Making the Peace: Violence Prevention in the Classroom

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"Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice."

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Introduction

Violence is a powerful and evocative concept in American life. We may all agree that some things people do to one another, like beating and homicide, are violent. We may strongly disagree about whether other things, like spanking children to discipline them, are forms of violence. For most of us, however, the first response to the issue of violence is fear.

Headlines emphasize the bloody, brutal, random, and senseless aspects of violence. We are inundated with information and advice about who is vulnerable, who does the hurting, how to stay safe, and who is to blame. Young people are in the headlines in both roles: as abducted children and victims of drive-by shootings, and as gun-wielding gang members. We have learned to fear for our children *and* to be afraid of them.

Fear distorts our sense of the world and incapacitates us. To begin to prevent violence, we must move beyond fear and develop an understanding of what violence actually is.

The Roots of Violence

One thing we do know is that most violence occurs among people who know each other. Homicide, sexual assault, family violence, fights between students—over 90 percent of all violence in this country is committed not by strangers, but by friends, dates, family members, coworkers, or classmates. Furthermore, 95 percent of all physical and sexual violence is committed by men. In other words, most interpersonal acts of violence involve men hurting women, other men, or children whom they know.

This fact has two implications. First, violence happens when the social bonds of a community break down and violence between people who know each other is tolerated, expected, condoned, or extolled. Rebuilding those community bonds is a requisite for peace.

Second, we must look to the gender-role training that teaches young men to use violence to establish who they are and to get their needs met. Young women can also be violent, but they are not systematically conditioned to use violence to meet their needs. When young women are violent, they are acting out male-constructed models of power and aggression. Reducing the effects of gender-role training, or eliminating this training altogether, is the second essential step toward making the peace.

Helping Young People Make Peace

A major focus of our work at the Oakland Men's Project is violence among and against young people: what it is, where it comes from, and how to stop it. Our goal is to help young people understand and heal from violence, to come together as a community to make the peace.

In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., "Violence is anything that denies human integrity, and leads to hopelessness and helplessness." Our work is built on the idea that violence is whatever hinders, limits, or damages us as human beings, including not only direct hurt but the long-term internalized effects of that hurt.

High-profile violent acts are usually rooted in *structural violence*—the deep, underlying social and economic inequalities that are drawn across lines of race, gender, age, and sexual orientation in our society. Visible acts in which one person hurts another are one area where structural violence shows up. Interpersonal violence of any kind cannot be prevented unless we address these structural roots.

When two young Latino men get into a fight with each other, it is not just a matter of two guys losing control or fighting for their self-respect. Lack of job opportunities, inadequate schools, the internalization of racial stereotypes, and male gender-role training in competition and violence all contribute to setting these two people up to fight, and perhaps kill, each other. More than anger-management skills are needed to incorporate them into a community of peers committed to working cooperatively with each other to make the peace.

Young people—in particular, young men—are caught in the middle of the dynamics of structural violence. They are vulnerable to physical, sexual, and emotional violence from adults at the same time they are being trained to assume adult roles that entail the control and abuse of others.

By ourselves, we can neither stop the violence nor protect young people from it. But, working together with young people, we can take action that will reduce the social inequality at the roots of violence and reclaim and restore the human integrity that violence denies.

As long as there are people, there will be conflict among them. Interpersonal conflict is a healthy, normal part of any community. Beyond making the peace, our work is about helping young people and adults learn techniques for resolving interpersonal conflict, welcome their differences, and begin the long process of achieving justice.

Working with Youth to Make the Peace

As an adult who cares about and works with youth, you play a crucial role in their lives. When you begin to explore the subject of violence with them, you start a process that will involve you in two companion challenges.

First, young people have *all* been hurt by violence—from disrespect and belittlement to beatings and sexual abuse—and almost always at the hands of adults. Concerning sexual abuse alone, one out of four girls and one out of six boys will be sexually assaulted before the age of eighteen. (Russell, Diana E. H. "The Incidence and Prevalence of Intrafamilial and Extrafamilial Sexual Abuse of Female Children." In *Handbook of Sexual Abuse of Children,* edited by Lenore E. A. Walker. New York: Springer Publishing, 1988.) While violence prevention does not rest upon the disclosure of such experiences, you can assume that if you make it safe for young people to talk about violence, you will hear about how they have been hurt. You may be surprised and upset at the amount and degree of violence they have already experienced. You may be discouraged to find that you are seen as part of the problem; because of their experiences, many young people are highly suspicious of adults. Some see you as the enemy. And many will expect, with some justification, that adults will lecture them about violence in much the same way they lecture about drug abuse and sex—telling them that their *behavior* is the problem and that all they need do is behave better. Young people may also have had adults tell them one thing and then practice another, making

them mistrustful of the motives of adults. Overcoming all the obstacles brought on by students' prior experiences may be one of the greatest—and most rewarding—challenges of being a teacher.

