

## EDUCATING FOR HARMONY IN SCHOOLS

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*Foreseeing a conflict often means avoiding it, thereby preventing its causes from developing. This article is an excerpt from the one published in issue number 287 of Cuadernos de Pedagogia and it describes strategies and techniques of "provention," a type of intervention that confronts conflict and promotes negotiation and the search for creative solutions.*

Our idea is to work on the conflicts that arise in educational and related settings. We do not have to wait for conflict to erupt to take action. We want to intervene in the early stages, even before the conflict occurs so that with time and without passion, in a more reasonable climate, we can learn to analyze them and develop creative ideas for resolving them that will allow us to better confront conflict when it occurs. When conflict has already erupted (crisis), we do not usually have the necessary time, tranquility or distance (we are too deeply involved) to be able to confront it successfully. One of the problems we find when dealing with conflict is that we respond too quickly (action-reaction), and we do not have enough referents on how to deal with the conflict in a non-violent way. We should look for spaces in which to work and develop ideas for non-violent resolution of conflict. We understand non-violence as a word which goes well beyond the mere negotiation of violence (it is really the translation of the Ghandian term *ahimsa*, which refers to a positive concept of actively constructing peace and justice). If we learn to develop resolution strategies, when conflict occurs, these new ideas will come to mind spontaneously in the same way that violent or destructive approaches come to mind now. Learning to stop, analyze the conflict and respond constructively is our main goal in conflict education.

We can work on developing these skills in class, during counseling or advisory sessions, during breaks or recess, or within a specifically-designed, school-sponsored program of conflict resolution and mediation.

### Means of intervention

In Peace Education, we approach conflict on three correlated levels and on a parallel level: provention, negotiation, mediation and "non-violent" action. When dealing with young children, working on conflict education will be almost exclusively provention, while with older children, this will be simply a first step on which we can build in order to work at the other two levels as well. In provention and negotiation, the involved parties try to resolve the conflict themselves. In mediation, a third party is brought in to help with the process. In any case, Peace Education does not exclude the use of "non-violent" methods in situations in which there is a significant imbalance of power. The idea is to learn to use "non-violent" force and aggressiveness, the kind that reaffirms you, that allows you to be assertive when fighting for your rights, but always showing respect for the other individuals involved.

## **Provention**

We usually speak of “preventing conflicts” when we want to allude to the need to act before a conflict erupts (crisis) and becomes ugly. However, this term has negative connotations: do not confront the conflict, avoid it, do not analyze it, do not let everything that is involved in the conflict come to the surface, do not look deeply into the causes or reasons for the conflict... Therefore, we will speak of “provention” (a term used by J. Burton) as a means of pre-crisis intervention which offers us:

- an adequate explanation of conflict, including its human dimension
- knowledge about the structural changes that will have to take place to eliminate the causes of conflict,
- suggestions as to the conditions needed to create the right climate and favorable cooperative relationships. This will decrease the risk of new conflicts because methods have been learned to deal with and solve differences before they become antagonistic in nature.

As regards this last point, conflict education means developing a series of skills and strategies that allow us to better deal with conflict. These are listed below:

### **Group-building in an atmosphere of value and trust**

Use techniques and games designed to allow people to introduce themselves, get to know each other and feel integrated into the group, leaving no one out, as this is often the source of many conflicts. All people have two basic human needs: a sense of belonging and a sense of identity. We want to feel part of a group; we want to feel accepted and valued for who we are. Rejection, which is really a lack of integration, is one of the primary sources of conflict. A rejected individual will seek affection and want to be the center of attention, but will use destructive methods such as showing off or bothering others to get this attention. Many times, we fall into the trap and respond to these provocations. The person achieves his goals, which simply encourages him to use the same strategy in the future, which will get him attention, but not acceptance.

In this regard, creating a space at the beginning of the school year in which to form groups, instead of doing this spontaneously when problems arise, is a good preventive step. We can do this in class with a specific group of students or organize a few days of activities throughout the school. It is also not a bad idea to carry out similar activities among the faculty, as new professors often find it difficult to integrate.

In this section, we will also talk about the dynamics needed to create a climate of trust within ourselves and in others that will allow us to confront conflicts free of fear, that we can bring everything out in the open and address any and all issues by speaking directly to the people involved.

