

Advancing Conflict Transformation Concept Proposal

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Abstract

This concept proposal details plans for a new social enterprise for conflict transformation. The nonprofit will be called ACT: Advancing Conflict Transformation. Its vision is to create a generation of conflict transformers. This proposal describes the organization, its response to negative school environments, its curriculum methods, potential funding, and how it will be assessed. Under the direction of the executive director, two

part-time employees will run after-school programs and workshops integrating traditional and theatrical techniques for conflict transformation education. Students will be able to use empathy and active listening to face conflict in a way that results in enhanced relationships. This process will also improve the Glynn County [Georgia] school system and the lives of students beyond the program.

Executive Summary

Unhealthy social environments are threatening the effective development of Glynn County school system students. ACT: Advancing Conflict Transformation seeks to solve this problem by giving students the tools to become conflict transformers. Each student requires different sets of techniques in order to take on conflict and use it to build relationships and solve problems. Empathy, active listening, and mindfulness are all important skills that ACT is uniquely able to impart to the youth in the area. Through after-school programming and community workshops, students will participate in an innovative process based on original research.

Funding for this project will come from several sources, including foundational support, grants, donors, and program fees. After starting up this year, ACT will be self-sustaining for the foreseeable future. Longevity will be assured by continuous assessment and improvement. ACT is committed to serving its community, and the community has responded with the intentions to form lasting partnerships. Glynn County believes in the vision and mission, and ACT believes in serving the youth of this community to help enhance it over the years.

ACT will be led by Kyle Hildebrand. He is a graduate of LaGrange College and holds degrees in Musical Theatre, Nonprofit Leadership, and Sociology (minor). This project stems from the intersection of these programs. It is a functional manifestation of years of study, research, and passion.

Vision and Mission

ACT: Advancing Conflict Transformation works to create a generation of conflict transformers. Our mission is to enhance Glynn County public school students' ability to transform conflict through teaching skills using innovative techniques, creating a cooperative environment, and investing time in student progress. This mission supports our vision by breaking down a lofty goal into achievable and measurable objectives. Conflict transformation differs from managing conflict in that it encourages dialogue and creates or strengthens relationships. *Managing conflict* is described by Schrock-Shenk and Ressler (1999) in *Making Peace with Conflict* as putting a lid on the problem (p. 35). True conflict transformation "seeks to connect with the hearts of the individuals involved in conflict, enabling them to look at themselves and each other in a new way" (Kraybill, 2001, p. 43). ACT focuses on instilling transformative tendencies in its beneficiaries to achieve its mission and vision in Glynn County, Georgia.

Discussion of Problem

As Wilburn and Bates point out in their article "Conflict Resolution in America's Schools," violence is a problem in American schools. Left unattended, this problem only festers and grows. Unfortunately, Glynn County K-12 students do not receive systematic training in conflict transformation. This deficiency creates an environment that does not encourage students to work cooperatively, form healthy relationships, or perform to the best of their abilities. Consequently, according to a middle school administrator in Glynn County, there is "a negative impact on individual

productivity and achievement” (Personal communication, April 3, 2021).

A quick search on poor school environments in America immediately shows just how many ways productivity and achievement are threatened. Violence extends beyond physical attacks. The number of articles on fat-shaming, racism, homophobia, hair harassment, food allergy bullying, and so many more are overwhelming. Bullying has always been pervasive in schools, but advances in technology have created new avenues for adolescents to engage with each other—and not always for the better. Essentially, the problem is a lack of a positive school environment, and “a poor school climate can act to encourage aggressive behaviors among youth...” (Siller, Edwards, and Banyard, 2021, pg. 1).

Grades and social relationships are at stake when students are exposed to a negative environment with no techniques to handle their conflicts. In order to improve this environment, some schools are implementing restorative justice programs. In Ortega, Lyubansky, Nettles, and Espelage’s 2016 study on restorative justice, they found that students who participated experienced better relationships with students with whom they previously had experienced conflicts. They also found that academic performance improved for these students. Teachers commented, “Students were more focused on academics, had more confidence and were better behaved” (Ortega et al., 2016, p. 465). This corroborates previous research, which found “lower rates of all forms of interpersonal violence victimization and perpetration...” when a school had a positive environment (Siller, Edwards, & Banyard, 2021, pg. 6).

