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The Teaching of Anti-Violence Strategies within the English Curriculum

ROSEMARIE COGHLAN

Curriculum of Peace? Oh, no, I bristled. What effect would these three words have on the English III reading list? Were English teachers again going to have to confront more efforts to censor reading materials in their classrooms? I had weathered attacks on Salinger and Morrison. But would I now be accused of promoting violence if I taught Golding's *Lord of the Flies*? ■ Still, the words "curriculum of peace" made me pause. Did my students who daily have to ward off the violence that invades their homes through their newspapers, television shows, music, and movies, if not in actual violent acts, really need

to envision Macduff triumphantly carrying Macbeth's head onto the stage at the end of *Macbeth*? Perhaps we could just as well read a different Shakespearean play? But which one is violence-free? And would my students be less prepared for college if they never met Conrad's Kurtz? Of course not. I might as well delete *Beowulf* from the British Lit curriculum as well. It is, after all, *sooo* hard to interest the females in the class in the troubles caused by a carnivorous monster. Of course, that meant Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* would have to go . . . and Chaucer's "The Pardoner's Tale" . . . and Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* . . . and Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. But what was left? And aren't the verbal comments of Austen's Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice* just as violent? Could we spend the entire year discussing "Tintern Abbey"? Perhaps the better question is, "Should we?"

As I began to assume my defensive mode in preparation for attack, I recalled the recent research on violence in America's schools: "About 21 percent of all public high schools and 19 percent of all public middle schools reported at least one serious violent crime to the police or other law enforcement representatives" during the 1996–1997 school year (U.S. Department of Education 10).

And recent news events have taught my fellow colleagues in suburban middle class schools that "no school is immune to the potential of extreme violence" (Wolfe 51). The need to do something is apparent and urgent.

But school administrators have been addressing this concern for years. However, to date, most of the response by school administrators to violence in their schools has been reactive. Student discipline codes have been rewritten to convey a philosophy of intolerance for violent behavior, and students have been quickly suspended, and even expelled, for threats of violence. School budgets, already stretched to the seams for technology expenses, have reallocated precious funds for security guards and metal detectors. While these interventions are necessary, "such measures skim the surface of violence prevention and may instill a false sense of security" (Halford 1).

"Experts" outside of the schools have also attempted to confront this deadly issue. Federal agencies have produced written guides for school administrators. Titles such as *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools*; *Preventing Youth Hate Crimes: A Manual for Communities*; and *Creating Safe and Drug-Free Schools: An*

Action Guide are readily available over the Internet. Educational publishing houses have also produced “Peace Curricula” with titles such as *First Step to Success*, *The Anger Coping Program*, *Positive Adolescent Choices Training (PACT)*, and *Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)*.

Research on these programs, which aim to teach social skills, is scant, yet early studies indicate some progress on violence prevention when such programs are implemented conscientiously (Walker 3). However, these various guidelines and programs frequently fail because teachers do not have the time or training to implement their directives, often complaining about the inability to fit “the program into an already overcrowded teaching schedule” (Elias, et al. 17).

Even if teachers did implement these programs, Eric Schaps points to another concern: He insists that “the dimensions of social, intellectual, and ethical development are interconnected in children. [Schools] can’t do surgical strikes on intellectual growth” (qtd. in Halford 3). Violence prevention strategies will only work “when they are congruent with teaching and learning overall” (Halford 3). In other words, violence prevention programs cannot be conducted in isolation, as entities in themselves. To be effective, they must be fully integrated into the student’s program of study.

Gradually, then, the phrase “curriculum of peace” assumed a new meaning for me. I sighed in relief as I realized that these words would not mean that my students would never meet Macbeth or Kurtz. Our students, unfortunately, do live in a violent world, if not one exactly similar to those of these literary characters. We, as English teachers, need to teach our students how to live in it, and, more importantly, how to work to improve it. The English classroom provides a fitting place to integrate anti-violence teaching into the academic curriculum. It readily offers opportunities to teach conflict resolution strategies, instill respect for cultural diversity, provide an atmosphere for cooperative learning while acknowledging controversy, and heighten personalization, empathy, and respect—all factors that, violence prevention programs indicate, contribute to the reduction of violence.

