

Talk to Me:

*What educators (and others) can learn
about de-escalation from hostage negotiators*

Emma Van Der Klift

Talk to Me:

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If I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behaviour.

—Henry David Thoreau

This is for my family, especially my mother, who taught me to hold the dignity of all living things as inviolable. This is also for the children in my family who are still in school (or will be getting there soon): Mieka, Zophiah, Coral, Emiko, and Julianna. May you always have adults in your lives who listen.

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There is no copyright on titles. For this I am grateful, since I stole the title from the New York City Hostage Negotiation Team. "Talk to Me" is their motto. I hope they will forgive my flagrant thievery. Imitation, as they say, is the sincerest form of flattery.

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I hope those not mentioned realize the only reason is lack of space. Thanks to all of you who made this project possible and helped me retain a semblance of common sense in the process.

FOREWORD

Listening, curiosity, and empathy nurture relationships. It sounds simple enough. But can delivering safer schools and communities to our students and teachers actually be that simple? As a court-qualified expert in school safety with over thirty years of public-school teaching, school administration practice, and law enforcement experience, I can certify that, yes, it often can be that simple. In this book, that is what Emma Van der Klift aims to show us.

During my varied professional career, I taught high school students; was director of student services for a California school district; trained teachers in classroom management, conflict resolution, and violence prevention in thirty-eight states and Canada; worked with the United States Departments of Justice and Education as a national school safety consultant; trained police and school security staff; consulted with prison and jail medical staff in seven states; partnered with Lee Canter on school safety planning; testified in eighty-five school law cases; introduced teachers and school administrators to resilience-based student interventions; and incorporated restorative justice programs into school discipline procedures.

Despite promoting these numerous programs over many years, I found that student and teacher relationships emphasizing positive empathetic communication were the most effective way to foster individual and institutional safety and our best hope for negotiating a safe resolution to school conflict, confrontation, or crisis. Like Emma, I believe that none of the programs and models currently on offer to educators will ever take the place of genuine relationships.

I met Emma Van der Klift and her partner, Norman Kunc, twenty-five years ago at a conference in Austin, Texas. Apparently, they were somehow impressed that a person like me who trained police to negotiate and communicate effectively and empathetically with serious habitual juvenile offenders and gang members would believe and teach educators about communicative relationships as the central key to school safety. Go figure.

Nevertheless, being internationally respected consultants in their own right, Emma and Norm decided they liked what I had to say and that it might be worth offering me a beer after the conference to unfairly extract information from me. How, they asked, does a “fed” survive scrutiny from his peers while promoting nurturing relationships instead of detentions, suspension, expulsion, and even incarceration? It’s a good question. While many in the field of education may remain skeptical that such approaches might be really effective, those of us involved in higher stakes negotiation know better. We have learned from decades of experience in both international and domestic negotiation that hard-line approaches do not deliver on their promises. I told Emma and Norm that what we’ve learned is that schools are not made safer through making them more like prisons.

After this initial conversation and many subsequent decades of friendship sharing the stage at numerous teacher and administration education conferences, Emma asked me to speak more specifically about my experiences with negotiation during times of school conflict and crisis. One of my primary observations regarding student and teacher conflict in schools was that teachers sometimes confront and challenge students in ways that hostage negotiators would never do. Emma was intrigued by this statement and wanted to know more.

A few years later, apparently based on this conversation, Emma began working on a leading-edge interdisciplinary thesis linking confrontational teacher and student behaviours with the de-escalating practices used by hostage negotiators. In 2010, she completed a major research project at Royal Roads University examining how the diverse perspectives of hostage negotiators, educators, and students could be merged to provide a road map to create better empathetic relationships

between students and their teachers. Much of that research is contained within this book.

Along with other experts, I shared with Emma how police hostage negotiators, often trained by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, use empathetic approaches like open-ended questions, mirroring, and paraphrasing to accomplish their goal of nonviolent resolution during times of conflict, confrontation, and crisis. But most important is the way in which negotiators come to view the people they are negotiating with. Rather than seeing these individuals as disordered or as criminals, negotiators understand that individuals in crisis are simply trying to resolve issues in whatever way they can and work actively to help them extricate themselves from these difficult situations without injury or loss of life.

