

Creating a Peaceable School Community: Resolving Intercultural Conflicts

By Annette Townley, M.Ed.



**For the School Conflict Resolution Resource Center
of the Western Justice Center**

Fourth in a Series of Four Leadership Forum Reports

The James Irvine Foundation and The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation provide operating support for the School Conflict Resolution Resource Center of the Western Justice Center.

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From Conflict to Collaboration

Based in Pasadena, California, the Western Justice Center is a national nonprofit that collaborates with other organizations to develop innovative models of conflict resolution. The Center relies on a small, core staff who convene cooperative efforts to create, evaluate and replicate new ways to resolve conflicts and to improve the quality of justice in the regional, national and international spheres.

The Center is a nonpartisan, non-ideological organization built upon respect for a wide range of viewpoints. This is a place where creative minds can invent new approaches, share ideas and serve as a catalyst for experimentation and change. The Center creates cost-effective partnerships with other organizations in order to accomplish what each organization could not achieve alone.



The Western Justice Center campus in Pasadena, California

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Foreword

The Western Justice Center is pleased to announce the release of Resolving Intercultural Conflicts. This is intended to provide a helpful guide for communities coping with conflicts that arise inevitably among a population of diverse and often transient cultures. This is the fourth in a series of four reports on constructive ideas for Creating a Peaceable School Community.

Previous reports from the School Conflict Resolution Resource Center have focused on: (1) the role of educational stakeholders as leaders in transforming a school's culture; (2) the role that a school's culture can play in creating an inclusive, collaborative community; and (3) how to evaluate the effectiveness of school-based conflict resolution programs. This report examines the development of competency in cross-cultural conflict resolution.

We would like to thank the following people for their important contributions: Annette Townley, M.Ed., Schools Program Consultant, who facilitated the Leadership Forum Series and authored the reports; Jonathan Hutson, J.D., Communications Director, who served as Editor; and Steven Brehm, Webmaster, who designed the reports and who collaborated with Hutson in posting the entire series on our Website, www.westernjustice.org/resources.htm.

We gratefully acknowledge The Weingart Foundation, The James Irvine Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, whose generous support makes possible the work of the School Conflict Resolution Resource Center.

We hope that this report will aid students, parents, educators, policy makers and other community stakeholders to enhance learning environments by understanding and addressing the dynamics of intercultural conflicts.



Bill Drake
Executive Director

Introduction

In the 21st century, the majority of public school students will be young people of color. Yet the majority of public school teachers will not reflect the ethnic diversity of their students. According to a 1991 survey by the National Education Association, 86.8% of public school teachers are white—a figure that has remained roughly the same for 25 years. Further, regardless of ethnicity or culture, most school personnel will lack the proper training to respond to conflicts arising from or impacted by cultural differences.

This picture raises four important questions:

1. How can school communities gain the knowledge and skills to successfully nurture an environment in which diversity thrives?
2. How can school communities cultivate awareness and acceptance of the inevitable conflicts that arise from differing values and cultures?
3. How can conflicts be better understood as opportunities for growth, self-awareness, and development of understanding and respect for others?
4. How can educational stakeholders articulate a shared vision that conflicts can enrich and strengthen our school communities?

Some answers to these questions rest in the field of conflict resolution in education. The best of today's conflict resolution programs look at the issues of diversity – particularly prejudice and bias – as these relate to the successful resolution of conflict. Conflict resolution strategies may be seen as powerful tools in helping to build peaceable school communities.

This fourth Leadership Forum Report in a series of four from the School Conflict Resolution Resource Center of the Western Justice Center examines two questions:

1. What are the conflicts surfacing in school communities in which cultural differences are underlying or exacerbating issues?
2. What skills do educators feel they need to address cultural differences?

It is important to recognize that few intergroup conflicts truly originate in schools. These conflicts usually reflect deep biases in the surrounding society. Therefore, schools cannot completely resolve these conflicts alone. However, schools are given the social authority to acknowledge broad issues and respond to them. With courage and vision, it is possible for schools to convene parents, students, staff, faculty, and community leaders in collaborative problem solving. School can be models for society-at-large. If we create environments and structures in which students and staffs routinely and effectively resolve their differences, we foster an expectation that it is normal and possible to talk through problems rather than fight.



Annette Townley, M.Ed.
Schools Programs Consultant
Forestville, California, Fall 1999

I. Background and Overview

A. The School Conflict Resolution Resource Center

The School Conflict Resolution Resource Center (Resource Center) sponsored by the Western Justice Center Foundation, is a Pasadena-based alliance of conflict resolution and educational organizations. It is dedicated to expanding the use of conflict resolution principles and practices in lower, middle, and secondary schools. The Resource Center focuses on the Los Angeles area and Southern California, with potential to expand to serve schools on the Pacific coast and eventually throughout the West.