We will also include work on self-esteem and valuing others in this section and developing a set of dynamics and spaces that allow us to construct a concept of ourselves and of others by discovering, valuing and bringing out into the light all of our potential that it can be recognized by ourselves and by others. Professors are encouraged to change their attitudes toward teaching and students and emphasize the positive rather than the negative. This is what we call the Pygmalion Effect or self-fulfilling prophecies.

Not only will we work on the values that each person has as an individual, but also those that he has as part of a culture (his identity), such as the values held by the different cultures that exist in our environment (gypsy, Northern African, different regional communities within Spain, etc. ...). We live in an increasingly multicultural society, but one that is not yet very intercultural. In other words, the number of cultures in our society is growing, but there is not much true interaction or mutual learning taking place.

### **Favoring communication and consensual decision-making**

Here we present a series of games and exercises that allow us to develop effective communication and show us how to actively and empathetically listen and participate in verbal exchanges. When we speak of communication, we simply assume it will be effective, but even with all of today's advances in this field, we do not always achieve our goal, which is simply to understand one another. We will develop active listening techniques. This involves going beyond merely hearing to being truly willing to understand the other person and make this willingness clear to him both verbally (by paraphrasing and verifying ...) and non-verbally, through eye contact, body language, etc..

Several techniques allow for fair turn taking in conversation and develop different channels of communication which allow us to transmit not only ideas, but also the emotions and feelings that are present in any conflict.

There are also techniques that teach us how to develop consensus in decision-making using an egalitarian, participatory and non-sexist approach. The goal is to go beyond a mere majority and learn to make decisions in an atmosphere in which everyone has had a chance to speak and feels as if their opinion has been taken into account when making the final decision. In order to learn how to do this, we must delegate part of the responsibility and power we have to build spaces in which decisions can be made.

### **Work on cooperation**

Here the goal is to establish cooperative relationships which teach us to confront conflicts by identifying all of the perceptions of the problem and making use of everyone's strength to achieve a common goal. These techniques allow us to discover and accept the idea that difference is valuable and a source of mutual enrichment. They teach us to discover the other person's values in order to view that person as a possible collaborator, learner and teacher and not as an enemy that must be eliminated because of

differences might make it difficult to reach our goals. We should develop cooperative games, look for cooperative teaching and learning techniques, find alternatives competitive sports and recreational activities, and find academic stimuli other than awards and competitions.

### **Analysis and negotiation**

Our goals here are to learn to analyze, negotiate and seek mutually satisfying and creative solutions that allow students to learn to resolve their own conflicts.

### **Separate person-process-problem**

The first thing we must do in order to analyze conflicts and intervene, is learn to separate and treat each of the three elements present in any conflict in the appropriate way. These three elements are the people involved, the process (approach to resolution) and the problem itself (the antagonistic needs or interests in conflict). Normally we do not separate these, and we take a tough or soft attitude towards them based on whether our attitude to the conflict is competitive or submissive. If we choose the soft approach we are normally sensitive to people, but “weak” when it comes to defending our interests. On the contrary, if we decide to compete or attack, we are strong or tough when defending our rights, but also when dealing with the other parties to the conflict.

Thus we personalize conflicts, attacking the person more than the problem, thereby escalating personal attacks and sometimes forgetting altogether what caused the conflict. All of our time and energy is spent on attacking the other person instead of resolving the problem. We always think that the other person has a problem, and there is only a small step from thinking that someone has a problem to thinking that someone is the problem. This is why it is quite common to hear comments such as “problem student” or “conflictive classmates” .. or terms such as “discipline problems” instead of “relationship or interaction conflicts.”

So here we want to separate the three elements, be sensitive to the people involved when there is a problem, be fair and actively participate in the problem-solving process and be tough on the problem itself by making our own needs known.

### **Searching for solutions**

In this section, the most important topic has to do with developing a series of educational processes that promote creativity and imagination when seeking solutions which satisfy the needs and interests of all of those involved in the conflict. By separating the solution-generating phase of the process from the solution-adoption phase, it is possible to promote open-mindedness as regards possible solutions. It is also important to use tools such as goal/desire or lateral thinking to avoid arguments and blockage of proposed solutions in the first phase. A crazy but unrealistic idea can give rise to a brilliant and very doable solution.