Another aspect of an unhealthy school environment is competition between students. According to Johnson and Johnson (1995), “competitors tend to avoid communicating with each other, misperceive each other’s position and motivations, be suspicious of each other, deny the legitimacy of others’ needs and feelings, and see the situation only from their own perspective” (p. 420). This leads to destructive rather than transformative conflict. The nature of the American school system is already extremely competitive. Top-ranked students are afforded opportunities that others are not. Certain classes are open only to those chosen as the most academically gifted. While some of this competition is healthy, it instills a competitive spirit in many students. When students adopt competitiveness as part of their identity, they are susceptible to destructive conflicts (Johnson & Johnson 1995). ACT’s programs encourage cooperation and working through exercises alone and with others.

While restorative justice supports conflict transformation education as a way to improve the lives of students, it is a reactive measure. It *intervenes*, but it *does not prevent*. Prevention techniques paired with a system such as restorative justice would provide students, teachers, parents, and others with the peace of mind that schools will provide

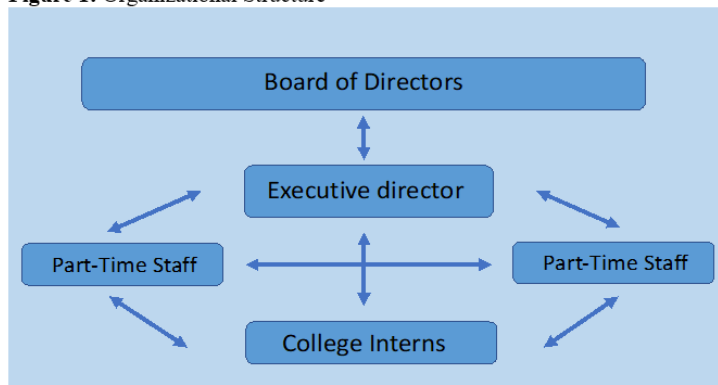
academic and social education. True conflict transformation programming would increase the potential of a nurturing environment for students’ lives and minds.

Discussion of Framework and Organizational Solution

The conflict transformation program that ACT uses is a unique combination of traditional and theatrical techniques that has been shown to be effective in a workshop setting. In my previous research, I found that participants who would have simply ignored conflict before the workshop were prepared to face a conflict head on after the workshop (Hildebrand 2021). In addition, the participants had an increased ability to use empathy and active listening skills in their everyday lives, which can be used to prevent a conflict altogether. This is consistent with Bilgin’s (2008) study in elementary schools, which found that students with similar training developed empathy and listening skills that their untrained peers did not. Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, Green, and Laginski (1997) saw similar results in high school students.

The initial structure of ACT will consist of an executive director and two part-time staff members. The staff will be primarily responsible for leading workshops and lessons in schools. The executive director will do this as well, but he or she will also be a full-time employee who is responsible for day-to-day operations. Part-time staff will report directly to the executive director. In turn, the executive director will report to a board of directors. The board will assist the executive director with organizational stewardship and financial support. Figure 1 shows this structure. While this structure lends itself to a top-down system, active communication and feedback among all parts of the organization are welcomed and encouraged. ACT’s focus on innovative processes extends beyond its workshops. The vision is to create a generation of conflict transformers; that vision drives ACT’s operations. If a staff member has a new idea, then they have the power to present their ideas to the executive director, who will include this input in reports to the board. The figure above shows a potential fourth classification of involvement: (college) student interns.

Figure 1: Organizational Structure



As ACT is able to scale in size, the organization wants to include even more youth in its design. College juniors and seniors will be able to earn a stipend by spending their time learning to teach ACT's curriculum in a workshop setting, gaining valuable knowledge, and contributing to our mission. In addition, the perspectives of a younger group will help ACT increase its effectiveness, due to a diversity of input.