The Resource Center's strategy recognizes that the problems of violence and intergroup conflict in schools will not respond to a single solution or isolated pilot projects. We hold that these problems are systemic in nature and require a holistic approach in which all stakeholders within a school community address these issues jointly and are given the necessary skills to solve problems constructively and collaboratively. Ultimately, successful methods must be incorporated into the fabric of our schools. This does not mean that schools must do all the work and that organizations outside the schools cannot play important roles. It means that school systems themselves must take the lead to design and build tested models into the educational structure.

B. Fourth Leadership Forum

This final forum focusing on intercultural issues took place on May 4, 1999. The author coordinated a team of facilitators. She was joined by Chiray Koo of the Asian Pacific American Dispute Resolution Center, Joe Maizlish and Wanda Smoot of the Martin Luther King Legacy Dispute Resolution Center, Bruce Philpott of the Community Non-Violence Resource Center and Terry Wheeler of the Center for Dispute Resolution Capital University Law School.

Three school districts participated. These were Glendale Unified School District, Rowland Unified School District, and South Pasadena Unified School District. Leadership teams from the districts met with conflict resolution experts to explore educators' concerns about resolving intercultural disputes and to identify the skills needed to address these concerns. In August, a two-day follow-up training took place to deepen the conversation and to provide the requisite skills.

The Resource Center selected these school districts based on several criteria and program directions:

- An initial focus upon urban/suburban districts that are often ignored in education discussions in the Los Angeles area and California, but have many of the same challenges facing inner city schools in major cities – including economic challenges; great racial, cultural, and language diversity; limited resources; and gang, drug and crime activity.
- A focus on school districts rather than individual schools so as to help more districts help themselves and each other at strategic levels.
- Districts that appear well led and willing to innovate.

- Districts with leadership, administrators, faculty, students, and parents, who are committed to introducing or enhancing negotiation and conflict resolution curricula and programs in a systemic rather than superficial manner.
- Sufficient geographic proximity to allow a concentration of effort and opportunities to work together across district lines, so that each district would not have to develop all its own resources for training, curriculum development, evaluation, and public education.

II. Setting the Stage

A. Statistics

Participants were given a copy of a report entitled **Excerpts from the Los Angeles County Children’s Scorecard 1998** and the relevant demographic information was highlighted. Los Angeles represents one third of the state’s population and California represents the seventh largest economy in the world. Within LA County, 240 cultural groups speaking 140 languages reside. Few if any places in the world can boast this rich mixture of cultural groups. Given these statistics, educators and students are faced with many cross-cultural challenges. For example, people’s cultural backgrounds can be quickly subsumed by the dominant culture. This is seen in the case of two Taiwanese boys who changed their names to Brian and Todd within two weeks of arriving at school so as to “make their lives easier.”

B. Team Building

Participants were guided through an activity that allowed them to begin to look at the relationship between culture and conflict. Four tangent boxes were created on the floor and labeled as follows:

Very Much or a Lot	None or Not at All
Somewhat	A Little

The group was asked the following set of questions regarding requests and directed to move to the box representing their response:

- How easily can you refuse a request?
- How easily can you refuse a request from a supervisor?
- How easily can you refuse a request from a colleague?
- How easily can you refuse a request from an acquaintance?
- How easily can you refuse a request from a good friend?

The next set of questions the group was asked to respond to focused on calling people by their first names:

- How comfortable are you calling people by their first names?
- How comfortable are you calling people who supervise you by their first name?
- How comfortable are you calling people you serve by their first name?
- How comfortable are you calling people who are older than you by their first name?

- How comfortable are you calling the friends of your parents by their first name?

The group discussed their responses and noted the following:

- It is important to understand what we have learned from our cultural and family background and realize that this learning influences our behavior.
- We often respond to people differently in personal than professional settings.
- Age and status do impact our responses to people.
- Respect, boundaries, and informality are viewed differently in different cultures.
- Values placed on hierarchy and power influence people's responses in situations.

When asked how the varied responses to the above mentioned situations might create conflict in the schools, participants identified the following:

- Some educators with PhD's want to be referred to with the title "Dr."
- The title "coach" often carries prestige.
- Allowing students to call staff by their first names can create a more cooperative school atmosphere, but might not be appreciated by all faculty members.

