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# Nurturing Social and Ecological Relationships: The Contribution of Conflict Resolution Education

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## Introduction

Peace education and environmental education have many affinities. At the heart of both, arguably, is a concern with transforming violent or unpeaceful relationships (those that are oppressive, exploitative or destructive) into peaceful ones (relationships that are nurturing, enabling, cooperative and caring). Many peace educators would argue that peaceful relationships among people are not imaginable without also understanding and addressing our violent relationship to the natural world; environmental concerns are integral to any comprehensive vision of peace, and therefore to peace education (see for example: Amster, 2014; Andrzejewski, 2009). Likewise, it is difficult to imagine any meaningful environmental education that did not also express, even implicitly, the value of peaceful relationships. To nurture health and resilience within ecological systems is to emphasise interdependence, connectedness and care.

Peace education is a broad field, encompassing many different objectives and contexts of practice, from dealing with legacies of war in post-conflict societies to educating about world affairs in relatively affluent, peaceful schools (Soloman and Cairns, 2010). It is therefore difficult to speak of it as one 'thing'. This chapter will focus on one important dimension of peace education: the effort to foster qualities and skills for engaging constructively with conflict. The idea of 'engaging constructively with conflict' (as opposed to avoiding, limiting or managing conflict) recognises that conflict is a natural and often productive part of human relationships; it is not always 'bad' (Lederach, 2003, 2005). Most what we consider as progressive social change, such as increasing gender equality, has been achieved through social conflict and struggle. It is often through conflict that we, as individuals or cultures, learn and grow. The challenge, then, is not to avoid conflict, but to find appropriate, creative and non-violent approaches to conflict, so that we can harness its constructive energy and limit its destructive potential.

Skills for engaging with conflict might initially seem tangential to environmental education. However, the nature of the changes happening in our world – the 'crisis' in this book's title - will only strengthen the need for those skills and qualities that enable people to imagine and maintain positive relationships in the face of change and/or adversity. I suggest there are at least three reasons for this:

Firstly, if there is to be an effective effort to de-carbonise the economy and address the wider threats to ecological systems, citizens everywhere will probably be faced with some hard choices. At the most general level this is a question about whether we continue with 'business-as-usual' or make a serious effort to change course. Do we continue to consume energy and resources at the current rate, with all that implies, or do we commit to changing our relationship to the natural world'? Even if there is a commitment to change, there will be conflicts to manage in the process. For example, do we prioritise using land for 'green' energy production (biofuels, wind and solar), for food, or for protecting biodiversity? Do we

prioritise initiatives to ‘green the economy’ over the protection of existing jobs and industries? Might there be a need to consider some forms of rationing or redistribution, to ensure that limited resources are used fairly and efficiently, and that carbon reduction targets are met? Will it become necessary to restrict some personal freedoms (i.e. through limiting the amount we travel) in order that broader, longer-term goals are achieved? Resolving these and related questions in a fair and equitable way will require advanced democratic skills: an ability to deliberate with others about complex issues, to reach informed and responsible decisions, and to resolve conflicts constructively (Few, 2006). It will require other things as well – democratic institutions and processes, an independent, honest media. But the qualities needed for active, responsible citizenship will be crucial.

Secondly, the environmental crisis creates a need for greater solidarity and cooperation at different levels of society, with people working together to build a more resilient and sustainable way of life. This will be challenging in those cultures that have celebrated competition over cooperation, individualism over community, and which have undermined the possibility of meaningful interdependence among people. It will be complicated by actual or perceived conflicts of interest – for example, over declining resources, jobs or other social goods. A renewed and more resilient form of community will require much effort to understand and communicate across different worldviews, to build relationships that can withstand the pressures of political and economic change, and maintain space for dialogue and social learning (Wilson, 2012).

Thirdly, active citizenship sometimes requires that we engage in conflict, to seek social change through what Adam Curle (1971) called ‘constructive escalation’. Curle’s point is that the suppression or avoidance of conflict can be problematic, especially where this is linked to the operation of power. Challenging inequality or injustice – or the continuation of a system that is violent – sometimes requires an effort to make conflict manifest, to engage in protest and challenge. The nature of the environmental crisis means that change is unlikely to happen without some conflict. The challenge is to avoid destructive, violent forms of conflict, whilst engaging in meaningful action.