The foundation of Emma's book *Talk to Me* is rooted in a philosophy of partnership between students and teachers. Unfortunately, one of the consequences of educational modernity, especially in countries like the United States and Canada, is that school boards and law enforcement officials continue to believe that paramilitary tactics like active shooter drills, lockdowns, surveillance, and arming teachers will guarantee safer schools.

There is scant evidence that these schemes are actually effective in preparing students and teachers for dealing well with each other during minor conflicts, never mind during a crisis like a school shooting. What research does substantiate is that some of these reactive preparations can actually be developmentally injurious to children (see Appendix A). Better to invest in positive relationships with our community, parents, and students than in combative correctional tactics designed to increase the stress in children's (and teacher's) lives.

In this book, Emma helps us learn from the collective wisdom of hostage negotiators, educators, students, and parents. When we negotiate our way through difficult interpersonal situations, and are confident in successful outcomes because we practice negotiation every day and embrace a philosophy of partnership, we will not need to lockdown our students' lives with fear.

Emma's book does not present the reader with prescriptive answers to hypothetical questions. Rather, she offers answers designed to stimulate more questions. And through this process of questioning, negotiation emerges as an effective pathway to better and safer relationships with our students.

Ron Garrison, MA, MS
Benicia, California

INTRODUCTION:

CALL OFF THE SWAT TEAM AND BRING IN THE NEGOTIATORS

There's an old joke I have heard is actually a Sufi parable. It goes like this:

A policeman is walking his evening beat on a dark city street. As he approaches a lone streetlight, he notices a man on his hands and knees apparently searching for something.

“What are you doing?” the policeman asks.

“I'm looking for my keys,” the man replies.

“Where did you drop them?” the policeman asks.

“Somewhere over there.” The man points across the darkened street.

Puzzled, the policeman asks, “If you lost them over there, why are you looking over here?”

“Because,” the man replies, “the light is better over here.”

When it comes to thinking about students who are labelled problematic through their behaviour, perhaps this is what we've done in education. We've looked where we believe the light is best, or where we were

told we *should* look—to the empirical and supposedly evidence-based material and the plethora of model-based interventions that overflow educational bookshelves and libraries. I am not arguing against those weighty tomes, but I am going to suggest that we may have lost those proverbial keys and that we should pull out our flashlights Nancy Drew-style and go back to where we lost them. Maybe the help we need can come from different quarters. In this book, the people I've enlisted to help us find those keys do indeed come from a different part of the street.

This book is based on work I did in 2010 as I completed a master's program in Conflict Analysis. The idea to meld the world of hostage negotiation with the world of education arose from a comment made by a friend and colleague who had experience with both—as an educator and as a federal agent. In the course of a conversation about classroom management and de-escalation, he told me, “Educators routinely do things to confront kids in ways that hostage negotiators would never do.” This counterintuitive statement both mystified and intrigued me. It prompted a year's worth of research into the world of hostage negotiation, domestic and international, and a series of fascinating interviews with women and men from all over North America. What I learned surprised and amazed me, and also profoundly influenced my subsequent thinking about the ethics of engagement when relationships are troubled, situations are escalating, and violence is possible.

Specifically, this is a book about the non-coercive, relational, and communication-based approaches that hostage negotiators use to help distraught, barricaded, sometimes suicidal, or even homicidal individuals to de-escalate. These men and women are successful in resolving more than 90 percent of the issues they are called upon to negotiate without loss of life, injury, or the use of coercion (Kohlreiser, 2006). This is a significant statistic, and the negotiators I spoke with told me they believed that 90 percent was actually a conservative estimate. They placed the number at closer to 95 percent. This book is about how we can help someone to de-escalate when they are in crisis and is also, perhaps most importantly, about how we can learn to effectively de-escalate ourselves. It is meant for teachers and others who interact with students labelled difficult or disruptive and offers

some ideas I gleaned through research and conversations with hostage negotiators, educators, students, and parents.

