

Finding Common Ground:

Learning the Language of Peace

In the Prologue to her seminal book, *The Peaceable Classroom*, Mary Rose O'Reilley poses the question a professor asked in a seminar for teaching assistants: "Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?" (9). Both haunted and inspired by this question, O'Reilley answers by demonstrating that English can be taught in a way that will reduce violence if the teacher creates a "peaceable classroom"—one which encourages students to find their own voice, listen to each other, respect each other, and to make peace (23). A "peaceable classroom" teacher fosters consensus, cooperation, nurturing, compassion, and "leadings of intuition" (O'Reilley 32-35).

O'Reilley and others who have since joined her cause point out that in a "peaceable classroom" students are encouraged to develop a rich, authentic inner life (voice) so they can share their own stories and enter into the stories of others. Personal writing helps students discover the power of their voices and what it means to be human. G. Lynn Nelson argues: "Deny me my stories, as the modern, dominant culture does, and I will eventually turn to the language of violence" (43). Moreover, reading enables students to discover their inner worlds and identities by engaging

with and connecting with the lives of fictional characters, by discussing the choices characters make for handling and resolving conflict, and by looking at issues from multiple perspectives. Reading, writing, and sharing stories help students understand and appreciate diversity in a positive and enriching way (Jonsberg 29-30; O'Reilley 117-118; Monseau 10-11; Quinn 103). Hence, students in a "peaceable classroom" use the power of language rather than the "force of fists or weapons of self-destruction to intervene symbolically in violence" (Bruce and Davis 121).

Mindful of the best practices suggested by O'Reilley and others, during the fall of 2004 we worked with a middle school language arts teacher to design, pilot, and assess a literature-based "language of peace" program in a highly diverse Chicago middle school setting. Students read, discussed, and responded to a number of young adult novels whose protagonists successfully work through conflict and hence can serve as positive role models for young people learning how to solve conflict in the classroom and beyond. Immediate post-research results show that the students learned how to communicate more effectively with one another, how to explore appropriate ways of agreeing and

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disagreeing, and how to show respect for each other and for those who share our planet.

This paper will describe the “language of peace” program, including a summary of the young adult novels used, the learning activities designed to foster a “peaceable classroom” environment, the instrument used to assess students’ (both in the experimental and control groups) pre- and post-attitudes toward reading vis-à-vis the problem of peace/conflict, and a preliminary statistical analysis of the pilot study.

To help her students start thinking about resolving conflict and making peace, the instructor asked them to respond to three questions: (1) What kinds of conflict have you experienced? (2) How do you respond to different kinds of conflict? (3) What do you do to try to avoid or resolve conflict?

After the pre-reading brainstorming session, she read aloud from Carl Hiaasen’s *Hoot* over a two-week period, modeling for her students the kinds of questions they might ask of other texts they would read and respond to in reading circles. The students were easily engaged in this hilarious ecological mystery and could identify with the central character Roy Eberhardt. They were fascinated with Roy’s choice to help a homeless boy save a colony of burrowing owls from a crooked business operator and admired Roy’s ability to outwit a middle school bully.

As the teacher read aloud, the class collaboratively created a large, three-column chart on which they listed conflicts they saw in the story, ways characters reacted to conflict in the story, and feelings and reactions the students had to the characters’ conflicts. Students especially noted the various kinds of “bullying” going on in the story, perpetrated both by young people and by adults. They observed how some victims were too scared to share their plight with others. They also noted that one character seemed not to be bothered by bullying. Feelings and reactions to the conflict they saw in the story included “feeling bad,” “confused,” “weird,” “curious,” “sad,” “scared,” “amazed,” and “happy” when Roy stuck up for himself.”

The class also began constructing a word wall of conflict/peace words. As they discussed and wrote, they added words to the wall—words such as “bully,” “unsocial,” “disobedient,” “defiant,” “uncooperative,” “rude,” “bossy,” “arrogant,” “annoying,” “bad influence,” and “liar” as well as “adapting,” “responsible,”

“helpful,” “confident,” “less self-centered,” “kind,” “secure,” “cooperative,” “dependable,” “passionate,” “sensitive,” “mature,” “sympathetic,” and “good listener.”

After listening to a section of *Hoot* being read each day, students individually wrote in their journals, responding to one or more of these prompts:

1. Tell how one character in the story is like you.
2. Tell about a time you have had a similar experience.
3. What are some ways the characters in this story respond to conflict?
4. What are some ways the characters resolve conflict? Do you think the characters choose helpful ways to solve their conflict? What would you have done?
5. Which character is the best peacemaker? Why?
6. What does this story make you think about?
7. What does this story show you about resolving conflict?

Sharing selected journal responses became the basis for review/recapitulation each day before the class reconvened to hear more of the story.

After the teacher finished reading *Hoot* aloud, students participated in a “HOOTenanny” in which they acted out conflicts from the novel or a word from the “word wall.” The class guessed what the conflict was or which word they were acting out.

