rather than exclusive...[and] involves substituting 'and' for 'but' in approaching the other."⁴ In everyday conversation, this would sound something like the following:

I hear what you're saying, but I believe.....

or

I hear what you're saying, and I believe.....

Rather than summarily dismissing another's perspective (using the word "but" seems to do just that), substituting "and" means we are willing to consider another's point of view, to include their thoughts and feelings along with our own, as worthy of respect and attention. To be sure, changing our ways of communicating to be more inclusive and empathetic is difficult, but it's a challenge worth embracing. (*And if you do try this exercise, please let me know how it works for you.*)

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Perspective-taking and empathy enable all of us—students, teachers, parents, community members and heads of state alike—to gain clarity about the different thoughts, viewpoints, emotions and motivations that underlie conflicts from the personal to the global. In profound and far-reaching ways, these skills contribute to creating cultures of peace based on compassion, open-mindedness and honest, authentic relationships.

Notes:

1. Roger Fisher et al., *Beyond Machiavelli: Tools for Coping with Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 21.
2. *Ibid.*, 33 (emphasis added).
3. Gordon Fellman, *Rambo and the Dalai Lama* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 27.
4. *Ibid.*, 151.

Community Scope

By Judy Rawlings, Healthy Community Coalition, Farmington

The Healthy Community Coalition (HCC) Saddleback Youth Initiative involved a yearlong effort by the community of West Central Maine to respond to concerns about the well being of our youth. Concerns were ignited by news reports of the killings at Columbine High School in Colorado, and compounded by a series of bomb threats at the area's five local high schools during the 1999-2000 school year. The resulting Saddleback Youth Initiative offered an innovative opportunity for high school students to take the lead in identifying problems, to design an event—the Saddleback Youth Town Meeting 2000—to debate and resolve issues with their peers, and ultimately to propose feasible programs that the community is now pursuing.

Working with four college students from the University of Maine at Farmington and the partnership of all five local school districts, HCC evaluator Judy Rawlings led a program of focus groups in the five school districts asking students what they view as their top concerns, and how and whether they would structure a meeting of youth. The results of the focus groups were consistent across school districts: the top problem students identified in their schools was substance abuse, with violence a distant second. The results were shared with the Youth Advisory Council, an ad-hoc group of seven high school students from Jay High School led by HCC board member and student Nicole Couture '00. The high school students developed a format for a Youth Town Meeting, to include a day of small group discussions, an inspirational keynote, outdoor activities, and a larger meeting to conclude with strategy recommendations.

In an agenda set by the youth advisors and focus groups, each of the 100 attendees (20 from each school district) were randomly assigned roles in the fictional town of Saddleback—named for the ski lodge that donated its facilities as well as food for the daylong conference. Roles included teachers, elected officials, clergy, students, parents, business owners, media, taxpayers, and school board members. Students then met in small groups with others assigned the same role to propose a platform for voting at the town meeting.

At the town meeting concluding the day, students worked together to weigh their proposals alongside a budget, and had a lively discussion about which proposals were high priority and most likely to be effective.

The collaboration and partnerships involved in this project were numerous. Students from UMF and from the five school districts, church leaders, a volunteer from the hospital auxiliary, HCC board members, the school-based advocate from the rape crisis center (S.A.V.E.S.), the executive directors of United Way and of the Children's Task Force all had a strong role in organizing and implementing the conference.

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We look forward to continued collaboration with our partner organizations and the schools as we address the issues facing the youth in our community.

Hallmarks of a School Transformative Peer Mediation Program

By Maureen Block

Conflicts, and how we respond to them, help shape and define our relationships, and those relationships form the center of our lives. As we attempt to find ways to teach and model for our children, effective, non-violent response to conflict, we would certainly fall short of our intent if we were to ignore the impact those efforts would have on their human interactions.

Many schools, responding to an escalating fear of violent response to conflict and the increased sense of alienation and powerlessness expressed by many students, are now seeking to implement peer mediation programs. Student accountability and self-responsibility are important and justifiable reasons for moving in this direction. However, it is equally important, and makes tremendous sense, to establish a program that has, at its core, the goals of improving student relationships while cultivating empathy, supporting student confidence and empowering students to decide for themselves how best to handle their difficult situations.

