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BEST LEADERSHIP PRACTICES
for Caring and Successful Schools

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CHAPTER SIX

Waging Peace in Our Schools

The Resolving Conflict Creatively Program

Linda Lantieri

I do not want a new generation of children with high intelligence quotients and low caring quotients; with sharp competitive edges and dull cooperative instincts; with highly developed computer skills but poorly developed consciences; with gigantic commitment to the big "I," but little sense of responsibility to the bigger "we."

Marian Wright Edelman, President, Children's Defense Fund
(Children's Defense Fund, 2000)

In 1968, Martin Luther King Jr., asked our nation a compelling question: Where do we go from here—chaos or community? This was the same year I began teaching in a
fifth-grade classroom in East Harlem. The 37 children in my class had many needs, and many obstacles interfered with their learning. Yet also present in their lives was a sense of community—an unwritten code, reflected by the open doors of churches and the greetings of neighbors, that these were everybody’s children. Back then, I could not have imagined that three decades later I would be interviewed for a prime-time television special titled “Kids Killing Kids.”

More and more, chaos seems to be replacing community. Who could predict that the 20th century would end with the senseless stream of violence in our schools and communities that has touched all of our young people, from the youngest to the oldest, from the poorest to the most privileged? As we enter a new century, we are faced with a great challenge—how to reclaim our schools, homes, and communities as violence-free growing zones for our children. How will we ensure that our young people feel so cared for that they would never wish to do harm to themselves or anyone else?

**CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

These challenges offer an unprecedented opportunity. The choices we make now about how to nurture our youth will have critical implications for generations to come. At this time, we seem to be doing the least harm to the most privileged (Comer, 1999). Yet one U.S. government study found that 25% of teenagers, privileged or not, are at risk for failing to cope with the demands in their lives (National Research Council, 1995).

In his groundbreaking book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman summarized 10 years of scientific study on emotions by saying the following:

Perhaps the most disturbing piece of data in this book comes from a massive survey of parents and teachers and shows a worldwide trend for the present generation of children to be more troubled emotionally than the last: more lonely and depressed, more angry and unruly, more nervous and prone to worry, more impulsive and aggressive. (Goleman, 1995, p. xiii)
One fact is clear: The times have changed and we must face the changes. Young people are coming to school with fear and anger that walks with them right through the metal detectors set up at school doorways. Families today don’t have the luxury of spending as much time together as our own parents spent with us, teaching us the lessons of the heart. Our neighborhoods are no longer functional villages, responsive to young people’s needs. Children are growing up farther and farther away from a deep sense of community. Instead of spending meaningful time with friends, parents, and neighbors, children in the United States are spending more time glued to a computer screen or a television set.

In our society, there is a deep current—a belief that something is not okay with the way we are living. In the midst of huge advances in technology and brain research, we are struggling to rescue a whole generation of young people who are growing up without the supports they need. We are facing a deep crisis concerning how to rediscover meaningfulness and purpose, and although we are aware of the void, we have few ideas about what to do.

THE MISSION OF EDUCATION EXPANDS:
SCHOOLS PLAY A VITAL ROLE

Fortunately, we know more and more about how education can help young people develop the convictions and skills to take part in shaping a safe, sustainable, and just society. For a long time, schools have performed a socializing function in our society. They are now among the few places—in our fractured times—where young people of diverse backgrounds can be found in large numbers on a daily basis. Schools can give children the opportunity to develop their critical thinking skills, practice handling their emotions, deal with conflicts nonviolently, and rediscover their purpose and vision—if the schools are organized correctly.

Addressing young people’s social, emotional, and ethical lives is an immediate, pressing, and urgent need. The mission of our schools is being expanded to include the critical human skills and values our children need for their lives to be safer, happier, and healthier. The definition of a well-educated person
is one who possesses an education of the heart and spirit as well as the mind.

For more than three decades, I have devoted my life to the important role schools can play in nurturing the emotional, social, and ethical development of young people. I have been attempting to answer the following question: How can schools help reclaim the hearts and spirits of our youth? I have used my experiences as a former teacher and school administrator while working with a particular initiative, the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP), of which I am one of the cofounders.

The RCCP began in 1985 as a collaboration between Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR), Metropolitan (New York) Area, and the New York City Board of Education. Today, the ESR National Center supports efforts to replicate RCCP nationwide. We are now working in more than 400 schools in 16 school districts throughout the country, serving 6,000 teachers and 175,000 young people.

WEAPONS OF THE SPIRIT

The 175,000 young people in RCCP are not armed with the thousands of guns that are still brought into schools on a daily basis or the daily taunts that so many young people wield like weapons. They use weapons of the spirit—creative communication, appreciation for diversity, the ability to center themselves and manage their anger, and skills to resolve conflict nonviolently. These young people attend schools with an educational vision that recognizes that the ability to manage emotions, resolve conflict, and interrupt bias are fundamental skills—skills that can and must be taught.

