

Teaching Students To Be Peacemakers



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Human beings can rarely relate closely to each other for very long without conflict. A way and a willingness to deal effectively with interpersonal conflict are essential to the healthy development of the student.

JACKIE Miller, an eighth grade social studies teacher in suburban Denver, was one of several teachers in the district who felt a need to help students learn to deal more effectively with conflict. Human beings, she knew, can rarely relate closely to each other for very long without conflict, and a way and a willingness to deal effectively with conflict are essential to the healthy development of the student. Yet most schools have done little to help students deal with conflicts.

In 1973, however, Adams County District #50, in Westminster, Colorado, where Jackie teaches, undertook a comprehensive project to teach concepts of conflict resolution throughout the district's social studies curriculum. In an extended series of workshops, some of which the authors of this article conducted, the teachers developed lessons in peacemaking for grades 5 through

12. The effects of the program on students in eighth grade classes were carefully assessed.¹

Problems of Perception

One of the most successful lesson sequences taught students to perceive conflicts from the other person's point of view. The sequence began with an exercise using the familiar gestalt drawing of a woman that can be perceived as either an old hag or a stylishly dressed young woman. First, half of the class was asked to turn their backs and the other half was shown a slide of the drawing with the young woman's features accentuated. Then they turned their backs and the rest of the class viewed a slide of the drawing with the old woman's features accentuated.

¹ Barbara Dodds Stanford, "The Effects on Eighth Grade Students of a Teacher Training Sequence and a Curriculum Unit on Conflict Resolution." Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Colorado, 1973.

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ated. Finally, both halves of the class viewed the original drawing and were asked what they saw. Because of their previous mind set, each half "saw" in the illusion what they had seen before.² Follow-up discussion led to insights about how differing points of view cause conflict. According to one student,

I thought that the perceptions slides were really neat of that old lady and the young lady. Because you showed us the young lady and all I saw was the young lady. Then you asked Jennifer to go and point to the old lady and when she pointed to the old lady's eye I thought she was crazy. This shows that conflict could appear if one person saw only one side and another person saw a different side. a fight might start.

² This activity and others similar to it appear in: Chester R. Cromwell, William Ohs, Albert E. Roark, and Gene Stanford. *Becoming: A Course in Human Relations*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, forthcoming.

To further help students recognize that the other person may have a different way of viewing an issue, they learned the technique of role reversal. Volunteers were asked to role play an open-ended skit about a conflict between a daughter and her mother. After they had enacted the scene, complete with the usual tears and temper-tantrums, the players reversed roles, with the daughter playing the mother and the mother playing the daughter. The students were amazed at how differently they perceived the conflict when they played the different roles. One student commented,

Role reversal is great for conflict because you are usually just listening to yourself not the other guy. With role reversal you learn the other guy's part to the story.

Other students can be taught a more sophisticated use of role reversal. In this version, a person usually plays himself in



The teacher should help students use their newly learned skills to resolve actual conflicts that occur naturally in the classroom.

the conflict and asks another student to play the person with whom he is having the conflict. Assume, for example, that Tim has come to class complaining about a run-in he had had with the principal that morning. Rather than merely talking about the episode, Tim could enact the situation, with another student playing the principal. From time to time Tim and the "principal" can be asked to reverse roles. For example, if Tim says to the principal, "Why are you always picking on me?" the teacher can quickly instruct the two participants to reverse roles. Tim is now the principal and must answer the question. He is confronted with the need to understand why the principal is doing what he is doing and can begin to view the incident from the principal's point of view.

Also, two students who are engaged in an actual conflict situation in the classroom can be asked to reverse roles temporarily while they continue their argument. By arguing in favor of the other person's position the students will begin to see the conflict from the point of view of the other person.

Active Listening Techniques

Since most conflicts are either caused by or result in poor communication, a very useful technique for coping with conflict is "active listening." In this approach, the listener undertakes to really understand what the other person is saying before responding to him or her. The listener's task is to draw out the speaker, to find out as much as he or she can about the reasons for the speaker holding this position and the feelings behind the speaker's position. The listener can ask questions for clarification, can check his or her own perceptions by reflecting the speaker's words or feelings, but cannot argue or offer his or her own opinions. After the speaker has finished explaining his or her position, the listener must summarize the speaker's position to the speaker's satisfaction. Only then can he or she become the speaker and respond to the previous speaker.