There are three reasons why I chose to look at what the field of hostage negotiation might offer educators who struggle to support these students. First, I am ethically committed to the search for non-coercive ways of working with people who are upset and struggling—even, or perhaps especially, those seen as particularly troublesome and unreachable. Second, I strongly believe in the value of “cross-pollination” between various fields of study. Applying the lenses of one field to the issues faced by another can generate unexpected insights and open new ways to think and act. The third reason is personal and ties directly back to my experience as a student in the public school system.

It is probably an understatement to say I was not a model student. As an undiagnosed autistic kid, my attempts to cope with what I experienced as a hostile classroom environment often led me to either retreat into myself or act out in ways that challenged my teachers. Throughout my rocky career at school my report cards were filled with that familiar litany of teacher frustration: “could do better,” “needs to pay attention,” and “must try harder.” When I quit school at age 15, disillusioned and angry, nobody tried very hard to keep me. Luckily, although I did not like school, I did like learning. So I took Mark Twain’s advice and didn’t let school interfere with my education. I read voraciously and eventually cobbled together an adequate education. I was one of the lucky ones, but I have carried with me a visceral memory of what it felt like to be labelled one of “those” kids—the so-called losers and dropouts.

We know what the statistics are for students who leave school prematurely. Research makes unequivocal links between dropout rates and unemployment, poverty, and even incarceration (Alliance for Education, 2003). We also know that students with learning difficulties and behavioural issues are the students most likely to drop out of school (Alliance for Education, 2009). However, what is less known is that teachers also drop out of school. Statistics on teacher retention show that approximately one in four teachers quit teaching

within the first two years (Greene, 2008), often because they feel inadequately prepared to deal with disruptive student behaviour. There is an ironic circularity to this problem. Both students and teachers feel unable to manage the classroom experience, but it is disruptive *student* behaviour that most often gets blamed for the defection.

For the teachers who stay, disruption at school can take up an enormous amount of time, energy, and even financial resources. Confrontations between students and educators can result not only in personal stress for both but also in conflicts that involve families and even the larger community. For example, school personnel may be held legally responsible when incidents erupt and interventions are questioned. Ron Garrison, an international expert in school safety and an expert witness in more than 85 legal cases involving restraint and seclusion, noted that every year in North America students and teachers are injured and even killed during confrontations (personal communication, June 2010). This is a sobering reality and, in this era of school shootings, is top of mind for many. However, it's not always easy to know what to do or how to respond.

My Journey

Over the period of a year, I read everything I could find about hostage negotiation. I perused FBI training manuals and read countless journal articles and books. But perhaps the most interesting part of the process was when I found and had the privilege of interviewing hostage negotiators from all over North America. Notable among these was Dominick Misino, whom I was fortunate to interview three years before his untimely death in 2013. Misino was the negotiator who resolved the Lufthansa Flight 592 hostage taking in 1993. During his career he successfully negotiated more than 200 incidents without a single loss of life, then went on to become an international trainer. I also spoke with John Tost, the Canadian negotiator who successfully negotiated the Headingly Prison riots in Winnipeg in 1996. Another negotiator I interviewed, Robin Burcell, became a forensic artist and now writes best-selling crime novels! Yet another, Andy DeWeese, retired from law enforcement only to become his county's most

successful bylaw enforcement officer. He told me he's never had to file a report or actually enforce anything. He credits his success to what he learned on the job as a police negotiator. He doesn't threaten people; he talks to them. Others are trainers and practitioners from both Canada and the United States.

During many hours of interview and discussion, I heard about how negotiators operate, what considerations are most important, and what kind of training they receive in order to do this difficult and sensitive work. I found a philosophy of engagement that surprised me in its unanimity. I found a group of women and men who are deeply committed to non-coercive de-escalation processes. They proved humane and thoughtful, and what I heard changed my view of what is possible when we learn to engage empathetically with people who are deemed irrational or dangerous.

Educators: Unprepared and Shocked

In the course of writing this book I reached out to educators, university professors, deans working in teacher education programs, and school administrators from all over the world. I asked about pre-service training. Almost unanimously I was told that little time or attention was paid to issues of classroom management (a phrase I confess to deeply disliking) in the pre-service training programs they'd attended. They also noted that little had changed in this regard since their days as university students. I learned that educators were usually left on their own to find, learn, and practise the interpersonal skills that appeared most needed. Some responded by taking personal initiative to seek out ancillary training. Many, however, claimed they had no idea where to look.