Despite the fact that there was actually only a one in two million chance of being killed in a school in 1998–1999 and that there has been a 40% decline in school-associated deaths from violence over the past several years, 71% of Americans believe that a shooting is likely to occur in schools (News Distorts Youth, 2001). The people implementing our program do not believe that violence is a necessary risk in going to school. Instead, these folks are talking about the ways they are creating a “culture of nonviolence,” in which true school reform and renewal is taking place by addressing human relationships.
RCCP: THE PEACEABLE SCHOOL MODEL

RCCP is one of the nation's largest and longest running, research-based school programs in social and emotional learning focusing in the areas of conflict resolution and diversity education. RCCP's goal is to promote caring and cooperative learning environments by reaching young people through the adults who relate to them on a daily basis in school, at home, and in their communities. It moves beyond implementing an isolated educational innovation and instead seeks to change the entire school culture and beyond, engaging the broader community in creating a safe haven for children.

RCCP uses a broadly conceived strategy to create schools that are peaceable and effective communities of learning. It is characterized by deep, committed involvement over a number of years. The kindergarten through eighth grade part of the model includes the following components:

- **Professional development for teachers** involves a 24-hour introductory course and ongoing support for implementation of the RCCP curriculum through on-site classroom visits.
- **Classroom instruction** features curricula developed in close collaboration with participating teachers.
- **Peer mediation** trains carefully selected groups of students to serve their schools as peer mediators.
- **Administrator training** introduces administrators to the concepts and skills of conflict resolution and bias awareness and explores how their leadership can enhance effective implementation of the program.
- **Parent training** helps parents develop better ways of dealing with conflict and prejudice at home and become more effective leaders in their children's schools.
- **Support staff training** offers an orientation to the skills and concepts of social and emotional learning to build communication skills and conflict resolution among secretaries, cafeteria staff members, bus drivers, and other school support staff.
- **Training of trainers** builds school district capacity to implement independently all program components and to integrate and institutionalize the program into school district curriculum frameworks.
In high schools, RCCP uses another ESR program called Partners in Learning, which includes the following components:

- **Planning and needs assessment** builds collaborative partnerships among the different constituencies in high schools (students, staff members, parents, and community members).
- **Professional development for teachers** includes a 24-hour introductory course in creating and managing peaceable classroom environments. It prepares teachers to implement "best practices" that help strengthen social and emotional competencies, build a cooperative learning environment, and develop more effective communication and problem-solving skills. This is followed by ongoing coaching, consulting, and team building.
- **Classroom instruction** fosters skill instruction in conflict resolution, anger management, and intergroup relations through specific elective courses, as well as through integration into subject areas.
- **Student leadership training and youth development** provides young people with the skills and convictions to participate fully in creating democratic and peaceful classrooms, schools, and communities.

**TRANSFORMING SCHOOL CULTURE**

Peaceable schools are places where we are able to practice building democratic communities. Schools can be the first training ground for students to develop the habits, values, and behavior needed to participate fully in our diverse society. If they are intentional about it, schools can nurture the development of social responsibility, cooperative problem solving, and nonadversarial dialogue.

Consider the dynamics of this classroom: Mrs. Frye sits at her desk in the back. The front right corner of the classroom bears a multicolored sign that students made, designating the area as "The Peace Corner." Several students are busily working there. Others work quietly with their groups at their tables. Suddenly, Frank, a short boy at the table near the door, breaks the silence.
“Hey, give me back my book, Tom. I know you took it!”

“I don’t have your stupid book,” Tom responds in a shrill voice. “This is mine.” They continue to yell at each other until Sara, a student mediator, walks over and asks, “Would you like me to help?” For a brief moment the boys stop bickering.

By this time, Mrs. Frye is standing behind the two angry boys. Turning to them, she says, “I’d like you both to calm down and decide whether you’d like to discuss this with me or whether you’d like a mediation.”

The two boys, still angry, stalk off to different sides of the room. They both know the procedure. They sit apart for a while and calm themselves before they attempt to resolve the conflict; then they walk over to the class mediator for help. During the 3 or 4 minutes that this argument lasted, other students looked on, but continued to work at their tables.

In this RCCP classroom and others like it, staff and students use mediation and negotiation, and discipline is not just a matter of teacher-made edicts. The children know that their job is to express and manage their anger appropriately. They also know that neither physically aggressive behavior nor hurtful, painful words and put-downs are tolerated because students take part in agreement making. They know what happens if agreements are broken, and they have the skills they need to resolve conflicts nonviolently and to encourage their peers to do the same. The children are the peacemakers.

