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Exploring conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Maine schools

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Opening Remarks *By Barbara Blazej*

Well, here we are in Year 2 of the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World. How ironic that this past year has witnessed anything but peace: the terrorist attacks on our country on September 11, our war in Afghanistan, the seemingly endless cycle of violence in the Middle East, just to name three that have dominated the news. And today, of course, we stand poised on the brink of another war against Iraq. The continual use of threats, intimidation, and violent confrontation to resolve global conflicts, with little thought given to nonviolent means, deeply disturbs me. To resist being overwhelmed by despair and hopelessness, I choose to focus even more intensely on peacebuilding and peace education. Every so often I re-read the UN General Assembly resolution that set in motion this International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence, which calls us to action by:

Recognizing...the role of education in constructing a culture of peace and nonviolence, in particular the teaching of the practice of peace and nonviolence to children...[and]

Emphasizing that the promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, by which children learn to live together in peace and harmony that will contribute to the strengthening of international peace and cooperation, should emanate from adults and be instilled in children....

Risky business to be sure. Teaching peace and nonviolence during times of war in a highly militarized society requires strength, courage, persistence and lots of hard work. Eleanor Roosevelt, one of my personal heroes, inspires me during these difficult times: “*You must do the thing you think you cannot do.*” And my students at the University of Maine also inspire and energize me, especially nowadays when I feel sorely challenged to remain optimistic. I have the good fortune to teach peace studies to a group of enthusiastic young adults who are trying to create meaningful lives out of confusion and disruption. Some of them just graduated from high school a few months ago. During a class activity recently in which we explored how different social structures contribute to both a culture of violence and a culture of peace, one group looked at the institution of education. For the first part of the activity (culture of violence), at least some of them were clearly remembering their secondary school experiences when they mentioned such things as: *overemphasis on competition; violent sports; cliques; bullies; school shootings; and history classes that focus predominantly on battles and famous generals and wars (seen as “good”), with a simultaneous lack of focus on peace.*

Their responses for the second part of the activity, on how education can contribute to a culture of peace, offer us excellent food for thought: *encourage students to question authority* (my personal favorite!); *change books, educational mission statements and curricula to include peace; and be proactive—have peace week in high schools with guest speakers, etc.* My students want to learn about peace, to know that peace is real and possible, and they see high school as a good time to begin such a study.

For those of you who might be interested in incorporating peace education into your curriculum, I’d like to share a few of the areas I cover in my peace studies classes. Many of these can be adapted for use in elementary, middle and high schools.

First (and this will not be new to many of you), I teach several concepts and practices of nonviolent conflict resolution, including how personality differences lead to conflict, perspective-taking, positions and interests, “I/You Statements,” listening and blocks to communication. Whenever possible, I illustrate how these practices

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work on both the interpersonal and global level. Numerous resources exist that cover the basics of interpersonal conflict resolution and mediation for K-12, and I'm able to modify the high school activities for use at the college level. Our library here in Peace Studies contains many of these books and curricula materials, all of which are for loan to educators across the state. If you're interested, please do contact me for a library list. Also, we carry Roger Fisher's book, *Beyond Machiavelli*, which is particularly useful for the global aspect of conflict resolution practices.

Another area that I spend some time in could be called (thanks to Paul Harvey) "the rest of the story." Students have expressed to me the importance of positive role models, and so I try to expose them to peace heroes and nonviolent, social change movements in history—to illustrate that the story of the US (and the world) is more than one long war. A valuable resource in this category would be the video documentary (and companion book) *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict*, which tells six fascinating stories of nonviolence movements in the US, Chile, India, Poland, Denmark and South Africa that brought about significant political changes against great odds (www.aforcemorepowerful.org). Heroic peace personalities include such famous icons as Mahatma Gandhi, Rosa Parks, Susan B. Anthony, and Martin Luther King Jr., as well as other inspiring role models such as Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and other Abolitionists, Jeannette Rankin (first woman elected to Congress in 1916, who opposed US entry into both world wars), Eleanor Roosevelt (instrumental in the drafting and adoption of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights), and Helen Keller (as socialist labor activist). And at least three authors have written excellent books filled with the everyday heroes whose lives and voices are mostly missing from mainstream texts: *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the American Revolution* by Ray Raphael, and *Lies My Teacher Told Me* by James Loewen.