First, teaching conflict resolution skills is one way the school, and especially the English teacher, can be proactive in stemming the rising violence in society. Programs such as *First Steps* aim to teach students how to resolve differences peacefully. Aleta

Meyer and Wendy Northup have conducted a research study on the effect of role-playing, which is the core of a violence prevention program entitled *Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP)*. In a 1995–96 study, these researchers found that RIPP participants “reported significantly fewer violence-related injuries . . . [developed] more positive changes in self esteem, and . . . use[d] resources such as peer mediation at a higher rate than did non-participants” (33). Dean Walker states that, although research information about the effectiveness of these programs is “limited . . . data are accumulating that show peer conflict-resolution programs reduce discipline referrals; improve the school climate; and increase self-esteem, confidence, and responsibility in the students who go through training” (3). David Johnson insists that conditions in society and in the schools have made such training mandatory, for “without conflict resolution, most students have two strategies: coercion or withdrawal” (qtd. in Halford 2).

Having students formulate “peace contracts” is another way to teach conflict resolution strategies.

Barbara Stanford, a former high school teacher who served as project director for a statewide program in interdisciplinary humanities and conflict management, would agree with Halford and Walker and has pointed to the benefits of integrating conflict resolution teaching, such as that which is the basis of RIPP, with the English curriculum. In an essay entitled “Conflict and the Story of Our Lives: Teaching English for Violence Prevention,” she details how a short story unit can provide particularly effective anti-violence education. She begins by having her students identify the conflicts in the short stories. The students are then taught to determine the style used by the characters in the short stories to deal with the conflict—that is, whether the character’s response is aggressive, submissive, or assertive. To help her students understand the differences in these styles, she asks them to role-play responses to a scene of conflict,

illustrating each of the three types of responses. After the students realize that there are options in responding to conflict, they suggest ways in which the characters might have responded more appropriately. She also has her students identify the places in the short stories where the main characters made poor choices leading to a situation of conflict. Because “real life” does not always have happy endings, she stresses the importance of including a “range of literature in which conflicts are resolved effectively and those in which they are not” (42). Literature, she believes, provides a way for students to view the world and imagine the possibilities beyond the world of violence they see too often in their neighborhoods and on television. Stanford’s suggestions can readily be applied to characters in longer works of literature, as well, such as Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* and Macduff in *Macbeth*.

Having students formulate “peace contracts” is another way to teach conflict resolution strategies. This activity works very well with literature that centers on the perennial clash between good and evil such as *Beowulf*. Students are divided into teams, each representing a “force” in the literature, such as Beowulf, Grendel, and Hrothgar. Each team is directed to compose a list of the assigned character’s needs. After this list is formulated, students form new groups in which each character is represented. Representatives present their needs to the entire group, which is then charged with the task of composing a “peace agreement” that acknowledges the desires/needs of each individual force while working to bring peace to the entire community. While the results are often hilarious—such as requiring Hrothgar to find an alternative food source for Grendel—the students learn that a “win-win” situation can be achieved if all work together, show respect for each other, and compromise where possible. This activity also gives students a rudimentary glimpse into the real-life challenges of adopting international peace accords and resolving local labor union disputes.

Teaching tolerance and respect for cultural, sexual, and racial differences is another way in which the school, and particularly English teachers, can be proactive in preventing violence in both the schools and society. Wendy Schwartz asserts that our society teaches children that “intolerance is an acceptable reaction to diversity” (1). Such intolerance often results in conflict, anger, and violence. Indeed, students are exposed to manifestations of

hatred among “different” groups on a daily basis. They see pictures of the effects of the ethnic war in Albania, they watch television coverage of a Neo-Nazi shooting pedestrians on Chicago streets, they hear racial slurs and disparaging remarks about jocks in school hallways. The resulting exposure to violence only further “desensitizes them [the students] to their own pain and that of others” (Berreth and Berman 25). The school can work to counter these societal lessons. Joan Halford states that “curricular materials and instructional processes that present, affirm, and encourage respect for student diversity also contribute to peaceable schools . . . Multicultural education, then, reinforces violence prevention” (4).

