

## Chapter 9

# Resolving and Transforming Conflicts

**H**umans have diverse beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and interests owing to dissimilarities in experiences and contexts. Sometimes, these differences create tensions which may consequently lead to conflicts. Conflict is an inescapable fact of life. If improperly handled, they can have undesirable results. In the larger setting, many conflicts have become violent which have resulted to the loss of lives, destruction of property, disruption of economic and cultural activities, disruption in the delivery of socio-economic services, exploitation of civilians especially women and children, and economic losses, among others. In the interpersonal ground, conflicts have caused anguish and stress among disputants. Unmanaged conflicts have also caused relationships to break apart.

Fortunately, conflicts can be managed and resolved constructively. If handled well, parties in dispute may find opportunities to improve their relationship and grow from experience. Resolving conflicts constructively is a skill that can be taught and learned. It is our belief that if humans are trained how to handle their interpersonal conflicts positively, such skills may be carried on to higher levels of human interaction.

### What Is Conflict?

Conflict is from the Latin word *conflictus* which means striking together with force. It occurs when one's actions or beliefs are unacceptable to

— and, are, hence resisted by the other (Forsyth, 1990). Conflicts occur in dyads, groups or larger societal structures.

### **Why Do Conflicts Arise?**

In the national or global levels, they may be caused by territorial disputes, ethnic and religious animosities, ideological and power struggles, social injustice, search for statehood, trade and market competitions, and contests over economic resources, among others (Wehr, 1979).

Within our immediate setting, conflicts may be caused by misunderstanding, misperception and miscommunication; difficult behaviors, unmet expectations; incompatibility of ideas, opinions and beliefs, values, goals and interests; distrust; competition over material resources; coercion; defense of honor; desire for revenge; need for attention and appreciation; intolerance; a lack of empathy; and power struggles in group situations, among others.

### **What Prevents Us from Resolving Our Conflicts?**

It is not second nature for many to resolve their conflicts constructively. There are many factors that hinder us from doing so. One of them is the experience of strong emotions such as fear, pride, anger and desire for revenge. When these powerful emotions are present, it is difficult to process information objectively. Indifference or apathy is another obstacle to conflict resolution. People sometimes show a lack of concern or interest, whether deliberately or not, for the situation. Others feel helpless or hopeless, perhaps, because the situation is discouraging or the other party is a person of authority. The lack of communication between disputants, or the absence of it, may also be a hindering factor in conflict resolution. There are also situations when conflicts are not resolved because of provocations from sympathizers who, with or without meaning to, “fan the fire” and aggravate the situation.

There are also situations when people perceive the problem-solving

process tedious and stressful and hence shun it. Dialoguing with an adversary also requires a great amount of courage and often we find ourselves lacking in audacity to face the “enemy”.

### **What Is Anger and Its Effects?**

Anger is one of the more commonly experienced emotions when parties are in conflict. Anger is not merely irritation or disappointment but a combined feeling of disappointment, anxiety and indignation that signal our body to prepare for a fight. It may take the form of verbal or physical attack, rage or animosity. It can be destructive when we express it in a way that will create harm, hatred or alienation. It is not uncommon to hear stories of people getting killed or hurt after an angry exchange.

Anger may also cause adverse effects on our health. Anger sets off the surge of stress hormones which can damage arteries and heart muscles that lead to irregular heartbeats. These excess hormones can constrict blood vessels disrupting plaque, jams the artery and triggers heart attack. Anger can also make us sick when it is repressed. Unexpressed anger drives our blood pressure up when our muscles are tightened (Spielberger, as cited by Foltz-Gray, 2002). Anger turned inward may also cause hypertension or depression (<http://www.apa.org>).

Anger can also be destructive when we can no longer function normally. Our routine is disrupted, or we become less productive. Our ability to think clearly is compromised. This destroys our ability to positively continue on with our work or studies putting our careers or goals in peril.