Through involvement in RCCP, young people discover that heroism can take the form of a passionate search for nonviolent solutions to complex problems. This message is exemplified in the comments of a high school sophomore from an RCCP school in California:

You want respect, but there’s only one way that you see you can get that respect, and that’s by being tough, bold. That’s the way I got respect, by being an aggressive person. I’ve changed a lot. It’s the way I look at people now, listen to them, and talk to them. It’s a different kind of high and it feels good.

Kim Jones, RCCP parent and ESR program associate in New York City, illustrates a parent’s perspective on the program:
If we demonstrate peaceful responses, our children start to learn by example. Children don’t always do what you say, but often what you do. A product of my involvement is that I am trying to “example” the behavior I expect from my children.

And what do the school leaders who are charged with implementing RCCP think about the program and its effects? Lee Ann Crumbley, former principal of an elementary school in Anchorage, Alaska, offers her impression:

RCCP works and takes time. I credit the program with being the major influence on the staff and students of our school in bringing about positive change. The culture of the school has changed over the past 5 years, and our reality now closely matches our expectation in terms of attitudes and behaviors.

EVALUATING RCCP’S EFFECTIVENESS

A recently completed independent evaluation of RCCP schools in New York City, initiated by ESR’s New York chapter, provides new evidence of the potential of such efforts in schools (Aber, Brown, & Henrich, 1999). The study, one of the largest scientific evaluations of a school social and emotional learning program ever conducted, involved more than 5,000 children and 300 teachers from 15 public elementary schools over a 2-year period. It was conducted by the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) at the Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University.

The study found that compared with children who had little or no exposure to the curriculum, children receiving substantial RCCP instruction from their classroom teachers (on average, 25 lessons during the school year) developed in more positive ways. They perceived their social world in a less hostile way, saw violence as an unacceptable option, and chose nonviolent ways to resolve conflict. The most positive change occurred in children who received the most consistent instruction over a 2-year period. Children in this “high lesson group” received significantly
increased ratings from their teachers on positive social behaviors and emotional control. Additional results indicated that RCCP benefits all children, regardless of gender, grade level, or risk status. In addition, children who received substantial instruction in the RCCP curriculum performed significantly better on standardized academic achievement tests than did children who had no or little RCCP involvement.

Metis Associates, using a self-evaluation model, also evaluated RCCP in our Atlanta site during the 1996–1997 school year (Metis Associates, 1998). The assessment shows that RCCP has had a positive impact on program participants. According to Stanley Schneider, the principal investigator, “The changes in measures we observed throughout the year of the evaluation were greater than one would expect in such a short time” (p. 16). Among the key findings were that 64% of teachers reported less physical violence in the classroom; 75% of teachers reported an increase in student cooperation; 92% of the students felt better about themselves; and more than 90% of parents reported an increase in their own communication and problem-solving skills. Administrative data from the Atlanta evaluation show that student attendance rates improved and that there was a lower rate of course failure. The in-school and out-of-school suspension rates at the RCCP middle school decreased significantly, whereas among non-RCCP middle schools, rates increased during the same period. At the RCCP high school, dropout rates decreased significantly, whereas rates in non-RCCP high schools increased during the same period.

ADVOCATING FOR A SHIFT IN APPROACHING STANDARDS IN EDUCATION

Although RCCP is one of the largest and longest running programs in social and emotional learning, our 400 schools represent only a small fraction of all the schools in this country. We have been successful in reaching thousands of young people, yet we also recognize that this is not enough. As Lisbeth Schorr says in her book Common Purpose, “We have learned to create the small exceptions that can change the lives of hundreds. But we have not learned how to make the exceptions the rule to change the lives of millions” (1997, p. xiii).
Successful models of social and emotional learning programs in a variety of school districts (urban, suburban, and rural) provide concrete examples and help this become feasible. There is growing public awareness of the idea that emotional intelligence (EQ) is as important, if not more so, than IQ in terms of future success—both personal and professional. This vision of education must become the rule rather than the exception.

As the debate around national standards continues in this country, we realize that we are still addressing only half the story. A young person can do well in school and flunk in life. To date, the talk around national standards has rarely addressed the social, emotional, and ethical domain in a comprehensive way. We need standards for young people’s social, emotional, and ethical development that are as rigorous as those for the cognitive and intellectual domains.

If we are successful in promoting policy changes that include integrating the skills and competencies of SEL into national standards and state curriculum frameworks, then we can begin to look at reordering resources toward more preventive approaches that focus on the development of the whole child.