These points may seem quite distant from the everyday lives of elementary school children and their teachers. Yet, children often experience analogous challenges whilst at school – moral choices (e.g. relating to friendship preferences), choices that imply trade-offs (e.g. how time is spent), dealing with children from different, unfamiliar cultures and backgrounds, negotiating the complexities of social comparisons and hierarchies, experiencing conflict with their peers or teachers, and sometimes dealing with situations or rules that are, or feel, unjust. In other words, the very nature of schools as communities and institutions means that children will be learning – consciously or not - about civic, relational life. The challenge for educators is to help children develop good habits and appropriate skills, not only to help make the school a caring and functional environment, but as part of a wider civic mission. As Deborah Meier suggests:

“Students learn from us; the robustness of our school community, its capacity to exercise judgment on important matters, and its inclusiveness are all part of young people's education. Where else might kids learn about the trade-offs, critical judgments, and responsibilities inherent in democratic life - including when and how to resist? If educating young people to make judgements based on credible evidence, reasoning, and collaboration with others is essential to our task, then we must create schools that have the intention of practicing these arts and the time to do so.” (Meier, 2006).

The remainder of this chapter will discuss some strategies for supporting these aspects of education in elementary schools (much of which may be applicable in other educational settings too). I will introduce three areas of practice within Conflict Resolution Education – cooperative learning, peer mediation and restorative justice – before offering a brief comment on some wider issues that educators might consider in this area of work.

## Conflict Resolution Education

Conflict Resolution Education (CRE) is an umbrella term for a range of initiatives broadly concerned with developing students' social and emotional competencies. Although most obviously associated with specific skills or processes for handling conflict, in reality CRE initiatives tend to have a range of overlapping objectives. Jones (2006) gives a helpful summary of the core goals that CRE initiatives might seek to address. These are:

1. To create a safe learning environment. CRE initiatives, such as peer mediation and restorative justice schemes (discussed below), can help schools address conflicts and behavioural issues when they arise. In contexts where school violence is a problem (Harber, 2009), this can help to reduce tensions and contribute to culture change.

2. To create a constructive learning environment. Linked to the above, CRE can support the creation of positive school and classroom cultures, in which children and teachers are able to communicate, cooperate and collaborate effectively.

3. To enhance students' social and emotional development. Conflict Resolution has a clear normative orientation. Processes like mediation and teaching methods like cooperative learning communicate core values of fairness, respect for others, justice, and nonviolence. They encourage better communication, awareness of self and others (including emotional awareness), critical thinking and creative problem solving – all key elements for more peaceful social relationships.

4. To create a constructive conflict community. Finally, CRE aims to establish habits, skills and processes that enable students and teachers to deal constructively with conflict when it arises.

As I will show, different approaches to CRE may pursue some or all of these goals, in different ways. It is worth noting that conflict resolution education is often both a means and an end in learning situations; it aims to foster certain skills and qualities in students, but in contributing to the creation of a positive, peaceful learning environment for learning, it can support learning more generally. This reflects a relational understanding of the learning process itself. Learning is understood not as an individual activity, but a profoundly social one, taking place through interaction and using the shared social tools of language and culture. In short, people learn in and through relationships. (Wetz, 2011: 6). CRE, in its different forms, nurtures beneficial relationships within and beyond the school.

## Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning is a good example of a broad and integrated approach to CRE. As developed by Johnson and Johnson (2004; 2009), cooperative learning involves the use of collaborative group work to teach simultaneously about curriculum topics *and* interpersonal skills. That is, structured, cooperative group work is used as a pedagogic strategy for engaging students with their core curriculum, whilst explicitly developing students' social, interpersonal skills. Many teachers use small groups for teaching, of course, but cooperative learning has a number of distinctive features:

- Long-term working groups and relationships: Students are often assigned to fixed groups for a long period – a term or semester – rather than being in ad hoc groups for specific activities. This can be a more demanding approach for both staff and students, as any difficult interpersonal dynamics will not be easily avoided (Kelly and Fetherston, 2008). Yet, this 'shared fate' can motivate students to invest in their relationships, to address conflicts if they arise, and work at developing an effective collaborative relationship. Thus, a key element of cooperative learning is 'processing' – spending time reflecting purposefully on how well the group is working, and what they can do to work together better. This can help students become more attuned to their own behaviour and its influence on others, and with a teacher's support, develop good habits in their social interaction.
- Design for independence: Johnson and Johnson understand that for genuine cooperation to happen in group work there must be what they term 'positive interdependence'. Group members must genuinely need each other for the successful completion of a task, otherwise there is little incentive for collaboration. As such, the cooperative learning involves careful design of learning activities in order to create what is termed 'positive interdependence'. The classic example of a cooperative learning activity is the jigsaw exercise. Here students are given different pieces of information relating to a task or topic. Because each student has only one piece of the jigsaw and need all the pieces for completion of the task, they are dependent upon and accountable to each other; they must be effective in their preparation and contributions to the group. In addition, the cooperative situation requires and promotes certain skills and attributes – being able to summarise and explain information clearly, being able to listen effectively, or eliciting information through questioning. Again, not all forms of group work necessarily promote cooperative behaviour. Rather, it can be common for students to work quite individually in supposed group work situations. The appeal of cooperative learning (and other similar methods, like team-based learning) is the consideration given to task design, with the aim of creating a need for genuine cooperation.
- Constructive conflict: cooperative learning activities sometimes deliberately create conflict situations within or between groups to teach good ways to deal with it. For example, Johnson and Johnson advocate the use of 'constructive controversy' exercises, a process that models the steps in deliberative, democratic decision-making. This centres on a chosen controversy, an issue around which there are clear areas of disagreement (for example, wind farms). Students are divided into pairs or groups and asked to research one side of the issue, to prepare the best possible case for their position, and to plan how to put their case across effectively. Students then make their presentations and engage in open discussion, exploring areas of disagreement, refuting attacks, etc. The next steps are the crucial ones. After debating, students then reverse positions, making the best case for the opposing side based on what they have

> heard. In a final step they collaborate to synthesise all the arguments and evidence, working towards a conclusion on which they can all agree. Although students first experience the common adversarial approach to political discussion, the deliberative element at the end reinforces the value of cooperative inquiry and addresses a number of skill areas. In order to produce a synthesis, the students must listen to each other effectively, they must ensure that discussion is inclusive and resolve differences consensually, and so on. This teaches a number of useful lessons – conflict and disagreement are not bad, but there are more or less constructive ways to handle it; active listening can improve mutual understanding; systematic, collaborative inquiry can lead to more robust outcomes.

The attraction (and perhaps challenge) of cooperative learning is that it can be integrated into everyday classroom work, providing a vehicle for collaborative projects on a range of subjects, whilst making the learning *from* and *about* collaboration an explicit focus of teaching. According to the four goals of CRE mentioned above, it can contribute to the establishment of a constructive learning environment as well as, or through, fostering social and emotional learning.

## Peer Mediation

Mediation is commonly defined as an informal, voluntary process in which a 'third party' (someone who is not directly involved in a dispute) helps the disputants (those who are experiencing conflict) find a solution to their problem. Mediation usually aims to help disputants improve their communication about what has happened, what their needs or interests are, and to generate ideas for solving the conflict in way that is acceptable to all. The mediator has no power and the disputants are only bound by what they agree to voluntarily.

Peer mediation schemes create opportunities for children to act as mediators in common, everyday disputes among children in school. Such schemes became popular in the United States during the 1980s, and have since been adopted in thousands of schools worldwide (Cremin, 2003; 2007). There are different models of peer mediation, but they usually include provision of training for volunteer mediators, and the establishment of a mediation service at specific times and/or locations in the school run by children. For example, peer mediators (usually working in pairs) may be available during lunchtimes and break times, so that disputes in the playground can be addressed quickly and without the need for teacher intervention.

Peer mediation schemes obviously need adult support (Cohen, 2005). Teachers may be involved in arranging or providing initial training, and working out procedures and policies so that the scheme runs effectively. Teachers responsible for coordinating the scheme are often on hand during mediation sessions, in case there is a need for additional support or to assist with difficult cases. They also facilitate de-briefing sessions afterwards, to help children process their experience of mediating and draw out any learning.

As noted earlier, the value of peer mediation schemes arguably goes beyond the existence of a procedure for handling conflict in schools. Mediation expresses or embodies a particular ethos, a set of values and ideas about conflict and how it can be handled. The establishment of a peer mediation scheme is therefore a means for establishing or reinforcing a particular culture in the school, as well as teaching values and skills to children in an experiential

manner. According to Liebmann (2000:12–13, in Cremin, 2007) mediation implicitly emphasises:

- Listening to others, for feelings as well as facts;
- Cooperation with others, valuing their contributions;
- Looking for common ground rather than differences;
- Affirmation of self and others as a necessary basis for resolving conflict;
- Speaking for oneself rather than accusing others;
- Separating the problem from the person;
- Trying to understand other people's point of view;
- Using a creative problem-solving approach to work on conflicts;
- Looking at what people want for the future rather than allocating blame for the past;
- Looking at all the options before selecting one to try;
- Looking for a 'win-win'solution, where everyone's interests are satisfied, rather than the adversarial 'win-lose' approach where one person wins and the other person loses.

