

## **Alternatives to Violence Project Workshops and Schools**

*by Nadine Hoover, September 2013*

From its inception, Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) workshops were designed to work with youth. Many activities were drawn from the Children's Creative Response to Conflict and other alternative education initiatives for young people. During the 1960s and 1970s, people's movements for peace and nonviolence recognized the institutionalized violence and oppression of schools and were dedicated to developing creative alternatives for their children and society. The men incarcerated in Greenhaven originally called on the Quaker community to help them keep young people from their neighborhoods out of prison. They quickly learned, however, that nonviolence is a personal practice that one must take on one's self and develop, like any art, sport, instrument or skill, before going about to share it with others. This takes time.

AVP facilitators today are deeply concerned for young people in the U.S.. We are aware of how violent our society has become, but also aware that the practice of nonviolence is possible and available to all. Nearly seventy AVP facilitators responded to a call to come from around the U.S. to north Philadelphia to do an afternoon of team building and four days of AVP training for high school students at the start of their school year. They came curious about how AVP works in schools, appreciative for the opportunity to join with so many others in making a contribution of this scale, and hopeful that nonviolence training might be able to spread on a larger scale.

### **Pillars of Alternatives to Violence Project Workshops**

Over the course of the week, we reaffirmed that nonviolence is an essential foundation for learning, communication and caring. Alternatives to Violence Project workshops offer a strong, appropriate, necessary foundation for education. We also acknowledged that workshops function fully when:

- Transforming power and the goodness and worth of each person are explicit and formative.
- Facilitators personally practice nonviolence, living in and from transforming power day-to-day.
- Everyone listens to one another, seeking to empathize and understand others' points of view.
- Everyone is equal, without power over one another, rather power is shared for a greater good.
- Participation is voluntary with informed consent and non-punitive options to leave at any time.
- Participation is inclusive, including people from throughout an organization or community to share a common language and concepts and not create an "in-group."
- Participants are diverse, mixed across differences or divisions, such as age, class, race, grade, gender, "sides" of conflicts and so forth.
- Everyone present participates in practicing nonviolence, including facilitators, no observers.
- Facilitators work as teams of three or more people, with team building, before, during and after.
- Communication is open, clear and transparent.
- Decision-making is cooperative among the team and the whole group.
- The group is no larger than 24 people, including facilitators and apprentices (although in a new environment many facilitators feel a limit of less than twenty would work better).
- Workshops are scheduled for at least 18-22 hours to allow for the experience of community.
- Participants commit to the whole schedule; if one misses one session, the group cooperatively decides if the person can fit back in or not based on real changes and dynamics in the group; if one leaves for more than one session, s/he may return to future workshops.
- Community is built over time through the experience of practicing alternatives to violence in daily life and in workshops.

These pillars establish an atmosphere where it's safe to be one's self, open to learning and to change.

### **Challenges for the Alternatives to Violence Project and Schools**

The experiment of conducting AVP workshops as the first four days of the school year in two high schools with 550 students and their teachers in north Philadelphia (September 2013) lacked most of the AVP pillars, in large part because the administration withheld information and violated agreements. AVP coordinators and facilitators were slow to absorb and realize the situation. As Limbo Stick helps us experience physically, intention does not always equate to action. Apologies are due to the students and faculty of these schools for the fact that our best intentions went awry in this bold experiment.

[Limbo Stick: Roll a piece of flip chart paper tightly on the diagonal, tape it, lay it on the outstretched index fingers of six people, three in a line on each side facing one another, with outstretched index fingers alternating with one's neighbors. Then try lowering the "stick" to the ground. It's not as easy as you would assume. Regardless of anyone's intention the "stick" tends to go anywhere but down!]

These two schools are administered by a charter school corporation which does not allow union organizing and may fire without cause. In mid-July, the corporation wrote a letter instructing teachers to return to school a week early. Regardless of travel plans, flights, weddings and so forth, teachers cancelled their plans and returned. Many teachers genuinely appreciated the AVP activities, but this often masked the fact that they were also angry, confused or disenchanted when AVP principles, particularly volunteerism and cooperative decision-making, were violated. We were all surprised to find out that students weren't given a genuine opt-out. A school administrator said with a smile, "Not a problem, just sent them down to us." When asked what the option was, the reply came, "If they don't want to get with the program they can go back to public school."