Teachers told me how unprepared they felt when issues first arose in the classroom. Most left teacher training with the assumption that they would simply learn what they needed to know on the job or through mentor teachers. However, the mentors and supports weren't always there, and there was little practical advice to be had. Teachers told me that despite their desire to learn new and effective approaches,

they often found themselves going back to what they'd experienced in the classroom as students with their own teachers, especially when they were under duress. Many expressed discomfort with this but admitted they often just didn't know what else to do besides reproduce what had been done to them. As one assistant principal I spoke with eloquently put it,

This profession is unique because everyone entering it is an expert. We've all been in the process from a young age. Essentially, teachers do to the kids what was done unto them. And that perpetuates a lot of behaviours that are rooted more in familiarity than a useful teaching practice.

A troubling theme emerged during these conversations. Educators underscored what I was seeing in my review of extant literature: there is still considerable disagreement within the educational sector about exactly how to respond to student disruption. Many schools support programs based on what are considered pragmatic behaviour management premises favouring the application of rewards and punishment. Although many of these approaches claim to be positive, and proponents insist that whenever possible interventions should be made supportively, most continue to operate from a deficit perspective. The assumption is that it is ultimately the student who must change to fit the school. Still others suggest that antidotes to disruption will not be found within the code of conduct but instead through the creation of more interesting, relevant, and self-directed curricula. In this instance it is the school that must change to fit the student. In the face of these contradictions, one has to wonder how teachers are to make sense of this divide and figure out what to do. Further, most of us recognize that even if there is a commitment to one approach or the other, neither is likely to eliminate disruption entirely, since interactive conflict is unavoidable.

Student Voices

This work would be incomplete without including the voices of students. Unfortunately, students are rarely asked for their

input—especially students most directly affected by the behavioural procedures and policies that are applied to them at school. It wasn't easy to find literature that showcases the voices of students, particularly those labelled disruptive, but I did find some. In addition, I spoke with students as part of the initial study and afterward as well. I also bring my own experience to this work and that of many of the people I've met in person and online in discussions about this topic.

I Don't Have Time, and You Don't Know the Kids I Work With!

For many years, my husband and partner, Norman Kunc, and I have offered workshops on relational, communication-based approaches to disruption. Unfortunately, these are sometimes criticized as placation, with the underlying assumption that empathy and accountability cannot coexist. “We can't just let kids get away with bad behaviour” is something we often hear. “There need to be consequences” is another. Even for those who want to try a different approach, the concern is that what we're proposing will be time-consuming and inefficient. I started this project because we were consistently hearing the same two objections when conversations centred on what are sometimes called “soft skills”—relationship building, fostering a sense of belonging, empathy, and deep listening. “We don't have time to build relationships” we were often told. At times our ideas would be dismissed as naive, idealistic, or just plain unrealistic. “You just don't know the kids I work with!”

I'll admit to being frustrated by these responses. I believed they represented an abdication of responsibility. But over time I began to rethink my perception. While it is most certainly true that time is at a premium for educators, and it is equally true that I don't know the particular students teachers work with, it became clear that what was being expressed in those two comments was actually deep frustration: frustration with students labelled disruptive, yes, but also frustration with the system's requirements and the unfulfilled promises of a long line of proposed solutions, many of which continue to mandate conflicting approaches. After all, how do you respond supportively to

students in a zero-tolerance environment? For many teachers, already overwhelmed with the day-to-day requirements of the classroom, arbitrary changes in curriculum, a decrease in both funding and support, and the increasing standardization of the educational system, it's been difficult to figure out where to turn for assistance or even find the time to do so.