Finally, throughout the course I infuse each topic with information on contemporary peace/justice/nonviolence role models, movements and resources, so students have a sense of who is working on these issues today and what types of exciting initiatives exist. Here is a partial list:

Individuals:

Jody Williams, Aung San Suu Kyi, Rigoberta Menchu, Jimmy Carter and other Nobel Peace Prize winners (www.nobel.se/peace);

Dennis Kucinich, Ohio Congressman who has proposed a Department of Peace for the US government (www.house.gov/kucinich/action/peace.htm);

Many heroes who work for peace and freedom around the world, listed on an excellent website: www.myhero.com/peacemakers (and also see related article in this newsletter);

Movements, Organizations and Initiatives:

Seeds of Peace Camp (in Otisfield, Maine), brings together young people from nations in conflict around the world to practice co-existence in a safe environment, www.seedsofpeace.org.

Alternatives to Violence Project: AVP's goal is to reduce violence in the world by teaching skills and techniques of nonviolent conflict resolution, www.avpusa.org.

Women's International League for Peace and Freedom: Founded in 1915 during WWI, WILPF works to achieve through peaceful means world disarmament, full rights for women, racial and economic justice, and an end to all forms of violence, www.wilpf.org;

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Veterans for Peace: “*We, having dutifully served our nation, do hereby affirm our greater responsibility to serve the cause of world peace by applying the concept of engaging conflict peacefully, without violence,*” www.veteransforpeace.org.

September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows (www.peacefultomorrows.org): Founded in 2001 by family members of September 11th victims, this organization seeks effective nonviolent responses to terrorism. “By conscientiously exploring peaceful options in our search for justice, we choose to spare additional innocent families the suffering that we have already experienced—as well as to break the endless cycle of violence and retaliation engendered by war.”

Nonviolent Peaceforce, started in 1999: A nonviolent global “army” of peacemakers who work to prevent violent conflict from starting and intervene to end conflicts and save lives, www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org.

Center for Nonviolent Communication (www.cnvc.org), promotes nonviolent communication methods for resolving conflicts around the world.

TrueMajority, an initiative started by Ben Cohen (of Ben & Jerry’s Ice Cream fame), mobilizes large numbers of citizens to work proactively on several social issues: poverty, world hunger, human rights, renewable energy, disarmament and others, www.truemajority.com.

A Safe Space for All

By Gert Nesin and Janet Nesin Reynolds

We worked constantly, from day one, to build community in our classroom. Our classroom was a sixth grade class at Shapleigh Middle School in Kittery and continued into seventh grade with the same students. As a partner team, we shared 40 students for a block of about five hours a day. Our curriculum centered around themes based on questions and concerns students had about themselves and the world around them. It seemed the perfect structure in which to develop a supportive classroom learning environment. But it’s never as easy as it seems.

Our students came to us with an interesting history. In earlier grades, they fought with each other, excluded chosen students, and called each other many derogatory names regarding gender, sexual orientation, body shape, and perceived learning ability. Fortunately, they had learned that racial and religious slurs were not acceptable, but had not generalized to other categories. They put themselves in constant competition with each other, resulting in clear winners and losers.

We started with games to learn names and then students developed interview questions, interviewed each other, and made posters that represented their classmates. We discussed classroom guidelines, starting with the question, “If *you* were the best student you could be, what would you *do* in and out of school?” They included all of the “rules” we would have written as teachers, both about their behavior and learning, but written in a way they understood and named as important.

Almost daily in class meeting we talked about behavior, how they treated each other, and whether specific nicknames were appropriate or inappropriate. We periodically completed group challenges to work on interpersonal and group skills. Students continually reflected on their behaviors and the effects on others and our learning community. They wrote individual and group goals to improve our classroom environment. The students and we teachers shared

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those insights with parents through weekly reports, progress reports, and conferences. In short, we worked as hard on behavior and classroom community as we did on academic curriculum.

By the end of our first year together, students no longer openly harassed and bullied each other, but several students continued that behavior when we were not looking—especially in related arts classes, in the halls and bathrooms, and on the busses. Students confidentially reported incidents where students were singled out for harassment and name-calling, but they didn't have enough confidence in the system to officially report the harassment. We knew that when we started our new year together, we'd have to try something else.

At the beginning of our second year together, we started by talking about words as weapons (Wessler, 2001). After a discussion of about an hour and a half, Tyler summed up the group realization that “words hurt more in the long run than other weapons.” We talked about the roles students take in issues of harassment—victim, active participant, and bystander—and what they could do in each role to help. In groups, they listed on chart paper all the derogatory words they had heard for gender, sexual orientation, body shape, and learning ability. Students wrote down some words they heard but didn't understand, some they used and understood, and others that even we hadn't heard before. We told them that these words were not to be used because they were weapons, whether or not they were intended as such. Students stopped using those particular words, and gently corrected each other when someone would slip. Students who used to stand by or quietly take harassment began to report it to us and the principal.