Finally, on owl shapes, each student wrote a letter to one character in the novel, addressing a specific conflict and how the character handled it. For example, Megan wrote a letter to Lonna, the mother of Napoleon, nick-named Mullet Fingers:

“Dear Lonna,

My language arts class just read the book *Hoot* with you in it as one of the stars. I’m writing you this letter because I was completely disgusted on how you reacted to the conflict with your son. He is a very intelligent boy and you never understand that. What did you bicker about to send Napoleon to boot camp? I can’t believe why you don’t care about your very own son. He is very lucky that he has an awesome step-sister to help him with his hard situations he stumbles into. If I were you I’d talk to Napoleon first before sending him away. Napoleon gets very furious at Boot camp. Your son is the best! P.S. Write back and change your attitude!”

By participating in discussions and completing reader response activities related to *Hoot*, students were learning how to recognize conflict; were identifying vocabulary to use when describing and resolving conflict; were seeing how characters in a novel

instigate, respond to, or resolve conflict; and were comparing conflict and its satisfactory resolution in the novel to their own experiences.

Next, the teacher divided the class into small, homogeneous reading circles. She presented book talks on five young adult novels—Esme Raji Codell’s *Sahara Special*, Sharon Creech’s *Granny Torrelli Makes Soup*, Kate DiCamillo’s *Because of Winn-Dixie*, Tony Johnston’s *Any Small Goodness: A Novel of the Barrio*, and Jerry Spinelli’s *Loser*. Each of these works depicts a character who discovers and uses her or his own story (voice) to solve conflict.

In *Sahara Special*, an extraordinary fifth grade teacher gives a special needs child new hope for academic success by validating the child’s ability to tell her own story despite her fears about fitting in and her struggles with a bully. In *Granny Torrelli Makes Soup*, Granny Torrelli uses good cooking, wise advice, and personal stories to help twelve-year-old Rosie reconcile with her best friend, Bailey. In *Because of Winn-Dixie*, India Opal uses her dog, Winn-Dixie, and the ploy of sharing stories to help people with different points of view get along and respect each other. In *Any Small Goodness: A Novel of the Barrio*, small acts of kindness transcend discrimination and potential violence when eleven-year-old Arturo and his loving Hispanic family move to Los Angeles. And in *Loser*, Donald Zinkhoff, who has always been different from his peers, becomes the brunt of jokes and cruel acts until a few recognize his “winning” ways.

After the books were previewed, each reading circle was asked to choose one of them to read in common; each student in the group was given a copy of the novel.

After revisiting the three pre-reading discussion questions used with *Hoot*, students read independently during part of class time. Each student created a conflict chart with three columns like the collaborative class chart created for *Hoot*.

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One student related to Arturo from *Any Small Goodness*, noting that “Arturo is like me—he wants to be called by his real name.” When this comment was shared in group discussion, the conversation turned to name-calling and ways to stop it. When another student revealed that her parents, like Sahara’s, were divorced, students discussed how family conflict makes them feel and how they respond to pain and guilt. When asked how characters in their novel resolved conflict and what they

might have done instead, students offered insightful responses. In response to an incident in *Loser*, a student pointed out that Andrew was not helpful. “He could have told Zinkoff it is okay that the cookie broke and helped him clean it up.”

When identifying which character was the best peacemaker, students revealed a growing sense of what making peace might look like. After reading *Loser*, one student wrote: “I think Zinkoff’s Dad is the best peacemaker. When Zinkoff can’t go to take-your-kid-to-work-day, he is sad. But Mr. Zinkoff to the rescue! He asks Zinkoff if he wants to come deliver mail on Sunday. So Zinkoff happily scribbles 100 fake letters and drops them in the mailboxes. Mr. Zinkoff has restored peace yet again!” Another student noted that Mrs. Pointy, the teacher in *Sahara Special*, is a peacemaker in several ways. Her “troubles basket” helps kids find peace, she respects her students, and she tells Aesop fables to help them learn to respect each other.

When responding to what the story made one think about, one student noted that *Granny Torrelli Makes Soup* made her think about people with disabilities and the conflicts the two friends experienced partly because of Bailey’s disability. She observed that conflicts in the story “. . . sometimes

made me sad. Sometimes made me mad, and most of the time made me relieved when everyone worked together to resolve their differences.”

Several students made perceptive comments about what they had learned about resolving conflict. After reading *Loser*, one student wrote: “This story shows

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The teacher visited each reading circle, sometimes just listening in, other times sharing her own reactions and observations about the novels. She also carried with her a small bag of “conflict cards.” She would randomly invite a student to draw a card from the bag and read the generic question aloud. The student could then answer

the question or invite someone from the group to answer it. Some of the questions printed on the cards were: “Is there a character in your book that you don’t think you would get along with? Why or why not?” or “Have you learned something from reading this selection that might help you the next time you are having conflict? What?” or “Did the author do a good job of describing how the main character reacted to conflict? How?” The conflict cards and group observation helped the teacher assess the progress of individuals in each group.