When You're Stuck...Bring in More People

A common problem exists in education—actually in almost any field. Typically, when we try to solve problems, we only talk to each other. Teachers talk to teachers; psychologists talk to psychologists; engineers talk to engineers. Generally, this makes sense. After all, who understands education better than educators? Especially when we are struggling, we want and need the support of our peers. At best, talking to others who understand our challenges can be a source of support and new ideas. The danger, however, is predictable. When we ask the same questions, we tend to get the same answers. Our understandable frustration at finding ourselves stuck in this loop can lead to another problem. Those conversations, rather than bringing forward alternative ideas, can become a litany of complaints and bitterness and devolve into what my friend and colleague Rich Villa refers to as “problem admiration.” The more stuck and frustrated we feel, the more we are inclined to indulge in these counterproductive interactions.

Margaret Wheatley (2002) says, “When you're stuck, bring in more people.” Unfortunately, when relationships become difficult, many of us are inclined to do the exact opposite. This is often the time we hunker down and try to wrestle the problem to the ground all by ourselves. Sometimes we take this approach because we worry that our struggles may be seen as evidence of our incompetence, but sometimes it's simply because we're exhausted and out of ideas.

When I heard Margaret Wheatley's comment, I began to wonder if the help teachers need could come from unexpected places. Hyman and Perone (1998) looked at the educational policies and practices most likely to contribute to disruptive student behaviour and warned

that a move toward a law-enforcement orientation by schools was a move in the wrong direction. Ironically, it is law enforcement to which I turned for ideas. However, hostage negotiators comprise a segment of law enforcement with a different focus. Instead of applying a series of cascading punitive strategies and relying on ultimatums and authoritarian directives, hostage negotiators rely on listening and support to help de-escalate disruptive individuals. Instead of applying an action imperative, negotiators use dynamic inactivity and respond fluidly to the situation rather than reacting to it. Hostage negotiation approaches are non-coercive and non-avoidant, and they rely on communication and relationship-building to create change. The hallmarks of modern crisis negotiation include active listening, self-management, and the development of authentic rapport and empathy. Negotiators insist that although there are some skills that must be learned and practised, the most important part of the process is not about superimposing theories and strategies on a situation or an individual but has to do with being present and flexible and, most important, changing the way we think about people who are in crisis. They also insist that the process is deceptively simple and that it works.

It's Not Another Model

“Any tool is a weapon if you hold it right.”

—Ani de Franco

I begin with a caveat and a warning. I started learning and practising conflict resolution skills almost 30 years ago, many of which are similar to those used by hostage negotiators. I used these skills and ideas profitably in my workplace position as a labour relations director and also in private mediations over the years. What I'd learned was helpful in many ways. However, I began to become concerned that these skills could also be used disingenuously around the time of Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014. Brown's death at the hands of law enforcement sparked outrage about the continuation of systemic racism and inequity in America and precipitated the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement. During the aftermath of the

Ferguson incident, Missouri politicians exhorted members of the fledgling group to tamp down their anger, or else they could not expect their issues to be heard. This expectation—that a dissenting group will be heard only if they state their issues “nicely”—exposes a serious power differential that effectively silences all protest. In the process, it ensures the survival of a problematic status quo: those in power can dictate how difficult interactions and conversations should take place or if they can take place at all.

Leaders in Missouri used the language of conflict resolution. I found this distressing. Since then, it has been my ongoing concern that the skills I talk about in this book could be used to suppress dissident voices or in service of the status quo. These skills must never devolve into tools of suppression or even oppression.

Students who present as “behaviour problems” are sometimes what my late friend Herb Lovett used to call the “social critics” who tell us what isn’t working in our schools. Sometimes the way in which those criticisms are raised is difficult for us to interpret, much less respond to positively. It is my hope that the approaches I bring forward here will be used not to silence those resistant voices but to create viable ways to listen to the subtext of what difficult students are trying to tell us. We must ask ourselves: Is a dissenting person a freedom fighter or a terrorist? Is behaviour always evidence of simple noncompliance, or is it a cry for help or evidence of resistance to a sometimes problematic system?