### **How Do We Manage Our Anger?**

Calming our anger is a better alternative to discharging or suppressing it. When we are angry, the brain signals our pituitary glands and nerve endings to produce adrenaline. The surge of adrenaline into the bloodstream gets us ready for a fight. Here are some ways to change the form of our anger:

- Recognize that you are angry. Awareness of the emotion that you are currently feeling can help cool it down.
- Distance yourself from the situation. Leave the anger scene. Changing environment, albeit temporarily, will help calm you down.
- Release anger physically in indirect forms:
  - \* Shout and let it out in a place where no one can hear you
  - \* Hit a pillow, a punching bag, a mattress or anything soft to reduce adrenaline level in the hands
  - \* Draw or paint your anger out. Release the stress hormones by using forceful strokes
  - \* Walk, run, and swim vigorously
  - \* Hit the gym. Exercise. Under pressure, people who exercise have lower levels of stress hormones and small increases in heart rate and blood pressure (Reyes, 2006).
- Relaxation Techniques
  - \* Breathe deeply many times while saying a calming word or phrase like “relax”
  - \* Paint pictures in your mind of happy thoughts and experiences
  - \* Go for a massage
  - \* Do meditation techniques
- Calm Your Mind
  - \* Talk to yourself. Think of alternatives to your anger as well as consequences if you explode (e.g., what will happen if I explode? What other options do I have?). Instruct your energy hormones “adrenaline” and “noradrenalin” which rushed into your bloodstream in excess to “keep cool”. Convince yourself that yes, you are angry, but you can handle it. Another simple tool is to instruct yourself to stop being angry, whether aloud or silently.

- \* Interrogate yourself. Williams (as cited by Foltz-Gray, 2002) suggests that we ask four questions whenever we are angry: “Is this important? Is my anger appropriate? Is the situation modifiable? Is it worth taking action?” Such evaluation, according to Williams, transforms the face of anger into something rational.
- \* Count to 10 before reacting. If you feel that you will still explode after number 10, continue counting.
- \* Change your thought processes. When we are angry, we think of our adversary in the worst possible light. We resort to blaming (e.g., it is his/her fault); labeling (e.g., s/he is a horrible person); embellishments (e.g., s/he does this to me ALL THE TIME); mental filtering (e.g., there is nothing good about this person); interpretations or conclusions (e.g., s/he does not like me); and speculations or attribution of malice (e.g., s/he did this intentionally to malign me). All these bring about a great deal of suffering. Changing the way we think can help change the way we feel. Hence, instead of making interpretations and speculations of the adversary’s attitudes or behaviors, try to alter these negative thoughts with more positive ones (e.g., s/he probably did not mean to hurt me). Altering cognitions is a cognitive-behavioral technique which argues that if we can change the way people think, we can change their emotional reaction or behavior (Houston, 1985).
- \* Put it in writing. It will help you organize your thoughts and think clearly.
- Therapeutic Techniques
  - \* Multi-media fix: Turn on the TV and watch an entertaining show. Go to the movies. Listen to music.
  - \* Play a musical instrument
  - \* Sing or dance
  - \* Take a shower or a long bath
  - \* Take a cold drink
  - \* Stroll in the park or in the mall

- \* Tinker with your PC. Blog, chat online, or download an entertaining video clip.
- Spiritual Aids
  - \* Lift it up. Pray for patience, understanding and the will to forgive. For example, the Bible tells us to forgive “seventy-times seven”. Forgiveness, according to the Center for Dispute Resolution, does not mean condoning the act. Rather, it is an act of releasing ourselves from the pain we have experienced at the hands of others.
  - \* Visit your place of worship. Offer your anger.
- Social Support
  - \* Talk to a family member or a friend
  - \* Get a hug from a loved one
  - \* Cuddle your pet
- Redirect Energy. Clean your room or house, redecorate your place or tend to your garden.
- When applicable, turn your anger into humor. Instead of exploding, crack a joke or endeavor to turn the edgy situation into something light.
- Cry it out. Crying is therapeutic. It allows the body to eliminate damaging stress hormones.

### **How Do We Directly Express Our Anger?**

When we have managed to bring ourselves down the anger thermometer and have cooled off, we may already express our feelings directly. Below are suggestions on how you can express your anger in a non-threatening way:

1. Describe the behavior that angers you (e.g., I noticed that you speak to me rather hurtfully these days)
2. Describe how you feel about the behavior (e.g., I am very sad).
3. Describe the reason for your feeling. (e.g., I consider you a good

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3. Describe the reason for your feeling. (e.g., I consider you a good

friend and I do not want our relationship to fall apart)

### **How Do We Deal with Other People's Anger?**

Johnson and Johnson (1995) and FSR Associates (n.d.) provide some tips on how we can handle angry confrontations constructively:

1. Allow expression. Listen
2. Do not counter-attack
3. Stand in the shoe of the other. Help him/her to calm down.
4. Paraphrase/Clarify.
5. Explain your situation.
6. Look into options together.