Some students did, however, still find ways of intimidating other students without words—using looks, exclusion, and “kidding” around. Most truly believed they were just joking and didn't see the effect they had on others, both on individuals and on the classroom atmosphere as a whole. We had to find a way to help them understand the control they had over each other and the community.

The next morning we cut paper into quarters and gave each student a quarter. The paper would be anonymous, but we asked them to tear off a piece of their paper (openly or secretly) when someone did or said something that hurt them. They would tear off a piece in proportion to the hurt they felt. Several students approached us by midmorning, asking what they should do if they had no paper left. We told them to save just a big enough bit of paper to share with us. At the end of the day, we collected the pieces of paper (12 tiny bits, many partially torn, none that were whole) and glued them onto a piece of chart paper.

At morning meeting the next day, we examined the results. Students talked about some of the behaviors they saw or experienced that caused paper to be torn. They talked about what they did or didn't do when they observed those behaviors. They related the pieces of paper to how it felt to be in the classroom. We continued this activity for the next week, asking them to jot down behaviors that caused them to tear their pieces of paper and pass in their lists anonymously. We also asked them to write down the names of people who participated in the harmful behaviors, again anonymously. Every day we shared the paper pieces, talked about the behaviors, and noted significant improvements. By the end of the week there were no tiny bits of paper and many that remained whole.

Additionally, we found that only a few student names came up repeatedly for harassing other students. We met with those students and shared what their classmates wrote about them. For the most part, those students were embarrassed. We reminded them about the school harassment policy and assured them that we would follow the policy if the harassment continued in or out of the classroom.

The words as weapons activities coupled with the pieces of paper created a turning point in our classroom. Students who quietly stood by began to speak up, students who were being harassed reported the harassment, and bullies found they had no audience for their behavior. Although never perfect, our classroom became a much safer place for all the students and a much more pleasant place for us as well.

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Janet Nesin Reynolds teaches integrative curriculum at Shapleigh Middle School in Kittery and Gert Nesin teaches at the University of Maine. You can reach them by email: Janet (JKRAG@gwi.net) and Gery (Gert.Nesin@umit.maine.edu).

It's All Connected: Academics, Social and Emotional Learning

By Tracey O'Connell

How are all the many facets of daily school life supposed to work together to make the climate, or the social, emotional and academic fabric of a school, a place where staff and students can thrive?

Today many schools are struggling to cope with academic standards in addition to preparing students for the future. Schools have less state money for budgets, and children and families are stressed by a changing world. School communities are expecting their staff to plan and implement programs and educate their students under many constrictions. All schools have a different flavor and style in presenting the implements that are educating their students. So how does the connection of these three factors work?

A conference or workshop is a place where those eager to pursue new trends gather to soak up the knowledge and then impart it to their staff at their home base. This gathering also is a means of connection, networking and conversations. These conversations are the base of establishing a priority of where to start. Sharing stories can become a way to begin sharing the experiences of what works, what are the needs and what resources are available.

Stories lead the way to developing the programs that are able to integrate the concepts of social and emotional learning with the academic, and has been of recent interest to many. Resources and texts are grabbing the attention of those searching for something new to try to reach children, while also addressing the pressing need of assessment and standards.

Reaching children at their level of need starts with skills. Academic skills come to mind first, then there is a need to address social skills. These are critical for students to navigate the waters of successful friendships and relationships at school. To learn to work in groups, ask for and get what is needed and to be tolerant of those who are striving for the same goals is a daily challenge.

New groundwork in emotional intelligence gives students awareness of themselves and their growth and other facets of the growing child. Information about health and growth continues to rapidly change and students and families need firsthand information to be prepared. If we place academics, social and emotional learning in the center of a circle and have branches of the supporting connectors, there is room for flavor and style.

Supporting Connectors:

- * Policies that support students and staff (harassment, safe schools, crisis policy, homework);
- * Community Component (service learning, community outreach, parent groups);
- * Assessment (MEA, Terra Nova, school assessments);
- * Teams (teacher teams, organized teams—math, chess, drama, peer mediation, civil rights, etc.);
- * Sports (participation, intramurals);

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- * Support Programs (Student Assistance Team, advisory, homework help, developmental guidance, conflict resolution, after school programs);
- * Adventure Education (Challenge by Choice, Kieve, Project Adventure, team-building).

These are a few of the collaborative programs and policies that have proven helpful when paired with leadership from the top that supports and assists these endeavors. There are many more ideas from conversations that can be shared. More importantly are the many helping hands that work together. Having a majority of staff on board to help make the links and support the programs is another priority. A very helpful web site to visit to learn more about the connections between the social, emotional and academic is www.casel.org.