The English teacher can expose students to the literature of different cultures and races. Through discussions, students can be led to appreciate the humanity that the peoples of different nationalities, religions, classes, cultures, and even sexes and socioeconomic groups, share. Once the common human bond is recognized, empathy for those who are “different” will develop. This is exactly what Conrad’s Marlow learns as he journeys down the river in *Heart of Darkness*.

Besides examples found in the traditional canon of American and British literature, appropriate multicultural literature is readily available for students of all ages. Major literature textbooks published in the last decade include such works, and major paperback publishers print literature by multicultural authors. In fact, teacher resource companies such as *Teacher’s Discovery* sell publications such as *12 Multicultural Novels*, a work containing teaching strategies for novels written by writers such as Sandra Cisneros and Helen Kim, and *Multicultural Education: Resource Guide*, which includes curriculum guidelines and lists of software and other audio-visual materials. The United Nations also provides materials to teachers, including *U.N. Study Kits* and online lesson plans; in addition, the UN conducts workshops for teachers, suggesting ways to use these materials. By exposing students to such multicultural literature, the English teacher is fostering tolerance and empathy and, thus, nonviolence in the students.

Of course, the English teacher can foster respect for diversity by more direct contacts. Kathy Checkley relates the suggestion of Theodore Eisenman, a communication specialist for the Peace Corps World Wise Schools program. Eisenman en-

courages teachers to use Peace Corps volunteers. An English teacher might invite the Peace Corps worker to visit classes. "In sharing what they learn about their host countries, volunteers help students see 'what life is like for an average citizen in another part of the world,' states Eisenman" (qtd. in Checkley, par. 14).

In addition to inviting speakers to their classrooms, English teachers can encourage direct communication with students from other countries. Checkley tells of teacher Mary Ann Huntley, who worked with a Peace Corps volunteer. Huntley states, "The volunteer helps lift the curtain on another way of life" (qtd. in Checkley, par. 15). Through a pen pal arrangement facilitated by the volunteer, Huntley's students not only got a direct, personal look at life in post-communist Bulgaria, but also learned to "realize how different circumstances make for differences in culture . . . [and to] learn that 'just because our culture is different, it doesn't mean it's better'" (qtd. in Checkley, par. 18).

Cooperative learning has been recognized as another tool for preventing violence. Robert Sylwester, author of *A Celebration of Neurons*, claims that, on the basis of recent scientific findings, "It's difficult to think of linguistic, musical, and interpersonal intelligence out of the context of social and cooperative activity, and other forms of intelligence are likewise principally social in normal practice" (qtd. in Elias et al. 16). Bolstered further by the research Dan Goleman presented in *Emotional Intelligence*, and by Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, Elias et al. reinforce the need for cooperative settings, concluding that "to succeed in school, family, friendships, the workplace, community life, and democratic participation, students need a full complement of skills—social, emotional, and academic" (16). Pete DeSisto, Director of the Cooperative Discipline Institute, sees the implication of such claims for preventing violence. He insists that cooperative learning aids in the students' "making and maintaining friendships across racial, ethnic, social, and economic lines" (1). As a result, conflicts among these groups may be reduced. In fact, insists David Hamburg, the president of the Carnegie Corporation,

reversing the trend of violence among the young depends on teaching children how to share, work cooperatively with others, and to help others. The more children and adolescents work in cooperative learning groups, the greater will be their psycho-

logical health, self-esteem, social competencies, and resilience in the face of adversity and stress (qtd. in Johnson & Johnson 65).