Second, we also have our *own* histories of violence and violation. Most of us are still affected by significant, painful experiences of our own childhood and youth. Listening attentively to young people discuss these issues can be difficult; their experiences can remind us of our own unresolved memories. Moreover, in our roles as adults, we are responsible not only for our own lives but for the lives of young people as well—and as parents and teachers, we are overworked and often lack the necessary time, patience, or attention to help young people cope with so much.

In our favor in dealing with these challenges is that we are *adults* taking a stand with young people against violence. We have information, useful experience, and resources to offer, and we want to create a world free from violence. Also, young people can be inspiring examples for each other and for us, and help share the responsibilities for making the world safe—and that will pay us back many times over for our efforts.

One important caveat to keep in mind: *there is no quick fix.* Our work must be about stopping violence by dealing with its underpinnings. Many people are looking for quick solutions for high-profile violence in their school or community. That violence is, of course, a major concern of all of us. However interventions focusing on the headline topics of youth violence—gangs, guns, and drugs—while ignoring the social and economic underpinnings, are ineffective and temporary at best, and promote and continue the violence at worst. Because these topics are the deadly consequences of structural injustice—and because young people are scared by the same headlines that frighten us—we must directly confront these topics in the classroom. Still, the structural injustice *is* the issue at hand.

Violence prevention is different from standard academic coursework, the teaching of violence prevention may require a few new techniques.

Teaching by Facilitating

Many of us were taught that as adults and teachers we are the authority, we have the information students need, and our role is to inspire students to learn what we already know about particular subjects. This information, and the power that accompanies it, was

passed down to us and certified by colleges, superintendents, principals, and boards of education.

But in dealing with the issues of violence in students' lives—family and dating relationships, racism, male/female roles, drugs, sexuality—young people are the experts. Although they have misinformation, they also have the reality of their experiences and, collectively, lots of untapped knowledge. Their culture, language, relationships, families, and neighborhoods are different from ours now and when we were their age. What young people lack is a safe place to put their experiences and information together as a group and develop solutions to their problems. They may also lack a deeper conceptual framework within which to place and understand their experiences. To be effective, we as teachers must facilitate a group process of discovery and change.

As a facilitator, the teacher guides a process in which members of a community examine the climate of their community, notice where the community is breaking down, and become enabled to take charge in changing that climate. This process creates a *learning community*—a group of people who learn together how to analyze and take action to change and build their community. Where the issue is violence, a learning-community approach is essential for the following reasons:

Young people are a community

 School is an enormous part of young people's lives, the place where they are socially sanctioned to be with others their age. Young people in a school form a community. Like any community, they have explicit and often unspoken rules of decorum. They have people who lead, outsiders, and people who lead outsiders. They reflect and act by what the larger communities around them have passed on to them, good and bad. Much of their interaction is implicit and taken for granted. Teaching the prevention of violence requires us to bring the norms of this community into focus for all of its members, enabling them to change the norms. Teaching geared toward the individual learner—in which each student is encouraged, motivated, and taught as if he or she were an isolated individual—is ineffective here.

Rather, by turning the classroom experience into a community-building experience, we enable young people to help each other to be safer and to work for justice. This enables them to turn peer pressure into peer alliance; competition and fighting into cooperation and respectful problem solving.

Young people's community extends beyond the classroom

It is often assumed that the rest of students' lives should be kept separate from the classroom, as it only distracts from the curriculum. But these "distractions" have reached gigantic proportions. The daily gauntlet of decisions young people face in negotiating family life, cross-cultural and intergender relationships, sexuality, money, work, contacts with police, the presence of weapons, and simple survival in an adult-defined world is more complex and overwhelming than ever before. Especially where violence is involved, students' learning processes are affected by what they bring to school with them. Teaching must bring this larger community into view; the curriculum must be made relevant to students' lives.

