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TOOLS FOR MANAGING SCHOOL-BASED CONFLICTS

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ACQUISITIONS

I work with the Colorado School Mediation Project. We do very similar things to what the Conflict Center does, so I'll let Liz's[2] comments stand for us as well. I would like to underscore a few points, as well as talk about the importance of adult modeling, consistency, and the quality of teaching skills. As Liz said, there really is no "magic pill" for solving the problem of conflict or school violence. I think that it is important to say this straight out to the people we are working with. It's just a matter of putting the time into the teaching of these skills.

Let me first talk about the kinds of intractable conflicts and the surrounding issues that I see in schools. The title of this session used the phrase, "alternative dispute resolution." More and more people are beginning to use the term, "appropriate dispute resolution," rather than "alternative" because what used to be considered an alternative is now getting to be fairly standard. Also, when we say appropriate dispute resolution it helps us ask, when there is a conflict, what is the appropriate tool to use? It's not what are the "other tools," but rather what is needed for this situation? When teachers are dealing with a really stuck conflict, are they the person who needs to bang on it harder, or do they say, "Gee, it seems like mediation would be a good approach," or "It seems like mediation isn't working, so here's the next alternative." This takes the judgement out of whether the conflict is getting solved or not, because if one thing isn't working, you move on to the next appropriate tool.

So what types of intractable conflicts do we see in schools? One is parent/teacher conflicts. Some of these seem to go on and on. Some parents, as Liz said, are school phobic, and other parents are extremely demanding or have the type of personality that a teacher just can't handle. These can be very difficult conflicts. Conflicts between staff can also be intractable. Some of the most difficult ones are the old guard / new blood issues that pit teacher against teacher. This can sometimes undermine the whole conflict management training process. Another issue that we frequently hear is teachers who say, "You know, it's about five percent of the students that cause 90 percent of the conflict here." So, what they want us to do is fix those 5 percent. As Liz said, that is not our main function.

Oftentimes, the most intense conflicts create the most attention, and certainly, there are five percent of the conflicts that can cause 95 percent of the problems. Some conflict management skills that we teach won't work on these very intractable conflicts; there are a different set of skills that are needed for dealing with these problems. I think it is important to recognize this, and to see that teachers and the schools understand that with the proper tools they can prevent the crisis, and that they can also increase the productivity and the creativity of the schools. Isn't that what we really want, rather than just crisis management? So that is a focus that we try to bring in with our work.

Another type of conflict that can become intractable involves gender issues. We hear them in all grades and ages. We call them, "He Said / She Said" conflicts. They tend to go on and on. It's almost like a ritualistic dance. How can you make them productive? There are ways to deal with these situations that have positive results.[3] The last common type of intractable

conflict has to do with gangs and deep-rooted prejudice. These two are very difficult issues to deal with, but they can be addressed.

Much of the work that we do is prevention. I'll tell you a story as an example of the effect of conflict training in the schools. There were a couple of girls who had about two years of conflict management training in elementary school. The teacher saw them fighting as they went up some stairs. The teacher said, "It seems like you two need help in resolving this problem. I think you ought to come into my room." But the girls said, "Oh no. That's okay. We need to negotiate this by ourselves." So they went to the top of the stairs and negotiated a solution to their conflict. They took the initiative! They had the skills, and they knew that they needed to talk it out.

Another example involves two students who knew they were about to get into a physical fight, but instead of fighting, they went to the school counselor and said, "We need you to mediate this, because, otherwise, we are going to get into a fight, and we don't want that." As you can see from these examples, if you lay the groundwork, and give the students the skills, the language, and the perceptions, magic can happen. But it's not something that can easily be developed. It takes work and time.

I would like to mention how we categorize what we are doing. Today, in this session, we are focusing on intractable conflicts. There is a different system for each conflict, depending on how deep-rooted it is. A few methods are (as Chris Moore defines them): peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding. Peacekeeping involves just keeping the violence down; peacemaking begins a dialogue; and peacebuilding is where people are working together toward a common goal or on a common project, and/or in educating others.

I would add to these, the methods of conflict management and conflict resolution. Although they are similar, there are differences between them. Both of these methods involve negotiation, mediation, and general skills. Management is a type of informal, day-to-day maintenance, whereas, resolution is the more on-going formal process where one actually comes up with a resolution to a problem.

Conflict transformation is a term that is being used more and more, even in businesses. I just talked to a friend, who is a consultant at Public Service, and he has started using that phrase. It's important because for some conflicts that are nearly intractable, the right systems design can transform them. Parties can break through the barriers, and really understand a whole new way of seeing the situation and dealing with it.

There is a fellow in New Mexico that works for Future Waves, which concerns alternatives to entertainment in the media. He emphasizes conflict transformation through the media. He says, "If you look at the movies today, you can see all the sensationalism that we are being subjected to, and that we are actually choosing to watch." He wants people to see alternatives to violence, to look at other ways to transform a situation.

There is another program called the Alternative to Violence Project, which spends a lot of time talking about transforming power. When you are in intense, violent, near-violent, or potentially violent situations, how can you transform a situation? The Chicago Police Department trains its officers to do that with a technique called, "clouding," which means altering the situation to shift reality. When the police enter the scene of a domestic dispute, they go in and start moving the furniture around and doing completely strange things. All of a sudden, the people in conflict stop fighting and say, "What is it with you? What are you doing?" addressing the police. The clouding technique shifts their reality and stops the conflict. That is what conflict transformation is about. It is about shifting reality and altering conflicts so that they become

resolvable. It is a skill that can be developed. Good conflict management or resolution has a real spiritual component. I think it is important to recognize that element of it, too.

