

Conflict Resolution in Schools: Learning to Live Together

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On September 15th and 16th 2003, our international conference "Conflict Resolution in Schools: Learning to Live Together" took place in Kontakt der Kontinenten in the Netherlands. The conference was a great success with 180 participants from around 45 countries, who shared a wealth of expertise, dedication and enthusiasm.

Over the past few years, interest in the field of conflict resolution in schools has grown considerably. Several recent instances of extreme violence in schools and among youngsters have opened many eyes to the importance of establishing conflict resolution programs in schools in order to further respect, understanding and a more peaceful environment among pupils. Important new research outcomes have shown the benefits for pupils and teachers, as well as for academic achievement and a more positive school climate in general. Pupils benefit not only from better results and a more positive attitude towards school, but also gain increased assertiveness, communication skills and self control.

Teachers find that their work is more rewarding in an enjoyable classroom climate with healthy interpersonal relations, and claim that this significantly reduces the dropout rate. Furthermore, conflict resolution skills learned at school can also be used in out-of-school situations, and the institutionalized teaching of these skills thus has a positive impact on societal problems as a whole. Inextricably linked to this development there is also growing interest in academic research and in educational planning on the theme of Education, Violence and Social Cohesion. The central question in this discussion is how the content and processes of current formal education relate to processes of social exclusion and violence, as well as how to create alternative practices which can stop these processes and contribute to a more cohesive society and a culture of peace.

These issues were addressed in a series of working groups, plenary speeches and debates. Experts and practitioners from a wide range of countries were brought together in order to share experiences, lessons learned and best practices, focusing on practical guidelines for setting up conflict resolution programmes in schools. These programmes range from "practical" initiatives that contribute directly to creating and maintaining safer and more stimulating learning environments, such as peer mediation and restorative practices, to curriculum change focusing on tolerance, coexistence and social cohesion education.

Even though each working group focused on a specific subject, there clearly were overarching themes that relate to any conflict resolution model in any school situation. Some of the distinct preconditions for conflict resolution education (CRE), for instance, were recurring themes in almost every debate:

- the need to have a whole school approach to a programme, involving not only students and teachers but also parents, school management, other school staff and the wider community
- the need for capacity building and broad support for the programme, crucially involving the majority of the teachers and the heads of school

- the need to have continuity in a programme rather than making it a short-term, extra curricular "event". Implementing a programme needs a thorough analysis of the needs of a particular school, a "mainstreamed" implementation and regular evaluation.

A brief selection of the conclusions and recommendations that came out of the various working groups highlighted that:

- Conflict Resolution Education should be mainstreamed in a school's curriculum and should be part of the school's ethos
- training teachers is essential both in-service and pre-service
- local, national and international networks between schools and practitioners are very important for the sharing of best practices and lessons learned
- programmes have to be reshaped for every region and every school. Networks and the sharing of other programmes are nevertheless of crucial importance as they bring in new ideas and evaluation
- the fields of peace education, conflict resolution and coexistence/tolerance/social cohesion education show great overlap and work towards the same basic goals. Nevertheless, they are still very much seen as different fields and treated as such. Closer links and cooperation should bring these fields together
- youth, women and minority groups should be heard and involved in the development of CRE curricula.

The establishment of an international network in this field this was an important topic at the conference. It was agreed that the conference should not be a one-off event, but should form the basis for continuous discussion. Education will also be an important topic in the Civil Society Project, with discussions on this issue in each of the regions. As for the conference, only the establishment of a loose network could be agreed to at this stage due to limited resources. Participants from Norway, England, Germany, Canada, US and West Africa have already committed to this, and with their help ECCP is looking forward to keeping the great spirit from this conference alive and taking it further.

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