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Rosalie Batistoni

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The adult child: equipping teenagers to deal with conflict

Rosalie Batistoni

Childhood has its own way of seeing, thinking and feeling, and there is nothing more foolish than to try to substitute ours for theirs.

Jean Jacques Rousseau.

Eighteenth century French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau understood the concept that children were not miniature adults who could adapt and respond to the world through adult eyes and maturity. Unfortunately, this lesson is one that remains to be learned by society. During a time when young people should be exploring who they are, they are often forced to become who they 'ought to be'. Parents, teachers, community members and administrators ask children to take on adult roles before they are prepared with the necessary tools, while refusing to acknowledge the adult we have forced them to become. 'Many adolescents feel betrayed by a society that tells them to grow up fast but also to remain a child.'¹ It is this tension that young people attempt to reconcile on a daily basis.

By the age of six many children are responsible for getting up, dressed, fed and ready for school, ensuring that the house is locked safely. These are not necessarily bad responsibilities to have, but when these tasks are handled efficiently by the child, parents often place more responsibilities on them that they are *not* prepared to handle. For example, a child may suddenly find him or herself in the role of confidant to the parent, sharing all of the economic, family, and social stresses of the mother and/or father. Suddenly, children are asked to participate in adult decision-making that they are not mentally or emotionally prepared to handle.

What many of these children experience is chronic stress

which 'is translated into what Freud called "free floating anxiety" in the sense that it is not attached to a specific fear or apprehension'.² Free floating anxiety can elucidate into anxiety, restlessness, irritability, an inability to concentrate, and low mood — one can never know how and when it will manifest.

When young people enter the school building, their stress increases. They carry with them not only their domestic 'emotional baggage' but also academic expectations to perform. Schools anticipate that young people will act and behave in a manner that adults themselves often find difficult. They are expected to divorce themselves from home pressures and concentrate only on the objectives that are placed before them on the blackboard. It is here that free floating anxiety manifests into notable behaviour. Whether it is withdrawal, academic or athletic success or failure, or violent tendencies and acts, it is nothing that should surprise us — yet it always does. Often, parents are incredulous when phoned about the classroom behaviour of their child, refusing to believe that the child is acting out, thus ignoring the opportunity to work through the underlying causes and adding to the stress.

We have placed unrealistic expectations upon young people. There is no turning back. We must provide them with proper tools so they can survive high school. A conflict resolution/peer mediation program that targets not only the entire school community but the total community might just help to turn the tide of violence entering our schools. It is also time that we learn from our children.

Trigger event

Daniel and Jessica were American teenagers who met in sophomore English

class. They liked each other and thought it would be a good idea if they dated. Their relationship lasted for nearly two years, but during their senior year, Jessica realised that being serious with just one boy was not what she wanted. However, she chose not to mention this epiphany to Daniel.

Jessica met David at a party one Saturday night. He made it clear that he was interested in her, and like many other high school parties, they got to know each other quite well rather quickly. Jessica decided that she would pursue David.

David was Daniel's complete opposite. Where Daniel was petite, David was tall and fit. David worked on his family's farm, whereas Daniel tutored students in order to earn some extra cash. Daniel was third in his class; David was closer to third from the end. Daniel had wit and was quick to use it; David had muscles and was quick to use them.

On Sunday, Jessica called Daniel and broke up with him. He was stunned. On Monday, Daniel learned what happened at the party and decided to confront Jessica about it. He found her at her locker with David. When he questioned Jessica as to her decision, David stepped in. Daniel asked David to stay out of the conversation since it concerned only him and Jessica.

David walked away — just far enough to get a running start. He attacked Daniel from behind and broke his jaw in three places. It took three teachers to get David off Daniel. Daniel was hospitalised for a week while reconstructive surgery was performed. David was expelled and did not graduate from high school.