Furthermore, claims Halford, "Engaging, student-centered curriculums also reduce alienation, especially for students with special needs" (4). The implication, of course, is that a sense of belonging enhances the building of community in the classroom and/or school, where conflicts can be resolved constructively. David W. Johnson, a professor of educational psychology, and Roger T. Johnson, a professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Minnesota, both of whom have written extensively about cooperative learning and its role in creating peacemakers, point out the danger of not striving to build such communities: "Anything that allows students to fail, remain apart from classmates, and be socially inept and have low self-esteem, increases the probability that students will use destructive conflict strategies" (65).

Teaching the power of language can help students understand the effects of their own words on others.

The English classroom is readily adapted to methods using cooperative learning. This does not mean that the English teacher must avoid topics that have conflicts. In fact, by encouraging "academic controversy," teachers can help students find ways of handling opposing views. Johnson and Johnson offer this strategy, which can be used in literature classes and as pre-writing activity for writing lessons. They suggest that teachers assign students to cooperative learning groups, within which students are paired and assigned pro and con positions on an issue. Each pair is directed to prepare a presentation (consisting of a thesis, support, and conclusion) in which the pair tries to persuade the other side. During a discussion period, the opposition can attempt to refute the others' arguments. The procedure is then reversed. After both sides have presented and defended their positions, each side is asked to state the most convincing point the other

side has offered, thus coming to an awareness of the other side's perspective (66). Topics such as Is *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* a racist novel? or Is Hester Prynne a good mother? can be discussed in this fashion. After discussion, students could be directed to write a persuasive essay in which they argue a point of view that includes recognition of the opposing view's arguments. "Developing sensitivity to what we read and see, heightening our awareness of the feelings and experience of other people is at the heart of both anti-violence training and good English teaching" (Carey-Webb 37).

In addition to utilizing certain strategies within the traditional English curriculum, the English classroom, by its nature, offers yet another way in which English teachers can be proactive in fostering violence prevention. "Language can be a catalyst for violence or for peace" (Wolfe 52). Foul language is, indeed, a force that results in violence. Notes an elementary school principal, "Most physical violence in my school . . . begins with foul language" (qtd. in Lickona 16). Denny Wolfe, in an article entitled "Three Approaches to Coping with School Violence," states that, "since language is our own business, in our own classrooms we can work to help students speak to one another with civil tongues" and thus build "learning environments where students feel secure" (52). Teaching the power of language can help students understand the effects of their own words on others. The written words students receive from English teachers can also foster a setting to promote violence reduction. R. Baird Schuman cautions English teachers to avoid the use of "insult, negativity, [and] sarcasm" when grading students' papers (28). Instead, words of encouragement, communicating a respect for the human being, however poor a student, can be used to build a connection, rather than create a gap, between teacher and student. Reducing a student's sense of alienation lowers the potential for violence. Dean Walker notes that, when students feel connected to the school, violence has decreased (2). Halford agrees: "Personalization . . . can create contexts to counter violence . . . When students feel a strong connection to their school, they are less likely to engage in violent behaviors or tolerate them among peers" (2).

Anti-violence education within the framework of the English curriculum—even when the works studied contain violence—can be effective. Examining the nature of conflict within works of literature helps students to learn productive strate-

gies of conflict resolution applicable in their own lives. Reading and analyzing multicultural literature heightens empathy for those who are perceived to be different, thus reducing attitudes of intolerance that often lead to violent actions. Using cooperative learning in English classes to explore controversy helps students listen to opposing views and come to a realization that differences can coexist peacefully. The English teacher can be most effective when using these methods in a respectful, student-centered environment that stresses the power and the potential of verbal and written language.