Mediation schemes enable children to experience what can be termed 'nonviolent communication'. The presence and intervention of a third person can help to diffuse strong feelings, slow down and channel communication, and helps disputants to properly hear what the other is saying. Perhaps most crucially, peer mediation schemes can empower children within a context where adults usually set and enforce rules and punishments. As Hilary Cremin writes, "People are more likely to change their actions if they hear how their behaviour is affecting the other person and if they have been involved in reaching a solution – rather than being subjected to an imposed solution (2007: 16). Her research suggests that the more equal power relationship among children, and their closer understanding of how it feels to be a child, makes peer mediation effective, and more empowering than more traditional processes for dealing with pupils' disputes.

Johnson and Johnson's (2004) 'Teaching Students to Be Peacemakers' (TSP) programme is an example of a more integrative programme. It combines teaching about conflict theory (what conflict is, what causes it), different strategies for response (from withdrawal to compromise), and techniques for negotiation (resolving conflicts without help) and mediation (helping others resolve conflicts). Once students have been trained, teachers set up a peer mediation scheme, as described above.

The TSP programme is intended to be progressive and developmental. It is taught over 12 years, with students attending training each year. The training becomes more complex and sophisticated as students progress, and the opportunity to practice skills year-on-year helps students to achieve meaningful competence. The idea here is that skilful conflict resolution requires mastery, and mastery requires core skills to become habitual or second-nature. Only through repeated practice, in a supportive environment, is this possible. While this is a more ambitious and demanding approach than a stand-alone peer mediation scheme, there are potential benefits in having a clear and developmental curriculum centred on increasing skills and understanding throughout the school years.

## Restorative Justice

Restorative Justice (RJ) programmes have some similarities to peer mediation, particularly in terms of a focus on empowering pupils to deal with situations of conflict in a constructive way. RJ processes usually come into play when some harm has been caused, but as an alternative to more traditional (punitive) mechanisms for dealing with misconduct. Morrison and Vaandering argue that standard school disciplinary processes often "rob students of a rich opportunity for collective problem solving, learning, and growth. Instead they (students) learn that other "people of power" solve problems."(Morrison & Vaandering, 2012: 140) By contrast, the focus of RJ is dialogue about what happened between those involved and those affected by the incident, with an emphasis on empowering students to find solutions to problems and to learn from mistakes. Where traditional disciplinary processes in schools focus on which rules or laws were broken and what punishment is deserved, RJ focuses on who has been hurt, what their needs are, and the obligations of the wrongdoer to address these needs and rectify the harm. The aim here is to foster reflection, understanding and empathy, primarily in relation to the victim's experience, but allowing exploration of the motives and intent of the 'wrongdoer'. This reflects a contention "that socially responsible actions and responses are best learned in a relationship culture where individuals are respected and well integrated into a social network" (Morrison, 2001: 196).

| **Three Shifts Toward Restorative Schools and Classrooms** | |
|---|---|
| **From…** | **To…** |
| Efforts to suppress misbehavior based on the view that misbehavior is evidence of failing students or classrooms. | Recognizing and using the inherent value of misbehavior as an opportunity for social and emotional learning. |
| Authority-driven disciplinary actions that focus only on the identified misbehaving students. | Restorative circles that bring together everyone who is most immediately affected by the incident. |
| Punishment and exclusion used to control misbehavior and motivate positive behavior changes. | Dialogue leading to understanding and action to set things right and repair and restore relationships. |

(From: Clifford, 2013)

There are different practices associated with RJ in schools. However, the use of 'classroom circles' are considered a foundation for developing a restorative culture. As the name suggests, this involves classroom dialogue with students sitting in a circle, sharing thoughts and addressing shared issues in an inclusive, participatory and consensual process. The circle arrangement may seem obvious or unimportant, but it both symbolises and encourages a different set of expectations. Compared with the usual classroom arrangement – children in rows, teacher at the front – the circle approach fosters a sense of equality and accountability; everyone can be seen and heard.

Amos Clifford (2013) describes two types of classroom circles: 'community-building circles', which focus on building relationships within the class, and 'responsive circles', focused on addressing a specific issue or problem. However, the two are related: community-building circles are used to build relationship, trust and familiarity with dialogue, which in

turn supports the use of circles to deal with more controversial issues. A responsive process would usually involve some guiding questions designed to elicit information about what happened and encourage exploration of both effects and possible responses. For example:

- What happened and what were you thinking at the time of the incident?
- What have you thought about since?
- Who has been affected by what happened and how?
- What about this has been hardest for you?
- What do you think needs to be done to make things as right as possible?