The students’ journal writing reflected how their ideas about conflict were evolving. Most interesting were their own stories prompted by the experiences of characters in the novels. Even after the project ended, students continued to use “nuggets” from their journals to write stories about themselves.

After each group completed reading and responding to a young adult novel, they chose ways to share their findings with the class. They acted out short skits, depicting how conflict was resolved in the story. They added new words to the word wall. They wrote and shared stories, focusing on personal conflict and on how that conflict was resolved or not.

Best of all, they began applying their new knowledge about conflict resolution to real incidents in class or school. For example, when some students accused one another of breaking rules during a basketball game, the class discussed the incident and wrote stories about times when they were falsely accused. Several students talked about characters who had been unfairly blamed. After the discussion, the students calmly resolved their own incident.

Before the “language of peace” project was launched, the teacher asked students to complete a Likert-type survey in order to assess their attitudes towards reading books, their classroom environment, relationships with peers, and resolving conflict. Two classrooms were used as the control group and a third class became the experimental group. The experimental group consisted of 23 students (12 girls, 11 boys) and the control group classrooms consisted of a total of 39 students (21 girls, 18 boys). All students took a paper and pencil pre-test survey in their classroom, administered on the same day by the same teacher. The experimental group then participated in the six-week “language of peace” project or intervention; the control groups did not receive any intervention during this time. Following the project, all students took a post-test in their classroom, administered by the same teacher.

A preliminary statistical analysis suggests significant differences exist between the post-test attitudes of the experimental and control group. Specifically, even though differences in learning about getting along with others from teachers, friends, and books existed between the experimental and control group children prior to intervention, the difference between the attitudes of experimental group children ($M = 4.0$, $SD = 1.00$) and control group children ($M = 3.1$, $SD = 1.30$) was even stronger following the intervention, $t(60) = 3.02$, $p = .001$.

Further analysis uncovered significant differences between the post-test attitudes of the experimental and control group students, even though the two

groups did not differ before the intervention. For instance, students in the experimental group ($M = 4.0$, $SD = .64$) were more likely than control group children ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 1.00$) to think about how book characters are similar to them, $t(60) = 2.21$, $p = .03$, even though the groups did not differ before the intervention. The experimental group was also more likely to report that reading stories helped them to learn how to get along with others. Finally, following the intervention, students in the experimental group ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 1.24$) were less likely to think they would walk away when seeing a fight start between two other people, compared to students in the control group, ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 1.05$), $t(60) = -2.12$, $p = .04$, though no difference existed before the intervention. Means and standard deviations for pre- and post-test measures are reported in Table 1.

Although a statistical analysis demonstrated positive changes in student attitudes, even more telling were the teacher’s anecdotal observations made later in the year. During the spring, she decided to give her students a “peace” inoculation. She read aloud Stephanie S. Tolan’s *Meet the Applewhites*, a story about a troubled youth who is sent to live with the Applewhite family and attend their home school after he is expelled from a number of other schools.

During this time, the class became engaged in a self-initiated, lengthy discussion about the similarities between Mullet Fingers, a character in *Hoot*, and Jake from *Meet the Applewhites*. One student even created a Venn diagram to share with the class. The class concluded that Mullet Fingers and Jake could become friends and constructively help each other avoid conflict.

Also, the class took the initiative to help two non-

English speaking students from Mexico adjust to their new surroundings. Based on Arturo’s experiences in adjusting to his new school in *Any Small Goodness* and Jake’s experiences when joining the Applewhites, the class brainstormed a list of things they could do to help the new students. And one day after a confrontation occurred between two students, the teacher overheard a serious conversation among class members, comparing the students to Jake and E. D. in *Surviving the Applewhites*.

Virginia Monseau contends that “. . . stories make us human. They satisfy our need to connect. . . . and will surely make our students richer in their understanding of one another—and the world” (11). By participating in a pilot project focused on learning the “language of peace,” 23 students with diverse backgrounds learned that English can be taught in a way that promotes self-respect, empathy, and peace.

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Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and T-tests Comparisons for the Control and Experimental Groups

Variable	Control		Experimental		t	p-value
	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>		
Pre-test: Learn from books	2.8	1.17	3.6	1.20	2.48	0.02
Post-test: Learn from books	3.1	1.30	4.0	1.00	3.02	0.00
Pre-test: Similar to book characters	3.5	1.27	3.4	1.23	0.03	0.77
Post-test: Similar to book characters	3.6	1.00	4.0	0.64	2.21	0.03
Pre-test: Walk away	3.5	1.30	3.6	1.30	0.19	0.85
Post-test: Walk away	3.5	1.05	2.9	1.24	-2.21	0.04

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