Initial steps

Violence is a human response to stress. A potential for violence is created when an organisation does not read the signals or ➤



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➤ interrupt the downward spiral. A good prevention program seeks to identify and relieve the sources of stress in the workplace and put in place mechanisms to deal with threats.

Anonymous

Following my visit to the hospital, I could not imagine what could be done. Daniel looked misshapen and feeble. I was angry. Not only would this affect Daniel's participation in his final year activities, he would have to recover from the emotional damage that follows any physical attack. Yet Daniel was not the only one to suffer in this case. David would not graduate, and he would still not be equipped to deal appropriately with his anger the next time it surfaced.

As I drove home, I tried to locate some sort of answer or solution. This was not the first attack of this nature in our school. In fact, during the four years of my teaching, student to student conflicts had been on the rise. There had also been a number of student to teacher attacks. Lately, it felt as if good classroom management meant juggling student to student relationships that at times ended in verbal and physical attacks. I also had to deal with a student who entered my classroom with a handgun because he felt he needed 'protection'. Tragically, that same year, I lost one of my favourite students to suicide. The classroom I had was not the one I envisioned while I was preparing to become a teacher. We were not in the same dire straits as other schools in our nation, but we could easily get there.

When I arrived home, I still wasn't sure of the approach I should take to deal with this incident. I was only one teacher. I decided to map out a few things to try to understand the underlying reasons for the presenting behaviour. I soon discovered that this was a huge, unwieldy task. In order to focus my thoughts, I applied a four quadrant analysis (see Table 1). This is a diagnostic tool that allows you to take a view of the situation from a macro level. It involves specifically identifying the observable symptoms which suggest that something is wrong (quadrant 1), hypothesising as to the possible ➤

Quadrant 1 Symptoms:

- Out of school suspensions have risen by 38 per cent.
- In-school suspensions have risen 26 per cent.
- Student/student fights in the hallway and classroom.
- Student/student verbal attacks in hallways and classroom.
- Student/teacher physical attacks in hallways and classrooms.
- Student/teacher/student verbal attacks in hallways and classrooms.
- Drug and alcohol related suspensions have increased by 18 per cent.
- Students are wearing gang colours and symbols.
- Students are sleeping in class.
- Increased number of visits to the nurse.
- Teenage pregnancy has increased by 8 per cent.
- Attendance at extra-curricular activities have decreased.
- 29 per cent of school population participates in extra-curricular activities.
- Increased student/teacher ratio from 25-1 to 31-1 in classroom.
- School population increased from 1839 to 2017.
- Increased percentage of emancipated students.
- 57 per cent of student population holds a job.
- Students work between 20-40 hours per week.
- Divorce rates in the country are 47 per cent.
- One parent households constitute 28 per cent of population.
- 7 per cent of students live with grandparent or relative other than parent.
- Increased number of minority students.
- Increased number of students from military families.
- Glorification of student athletes.
- 5 per cent of parent population is part of PTA.

Quadrant 2 Possible causes:

- Students are more violent.
- Students cannot control their anger.
- Students are emotionally scarred.
- Students have adult-like problems.
- Students are crying out for help.
- People are losing control.
- Disdain and disregard for adults.
- Young people have no self-respect.
- Young people are under greater amounts of stress.

- Teachers are not equipped to handle the situations that arise.
- Adults have no respect for young people.
- Adults have lost touch with youth.
- Parents are under great amounts of stress which they pass on to their children.
- Young people are not equipped to constructively handle conflict.
- Students have adult responsibilities — they have families of their own or they are paying child support.
- Young people contribute a significant amount to household finances.
- Teachers do not have the time to spend one on one with students.
- Nuclear family is the norm; parents cannot call on extended family members to help.
- Gang culture is filling the void of family.
- Sports are a cult — student athletes feel they are 'untouchable'.
- Parents are too busy to spend time with their children and family.
- More single parents must hold greater number of jobs to make ends meet — lots of shift work.
- Stress.
- Anger.
- No vehicle for dealing with stress.
- Safety — student, teacher, parent.
- Young people in adult roles.
- Social system is changing: roles of parents, young people, children, community members are changing.