Teaching this technique to a class usually requires several steps. First the teacher should explain it in detail. Then the

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teacher should demonstrate it using a student as the speaker. Then the class should be divided into groups of three. Two students in the triad practice active listening, while the third person acts as referee and points out any violations of the rules.³

Active listening can also tremendously improve the quality of class discussions. Too many students equate a good discussion with a heated argument, which usually involves little learning and often generates hostility. By reminding students to practice active listening in the classroom whenever another member of the class brings up a point with which they disagree, students learn to probe issues deeply and to understand reasons for people taking different points of view. They also tend to develop more respect for people of different backgrounds.⁴

The 3R Strategy

Another technique for conflict reduction that can easily be taught to students is the 3R strategy—Resentment/Request/Recognition. Often people in a conflict are not really certain what they are arguing over, or they are arguing over something which neither party has the power to change. The 3R strategy requires each person to state his or her demands of the other person explicitly, and often a conflict is thus revealed to be far easier to resolve than was assumed.

To apply this strategy, one person in the conflict states what he or she *resents* about the other person, and tells everything that the other person has done to make him or her feel resentful. The other person must listen without interrupting. Then he or she states his or her resentments toward the first person, and the first person listens without interrupting.

Then all the parties to the conflict state

³ For a more detailed explanation of this activity, see: Gene Stanford and Albert E. Roark. *Human Interaction in Education*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, Inc., 1974.

⁴ Gene Stanford. "The Effect of Interaction Exercises on the Quality of Class Discussions in Junior High Schools." Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Colorado, 1973.



The first step in the 3R conflict reduction strategy is for one person to tell everything that the other person has done to make him feel resentful.

their *requests*. The first person tells what the second person should do in order to make him or her feel better and solve the problem, and the second person does likewise.

The *recognition* step has two parts. The first person begins by recognizing those requests that he or she would be willing to meet; this must be done in a spirit of compromise. Then the second person states his or her recognition of those requests of the first person that he or she would be willing to meet. It is possible to continue negotiating for a few minutes until a satisfactory plan of action is decided on. Then the first person states those things he or she recognizes as likeable or admirable in the second person, and the second person does the same. This final step helps assure that the two parties acknowledge that they both have positive as well as annoying qualities.

Students as Mediators

Students are often caught in the middle of other people's conflicts and need to know how to be helpful in such situations. An important concept students should be taught is that taking sides, trying to establish which of the parties in conflict is "right" and which is "wrong," isn't the most helpful way to deal with other people's conflicts. As Thomas Gordon has pointed out, it isn't necessary for

one party to win and another to lose in order to resolve a conflict.⁵ It is possible for the two persons to come to agreement on a solution acceptable to both. In teaching students this "no-lose" approach to mediating a conflict, the following steps are useful:

1. Explain to both parties that it is likely that a mutually agreeable solution can be worked out and that you are willing to help them work toward it.

2. Ask each of the parties, one at a time, to describe the conflict as they see it. If they tend to interrupt one another or do not listen carefully, ask each to summarize the other's position to his or her satisfaction before responding.

3. Ask both parties, one at a time, to explain how the conflict makes them feel.

4. Ask both parties, one at a time, to tell what they desire as an outcome to the conflict, what would be the "ideal state" from their point of view.

⁵ Thomas Gordon. *Parent Effectiveness Training*. New York: Peter H. Wyden, 1970.

5. Help the parties negotiate changes that they are each willing to make in order to bring about the desired outcome for one another.

6. Make a list of what steps each of the parties agrees to take in the future, and set a means for checking back to see if the changes are being made.⁶

The mediation strategy, just like all the other conflict reduction techniques, should first be explained to students, then demonstrated by the teacher using a simulated conflict. Then students can practice the technique in role playing situations. Finally, the teacher should be prepared to have students utilize these techniques to resolve actual conflicts that occur naturally in the classroom. They, like Miss Miller, may find the results surprisingly effective. □

⁶The authors are grateful to Al Roark and Al Main of the University of Colorado for the original version of this strategy. For additional information on teaching conflict reduction, write to: Dr. Gene Stanford, 25 Talcott Road, Utica, New York 13502.

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