As an organization, ACT will upset the status quo in scholastic environments. It will give students new tools for transformation. In turn, this will change how students interact at school and in their daily lives. To do this, ACT will have two main programs for younger and older youth: after-school for elementary and workshops for middle and high school. These will stem from key community partnerships. ACT will partner with the Glynn County public school system for elementary after-school programs, and local organizations that cater to youth will be the main partner for middle and high school students.

The programs for both will be similar. They will consist of traditional empathy and active listening training as well as theatrical techniques such as improvisation, A/B scenes, and Uta Hagen's score (See Appendix¹). Each of these exercises emphasizes skills that are necessary for conflict transformation. Improvisations can be adapted for every grade level and many different situations. The principal exercise will be "Yes, and." This exercise is detailed by Ingalls (2018) as a way to teach "listening and responding" (pg. 43). One person begins a story with a sentence, and each person after adds on. This encourages listening skills, which are vital for transformation.

A/B scenes will be used for more in-depth listening skills and non-verbal empathic responses. Much of the traditional empathy training is done without a focus on body language and tone, but they are essential to how a message is received. These scenes consist of lines that do not necessarily have any meaning behind them, but once students are given a situation, the lines can be conveyed with the tone and body language that give them a purpose.

The most important part of this unique curriculum is Uta Hagen's score. The score consists of several questions that require one to consider who they are (Hagen 1973). Traditionally, this instrument is used by actors as they prepare for a role, but they may be used to increase individuals' awareness of how they perceive and respond to conflict. In a workshop setting, the questions will be used to spark discussion about self-awareness and how it relates to effective conflict transformation. In my research, this was the most effective part of the workshop (Hildebrand 2021).

One common theme found throughout all of these theatrical techniques is mindfulness. Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist monk, is one of the foremost writers on the subject of mindfulness. Hanh (1975) writes, "We must be conscious of every breath, each movement, every thought and feeling,

everything that has any relation to ourselves" (p. 8). This deep awareness is central to transforming conflict. Without being aware of oneself, a person cannot be completely available to another. Tekel and Erus (2020) studied mindfulness in the context of conflict. Their findings indicate that a deeper level of mindfulness led to higher levels of conflict transformation.

These three techniques are just the basis of an innovative curriculum. Staff will be trained extensively in these and other techniques. They will also be encouraged to use their own backgrounds to develop conflict transformation education exercises. As an organization, ACT responds to the problems discussed above by continuously growing and providing students with the most diverse set of tools to address conflict effectively. Students will be able to go beyond putting a lid on an issue. They will be prepared to intervene before conflicts escalate and rebuild relationships where they are damaged.

Discussion of Funding

Funding for ACT will consist of a diverse stream of revenue. It is important to rely on multiple sources of income, and ACT plans to aggressively apply for grant and foundational support, collect program fees, and charge for workshops provided to non-educational institutions. Table 1 breaks down anticipated revenue from various sources after receiving startup funds from Georgia Pacific. Donors will account for a small portion of income: 19%. The dollar amount is comparable to similar-sized arts organizations in the Glynn County area. Given the unique socio-economic makeup of the area, there is much support for fine art as well as accessible art. The median household income ranges from below \$30,000 in the City of Brunswick to over \$80,000 on St. Simons Island (Median household income, 2019). Census reports do not include information for Sea Island, which is a large market for donors as well as program services. These figures show opportunities for micro to large donations in an area that has historically supported such organizations as Golden Isles Arts and Humanities, Glynn Visual Arts, and many others.

Table 1: Sources of Annual Revenue for ACT

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Donors	15,000
Grants and Foundation Support	25,000
Class Fees	4,500
Workshop Fees	36,000
Total	80,500

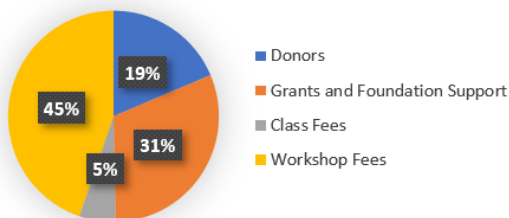
In addition to soliciting individual donations, ACT will apply for any grant funds that align with our mission. The executive director will be responsible for writing and submitting grants, and part-time instructors will assist when necessary. All staff will be responsible for keeping records from programs that will assist in the grant writing process.