In sum, we each view the world through particular filters and lenses, ones that have been influenced by our cultural backgrounds. (Here, culture is defined broadly to encompass a range of factors such as age, gender, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, disability, and ethnic, racial, religious, and linguistic affiliation.) When multiple and differing perspectives exist side by side, a community is bound to experience misunderstandings and miscommunications that can lead to conflict. Conflict resolution offers a structure and a set of skills that allow us to have the kinds of conversations we need to be having on the issues of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, et cetera, as they inform many of the conflicts emerging in school communities today. Conflict resolution also provides us with the opportunities and strategies to engage in creative problem solving by helping us think outside of our boxes. By boxes I mean our mental models or the stories we tell ourselves about the world that create obstacles to our understanding of others and our ability to work through problems together.

III. Mapping the School Landscape

A. Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism means more than one culture and encompasses the perspectives from many cultures. Often, in order for school communities to sincerely embrace and reflect their cultural diversity within school programs, curriculum, and policies, there needs to be a shared sense of why this is important.

To begin this process with the school districts attending the forum, participants were asked to identify their personal and institutional (school or school district) interests with respect to multiculturalism.

An inventory of the personal interests from the participants revealed:

- Respect for diversity
- Respect of individuals
- Acceptance
- Enjoy richness
- Treat all with integrity
- Tolerance
- Justice
- Awareness
- Communication
- Willingness to accept
- Overcome pre-conceived notions
- Educate others about ethnic backgrounds
- Build awareness of what is around people
- Understand gestures, body language
- Respect and understanding
- Understand/recognize the cultures I carry within myself

Below are the institutional interests identified. As we can see, there are many intersections between the personal and institutional.

- New subcultures may develop values that are not positive such as males disrespecting females
- Concern that students will feel isolated

- Acceptance
- Tolerance
- Respect
- Integrity
- Diversity – acknowledge and accept
- Awareness
- Communication
- Overcome pre-conceived notions
- Egalitarianism
- Educate others about ethnic backgrounds
- Build awareness of what is around people
- Understanding
- Greater recognition of existing multiculturalism
- Generational perspectives and understanding
- Programs to develop and celebrate multiculturalism
- Empower the kids to take these things on themselves

Underlying all these interests is most likely the desire to create an optimum learning environment to meet the needs of a diverse student population.

B. Types of Conflicts

Participants were asked to brainstorm the types of conflicts on their school campuses in which cultural differences are the underlying or exacerbating issue. Their list was as follows:

- Intercultural conflicts – for example, between some Armenian and Latino males
- Intracultural conflicts – such as some Korean girls who assault younger Korean girls when they do not show older ones respect
- Iranians vs. Soviet Armenians who share the same language and many cultural values, but the Soviet Armenians have lost socio-economic status
- Lunch group cliques
- Fights
- Gangs separated by race/neighborhood
- Economics/class/socio-economics
- Homework

- Names
- Level of parent participation
- Ability to help parents acculturate to the system
- Communication differences due to language
- Economic situation affects social status among kids
- How honor classes are selected

C. Case Studies

Each district team was then asked to select one of the conflicts they had identified and develop it into a brief case study by answering the following questions: 1) Who was involved? 2) What was the situation? 3) Where did the conflict take place? 4) When did it take place? And 5) What was the underlying issue? The team was also instructed to develop the case only up to the point of intervention.

Once the case studies were written, the teams passed their “stories” on to another district team who responded to the situation as if it were their school. Outlined below are the case studies and suggested intervention strategies.

Case Study 1

Who: An Armenian of Iranian descent born in the US and a Soviet Armenian who recently immigrated to the US.

What: Soviet youth is aggressor because an Iranian youth “dissed” (disrespected) him, his mother, and his origin.

Where: Gym locker, basketball court, and quad.

When: During a normal school day in February.

Underlying Issue: The students’ families support animosity between Armenians from Iran and the former Soviet Union.

Intervention Strategy: School’s conflict resolution program would be informed and peer mediation would be offered to the two students. If the conflict had progressed into a physical fight, there would be a suspension. However, upon re-entering school after suspension, peer mediation between the students would be required. There needs to be a program in place to reach and work with the parents as well.

Case Study 2

Who: Two students from the high school and one student from a parochial school.

What: A comment made by the student from the parochial school: “The problem with violence is that poor families don’t care about their kids and allow them to run the streets all night.” Two students from the high school (both from poor families) took vehement vocal exception to the remark and commented that both of them were college-bound with full scholarships and do not roam the streets.

Where: A five-school conference on preventing youth violence at the Whittier YMCA that included various law agencies and related support agencies.