Quadrant 3 Possible responses:

- Involve students, parents, community members in a joint venture.
- Start a mentoring program.
- Start a peer mediation program.
- Propose a mediation program to the board of education.

Quadrant 4 Action plan:

- Conduct research on peer mediation programs
- Learn the procedures for approaching the board of education.
- Prepare self for session with the board of education — create a seven element chart.
- Do a stakeholder analysis.
- Do a PVI.

*Figures quoted are author's estimates.

Table 1: Four quadrant analysis



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➤ causes of the observable symptoms (quadrant 2), generating responses which address the possible causes so as to eliminate or reduce the symptoms (quadrant 3) and finally developing an action plan from the possible solutions (quadrant 4).

Separating out symptoms from diagnosis in the first two quadrants, helped me to focus on the specific problems I was seeing — rising suspensions, fights, teenage pregnancies — rather than immediately leaping to conclusions about what was causing the problems. I could then focus on generating possible responses, which tied in with the seven element analysis I had undertaken (see Tables 2 and 3), drawing on interests and options to generate possible responses. It was clear that in order to help our young people work toward peaceable resolutions with each other, we, the school and the community at large, had to work together toward a solution.

Incorporating a peer mediation/conflict resolution (PM/CR) program in the county seemed like a viable proposition and getting such a program off the ground became my action plan. After initial research, I found that the many school systems which incorporated a PM/CR program reaped benefits beyond statistics like fewer discipline problems and increased attendance. These programs made a significant difference in the lives of the participating students, staff, administrators and community members. Students talked out their issues and resolved them without the use of violence. Students often brought and utilised these tools at home with siblings and parents. There were requests from parents to receive the training.

The concept of a district-wide PM/CR program sounded appealing. Yet how beneficial would the program be if it only touched the lives of students and teachers? It could go further than that to incorporate the entire school district, as well as the community. If the process merged recognising, listening, and talking out conflict in order to reach a conclusion that could be agreed on by all parties, these skills would not be lost on the ➤

Interests

- Safety of the students.
- Personal safety, community safety and stability.
- Helping students become responsible adults.
- Helping young people succeed.
- Teaching alternatives to violence.
- Safer learning environment.
- Being a pioneer; making a proactive contribution to education and the community.
- Long term commitment to the program.
- Help adults learn to cope with stress and with young people.
- Teach students to learn to act responsibly in a social setting.
- To teach young people to understand and accept the consequences of their actions.
- To empower the community with the tools to allow for productive dialogue.

Alternatives

- Do nothing.
- Quit teaching.
- Rally parents together to implement the program with or without the Board's approval.
- Propose a plan to the local council to offer peer mediation as an option for young people.
- Raise public awareness of the issues through a public relations campaign.
- Speak with the State Department of Education.
- Conduct a letterbox drop.
- Get in touch with the media and have them do an expose on school violence.
- Go to the State Education Association.

Options

- Implement a full scale PM/CR program in the school system.
- Write a grant that will fund the program for three years.
- Get the community to fund the program.
- Begin with a small pilot program at one of the high schools in the county.
- Have PR personnel donate pro bono time to conduct an educational awareness program for the community.
- Have dispute resolution personnel donate time for training.
- PM/CR guru to speak on the benefits of such a program to the teachers and administrators in the county.

Standards

- Acquire statistics on similar programs and their relationship to discipline, attendance,

attitudes and beliefs.

- Panel of speakers that would consist of superintendents, principals, teachers, community members, and students who are part of PM/CR programs in schools.
- Acquire juvenile justice statistics that measure crime trends in our area and compare them to the trends in similar areas.
- Acquire statistics from school districts of similar size, student population and so on.