ACT anticipates at least \$25,000 of grant money during the first year. The programs and workshops offered by this organization are unique and find themselves at important intersections of art, education, and underserved communities. Key groups that will be considered for funding are the Community Fund of Coastal Georgia (local), Georgia Council for the Arts (state), and the National Endowment for the Arts (federal). Each has a history of funding arts organizations, especially when they pursue educational and social missions.

Program fees will provide additional support for ACT's mission. The classroom fees will be kept as low as possible, and workshops for the public will also be offered at an affordable rate. Fees for after-school programming will account for \$4,500 in revenue, assuming that ACT will reach at minimum 500 students in its first year with a year-long program fee of \$15 per child. It should be noted that a child who cannot pay will not be excluded from the program, but this reasonable contribution will contribute towards an entire year of impactful programming.

Workshops will be prioritized for organizations that cater to middle and high school-aged students. At the beginning of the program, one six-hour, three two-hour, or six one-hour workshops will cost \$1,500. Community organizations such as group homes, churches, and youth centers are all interested in this service. After allowing Glynn community organizations an opportunity to take advantage of the workshops, other organizations and businesses will be encouraged to take part. Local businesses and nonprofits see the benefit of having a team of conflict transformers in the workplace, and ACT anticipates providing at least 24 workshops in the first year, resulting in \$36,000 in revenue. Workshop fees will provide the bulk of funding. This ensures sustainability because the organization will be actively generating revenue as it accepts donation and foundation support. Figure 2 shows sources of revenue as a percentage of total revenues.

Figure 2
Donor Categories as a Percentage of Total Revenue



Relying on a diverse stream of revenues will help ACT remain sustainable each year. Combining contributions with an in-house revenue generator also ensures a safety net, should one stream become interrupted. Sustainability is very important for this organization, as the work must be observed longitudinally to be able to contribute to research in an understudied field.

ACT is asking Georgia Pacific for a total of \$76,039 to get the project started. This will cover several key areas: operating costs for the programs, training for staff, laptops for staff, and advertising. For general operating support, including salaries for the executive director and two part-time staff members, ACT needs \$74,473. The programs will not be able to launch without an influx of cash for salaries. Laptops are necessary for the staff to stay connected and separate work from personal equipment. To pay for three laptops, ACT is requesting \$750. These will last for several years and will not require additional funds after purchasing until they are replaced. Finally, advertising is necessary for any new venture to get noticed. Advertisements will be placed in prominent Glynn area publications: *The Brunswick News* and *Golden Isles Magazine*. For \$1,716, ACT can place a six-month ad in the newspaper and three months in the magazine.

Assessment

To assess the effectiveness of ACT's school programs, a yearly survey will be administered to teachers, administration, after-school program leaders, parents, and students. In addition to a longitudinal study through surveys, focus groups comprised of the above will be used to gauge community feedback after the first year of programming. Mixed methods such as these will provide quantitative statistics as well as qualitative responses to fill in the story. Other measures, such as suspension rates, standardized test pass rates, and disciplinary actions, will be pulled periodically and examined by the executive director. Feedback from participants and other interested parties will be filed as it is received and used to assess how the program is performing. Assessing workshop effectiveness will be achieved by soliciting feedback from the organizations that employ ACT's service, in addition to the surveys and other methods. Interviews with students and organization officials may be performed periodically to assess program effectiveness.

Conclusion

Transforming conflict is not merely finding a way to end a conflict. It is building lasting relationships through intention. It requires effort, but it can change a community and lives forever. ACT: Advancing Conflict Transformation seeks to create a generation of conflict transformers. By offering a unique curriculum, ACT intervenes in ways others cannot. Every Glynn County student should have proper tools to transform conflict. An educational environment is a social institution that offers the perfect setting for conflict transformation education.

Short-term effects of this program will be a safer, more effective school system. Long term, students will have irreplaceable skills that they could not attain otherwise. Systemic change is possible when the community desires it. Glynn County, especially now, needs a way to embrace interpersonal conflicts in a healthy way. ACT is the solution.

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ⁱ This paper includes an Appendix, which can be requested by contacting the Faculty Mentor.