When: October 1998.

Underlying Issue: Assumptions and stereotypes about poor people.

Intervention Strategy: Making this incident a teachable moment by posing the following questions to the conference for discussion with an emphasis on student dialogue:

- Where does this idea about poor families come from? Is it valid?
- How do students perpetuate this notion? How can students change this notion?
- Does wealth play a role in who we are, how we behave, what we can achieve, and our desire to achieve?
- How do economic and cultural backgrounds affect our values and assumptions?

Also, make sure that the discussion moves into action planning and suggestions for the participants.

Case Study 3

Who: Sixth grade girl in gifted interdisciplinary English/Social Studies class.

What: Homework assignments are very heavy and projects are very time consuming and require detailed effort. The assignments often require reports to be printed on computers and parents are expected to make sure their child's work gets done. Her parents are concerned because they feel the workload is too heavy.

Where/When: Student had to work through Christmas Break.

Underlying Issue: Parents from different cultural backgrounds have different responses to the amount of homework. Many other white parents have voiced the same concern as the parents of the sixth grade girl feeling their kids need time to play. Some Asian parents and other parents of students aiming for the Ivy League schools (often affluent whites) have requested more homework for their children. The Latino population has not expressed concerns either way, but many Latino students do not always complete their homework assignments.

Intervention strategy: Clarify expectations of classes and their respective workload through an orientation with parents. The goal is to make sure that the parents have satisfied their understanding of what is expected at different levels of class offerings. Review school philosophy, goals and standards and get input from the parents. Allow flexibility in policy to allow transfers without placing labels or blame.

An important part of the work over the past year in the Leadership Forums has been the sharing of ideas and expertise across school districts. This activity provided an important vehicle this for this type of networking and was built upon in the August Training through extensive case study development and feedback sessions.

IV. Dialogue

At the end of lunch, Jonathan Hutson, the Western Justice Center's Program Manager for Dialogues Online: Racial Healing in Our Communities, gave a presentation on intergroup dialogue. He described dialogue as "an open and honest forum which brings together diverse people with the aid of trained facilitators to share personal stories, express emotions, affirm values, ask questions, clarify viewpoints, and propose solutions to community concerns."

He then noted five factors that make for an effective dialogue:

1. Involve grassroots leaders and stakeholders.

Effective dialogues seek diverse perspectives from grassroots leaders and stakeholders within a variety of community institutions including faith communities; schools and universities; government agencies dealing with issues such as education, health care, and law enforcement; business; and media.

2. Create a safe environment.

Encourage groups to agree upon ground rules that help people feel safe in sharing personal stories and revealing a range of emotions. Ground rules might include: listen with respect, speak from personal experience using "I" statements, and disagree without being disagreeable.

3. Sustain commitment.

Bridge building is trust building and the process takes time. Trust is built on honesty, consistency, and patience. Effective dialogue is not a one-shot deal, but a sustained commitment to building relationships of trust that are based on mutual understanding and respect. Let honest, friendly, one-to-one relationships become the basis for transforming a community's key organizations.

4. Move from talk to action.

Dialogue is more than an opportunity to stand on a soapbox and sound off. The aim of dialogue is not to argue "correctness" of a position, but to correctly understand the values and viewpoints that inform another's worldview. In dialogue, people listen to each other's experiences and perspectives, identify community problems, explore underlying causes together, and then search for collaborative solutions.

Envision opportunities for people to participate in positive change. Brainstorm what changes need to occur on the individual, group, and institutional levels and how people can work together to transform their communities.

5. Develop skills in dialogue and conflict resolution.

A number of national nonprofit organizations such as Study Circles Resource Center, Hope in the Cities, and the National Conference for Community and Justice provide training and materials on the art of organizing and facilitating dialogues. The Western Justice Center's Website (www.westernjustice.org/orgs.cfm) features an online database of more than 1,450 community groups, educational institutions, and professional associations which provide resources or experience in the skills of dialogue and conflict resolution.

V. Mapping the Personal Landscape

A. Cultural Frameworks

The stage was set with a short skit presented by some of the trainers. A male is complimenting a female co-worker on her presentation. The woman thanks the man and agrees she did a good job. Another female worker overhears the conversation and as another male co-worker enters the room he asks her if she saw the presentation. The woman says she did and states that it wasn't very good and that she thought the female presenter were arrogant. Participants were asked to share their observations of the scene.