Surprisingly, AVP facilitators defended the situation as normal and discounted criticism as exaggerated. Comments on the situation were, "Of course. Don't you know teachers are owned by the school?" and "That's the way it is for kids, they don't have choices." Responses on concerns were met with, "Well you came with an agenda so that's what you see." and "You need to be flexible if you want to make a difference." Actions speak louder than words. Practicing nonviolence takes time. The greatest challenge for AVP in schools is to be realistic about how hard it is for school administrators, even with the best of intentions, to counter years of training, experience and culture which relies heavily on authoritarian power and about how hard it is on education when actions and don't align with words.

One of the teachers commented, "I'd really like to learn from you because the most effective class management training I've received, I'm ashamed to say, is shame and guilt, which works consistently, but I wish I could do it differently." It takes practice to not blow up, yell or lash out in frustration. Under pressure, practicing nonviolent approaches to school administration or classroom discipline and management takes a great deal of time, experience and reflection. Young people realize when adults ask them to do what the adults themselves don't do. A school administration and faculty that takes time for reflective practice is powerful, otherwise we essentially fail at the outset.

Although peace and nonviolence are essential for education and learning, the purposes of schools besides education often predominant: manage children, create labor forces, control behavior, provide child care and so forth. Although not necessarily violent in and of themselves, purposes of schooling may be achieved with authoritarian, violent or oppressive methods inconsistent with AVP. This inconsistency is structural not merely cultural, therefore a committed administration must believe a school can be run based on transforming power and make changes in the structure of power in order to make AVP real and not just a highly effective way of making people more docile and manageable.

### **Approaches to the Alternatives to Violence Project and School**

Recognizing how school administration and classroom discipline may be inconsistent with AVP, it's critical to be realistic about how far the administration is willing or prepared to go. Young people are responsive when adults are direct, honest and reliable. If the administration is not confident or prepared to experiment with transforming power in their own work, then partition participation in workshops. If the administration is confident, willing and prepared to take on this enormous challenge, then recognize how daunting it is. First, support them in demonstrating structural commitments to it. Second, plan a staged progression of participatory, reflective opportunities to practice moving AVP throughout the school and to family members and the community.

The Alternative to Violence Project encourages people to use some of the activities or the whole workshop under a different name if the pillars of AVP are not in place. Many great programs have evolved in this manner. Experimenting with transforming power in school administration is rare, so begin with the presumption that partitioning would be more likely. A few illustrative examples of AVP approaches to schools are:

**Offer workshops for professional training** of everyone in the system as well as students, but do so under another name, e.g. Help Increase the Peace Project (H.I.P.P.), Discover Me, Peace Education, Conflict Resolution and so forth. Be honest and direct about our belief in transforming power but the real limitations and adaptations necessary to apply this approach in a school.

**Offer AVP workshops for everyone in a school**, but partition students, faculty and administration. Maintain two-thirds youth participants and one-third adult participants, including adults who support and advocate for youth (youth allies). Teachers and administrators, as well as community members and youth workers, may "trade" facilitation, which means they work with young people outside their own school or social circle. This can be successful, but requires strong AVP facilitator support to encourage, maintain and sustain relationships.

**Offer community-based AVP workshops reaching out to everyone** and accepting a school's assistance for publicity, facilities or supplies. Choose either to maintain two-thirds youth participants and one-third adult allies or to balance across the age spectrum with some teens, young adults, middle-aged adults, seniors and elderly. One mixed, advanced workshop, including teenagers and teachers, selected the topic "Responding to Imbalances of Power," which was significant experience for all the participants. Whether or not to include administrators, teachers or parents with their own students or children may be considered on a case-by-case basis with those involved—sometimes it makes sense and feels right, sometimes it does not and sometimes it's not clear. When it's not clear, error on the side of partitioning until participants have had time to practice and it becomes clear.

**Publish your approaches and results.** The AVP community's concern for youth and society as a whole is important and AVP has much to offer. We are, however, neophytes in this arena. We learn from mistakes, so both our errors and learnings should be celebrated and drawn upon. On the other hand, all participants in any experiment should understand their role in the experiment and feel empowered as a full participant in the design, reflection, adaptations, conclusions and recommendations. All our efforts will benefit from sharing experiences of experimenting with transforming power in our lives and communities.