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The Newsletter of the National Association for Mediation in Education,
Promoting the Teaching of Conflict Resolution Skills in Schools.

Practical Strategies for Integrating Systemic Change, Part II

In this issue, we continue to explore the topic of systemic change: How do we manifest our vision of schools in which conflict resolution is an integral part? How do we break resistance to change, and where does the resistance come from? What are practical steps and successful strategies for creating change in schools? We began discussing these questions in Vol. 51, June/July 1994. In Part II of this topic, Kathy Germann, Denise Messina, and John Conbere provide a varied, thoughtful, and provocative discussion of these difficult issues.

Transforming the Challenges of Creating Inclusive Schools

by Kathy Germann

An inclusive organization is one in which members of diverse social and cultural groups are actively included, and where the dignity of all of its members and potential members is respected so everyone can thrive and reach their fullest potential.

"People will change their minds about deeply held convictions when:

1. A new perspective is presented in a way that makes sense (*and feels right*) to them.
2. They trust the person who is presenting the new perspective.
3. They are not being blamed for having believed misinformation."

(Creighton, 1993, p.23)

I would add:

4. They are in an environment where they feel safe and are encouraged to take risks.
5. They are presented with new information and/or experiences that enable them to make connections with their own experiences and also encourage them to understand the experiences of others.
6. They are supported as they work through their own pain and conflict.

An inclusive organization is one in which members of diverse social and cultural groups are actively included, and where the dignity of all of its members and potential members is respected so everyone can thrive and reach their fullest potential. Inclusive organizations fully value different perspectives and reflect the interests of diverse members throughout all levels and aspects of the organization starting with its mission. Finally, inclusive, multicultural organizations actively strive to eliminate all forms of oppression. (Jackson & Hardiman, 1981.)

In this article, I discuss twelve beliefs which, when held strongly, can be major obstacles to change. When these barriers are acknowledged and worked with, we can begin creating safe, inclusive, multicultural school communities.

1. Change can be imposed.

There are many state and federal anti-dis-

crimination laws on the books and many schools have additional anti-harassment policies. While these laws and rules may force some behavioral change, they do not necessarily change attitudes. Deeply embedded attitudes and beliefs often prevail and drive our behaviors. It is still common practice for people to find ways to get around laws and rules, thus subverting intended changes.

We don't tend to change our attitudes because somebody tells us to do so. (Recall your adolescent years: I for one didn't change my attitudes because an adult told me to, especially when they said it was "good for me.") Furthermore, just because we may think our ideas are correct doesn't mean we will be able to persuade others to think so as well. Rather, behaviors and attitudes begin to shift when we are directly engaged with the issues in an atmosphere that is non-judgmental and that fosters trust.

This calls for dialogue, a communication pro-
— continued on page 6

In this issue...

National Bulletin Board	2
Mailbag	3
Regional Updates	12
New NAME Resources	21
Publications/Resources	22
Conferences/Trainings	23
Research Network	24
Teacher's Column	25
Higher Education Column	26
Resource Review	27
Regional Bulletin Board	28

cess that facilitates respectful and meaningful communication. This process can have a profound effect on classroom communities by building trust and creating a climate for effective problem-solving. "...dialogue about issues important to students was the core activity that cultivated student empowerment. As individuals develop a sense of connection and community, they are ever more willing to take risks, because, increasingly, mistakes are accepted and everyone's contribution is valued by the teacher and students." (Kreisberg, 1992, p. 164)

2. Blame and guilt can motivate change.

Blame and guilt most often serve to put people on the defensive or paralyze them into non-action. We began to learn misinformation about others as children. This misinformation was taught to us by adults that we trusted — parents, teachers, spiritual leaders. It was supported and perpetuated by the institutions in our lives — schools, government, media, until it became so embedded in our psyches that we began to perceive it as "normal." *It is not our fault that we were taught these things — we are not guilty.* Blaming ourselves and each other for believing misinformation is not useful. It is helpful to take responsibility to learn the truth and take action to stop the cycle of misinformation. Understanding how we've all been hurt by this misinformation and learning the truth about ourselves and others can create a powerful personal motivation to make change.

3. There are quick, easy solutions.

Creating inclusive schools is an evolutionary process. What we are "undoing" didn't happen overnight — these systems and ways of thinking have been deeply embedded in our societal psyche for a long time. There are no curricula or step-by-step checklists to create this change. Seeing this larger picture can prevent us from getting bogged down in frustration and despair over lack of quick changes.

Rather than searching for a quick fix, we need to reframe this work as a process and prepare ourselves for the long haul. How we relate to one another is an essential aspect of what makes an organization inclusive and allows all its members to succeed to their fullest potential. "...community-building, group problem-solving, and the fostering of mutual interdependence are central to our task as liberal arts teachers and vital to a positive vision of the future." (O'Reilly, 1993, p.138) This type of change isn't a means unto an end — the process of how we relate is a significant aspect of the vision toward which we strive.