My second worry is that readers might interpret what I’ve written as an invitation to use these ideas as a step-by-step model. “Just do these ten things in this order, and you’ll be fine.” That’s actually the opposite of my intent. Instead, I hope these ideas will be used flexibly and situationally. My concern with models is that they tend to crystallize ideas and are not always responsive to the diversity of situations we are confronted with or the people we’re interacting with. In a model-based approach, we often have only one option or a limited series of options to choose from. When those options fail or fizzle, we’re at a loss. What to do now? In some ways it is like the difference between classical music and jazz. In classical music, although musicians can

add feeling and nuance, they are required to follow the score quite rigidly. Many models mandate similar rigidity of response. In jazz, improvisation is what makes the music alive and responsive. The actions of one musician prompt the others to create variations. They must be intensely attuned to one another and follow one another's leads flexibly. This is how I hope these ideas will be used.

But Wouldn't Life Be So Much Easier If There Was a Recipe We Could Follow?

Unfortunately, we all know there isn't a recipe when it comes to human relationships, much as we might wish there were. People and relationships are far too complex to fit neatly into pre-packaged boxes. So what I didn't want was to write yet another book of tactics and strategies, another "ten tips for what to do on Monday," or offer more tricks for that ubiquitous "teacher's toolbox."

However, if you're like the many educators I've talked with over the years, it's likely that your toolbox is already overflowing, and further, many of the strategies you've collected are frustratingly contradictory. We probably all secretly wish for some kind of recipe we could follow that would solve our problems efficiently once and for all. However, if I came to you claiming that I (or even the negotiators I interviewed) had the answer to all the issues you face, you'd likely be skeptical. So you should be. In the time you've been teaching, you've likely seen your share of suggested programs and approaches taken on and discarded with disheartening regularity. This has led many teachers I know to harbour cynicism and mistrust of anything labelled "the new best thing" or "flavour of the month."

In this book I neither pretend expertise nor claim a technology. If anything, I am relying on the credibility I've borrowed from the negotiators, educators, students, and others I spoke with and a set of guiding principles. What I hope to do is to provide a series of stories and concepts that may spark new ideas for you. Rather than techniques, they are more about being present than following a formula. They reflect an overarching philosophy of engagement.

To quote two of the negotiators I interviewed,

You've got to adjust, depending on what the situation is. You've got to be able to change your methods. And it depends on . . . the people you're dealing with.

There's no template to what we do . . . we modify . . . adapt.

Are There Specific Skills We Can Learn?

Yes. Might they be useful to you in your classrooms? I believe they could be. But here's that caveat again. Unless these approaches are grounded in a philosophy of respect and partnership, of openness and empathy, they will simply be more stuff to collect for that toolbox. The most important thing I learned from the negotiators was not about specific strategies. It was about a change in perspective, finding other ways of seeing and interpreting people and events. They reminded me that this always involves being reflexive, observant, and quick on your feet. As the great South American educational philosopher and activist Paulo Freire (1970) says, praxis must be much more than simply the practical application of a skill. Rather than a habitual response based on what we've done in the past, or a rote series of discrete steps, it should be a process of reflection followed by action, followed by more reflection. In other words, an organic, fluid, and generative process that flows from an ethical, values-based stance.

In short, this is not a book about how to make someone do what you want them to do without them knowing you're doing it. It is, however, a book that will introduce you to some people and some ideas that may be new. It might help you to see the situations you find yourself in through new eyes.

How the Book Is Organized

This book is a blend of journalistic exploration, story, theory, and discussion, and it includes vignettes from hostage negotiators,

educators, students, parents, and others. Some stories and metaphors come from my own experiences and others who have personal experience with school discipline programs.

I begin by offering an outline of the problem faced by educators in contemporary Western education. This chapter is the most academic in the book. If that's not your thing, you may want to skip it. However, its purpose is to create some context for what follows.

Next I introduce you to a brief history of hostage negotiation and the way this branch of law enforcement has changed from an "action imperative" policy of "contain, chemicals, and SWAT" to a communication-based process that has its roots in communication theory and psychotherapy.

The next chapter, titled "Relocating the Problem," will introduce the concept of narratives and explore how the narratives we use to make sense of the world influence our behaviour and responses—and how critical it is to question and sometimes intentionally change those narratives.