Although most peer mediation models are designed to help students find mutually agreeable solutions to their disputes, the Transformative Approach to mediation speaks directly to the relational needs of students. While reaching an agreement is a possible outcome of a mediation, the primary focus always lies with improving the quality of student relationships.

Strengthening our students' ability to analyze situations, honoring their emotional perspectives and helping them learn to make effective decisions for themselves are the concepts inherent in recognition and empowerment, the foundations of the Transformative Approach. Joseph P. Folger and Robert A. Baruch Bush, authors of *The Promise of Mediation*, have identified 10 hallmarks of a transformative mediation practice. I attempt here to adapt these hallmarks for use in building a successful school peer mediation program based on their model. I believe such a program has the potential to change the entire relational dynamic of a school and its community. While there is great value in simply practicing peaceful problem-solving, a school that is considering introducing peer mediation to its students should consider as well, the merits that learning to build stronger, better relationships would hold for today's student.

1. "The opening says it all." Student mediators need to introduce their role and objectives, right from the beginning, as that of guiding a process that will help disputants gain clarity about the issues and better understand one another, thus helping them decide for themselves what they would like to do.

A school deciding to use the transformative model believes that mediation can be more than just a tool for settling disputes—that it has the potential to actually transform the character of those participating. Even in the earliest stages of discussion about meeting the needs of a school by implementing a conflict management program, administrators should maintain a focus on improved relationships and their impact on the school.

2. "It's ultimately the parties' choice." The transformative model makes clear the responsibility for the outcome of a mediation lies only with those in dispute. The student mediators assert their neutrality, look for cues about the

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parties' feelings, find opportunities to hold them up for recognition, and support the parties' confidence, clarity and decision-making.

The school that models this approach believes in, and supports, student attempts at self-determination.

3. "The parties know best." Student mediators will remain non-judgmental about the disputants' views and decisions, believing that to support their sense of responsibility strengthens their decision-making. As difficult as it is for students to remain impartial, it is important to remember that, as mediators, they cannot possibly know more about the situation than those directly involved.

Schools using this approach trust this process and their students' capabilities.

4. "The parties have what it takes." Student mediators should practice with the belief that the disputants are capable, competent and that their motives are honest. Students should be reminded that those in conflict should be seen as "good kids caught in difficult situations."

Administration and staff must be willing to redefine their roles in school dispute resolution and be prepared to model these same practices in their own interactions.

5. "There are facts in feelings." By allowing student disputants adequate opportunity for the expression of their emotions, student mediators will begin to see that anger often stems from misunderstanding and frustration often happens when someone is scared or uncertain. This heightened awareness will help students identify further opportunities for recognition and empowerment.

The school that honors the emotional terrain of its students will find an improved school climate with enhanced relationships all around.

6. "Clarity emerges from confusion." Student mediators should understand that the events of the past are important in allowing the disputing parties to explore how they feel about the present situation. This consideration can help to bring about clearer self-understanding and a recognition of each other's feelings, which in turn, can be empowering.

Schools practicing recognition and empowerment will be clear and confident in dealing with their everyday conflicts.

7. "The action is 'in the room'." Student mediators should practice patience and tolerance and believe that, by allowing the disputants time to explore their uncertainty and confusion, they will eventually find opportunity for supporting disputants' confidence and decision-making.

Schools should be prepared to support flexible time-management in their mediation program in order to allow ample opportunity for clarity and decision-making.

8. "Stay focused and present." The student mediator should remain focused only on the present conflict interaction and not look for the "bigger picture" where they might be more inclined to be "problem-solvers." By avoiding this, a student mediator will remain alert to the cues for recognizing feelings and self-determination.

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A school mediation model that stays focused on present efforts will notice an empowered student body with stronger decision-making skills and a better perspective of human interaction.

9. “Conflict is an ongoing process.” The student mediator should remember that the present mediation is only one moment in an ongoing interaction between the parties. By maintaining this view of conflict, students will be less likely to be directive and look for solutions.