This method of violence prevention teaching *does not* take time from the academic curriculum, a complaint waged against the use of "peace curricula." Furthermore, not only does such integration enhance the English program—by teaching plot structure, characterization, point of view, tone, close textual reading, enhanced listening, and analytical/persuasive writing skills—but also studies on the use of academic controversy and on cooperative learning have shown that they "result in increased student achievement, critical thinking, [and] intrinsic motivation to learn" (Johnson and Johnson 66). In addition, Elias et al. state that "social and emotional learning is strongly related to several of our national educational goals and standards" (17).

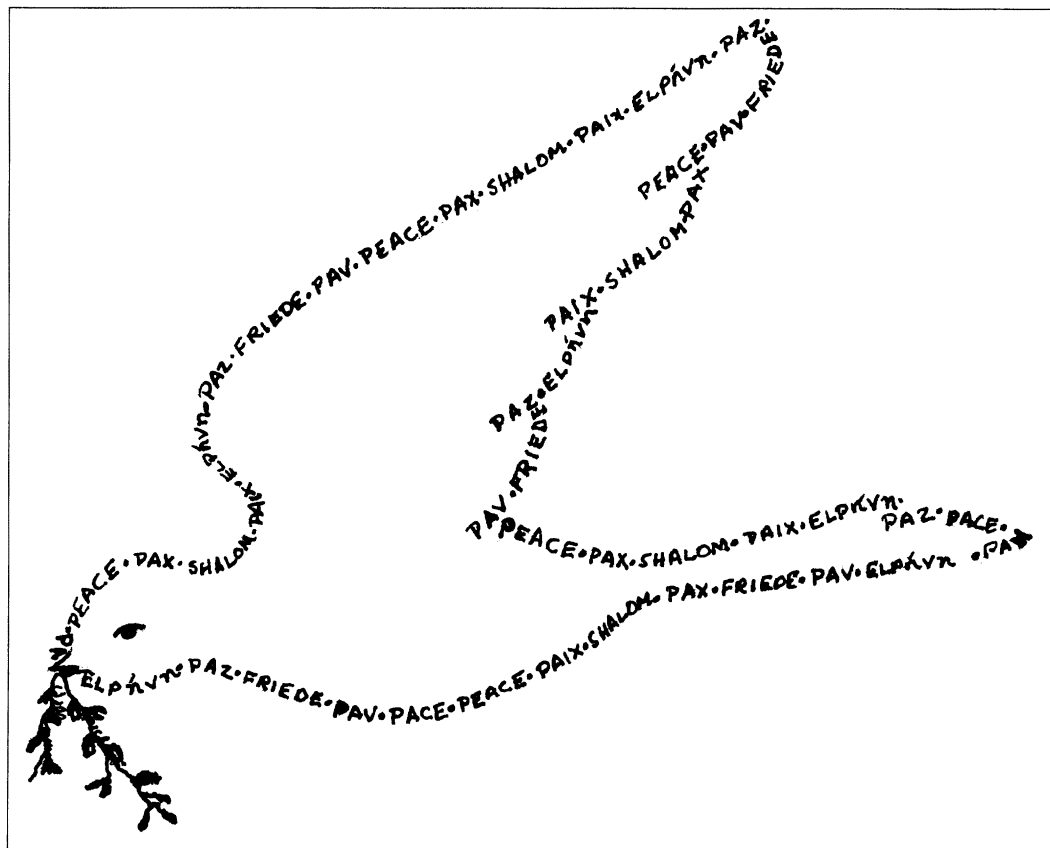
Certainly, such integration takes planning on the part of the English teacher, and "there is no reason to expect . . . that the process [of teaching to manage conflict] will be quick or easy" (Johnson and Johnson 67), for America is a violent land. But what has typically been done to prevent violence in the past has had no or very little effect. Teachers, especially English teachers, have the opportunity to address this national nightmare, not by changing the content of the English curriculum, but by integrating proven violence prevention strategies into it. They need to help students learn nonviolent ways of handling conflict so that school shootings will cease to be "routine" (Cloud 34), and school administrators can go back to worrying about more important things than the cost of metal detectors.

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In any language, PEACE.