AN EMERGING PARADIGM CHANGE

As the social and emotional learning movement continues to grow and deepen in schools, we are also operating in a wider context of change. There are clear indicators that a new paradigm is emerging in how we think and what we value—a new model emphasizing personal growth and community rather than personal autonomy and mobility. It focuses on cooperation rather than cutthroat competition. The paradigm represents a change in human consciousness. Looking at this shift, it becomes clear that the skills and concepts that are taught in a program such as RCCP are the competencies needed to bring us into the 21st century. And as we take part in preparing young people to play a role in this transformation, I am acutely aware that it will not be easy.

We adults have to change our education priorities dramatically for this to happen. We are a country that has let its priorities become so skewed, we spend $4 billion in medical care each year to take care of gunshot wounds and still don’t guarantee every
child health care coverage. In fact, among all the industrial countries, the United States ranks first in military exports and defense expenditures and last in protecting children against gun violence. A gun takes the life of a child in this country every 2 hours. We must invest in the support communities need to address this grim statistic: One out of five children grows up poor—more than 13 million children across the country. We are living in a country that spends more money on prisons than education, that guarantees young people the availability of a prison cell but not a college education. And the wealth of only three of the richest people in the United States exceeds the gross national product of the 32 least developed countries. The annual budget of the Head Start programs pales in the shadow of spending on military weaponry (Children’s Defense Fund, 2000).

What would it cost to implement a comprehensive social and emotional learning program in every school in this country for 1 year? The price tag is $4 billion. Can we find this money through a decrease in defense spending, by controlling access to guns so we will not need to spend as much money to treat gunshot wounds, and by limiting the salary of top executives to perhaps the two digit, instead of three digit, millions? It does not seem impossible. And it may be among the best investments we can make toward spending less on the consequences of violence and more on nurturing the social, ethical, and emotional development of our children.

VISION FOR THE FUTURE

We know we will have succeeded when programs such as RCCP are no longer needed, when this broader vision of education is widely adapted and supported. Until then, recalling the words of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., we “keep our eyes on the prize and carry on.”

Yet schools working alone cannot make a big enough dent in the crisis we face as a nation. Even if we could effect a comprehensive, multiyear commitment to the teaching of emotional and social competencies and conflict resolution skills in every school in the United States, we would still be unable to turn the tide. As those of us who are involved with programs such as RCCP wage peace in our schools, our children are getting strong, frequent,
and extreme messages to the contrary from the wider society and from their own communities. They have ready access to real and simulated violence. Some live in homes and neighborhoods where violence is often the accepted norm.

Thus our response to these complicated issues must be a wide-ranging and public one. It must be part of a larger movement of social change and activism with the ultimate goal of bringing stability, community, love, and safety into children’s lives. That movement must involve the private sector, national and local governments, businesses, community organizations, religious groups, law enforcement, and researchers to bring about the kind of heart-to-heart resuscitation that will transform neighborhoods into functional villages again. Peaceful classrooms and schools are more than refuges from harm—they are interdependent models for the greater community.

In our long-term vision, we see children entering kindergarten and immediately beginning to learn that differences are accepted, that feelings are okay, and that conflict can be resolved nonviolently. By the time they are in first or second grade, these young people will almost automatically choose conflict resolution skills to mediate disputes among classmates. Later, as they enter high school, they will have the courage and skills to stand up to bigotry and violence and to work for a more peaceful, caring, and just society. When young people can experience this way of being in their schools, the chances that they will fully internalize and employ this approach throughout their adults lives will be much, much greater.

Will we learn from the mistakes of the past so that we can avoid losing more of our young people? More and more schools are making significant long-term commitments to creating cultures that emphasize caring, respect, and safety. Our willingness to turn schools into caring communities rather than armed fortresses may determine the future of young people in far greater ways than we know. As 1999 drew to a close, I had the extraordinary opportunity to be present at the final meeting of the century of the United Nations’ General Assembly. It was inspiring to witness the UN declare the first decade of the new millennium as the “Decade of the Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World.” Our work is clearly cut out for us in meeting this challenge.
NONVIOLENCE AS THE NORM

While visiting one of our RCCP elementary schools recently, I witnessed two fourth-grade boys in an intensive conversation as they were walking in front of me, oblivious that I was behind them. One of the boys had his arm around the shoulder of the other boy, who was visibly upset. “He said those mean words to you?” asked the one boy. “Yes,” the other one nodded. “And he even almost hit you?” Another affirmative nod from the troubled youngster. “I know what must be happening,” said his friend. “That mean boy is probably new to the school. He doesn’t know that we don’t do things like that around here.” The power of nonviolence had taken hold so strongly that these students could not imagine why someone had been acting mean except that “he was new to the school.” To make such schools the norm, not the exception, is an aspiration worthy of our greatest efforts and the resources, time, and commitment that will be needed. It will be worth it.

REFERENCES