Transforming Conflict in the Classroom

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How to productively transform conflict remains one of the most pressing issues that educators face today in schools. Simply put, students cannot learn and educators cannot teach if they do not feel safe and adequately engaged in their learning communities. There are a number of forms of conflict intervention ranging from security measures (video cameras, metal detectors, security guards) to management procedures (punishment and discipline systems), but for the purposes of this article and because I believe it possesses the greatest importance and potential, I am going to focus on educational and curriculum-based approaches to dealing with conflict.

Conflict in the context of schools can range from forms of perceived or actual opposition (to needs, values or ideas, etc) to manifestations of violence (bullying, assault, weapon use, hazing, sexual abuse, and harassment). According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 5.5% of high school students feel too unsafe to go to school, 18% report carrying a weapon, 35.5% were in a physical fight, 12% report having been forced to have sex and 14.5% report having seriously considered attempting suicide. Homicide is the second leading cause of death among youth between the ages of 10 and 24 in the United States and for each such homicide; there are approximately 1,000 nonfatal violent assaults.

So how does an educator, a school, or a community create and sustain programs and approaches that are truly transformative to address these challenges? Here are six ideas that may be helpful:

1. Conflict can be constructive. The focus should not be to eliminate conflict but rather to equip teachers and students with the tools to deal with conflict constructively. That is why the term "transformation" may be more appropriate than resolution, management and even prevention when qualifying an approach to dealing with conflict.

2. Conflict transformation must be linked to academic instruction. Educational systems and schools are sometimes so focused on instruction, standards, and testing that the practice of conflict transformation is seen as a separate endeavor or sidelined due to time constraints. Ultimately the goal is to create learning communities where the skills of empathy, mutual respect and conflict transformation are not only seen as vital but are also understood to actually enhance the instruction of reading, math and other subjects.

3. In order to transform conflict in the classroom, educators should consider pedagogy (how they teach) just as important as content (what they teach). The pedagogical approaches of critical thinking, dialogue, inquiry, and reflection can be used not only to reinforce and enhance the content of a lesson, but also to help students develop the agency necessary to transform conflicts on their own.

4. Conflict transformation programs are as successful as they are comprehensive and long-term oriented. Creating a culture of peace in the classroom and in the school demands participation from all stakeholders in a community: students, teachers, administrators, and parents. It also means engaging these stakeholders through a variety of mediums and activities (afterschool programs, teacher trainings, parent workshops, etc.) over a substantial period of time.

5. It's never too early to start. You might be surprised to learn that some programs have 4 and 5 year olds doing peer-mediation and anti-bullying programs. Fostering core foundations of empathy and respect at this age is absolutely critical.

6. Strategic partnerships are important. There are a number of organizations and universities that specialize in providing training programs that help teachers and students to transform conflict. Likewise, because some forms of conflict are not only emotionally costly for communities but also

economically damaging, it may also be possible to reach out to neighborhood businesses and companies in seeking additional resources for comprehensive conflict transformation programs. Here is a list of organizations and programs (including my own) doing innovative work to transform conflict and build peace in schools communities, both nationally and internationally:

DCPEACE: DCPEACE equips teachers, youth, and families with the skills and knowledge necessary to transform conflict and effectively serve as peacebuilders in their communities. (local).

PeaceGames: Peace Games empowers students to create their own safe classrooms and communities by forming partnerships with elementary schools, families and young adult volunteers. (national).

Educators for Social Responsibility: ESR works directly with educators to implement systemic practices that create safe, caring, and equitable schools so that all young people succeed in school and life, and help shape a safe, democratic and just world. (national).

Search for Common Ground: Search for Common Ground works to transform the way the world deals with conflict - away from adversarial approaches and towards collaborative problem solving. (international).

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