4. The mission of the school system doesn't need to embrace the concept of inclusion.

The mission of any organization should be driving its activities and decisions. It is critical,

therefore, that the mission address the issue of inclusion. If it doesn't, it will be easy to avoid instituting an inclusive organization. Having a statement about inclusion in the mission provides an imperative to address it.

Dr. Robert Terry (1983), suggests that schools act as systems that continue to perpetuate patterns of hierarchy and the use of "power over." He contends that the mission of the schools is to create "ups", i.e., straight, white, male, Christian, etc. In other words, there is still an implicit valuing of certain groups of people over others. Of course, some of us will never be capable of achieving "up" status in certain categories. Our efforts should be to dismantle notions of up/down and the use of power-over and transform our relationships into partnerships where power-with is the norm for our interactions.

5. Being "non-discriminatory" is enough.

Many people think that being non-discriminatory is sufficient for creating inclusive schools. "I treat all my students the same." "Everyone has an equal chance here." "We celebrate Black History Month and Women's History Month." The truth is that not everyone is treated the same. This isn't because people don't have good intentions in this area; it is due more to a lack of awareness and understanding of how the subtle dynamics of power and privilege impact our behavior. The notion of everyone having an equal chance would be true if we were all on an equal playing field, but we're not. Historically people of color, women, people with disabilities, gays and lesbians, etc. have not only not been included, but have in many ways been completely devalued. A non-discriminatory stance is usually one of passive inclusion, tokenism, being "colorblind," intermittent uses of empowerment. On the surface it looks like some things are happening (and in fact some good things are happening). But, there is no challenge to the underlying structures that perpetuate institutional oppression.

A non-discriminatory stance not only maintains the status quo — it can actually provide mixed messages for members of a school community. It becomes difficult to get a clear reading on the norms. For example, what happens when anti-racist language is not tolerated, but teachers don't interrupt anti-gay jokes? Or the school says it values diversity and welcomes immigrants, but people complain when newcomers don't speak "proper English" and there are no support services available to aid their learning?

Creating truly inclusive schools requires an anti-oppressive stance. This means actively working to be inclusive of all people and examining and changing institutional structures that

Transforming Challenges

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Transforming Challenges

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maintain oppression. This means fundamental changes. "...the nature of power in schools must be transformed. The hierarchy of decision making must be transformed, the structure of the school day must be transformed, and the way we interact with colleagues and students must be radically reexamined." (Kreisberg, 1992, p.151)

6. We don't need to understand and address the institutional nature of oppression.

Oppression is more than individual acts of prejudice. It is systematic, routine mistreatment of whole groups of people. This mistreatment is seen in the policies, procedures and norms that educational and other institutions carry out on a daily basis. Examples include, holding extracurricular events on Jewish high holidays, maintaining the use of curricular materials that are non-inclusive because "there are no other texts on the market" failing to mention gays and lesbians as parents when teaching about families, etc.

As a result of the routine and insidious nature of this mistreatment, it often becomes "invisible" and is perceived as "the way we do things" to those who are not the target. The more we can understand how the system affects all of us, the greater chance we'll have of dismantling it and creating new, inclusive ways of being. Creating inclusive schools requires working on the personal and the institutional levels simultaneously.

7. Privilege and the fear of giving up exclusivity of privilege play no part.

Privilege is an unearned right or resource that one group has access to that other groups are denied. Because it is unearned we are often unaware of the privileges we might have. Since we've always had them, they're "normal." Examples of privilege might be able-bodied people being assumed to be intelligent until proven otherwise, and white skinned people being able to easily find books, magazines and music featuring people who look and sound like them.

The scarcity mentality has taught us to fear sharing privileges. Yet there is an important distinction between giving up a privilege and giving up the exclusivity of a privilege so that it can become accessible to everyone. There are costs to maintaining the exclusivity of our privileges including an inaccurate sense of history, loss of skills and insights from other groups, and limited possibilities for genuine relationships.

8. Lack of action is not harmful.

Collusion is consciously or unconsciously reinforcing and perpetuating misinformation, attitudes, behaviors and norms that lead to the systemic mistreatment of people. Silence is the loud voice of collusion. Our lack of action when we witness an act of prejudice or mistreatment can be interpreted as support. This can range from failing to interrupt an anti-gay joke, to self-

fulfilling prophecies about the academic ability of children of color, to failing to speak out about patterns of promotion that leave white women and people of color behind. In order to create systemic change and not tacitly endorse the status quo, we must keep paying attention and naming the obvious.