Schools should look at conflict as normal and inevitable, an opportunity for growth and learning.

10. “Small steps count.” Student mediators should feel, and share with the disputants, the belief that a successful mediation has happened when the disputants have gained better understanding of each other and the situation, even if only in small doses. Mediators should recognize that recognition and empowerment are valuable outcomes in themselves, and that lasting resolution will only come when students in conflict have felt their voices have been heard and that they have led the way in designing their agreement.

Schools with long-term commitment to the possibilities of this peer mediation program recognize that character transformation often happens in small increments, but that it is ultimately what will change the way their students choose to deal with conflict.

Every standard that the Maine Learning Results ask that we cultivate in our students can be addressed with a peer mediation program, including: clear and effective communicators, integrative and informed thinkers, self-directed and lifelong learners, and creative and practical problem-solvers.

It is also important that when considering implementation of peer mediation, schools acknowledge the complexity of conflict and recognize the need to build a school conflict management program with a multifaceted approach. By including the transformative peer mediation model they will offer their school community an important opportunity to grow and learn together, and to build stronger, richer relationships. We need to help our kids reach out, re-connect, and find their way in this world. The Transformative Approach offers us that possibility.

References:

Bush, Robert A. Baruch and Joseph P. Folger. *The Promise of Mediation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994

Folger, Joseph P. and Robert A. Baruch Bush. “Transformative Mediation and Third-Party Intervention: Ten Hallmarks of a Transformative Approach to Practice.” *Mediation Quarterly*, 13:4 (Summer 1996) pp. 263-278.

U.S. General Accounting Office. *Seven Characteristics of Promising School Violence Prevention Programs. School Safety: promising initiatives for addressing school violence*. Washington, DC: U.S. General Accounting Office, 1995.

Maureen Block coordinates the peer mediation/conflict resolution programs at Monroe Elementary School.

Summer Conference

By Sue O'Halloran

“The Power of Partnerships,” this year’s August Conference title, reflected not only the theme of the day, but the process of pulling it together as well! This is an annual event co-sponsored by Maine Bureau of Health, Division of Community and Family Health, Maine Injury Prevention Program; Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services;

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Maine Department of Education; EXCEL, University of Maine School of Law; and the Peace Studies Program, University of Maine.

Nearly 200 participants were involved in this year's one-day event that featured partnerships involving schools, communities, youth and families, all working together to make a difference for youth. While this conference is created for adult audiences, a special effort was made to involve many youth as workshop presenters. They did a magnificent job and the evaluations reflected positive feedback. Participants appreciated the diversity of choice, the size, length and relaxed atmosphere of sessions. Speakers generally received rave reviews for their knowledge and enthusiasm. The reception to youth representation and presentations was "off the charts." The youth, of course, wished that the conference could have had more young people present and been more designed for youth.

While reluctant to mention favorite parts of the conference for fear of leaving someone out, it was clear that having the welcoming and closing sessions delivered by youth speaker Anna Bullett from Auburn was refreshing. The three sessions presented by Outright of Portland and Lewiston-Auburn were very special. Youth representing partnerships from the Farmington Area, Biddeford Middle School, Bangor, and Augusta showcased their projects beautifully. The Maine communities of Buckfield, Milbridge, Kennebunk & Kennebunkport described exciting projects happening in each area. In addition, several individuals from Maine shared their expertise...all of it contributing to a great day for the teachers, administrators, school resource officers, social workers, nurses, community volunteers/mentors, parents and youth in attendance.

This is an annual event that traditionally addresses issues of violence prevention, conflict management, etc. Plans will soon be underway for next year. The Planning Committee has yet to meet, but they are in constant search of a theme, workshop session suggestions and new ideas for ways to combine adults and youth for next year's "August Conference." Any thoughts? If so, call Sue O'Halloran at Medical Care Development in Augusta, (207) 622-7566 ext. 221; e-mail: sueoh@mcd.org or fax to 622-3616. ***The names of all people who offer suggestions will be entered into a drawing for a free registration to the conference!***