A teacher/facilitator might use various techniques to encourage full, but safe participation, from agreed groundrules, to the use of a 'talking stick' or other objects. The important thing is that processes are open and honest, focused on inquiry and discovery, rather than leading students to specific, pre-determined conclusions.

There is emerging evidence that restorative justice practices can have numerous beneficial effects in schools, ranging from improved behaviour and participation, to noticeable effects on students social and emotional learning (Clifford, 2013). Because different sides of a story are listened to, pupils tend to see the process as being 'fair' and equitable. Likewise, the focus on restoration as opposed to punishment helps to maintain community within the school, preventing the harm that can arise from exclusion or stigmatisation of a wrongdoer (McClusky, 2008).

There is much more to discuss here, but there are many resources available online, including detailed lesson plans and activities (see resources below).

## Comment

There is clearly value in these and other efforts to teach young people how to engage more constructively with conflict (see: Akgun & Araz, 2014). At the same time, however, it is important to keep asking some broader questions about the need for such initiatives within schools, and about their limitations in addressing the prevailing culture of education. For example, the Human Scale Education movement has argued persuasively that many problems in contemporary schools – including poor discipline and unpeaceful relationships– are linked to the size of educational institutions. As we know, the tendency in most state education systems has been to favour larger schools. This is often in the belief that these offer 'economies of scale', and a richer experience for children – arguments for which there is some support. However, there is growing recognition that it is difficult in big schools "to establish the kind of human relationships that lead to good educational outcomes" ('good educational outcomes' here meaning not just academic achievement, but the well-being and flourishing of the individual student) (Haunebdorf and Kestner, 2009). The sheer size and anonymity of large schools make it harder for children to know one another other well and, crucially, to be known by properly their teachers. In turn, problems of discipline and conflict become both more likely and more difficult to manage when relationships within the school are weaker. By looking at the relationship between scale and the culture of the school, we might gain a more a critical perspective on the "taken for granted" structures and systems of discipline and control in schools' (Vaandering, 2013).

It is worth noting here that making schools smaller is not necessarily the best focus for change; there can be very poor small schools and very good larger schools. Rather, Haunebdorf and Kestner (2009) suggest that the most important thing is to 'adopt the *characteristics* of smallness'; to adapt the size and culture of learning communities *within* a school so that they enable the same kinds of relationships that good small schools can achieve. There might be any number of ways to ensure that students feel part of a defined peer group, and have a sense of continuity and regularity in their relationships with each other (such as classroom circles or cooperative learning); the point is to understand what conditions make good relationships more likely.

There are also different ways to teach the values and skills that are the focus on conflict resolution education, and indeed there can be advantages to embedding these in everyday classroom activities rather than labelling them as a 'special' activity. For example, the foundational skill of 'active listening' – being able to listen attentively and respectfully to others, to notice body language and other aspects of communication, to ask questions to elicit more information, etc – can be practiced within many classroom processes. It can obviously be modelled by a teacher in their interactions with students. It can also be integrated into peer feedback processes or small group discussions, through explicit instructions to take turns, to summarise what others have said, to give and receive feedback in appropriate ways – such activities can help develop good habits in social interaction.

## Conclusion

If there is a central theme in this chapter, it is about relationship. I started by discussing the connection between peace education and environmental education via a shared concern with violent, unpeaceful relationships – including our relationship with the natural world – and the necessary effort to establish more peaceful, nurturing relationships. I then discussed some different approaches to conflict resolution education all of which are concerned with encouraging or restoring positive relationships, through better communication, cooperative learning, through social and emotional awareness, and through processes like mediation and dialogue. I also suggested that conflict resolution education is informed by a relational pedagogy; an understanding of learning as a social, interactive process.

Clearly, if we are to address the environmental problems that are the concern of this book – climate change, biodiversity loss, soil erosion, etc – there is a need to critically re-examine our relationship with nature. There are many ways to approach this, including through nature-based learning and other approaches to environmental education. I would like to end by suggesting that the experience of cooperative, nurturing, respectful and restorative human relationships might enable and encourage the same in relation to nature. Conflict resolution education can help to create school communities where such qualities can flourish and be part of children's experience. In turn, this might encourage a capacity for the necessary restorative work so urgently needed in our often unpeaceful world.

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**Selected Resources:**

Cooperative Learning: http://www.co-operation.org/

Peer Mediation: http://www.schoolmediation.com/

Centre for Restorative Process: http://www.centerforrestorativeprocess.com/

International Institute of Restorative Practices www.iirp.org

Human Scale Education: www.hse.org.uk