The following nine chapters are about specific relational crisis negotiation approaches and reflect a synthesis of the things I learned from negotiators. As mentioned, none of the nine ideas are intended to represent a fixed model. Rather, they are intended as ideas that may be profitable to grapple with and consider. They might best be described as "things to think about". Although I have treated them separately, they are all part of a single approach. It's impossible, for example, to create supportive relationships without empathy and impossible to listen well without curiosity. Of course, self-awareness is always necessary! The approaches are as follows:

- Relationship
- Empathy
- Curiosity
- Listening
- Self-awareness/management
- Dynamic inactivity
- Face saving
- Thought interruption
- Problem solving

In the epilogue I look at the issue of school shooting, a topic that today inevitably arises in the context of any discussion about school discipline and safety. I revisit the recommendations of the Safe School Initiative (2003) and the Bystanders Report (2008).

Finally, I have included the transcript of an interview with Ron Garrison, school safety expert and expert witness in 85 cases involving restraint and seclusion.

A Few Words on Language

I've used the term *hostage negotiation* throughout this book, even though it might more aptly be called crisis negotiation, since many of the situations negotiators face don't necessarily involve hostages. Dominick Misino, former head of the New York City Hostage Negotiation Team, told me that more than 80 percent of the issues they are called to negotiate are incidents involving barricaded or suicidal individuals (personal communication, February 2010). Hammer (2007) also suggested that hostage negotiation is more accurately defined as crisis management. In this context, crisis can be defined as "A personal difficulty that overwhelms, or threatens to overwhelm, a person's resources and coping ability or capacity" (Slatkin, 2006, p. 5). Crisis (or hostage) negotiation is the process whereby an outside intervener attempts to de-escalate or disarm an individual and bring closure to a hostage or barricade event through listening and verbal means.

I have deliberately avoided using the word *behaviour* wherever possible. Over time, this word has changed from a verb to a noun and is often used pejoratively—as in "he's a real behaviour problem." We may assume the word *behaviour* is neutral and merely descriptive, but in fact it is more than that. A student assigned the label of behaviour problem as if that label encompassed an entire identity may have significant difficulty becoming free from the globalized weight of such a pronouncement. In this book I suggest that there is no such thing as a behaviour problem; there is only conflict. Making this shift in the way we see disruption has the potential to open space for different and more effective responses.

Many of the stories in this book are true or only slightly altered. In some cases names have been changed to protect identities, but in most I was privileged to have permission to use names. In a very few cases, stories are hybrids. I thank all the people who kindly allowed me to recount their experiences.

In Conclusion: A Confession or Two

Before we proceed with the interesting stuff—what I learned from hostage negotiators, educators, and students is nothing if not interesting—I have a confession to make.

Although this is a book about education, I am not a teacher. The only experience I have in the classroom is as a student, and as mentioned, I wasn't terribly successful. Despite the fact that I have never taught in the classroom, in a strange twist of fate I have been involved in adult education: providing conference keynotes and workshops, and conducting in-service and training for teachers and human service workers in the areas of inclusive education, disability issues, conflict management, and behavioural support for almost 30 years.

I used to feel apologetic about my lack of direct classroom experience. What right did I have to speak to teachers about what goes on in the classroom? However, I've had to rethink that. Perhaps it is exactly because I come from outside the field of education that what I have to offer might be relevant and helpful. I bring you a different perspective, both through my experience as a mediator and negotiator and through my past experience as a so-called disruptive autistic student. Further, because I have had the privilege of travelling internationally to talk with educators about their work, perhaps I can serve as a conduit, bringing their wisdom to you and vice versa.

It is for this reason that I no longer apologize about sticking my nose into the work teachers do. I know how much I have learned from the many wonderful educators I've met over the years, and I hope I've been able to give back something useful. I have had the privilege

of time and resources that have allowed me to delve into alternative fields that interest me and bring them forward for your consideration.

I bring to this work both passion and curiosity: passion in support of outliers and outsiders in our school system who struggled like I did, and curiosity about whether the approaches that helped me learn adaptive skills might help others. It's my hope that what I've written might broker a peace between educators, who try valiantly to understand why these students do what they do and ache to find a way to help them, and students, who likewise try valiantly to cope with difficult situations and to understand what adults want from them.

It is from this vantage that I wrote this book. I hope it proves useful.