\*If you can't deal with the other person's wrath, ask for help.

### **What Are the Main Options in Dealing with Conflicts?**

In dealing with conflicts, there are two variables that are normally considered by disputants. One is the relationship with the adversary. The other one is the importance of the issue at hand. Below are some options people choose from when they are faced with conflicts:

1. Move away. Avoid the situation or withdraw. This option is normally chosen when the issue is trivial or when the person in conflict believes that s/he has no power to change the situation. (FLIGHT)
2. Move against. Win the battle. This option is taken when the issue is important, the party thinks that s/he is right and is bent to prove that, or s/he has the power to achieve his/her goals. (FIGHT)
3. Give up or give in. This option is taken when goal is to preserve harmony in the relationship. It is also taken when the other party recognizes the validity of the other's viewpoint. (ACCOMMO-

DATE)

4. Give half. Meet in the middle. This option is reached when both parties cannot get what they want fully and are willing to give up part of their goals. (COMPROMISE)
5. Move towards. Dialogue or collaborate with your adversary. This option is taken when both issue and relationship are important to the parties; hence, a mutually acceptable solution is sought. (FACE/COLLABORATE)

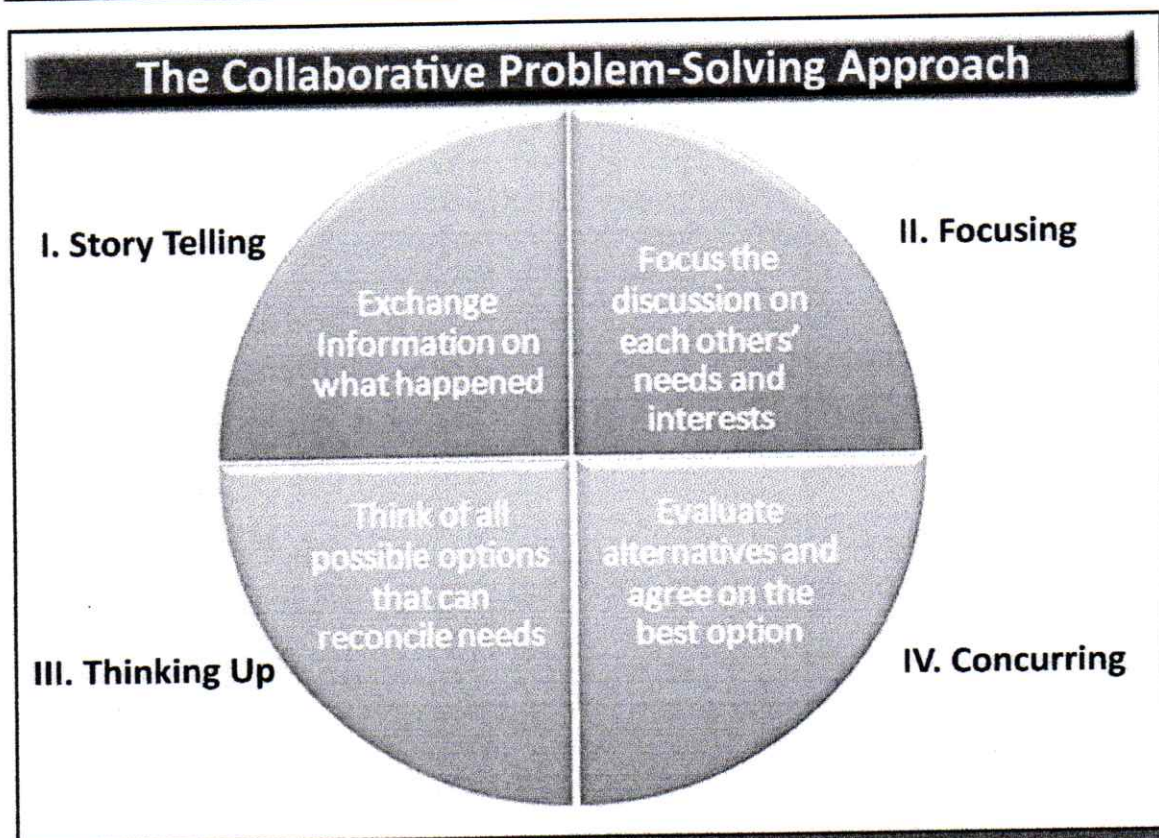
### **What Are the Steps in the Collaborative Problem-Solving Approach?**