9. We're doing this for "those poor oppressed people".

This attitude continues to perpetuate a form of one-upship — "I've got it better so I'm going to fix it for you." This is not only patronizing, but it also fails to acknowledge the negative affects of oppression on all of us. Since we are all now or all have the potential to be members of some group targeted by oppression, we all need each other as allies. It can be easy to lose our motivation to do something for someone else, especially when the going gets rough. We need to recognize that our actions are an act of liberation for ourselves. With this understanding we will be more motivated to hang in there through the difficult times and sustain positive change for and with each other. Creating inclusive schools requires a partnership approach, a view of others as equals, and a recognition that we all have something to gain from this.

10. If "they" would change, everything would be better.

A variation on this theme is, "I'm not ___ist (racist, sexist, etc.), but I know somebody who is." It is virtually impossible to grow up in this culture and escape being infected by the virus of oppression. This virus creates dis-ease that is manifested in many ways, one of which is the ability to see problems in other people's behaviors/attitudes and the failure to see one's own. Of course this serves to continue the divisive notion of "us vs. them."

Most of us see ourselves as good-intentioned human beings who would never purposefully hurt anyone. Yet as we discovered with the notion of collusion, our silence and inaction does hurt — not only others but ourselves as well. We have a tendency to go "dumb-up", i.e., we fail to examine our own power and privilege and the ways that we may unwittingly act (or fail to act) that serve to maintain institutionalized oppression. (Terry, 1983) It is crucial for us to recognize that our behavior is a powerful example. "When teachers and students successfully develop relationships that are characterized by assertive mutuality, vulnerability, listening and dialogue, then these relationships become models for the kinds of relationships that students can form with one another." (Kreisberg, 1992, p.178)

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11. This is all too overwhelming.

Yes, it's true, this can feel overwhelming and yet we can't let this stop us from taking action. What are our alternatives? We've already acknowledged that inaction perpetuates the status quo. There is no such thing as being passively anti-oppressive; we are either part of the solution, or part of the problem. This is where we are strengthened by working in collaboration with others. Through this approach we can sustain and support one another as we live our visions of inclusive schools and communities.

A slightly different version of this barrier is the idea that we can only choose to work on one area at a time, i.e., we'll work on classism this year and next year we'll focus on ablebodism. This fails to recognize the intricate web of relationships between the many forms of oppression. Because they are so interconnected, it is essential to work on them all.

12. We can just *think* our way through this.

We've all been hurt and learned to fear and distrust others who may be different than us. These hurts, as well as deeply conditioned attitudes, have become held in place with the glue of emotions. We need to be able to acknowledge these feelings and heal the hurts in a safe environment for there to be lasting change. It takes both our brilliant minds *and* our compassionate hearts to do this work.

Conclusion

"Empowering schools must be educational communities coalesced around a core of values guided by a sense of hope and possibility, grounded in a belief in justice and democracy. These communities must nourish the voices of all their members; they must provide contexts in which people can speak and listen, learn and grow, and let go of ideas in order to move on to better ideas." (Kreisberg, 1992, p.151)

Creating inclusive schools is not easy work. Recently I asked a group of 130 participants at a Diversity in the Workplace Conference how many of them would like to see all forms of oppression end tomorrow. The response was unanimous — everyone agreed that would be great. Then I asked, if there was so much good intention in the room, why did the "isms" continue. Their response — lots of thoughtful, puzzled looks.

Creating inclusive organizations isn't about good intentions. It requires that our actions, both individual and institutional, be grounded in a thorough understanding of the nature of oppression. Does this mean we shouldn't start until we "get it"? No, it means getting clear about what "it" is and being willing to do some deep examination of our current behaviors and institutional structures. This requires being open to diverse perspectives, as well as a willingness to take risks,

make "mistakes," and walk through our fear and doubts. It also means creating safe space for this kind of exploration and dialogue to take place. Only when we join our allies with open hearts and discovering minds will we be able to continue to build new ways that embrace the common differences in us all.

"The way forward is not in the mere construction of universal systemic solutions, to be applied to reality from the outside: it is also in seeking to get to the heart of reality through personal experience. Such an approach promotes an atmosphere of tolerant solidarity and unity in diversity based on mutual respect, genuine pluralism and parallelism. In a word, human uniqueness, human action and the human spirit must be rehabilitated" (Vaclav Havel, 1992). ■

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(Since 1981, Jackson and Hardiman have further refined their Multicultural Organizational Development Model. Their most recent writing can be found in their article "Multicultural Organizational Development," found in *The Promise of Diversity: Over 40 Voices Discuss Strategies for Eliminating Discrimination in Organizations* edited by Elsie Y. Cross, Judith H. Katz, Frederick A. Miller, and Edith Whitfield Seashore, New York: Irwin Professional Publishing, 1994.)

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Transforming Challenges

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