Teachers have a complicated and difficult role as a part of the student community

Being a teacher is not easy. We live in a society that allots inadequate resources to its teachers and schools. Classroom size has increased, salaries and benefits have decreased, many schools are chronically underfunded, and the varied and immediate needs of students coming into the classroom place ever-increasing demands on teachers and school systems. To compound the problem, teachers are near the bottom of the educational hierarchy in terms of power, status, money, and influence.

Many of us enter the teaching profession with a vision of how we can inspire and affect students; with ideals of how schools, curricula, and teacher-student interactions could be. This vision is soon blurred and these ideals are set aside in the face of daily classroom maintenance, discipline and grades, and declining working conditions and safety in educational and youth-treatment systems across the country.

People who work with young people are at a critical social juncture. When a larger society is under stress or breaking down at certain points—and violence in our community is a visible sign of that breakdown—it most shows itself in the lives of young people. Clearly one of the social functions expected of teachers and other youth workers is to handle, manage, or even control young people on behalf of the larger society—making teaching very much like "front line" work, under conditions that sometimes look and feel like combat.

To teach these issues, we must be prepared to examine not only how they affect our students but how they affect us. This will mean

acknowledging to young people that we are part of their community, and sharing our experiences with them as well as listening to theirs. We will need to agree to be equal partners with them—and accept them as equal partners with us.

Only young people can make the peace with each other

Young people are vulnerable to violence—from other youth and from adults—because they have not been given the tools, skills, and resources to take care of themselves. As a result, the norms they set with each other expect and condone violence, and reproduce the cynicism, hopelessness, and despair of the larger society. As adult allies we can provide tools, skills, and resources, but we are peripheral to their community and cannot establish norms for them. Only they can change the norms of their society to ones in which violence is not tolerated and human dignity is honored.

Our experience at the Oakland Men's Project has been that young people are respectful when respected, caring when cared about, hardworking when allowed to participate in defining the work, and only manipulative and dishonest when manipulated and lied to. In other words, they are very much like us.

Young people have always been in the forefront of social change, leading movements against injustice, inequality, and violence—sit-ins and protests of the early civil rights movement, protests against Apartheid in South Africa, antinuclear organizing in Germany, pro-democracy struggles in China. They need us to work *with* them, not for them. We can't do it in place of helping them do it. Facilitating is not rescuing or protecting; young people need neither. They need support in taking leadership to address issues of violence and injustice.

So Who's in Charge?

You don't have to be an expert in the issues to help young people make the peace. In fact, we expect that you will learn a lot as you go through the process with your students. Our work is designed to build a strong community response to violence. For that to happen, community members must first acknowledge the violence that is happening, then work together to stop it. This will require you to be a *true* leader, one who fosters other people's leadership.

Young people stop violence by taking charge and leading. What does it mean for young people to lead? Leadership in school is often highly valued by adults in areas of "desirable" behavior, such as cooperation, academic performance, and school spirit—and

unrecognized or resisted when it doesn't promote, or competes with, our leadership. Leadership doesn't have to be a competition—our authority doesn't have to be threatened by the authority of young people. And there are many ways to be a leader.

Young people lead in the classroom and among one another by setting standards and trends in the clothes they wear, the music they listen to, the nerve they show, the things they start, the attitudes they flaunt, or just the passion and concentration they pour into an activity. Youth we might find to be troublemakers are usually leaders in their own right—they just happen to be leading in directions we don't want to go. They often speak for other young people about the (ir)relevance of the direction in which we are leading. The role for the facilitators should be not to discourage leadership but to develop and widen it, to open it up for group analysis, definition, and widespread participation. Not everyone is a leader is the traditional sense, but everyone has valuable experience to contribute to help lead the group *as a group.*

Our highest image of leadership in this program is that *everyone* in the group leads. And your job as facilitator is to think of the group as a whole and to bring out or call out everyone else's leadership. This means helping young people recognize and value their own and each others' participation in the group, making enough room for them all to take part, and bringing them to the point where they insist on making room for each other. This means paying a lot of attention to the group process.

When you are facilitating and things are not going smoothly, you and everyone in the group can stop and ask, "What's going on?" Often you discover that neither where you were going with the process, nor where some of them were taking it, is where the group needs to go. You can collectively renegotiate, calling on everyone's help. Violence happens when people are separated, excluded, ignored, or set apart. Making the peace requires all hands. When you help make this happen, you are becoming an ally to young people.

Please send comments, feedback, resources, and suggestions for distribution to paul@paulkivel.com. Further resources are available at www.paulkivel.com.