Many people find it stressful to dialogue with an adversary and choose instead the path of avoidance. Others are too angry and take the path of aggression. Surveys made by the Center for Peace Education among its workshop participants, mostly students and teachers, revealed that the path normally taken is avoidance. Of 267 responses gathered from the question "What option do you usually take when you get into a conflict," 37% of responses point to "moving away" from the adversary as a strategy, 9% opted for aggression, 17% claimed that they would talk to their adversary and 36% would give up, give in or do coping techniques such as talking to a friend.

If both issue and relationship are important to the disputants, moving towards the adversary or problem-solving is the ideal option. In the next page are steps to a problem-solving approach.

### **What are Some Tips to a Good Dialogue?**

For the problem-solving process to flow peacefully, the following guidelines may be observed. Some of these tips are taken from AK-KAPKA (1987); Johnson and Johnson (1995); Fisher and Stone (1990); and Ruiz (n.d):



### **Dialoguing Tips**

1. Speak in a gentle, non-threatening manner.
2. Think carefully of what you are going to say. Do not make the situation worse by angering the other person.
3. Use the I-message. Begin your sentences with "I" to illustrate how you feel about the situation. "You" messages tend to be blaming or reproachful.
4. Admit your own responsibility to the conflict. Such will soften an otherwise positional stance.
5. Avoid using hazy statements and global words such as "always" and "never". Be as specific as possible.
6. Be willing to tell the other person his/her positive attributes. This will help create an atmosphere of trust and openness.
7. Show positive regard and respect. Do not call names, blame, humiliate, characterize or judge.

8. Do not give in to the temptation of returning hurt for hurt. As Gandhi had said, “an eye for an eye will make the world blind.” Instead, paraphrase, clarify and explain your situation.
9. Be tough on the problem, not on the person. Make it clear that it is with the behavior or ideas that you disagree with, not the person.
10. Don't take anything personally. Instead, become aware of the wound the person has let out in the open, be grateful that s/he helped uncover it, and take responsibility in healing that wound.

### **Listening Tips**

1. Actively listen. Show that you are hearing his/her point of view.
2. Listen with empathy and try to stand in the shoe of the other.
3. Accept criticism of your ideas or behavior. This does not mean rejection of you as a person.
4. Paraphrase and clarify when needed.

### **Collaborating Tips**

1. State your needs or interests, not your demands.
2. Deal with issues one at a time.
3. State repeatedly your positive intentions to solve the problem.
4. Be solution-oriented. Prepare realistic proposals for a solution. Look for solutions that are good and fair to both sides.

## **What is Mediation?**

Ideally, two people with a conflict should be able to resolve their problem through a face-to-face dialogue. However, disputants sometimes find themselves lacking in courage or skill to handle a problem-solving process. This is where an impartial third party can come in to help disputants reach an agreement that is mutually beneficial and workable.

The mediator can use the problem-solving approach described above in mediating conflicts. S/he should make sure that the dialoguing tips previously discussed are also observed. These dialoguing tips can serve as ground rules for the mediation process.

There are characteristics or qualities essential to a good mediator. Mediators have to be impartial to establish trust among parties in conflict. They should be nonjudgmental and understanding. Mediators should be flexible and creative. They should know how to reframe situations and broaden perspectives. Mediators should be good at analysis as this will help in recognizing causal relationships and in distinguishing interests from positions. (Positions are the demands of the parties while interests are the underlying needs or reasons for the demands.) It would be good for mediators to lead parties into focusing on the interests as this opens up the possible alternatives towards a solution. Mediators should show regard and concern for the parties in conflict. They should also be trustworthy and optimistic. They should anticipate a positive outcome and influence adversaries with such hope. In the event that the procedure does not succeed, they should encourage the disputants to try again.

### **What is Conflict Transformation?**

Conflict resolution can be too focused on addressing the issue. It is important to note that the relationship is also important as the issue at hand. Mending the relationship can be facilitated by a change in the disputants' outlook and attitudes. Conflict transformation is a higher goal compared to conflict resolution (CR). Lederach (2003) explains that conflict transformation involves changing the way parties look at issues, behaviors, and people or groups. Transformation must take place at both the internal and structural levels. It emphasizes the importance of building right relationships and social structures.

