next steps were identified for peoples' work with organizations or institutions.

Open sessions designed to hear the concerns not being met by workshops facilitated ongoing dialogue among many participants. The final session mentioned above helped bring about some common purpose and a sense of resolution for most at the conference.

For European American participants, the conference built motivation and understanding about issues of racism. For too many of the African Americans, the conference did not go far enough, fast enough, and it traveled already well-known territory.

This conference is an ambitious, difficult and vital undertaking. Because it did not succeed completely is not to say it was not important. CPE is attempting to present a crucial step forward for the whole emerging field of conflict resolution. Conference organizers learned a tremendous amount from the entire process and a next conference can move ahead further. The whole process has also served to push the CPE conference planners to look at issues of racism among themselves more thoroughly.

A more detailed report on the conference is being prepared and will be available later this year for $5.00. To order copies, write the Center for Peace Education, 103 William Howard Taft Road, Cincinnati, OH 45219 or call 513-221-4863.

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The Social Transformative Potential of Conflict Resolution Training

by Les Brunswick

When schools adopt conflict resolution programs, it is often with quite limited aims such as solving discipline problems. But many people who are active in the school conflict resolution movement have a sense that it could have a far larger impact, and not just on education, but on society as a whole.

In fact, there is a very good chance that conflict resolution will help produce enormous changes for the better. Conflict is an inevitable part of life, and we find it at all levels, from the individual to the international, and with all types of issues. Unfortunately, today conflicts are very often dealt with through adversarial, win-lose approaches, and the result is an enormous amount of unnecessary suffering.

What we need is for people to convert to resolving problems through the win-win, collaborative approach. This might well happen. Conflict resolution is increasingly attractive to people, and the school movement is expanding very rapidly. It is conceivable that within two or three decades, virtually every student in the United States will receive training in conflict resolution skills as part of his or her education.

As these students graduate and join the adult world, we can expect they would apply what they have learned in school. This could well lead to conflict resolution methods being applied in all areas of society, at all levels, and with every type of issue and ultimately to major restructuring of our institutions — institutions which are at present structured so that they lead to chronic conflicts between individuals or groups. The school movement is thus part of a larger movement that could radically improve our country and perhaps the entire world.

Such a universal adoption of the win-win approach is absolutely essential for social justice. Among those who promote social justice, there often seems to be a vague idea that we will at some point reach a perfect society and all conflict will then cease. However, new conflicts, often between various social groups, will continue to arise, no matter how justly structured a society is.

If such conflicts between social groups are not resolved in a win-win fashion, then they will be handled through coercive power, with stronger groups dominating weaker ones, and so we still have injustice. For that reason, it is impossible to have and maintain a truly just society unless everyone knows and practices conflict resolution.

Conflict resolution is also essential because many of our social institutions are structured in ways that are counter to human needs. What is needed is radical restructuring, which would require taking into account the concerns of many involved groups, and such a complex process of planning and negotiating could not be accomplished unless the involved parties used a win-win approach and did so in a skilful manner.

In addition, teaching conflict resolution is essential for getting people to work for social justice. Most people would like a cooperative, human society, despite their doubts that such a society is possible to achieve. However, when people learn conflict resolution, they come to see that conflict can be solved voluntarily, and so they realize that a cooperative society is possible. As a consequence, they become much more supportive of fundamental social change.

In her article "Conflict Resolution: Bane or Boon to Peace and Justice?" (The Fourth R, Vol. 20)
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Social Justice

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Abigail Fuller also advocates fundamental structural change, but by a different strategy. Fuller speaks of “oppressive structures” that are supported by “the state” and must be overthrown through “mass action” for large-scale social change. She thus apparently advocates the traditional left-wing strategy in which oppressed groups and their supporters unite in a giant political force that gains the power of the state and then uses its position to tear down present structures and put radically different ones in their place.

It is virtually certain that such a strategy would not work. Over the last two centuries, many radicals have tried it in this country and failed, and there is little particular reason to believe it would work today. For one thing, the vast majority of the population is simply opposed to it. Beyond that, in the unlikely event that a movement along these lines made major progress, it would almost certainly provoke a forceful response that could well defeat it.

Furthermore, in those cases in other countries where a group advocating revolutionary change has, through election or armed revolt, come to power, there has almost invariably remained a large minority (or even majority) of the population that was opposed to fundamental change through the training of officials, it may be best to speak of more limited aims. However, there is no doubt that conflict resolution skills is far more attractive to people in this country, much less likely to provoke forceful opposition, and it involves far less coercion than the traditional left-wing strategy. It is therefore much more likely (perhaps in occasional combination with confrontational tactics) to achieve success in producing radical positive change.

In selling conflict resolution to school officials, it may be best to speak of more limited aims. However, there is no doubt that conflict resolution has an enormous potential to produce radical changes in society in the long run, and we need to keep this clearly in mind.

Les Brunswick is a member of the training team of the Pittsburgh Mediation Center. He may be reached at 420 Hastings Street, Pittsburgh PA 15206.