Relationships

- As the Board of Education is essentially my boss, I must remember that a good relationship will help me remain employed. It might also help me in future negotiations or even with a position at the Central Office.
- This program might lead to other long term joint ventures that will involve both the school community and the community at large. With educational funding dependent on industry, this relationship is one to be nurtured.
- The relationships that the school and the community at large develops with the student population will pay off in both the short and long term. In the short term, the students will help to create an environment conducive to learning. In the long term, the students will become better citizens and will participate in the process.

Communication

- In speaking with the Board of Education, I want to make sure that my message is expressed and understood by the other party. I can accomplish this by making sure my communication is clear, concise, and focussed.
- I can make sure that the Board knows how serious I am by making sure I listen attentively to all that they say. Through the use of paraphrasing, I can ensure that I understand their points. This will help diminish confusion, and it may also help me remain calm.

Commitment

- One good outcome for this meeting would be to commit to research on the program.
- One good outcome for this meeting might be an agreement on the issues.
- One good outcome for this meeting might be an agreement to move forward with this idea to the local council.
- One good outcome for this meeting might be to have the board agree upon this proposal in principle.

Table 2: Seven element analysis for Rosalie Batistoni as teacher



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➤ community. In fact, it might serve to support efforts that have already begun in the local area such as gang intervention and mentoring programs.

Next steps

Once it became clear that a PM/CR program would benefit the school and the community at large, the next step was to devise a strategy to see it happen. After weighing the benefits of approaching the local council against the benefits of approaching the school board, I decided that it would be better to negotiate with the school board.

The board of education became the logical choice for a number of reasons: first, I was a teacher in the district and as such, I was familiar with the procedures; second, I had a positive relationship with the superintendent and school board members; third, they might be insulted if it were seen that I was 'going over their heads' by approaching the council; and fourth, the school board had access to the entire population that would participate in the program. If they chose to support this program, we could then approach the local council.

In an effort to prepare for the meeting, I constructed a seven elements chart for myself as well as the board (see Tables 2 and 3). The seven element tool is another diagnostic tool. It provides a more detailed, micro analysis of the presenting situation and so is valuable to use in conjunction with the macro four quadrant analysis. The seven element tool assisted me to prepare for the meeting in a systematic way. It allowed me to identify a good outcome for me by considering what I really wanted to achieve out of the meeting (interests), what I could achieve on my own without the board's co-operation (alternatives) and the numerous possible outcomes we could achieve if we worked together (options). Looking at my 'walk away' alternatives prior to the meeting gave me a yardstick to evaluate the options on the table more realistically.

The tool not only clarified my interests but also reminded me to focus on the board's interests as well. It was useful to note that although many of our interests were shared, this still might not indicate that the ➤

Interests

- Funding — a county-wide program that would incorporate the entire community would cost a great deal of money.
- Sharing the responsibility of the welfare of the youth in the county with the community.
- Taking a conservative approach. Do not want to look as if we are grasping at 'magic remedies'.
- Interest in reputation and community confidence.
- Not looking foolish (not letting the youth get the best of us).
- Equipping students with ways to become good parents and good citizens.
- Positive profile for the school district.
- Keeping the position of school board member (elected position) and superintendent (appointed position).
- Solving the problems in the system not just treating the symptoms.
- Safety of the schools and school children.

Alternatives

- Do nothing.
- Create an alternative school for students who participate in violent acts.
- Implement a 'zero tolerance' policy.
- Check into the costs of liability if a lawsuit results following another violent act.

Options

- Form a planning committee whose members reflect the school's and community's cultural make-up.
- Have the Professional Development days used for PM/CR workshops.
- Look for grants that are industry-based to fund the initiative.
- Supporting staff who take an interest in school issues.

Standards

- Acquire statistics on similar programs and their relationship to discipline, attendance, attitudes and beliefs.
- Panel of speakers that would consist of

superintendents, principals, teachers, community members, and students who are part of PM/CR programs in schools.

- Acquire juvenile justice statistics that measure crime trends in our area and compare them to the trends in similar areas.
- Acquire statistics from school districts of similar size, student population and so on.