Another element is conflict prevention. That is a term that is being used more frequently now. Conflict prevention means acting to prevent the conflicts before they occur. An example might include classroom meetings, where you establish a level of dialogue in a classroom setting. You also consider the climate in the classroom. So much of the time the climate can be just hectic and chaotic, which itself fosters conflict. Family meetings are another way that you can bring people together to dialogue and prevent conflicts.

Some conflicts are structural. We teach a class on restructuring playgrounds. We've found that most of playgrounds are created in a way that enhances or encourages conflict, because of the ratio of students to adults, and the type of environment that exists in the playground. Most of the playground games are very competitive, and the surfaces are asphalt. There really is not a place for the students to engage in a cooperative-discovery aspect of play, so the possibility of conflict is enhanced.

The last term I would like to talk about is conflict enhancement. It is important to show teachers and other school personnel that sometimes it is necessary to enhance a conflict. Johnson and Johnson, the pioneers of cooperative learning, use the term, "creative controversy." This involves learning how to foster controversy in cases where it can be exciting and can become a learning process. Oftentimes, conflict is what creates change and that is what creates creativity. So how can we enhance that? Controversy or cooperative conflict is defined as a "friendly excursion into disequilibrium."

These are all areas that are workable; they are not intractable. They are skills that students and adults can teach and model.

I especially like the book entitled *The Great Turning*, which was written by Craig Schindler and Gary Lapid. They are from New Mexico and have worked to pull together nuclear activists, the people who make nuclear warheads, and local people to try to address conflicts over nuclear weapons and nuclear materials. One of their main conclusions was that a "warring mind" is at the root of intractable conflict. There are a lot of other things, too, that contribute to a conflict's intractability, of course, but mostly, it is a state of mind that we have--we are at war with ourselves and thus with the another person.

Where does this warring mind come from? According to Brendtro and Brokenleg,[4] it comes from the values of Western patriarchal civilization--especially those values of individualism, winning, domination, and affluence. These values are the source of many, many intractable conflicts. Let me give you some examples.

Suspension and expulsion are examples of the value of individualism manifested in school discipline policies. When students have a problem, they sometimes act out to get attention. What do we do in response? We suspend them and alienate them from the rest of the group. So, they don't get a chance to bond properly with their group, which fosters even more extreme efforts to get attention. If we would pull them into a group and work with them on a group level, we could be much more effective in meeting their needs and eliminating their need to act inappropriately.

Winning and competition are also very dominant modes in the school setting. They have a lot to do with the need to feel "right." Most of the intractable conflicts that I have seen involve two people, both of whom need to feel right--even if it means making someone else feel wrong. People will go to great lengths, even to the extent of losing control, just because they want to be right.

Dominance is another value that contributes to intractable conflict. How do we impose our values on another person? One way we do this is with punishment. We want to make children obedient to certain rules, based on our values. If they are not, we punish them until they, too, hold these values.

Finally, affluence, fosters personal assimilation, power, and status. So many of the conflicts in schools have to do with power and status: who has the coolest tennis shoes, or what clique kids are in.

As Brendtro and Brokenleg suggests, we can avoid or limit some of these problems by adopting what they call, "Native American empowerment values." They replace the value of individualism with the value of belonging, the need to create community. In a strongly bonded community, you can give or get criticism from somebody, without being hurt, without causing conflict. The criticism will be heard and understood, but it will not break the bond between people.

The second value is mastery. Rather than winning, try to master a skill. We haven't been emphasizing this in enough schools. Kids often just try to be better than somebody else. People would do better to focus on the task, rather than on winning.

A third value is independence, rather than dominance. Through independence, you take personal responsibility for yourself and your actions. Related to this is the term "inductive discipline," where discipline is based on how you affect somebody else, not on preset rules. We've heard over and over again, that the turning point in negotiations and mediations is when children share their feelings and the other person hears them. Kids will say, "Wow, I made you feel that way? I didn't realize that." And there's authenticity there. So inductive discipline occurs when children recognize how they are affecting another person.

Lastly, generosity can replace affluence. Children need to be encouraged to give to others, to their school, through service learning. We are trying to incorporate these values into our school mediation programs.

I'll add a few more quick ideas. The dialogue process is also very helpful. It is different than negotiation because you spend more time really getting to know who the other person is. You are able to share more of your vulnerabilities, and come to a greater understanding of the other person. The last stage in the dialogue process is not only coming to a resolution, but determining how you might be able to work together.

My last observation is that conflicts become intractable because of our inability to feel pain. When we don't want to feel pain, we put it on the other person. How can we help ourselves and children accept pain, whether it's the pain of a wound, or the pain of not knowing or growing up? A lot of that has to do with becoming emotionally literate, of being able to understand and express our needs. When we can do that, we are more likely to be able to accept our pain, and not have to put it on somebody else.

NOTES

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[2] Elizabeth Loescher was a co-presenter. Her presentation is available as Working Paper 94-8.

[3] Mostly, they include providing the skills and opportunity for students to communicate more openly and directly.

[4] Larry K. Brendtro and Martin Brokenleg. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Problems*. Vol. 1, No. 4, Winter 1993: 4.