## Methodology

The main tool for working on the elements mentioned above are visualization techniques (role-playing, simulations, theatre, puppets, ...), which, as their name suggests, are techniques which allow us to visualize the specific characteristics of conflict. When using them, we can:

- consider not only the rational aspect, but also the emotional one; feelings often greatly affect perceptions of and attitudes toward a conflict.
- allow ourselves to “distance ourselves” a bit, thereby making it easier for us to see different points of view with less passion.
- try to put ourselves in the other person’s shoes and understand the conflict from his point of view in order to better understand him. This produces a sense of empathy that predisposes us not only to better understand what the other person is feeling, but also to look for solutions that satisfy both parties.
- try to analyze conflicts by going beyond their outward appearance to the roots of the problem by discovering the unsatisfied needs or interests that caused it.
- practice a series of solutions in a laboratory setting and take full advantage of the potential of the group/class with which we are working in order to help us analyze a conflict and find the appropriate solution. Thus we can use our imagination to break down barriers, in other words, to realize that we are not limited to only one possible solution (usually the most traditional one) which we may have used many times in the past with negative results.

This method has to do with what in the field of Peace Education is called the “socio-affective approach.” It is a methodology that recognizes and respects the value that we want to transmit and emphasizes not only content, but also attitudes and values. It is fun, participatory, cooperative, and socio-affective, and it promotes reflection and a critical attitude.

The socio-affective approach consists of “experiencing first hand” the situation to be addressed so as to better understand and feel its dynamics, to be motivated to study and finally, to develop an empathetic attitude which will help us change our values and behavior and come to a personal and transforming commitment.

## Some practical examples

I would like to share some examples that can be used with a group or a class to address five types of dynamics: conflicts, perceptions, power, communication and creativity.

### **Conflict: Imaginary hallways**

The group or class stands in a circle. The facilitator sticks a piece of paper in the center and tells the group that they cannot ask him anything. He goes on to explain how the exercise works: "Each person is standing across the circle from his or her partner (make sure everyone knows who his partner is). Between the two partners there is a completely straight imaginary hallway. All of the hallways cross over the center mark. The walls of the imaginary hallway reach to the ceiling and the hallway itself is as wide as the person's shoulders. When the facilitator claps his hands, everyone must change places with his/her partner while staying within the hallway." The activity can be repeated. Once done, participants evaluate attitudes, reflections, organizational communication, etc.

### **Perceptions: Role-playing on Friday night**

The group or class sits in a circle. Each participant needs a sheet of paper and a pen. In the role play, each person is the parent of the person sitting to the right, and therefore, the child of the person sitting to the left. The idea is to maintain a written conversation with both the person to the right and the one to the left. The exercise begins with each person writing something in their role as parent and passing the paper to the right. From that point on, each person has to respond to the papers received from both right and left, playing either the parent or the child, as the case may be. The situation to be addressed is the parent opening the door very late one Friday night to find his/her 17-year-old child coming in. The child had not notified the parent he was going to be out late nor did he have permission to do so. After a few moments of written "conversation," the participants evaluate how they felt in each role and if they can understand both perspectives on the situation.

### **Power: Flipping the omelette**

The class or group is divided into pairs. One member of each pair lies on the floor with instructions to stick to the floor no matter what. The other person has to try to turn the person over using legitimate methods (no hitting or martial arts allowed!). It is important to make it clear to the person on the floor that he cannot be turned over if he doesn't want to be. After a while, roles are changed and the other partner lies on the floor. After finishing the exercise, we evaluate what kind of power we have and what kind we could have, what power is based on in different relationships, etc., etc..

### **Communication: Paraphrasing**

The group or class is divided into threes. In each group, two members will discuss a topic and the third will be the observer and the person who makes sure that the rules are respected. The topic and one basic rule will be given to the two participants: no one can rebut or challenge an opinion given by the other party without first summarizing correctly what that person said (if the person whose opinion is being paraphrased does not feel the summary is correct, he says so and gets to speak again). After a few minutes, participants

evaluate how they felt, how difficult it was to obey this rule and what usually happens when we argue with someone ...

### **Creativity: Numerical conflict**

Each person in the group is given a piece of paper with either a zero or a one written on it to pin on his/her chest. Half of the group has zeros and the other half, ones. The group must try to come up with a number (for example, 4,565) while complying with the following rules: every person's number must be used to come up with the final number; numbers can be grouped any way the participants want (for example, a 1, a 0 and a 1 would be read 101 – one hundred and one); and the sign for any mathematical operation can be placed between the numbers (add, subtract, multiply or divide). After carrying out the exercise once or twice, participants discuss the difficulties involved in organizing the group in order to find new ways to solve problems.