Relationships

- Rosalie is a teacher who is well-respected both by students and parents. A good relationship with her would ensure that these people would not become agitated.
- A good relationship with Rosalie would show that we are proactive in the attempt to curb violence in our school system.
- Establishing a good relationship with the community would be beneficial. This would help to ensure our 'seats' and it would help out in the long run with other programs that need to get started.
- The reforms that have swept through Kentucky have demonstrated the need to have a strong relationship with the constituents in the school building but with the community at large. It is in the best interests of the school board to enhance the relationship with the community through the pursuance of this program.

Communication

- It would be beneficial to show Rosalie that we are listening to her. We can do this by rephrasing her messages taking into account the 'crux' of what she is saying.
- It would also be beneficial to the public that will also be in attendance at the meeting to use non-bureaucratic language. Direct responses to any questions or queries will be important.

Commitment

- A good outcome of this meeting would be an agreement to pursue the necessary research into CR/PM programs that have been conducted.
- A good outcome would be to agree on the issues.

Table 3: Seven element analysis for the County Board of Education

➤ resolution would be passed. It is important to not take shared interests for granted, and to remember to test whether what I have assumed to be their interests are in fact really their interests. This is the importance of the communication element — preparing questions to ask to test assumptions.

I also realised that although I had prepared some options prior to the meeting, far more were possible and could be better shaped if more than one brain worked on it. Generating options also highlighted the importance of identifying both parties' interests upfront because options need to meet both parties' interests.

I found the use of objective standards to benchmark my options extremely useful. It was great to have so much research at my fingertips. Educators are big on numbers and evidence — it comes with never having left the classroom. Having this data available made me feel far more comfortable going into the meeting as I knew I could substantiate the options I was suggesting and show that there were precedents for what I wanted to achieve. It also made it more difficult for the board to argue with me as I was prepared for their objections and could respond to them.

The final elements of relationships and commitment were a bit difficult to work through, yet they are crucial. They really keep you focused not simply on the task at hand, but for future encounters. The relationship element highlighted to me the fact that I needed to work with the board in future, as it was essentially my employer, and so I had to make sure I separated out the people from the issues.

The commitment element also helped me to focus on the reality that this would be a long term project that would take a large amount of time and planning. It could not happen overnight and would be unrealistic and dangerous to try to achieve an agreement on everything immediately. This element helped me to realise that what I needed to achieve were largely process commitments: an in-principle substantive commitment to pursue the idea of a PM/CR program, and then a process commitment in the form of a timetable

for research, consultation and future meetings to finalise out the details of how such a program would work.

Final thoughts

It is no longer viable to expect our young people to act like adults without preparing them with the necessary skills. My school's mission is a simple one: helping children succeed. It is not helping children succeed *in the classroom alone*. This mission obligates us to help our young people discover a way to grow into adulthood with tools that will offer success in a number of environments. If they can learn to resolve conflict in a healthy way, they will have transferable life long skills that can only benefit the community in which they live. High school is difficult enough without constantly worrying about whether you will survive the day without altercation. A school wide or community wide PM/CR program can start these young citizens on their road toward successful relationships. They can become our teachers — I only hope that we are willing to learn. ●

Rosalie Batistoni, Client Services
Co-ordinator, University of Technology,
Sydney.

Further reading

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Endnotes

1. Elkind D *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon* Addison-Wesley Publishing Company Massachusetts 1981, p 12.
2. As above, p 165.

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Elizabeth McCrone

MANAGING EDITOR:
Linda Barach

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SYDNEY OFFICE:
Prospect Media Pty Ltd
Level 1, 71-73 Lithgow Street
St Leonards NSW 2065 AUSTRALIA
DX 3302 St Leonards
Telephone: (02) 9439 6077
Facsimile: (02) 9439 4511
www.prospectmedia.com.au
prospect@prospectmedia.com.au

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