At the personal or internal level, Lederach explains that the recognition of feelings such as fear, anger, grief, and bitterness on the part of the parties in conflict will help them to understand, grow, and com-

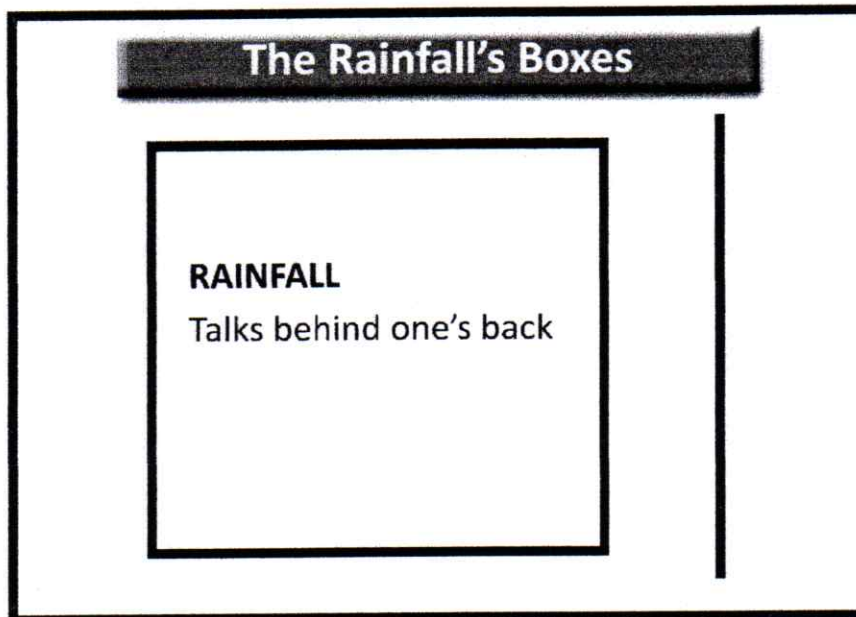
mit to change. These emotions must be dealt with, for effective conflict transformation to occur. Transformation of the person and of personal relationships makes possible the transformation of structures. Structural changes, in turn, facilitate personal transformation.

Goals in settling disputes should go beyond resolving the issue. The target should be the building of creative solutions that improve relationships. Applying this in the school setting, schools' discipline programs should go beyond sanctions. Constructive strategies to resolve conflicts among students ("ending something not desired") and to transform disputants' relationships ("building something desired") are options that are doable and more peaceful.