A lot of the conversation centered around whether the woman who had a problem with the presentation should speak directly to the presenter and what might be going on between these two woman. (The presenter was an African American woman and her co-worker was a Chinese American woman.) There was a concern that value judgments were made about people based on assumptions rather than a spirit of seeking to understand the other person. People wondered if the conflict between the two women represented a larger conflict between these two cultural communities. The general feeling was that the Chinese American woman should have spoken to the presenter directly which led to a discussion about how third party intervention is more appropriate than face-to face confrontations in some cultures. How compliments are handled in different cultures was also explored. For instance, in one Chinese-American's family compliments were never accepted and to do so demonstrated arrogance.

The activity reminds us how important it is to not be ethnocentric in our interpretation of other people's behaviors. Rather we must enter communication with an open mind and an open heart, and always to check our assumptions before responding to a situation.

B. Skills

Participants were asked to draw a picture of a landscape that represented and reflected how they felt about their skills for navigating the terrain of conflicts that have a cultural component.

Below is a description of some of their drawings:

- Beginning of a path very rocky, as the path continues it is covered by the shade of a tree.
- River represents personal life and the rocks in the river indicate when personal conflicts arise; the mountain represents work that needs to be done to overcome issues, but there are steps up the mountain which represent resources to assist on the journey; and once over the top the sun is shining.
- Barriers on the periphery with a body of water representing thoughtfulness and then a big open expanse indicating uncertainty of what's ahead.
- Transformative landscape in which a forest becomes a canoe that is created from the local resources of the forest; the canoe travels on a river that has hidden obstacles that can be overcome through solutions from other cultures.

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- Uphill battle with trees representing success and you plant more trees as you go until they flourish.
- Dark murky road with blocks along the way.
- Two trees with roots too close together needing many solutions to resolve the problem.
- Desert with path with rocks and prickly bushes (issues), inclined to avoid because of lack of skills; however, not afraid of the heat so stay involved and build the skills.
- Two views: one road goes off and the other road has a clear path.
- Climb up ropes in a building with no doors; always going to be tough to reach the top.
- Tree goes through cycle and grows bigger and stronger and continues to evolve.

Participants were then asked to translate the feelings from their drawings into a both a list of the skills they feel they already have and ones they feel they need to address conflicts with a cultural component. Below are their responses:

Current Skills

- Not assuming I have all the answers
- Good listening skills
- Patience
- Willingness to facilitate conflicts
- Risk taking
- Focus and flexibility

Skills Needed

- Create a safe, trusting environment
- Bring closure to an issue
- Create a win/win situation
- Develop respectful modes of operating among participants
- Neutrality – when and how much
- Avoid assumptions
- Actual techniques for facilitation
- Identify spectrum of cultural differences
- Conflict management skills
- Practice

- Comfort with conflict
- Watch people model techniques and explain them
- Relationship building
- Ability to partner with diverse co-facilitator
- Conflict analysis
- Analyze issues of power
- Active listening/validation
- Establishing and maintaining norms
- Focus and flexibility
- Recognizing stereotypical assumptions and pointing them out non-judgmentally
- Evaluation of how people's attitudes have transformed

The participants provided the trainers with a good blueprint for the August training.

VI. Conclusion

The purpose of this report is to summarize the thoughts, feelings, and concerns of the participants with respect to resolving intercultural conflicts. Developing competency in cross cultural conflict resolution is more and more of an imperative for educators across the country. Administrators who consistently utilize skills they learn in professional development workshops provide important role models for the staff. The teacher sets the tone for the classroom, the principal for the school, and the superintendent for the district. If students experience a non-threatening environment in which cooperation is encouraged, trust is demonstrated, and group dialogue is frequent, they will have more opportunities to practice and reasons to choose non-violent conflict resolution strategies over aggression and violence.

As school communities are trying to understand the social changes taking place in our cities and towns today, it is important to remember that there is no one program, no magic bullet that can provide a “quick fix.” We are attempting to change lifelong patterns of behaviors and beliefs and this task is enormous and complex, but educators with open hearts and open minds can make a difference. However, passion and caring in and of itself is not enough; it needs to be coupled with knowledge and wisdom in intergroup relations. Our relationships need healing. We have the courage and vision to meet the challenge of the 21st century and make our school communities into ones in which the human spirit in all its diversity succeeds and thrives.

Appendix: Participants in the Forum of May 4, 1999

Leslie Adelson
Superintendent
South Pasadena Unified School District

Bonnie Armstrong
Regional Advocate
The Casey Family Program

Ron D'alessandro
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Rowland Unified School District

Rene Arrobio
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South Pasadena Unified School District

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Ken Biermann
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Creating a Peaceable School Community

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South Pasadena Unified School District

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