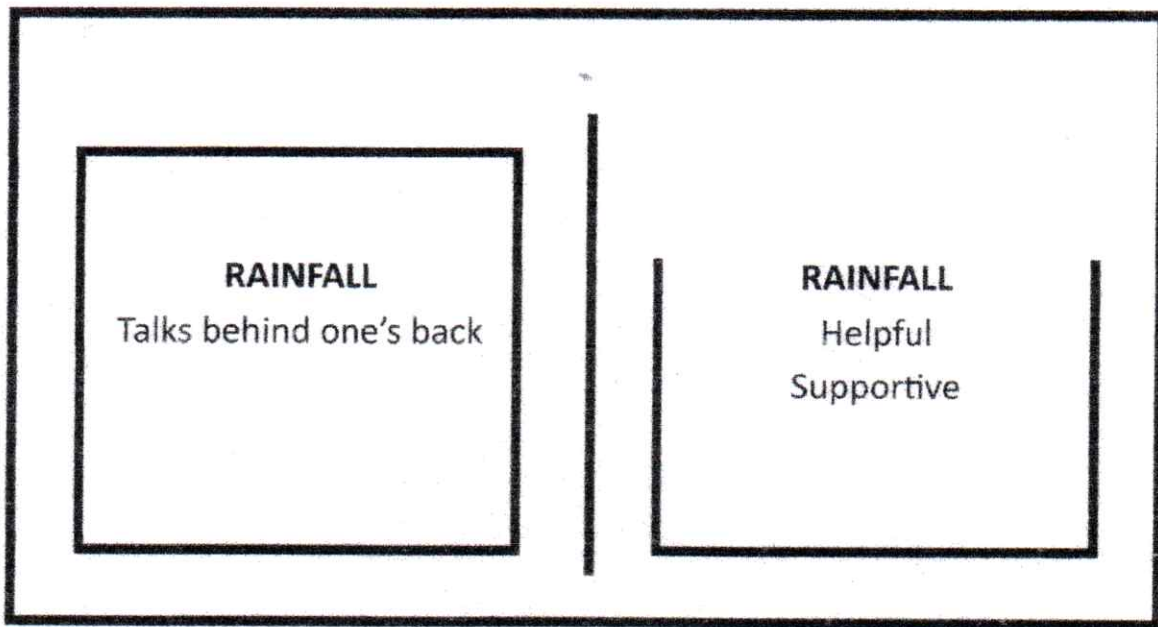
### **Teaching-Learning Ideas**

- **Webchart.** Write the word "conflict" on the board and ask your students to connect with it words that they associate with conflict. When done, ask students for commonalities and generalizations in the responses. Categorize responses (e.g., meaning of conflict, causes and effects).
- **News analysis.** Ask your students to bring newspapers to class. Ask them to look up articles that depict conflict. Ask them to identify causes and implications. After the individual work, encourage students to share their insights in class.
- **Sharing of obstacles to conflict resolution.** Ask students to form a circle. Ask them to recall a conflict incident they were involved in but were not able to resolve. Ask what hindered them from resolving the conflict. Get volunteers to share their experiences.
- **Ask your students to think of their personal conflict resolution style in relation to the topic covered in class.** Ask them to reflect on how their styles affect their relationships. Ask them to write down at least three implications of their CR style in their relationships and how they feel about these.

- Ask your students to draft rules for a peaceable classroom where conflicts are effectively managed and resolved. Tell them to make posters out of these.
- Open the Box. Ask students to draw a vertical line in the middle of a bond paper. Instruct them to think of a person or persons they have an aversion to and the reason for this feeling. Ask them to draw a closed box on the left side where they would write a fictitious name or symbol representing the person, including this person's attitude or behavior that annoys him/her. The students can draw more than one box.



Then instruct the students to think of a good attribute/s of this person. Do not allow the student to write "none" emphasizing that each person has both good and unpleasant qualities. Instruct them to draw an open box on the right side of the paper, write the name of the person and his/her good attribute/s.



**Process Questions:**

1. How did you feel about doing the first box? the second box?
  2. Why did you feel this way?
  3. What consequences are there if our feelings generated by the first box linger?
  4. Why do you think did we do the second box? What benefits are there to doing it?
  5. Why is the first box a closed box and the second an open one?
  6. What other insights did you gain from the activity?
- After the discussion, reinforce the learning that staying hostile towards others has detrimental effects. Negative feelings create poison in us and in others. We should be open to the thought that even if people have unpleasant attributes, they, too, have redeeming qualities. It is much easier to badmouth and think of ourselves as morally superior. But attitudes and actions we do not like in others do not stay in them forever as people grow out of their own mistakes or unpleasant ways. Hence, “boxing” people in is unhealthy. What we have to cultivate in us, to avoid conflicts, is to keep an open mind that people in their imperfection are capable of change.

- **Storytelling.** Share an incident in class when you got very angry. Describe the cause, the feelings that went with it, what you did thereafter and the lessons you learned from the experience. Encourage others in class to share their own stories, too, following the procedure you set and emphasizing the lessons learned from the experience. After the sharing, proceed with the discussion of anger management. Then ask the students to complete this sentence: Next time that I get angry, I will...
- **Role playing.** Ask the class to form partner-groups. Read to them the following story of conflict:

### **Conflict Situation:**

Aliza is a new girl in class. She is a transferee from another girls' school. In her former school, Aliza was a consistent honor student and class officer.

On the first few days of class, Aliza made a good impression on her teachers. She participated actively in discussions and offered herself whenever teachers asked for volunteers, the way she was used to.

Teresa, an old timer and popular student from the same class was affected by Aliza's behavior. She thought that Aliza was reciting too often that she was already monopolizing class discussions. Teresa also felt that because Aliza was volunteering in almost any activity, she was depriving other members of the class the chance to be recognized by the teachers. Teresa's group didn't like Aliza, too. They started to make nasty remarks whenever Aliza recited. They ignored her and pretended they did not hear whenever she talked to them. Soon after, Aliza felt alone and out of place. She was also very hurt by her classmates' repeated remarks such as "o, pakinggan ang feeling" (listen to someone who is feeling great).