

---

---

## Excerpts from CHANGING WAYS / *Building Skills*

Vol 8, #2

Exploring conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Maine schools

Fall 2004

---

### Opening Remarks *By Barbara Blazej*

*“Dialogue is about bringing together many voices, many stories, many perspectives, many experiences with a goal to increase understanding about others and ourselves.”*

Jen Murphy, George Mason University’s UDRP Dialogue Project

*“Dialogue is a process of genuine interaction through which human beings listen to each other deeply enough to be changed by what they learn.”*

Harold Saunders, A Public Peace Process

A year ago in this column I wrote about the power of sharing our stories and listening in creating connections and building community. Since that time, I have given much thought to the role of dialogue in improving classroom and school climate. Along with my colleague here in Peace Studies, we have worked to formulate a structured, facilitated dialogue process that would be useful in various group settings. We call this particular model Circles of Connection.

It’s worth repeating here the reasons why meaningful dialogue is valuable in general terms. Among other things, dialogue can:

- Remove barriers (of difference, bias, mistrust, fear) that separate us from others;
- Invite empathetic understanding of others;
- Foster authentic, heartfelt connections and relationships;
- Teach invaluable life lessons in ways we can hear;
- Elicit our deepest wisdom, courage, compassion and hope.

In schools, dialogue can be helpful in many ways, all of which have the potential to empower students and staff, reduce tensions and stress, and build and strengthen relationships. Here are some specific uses of this process:

1. As a community-building activity in classrooms, staff meetings, etc.;
- Getting to know each other at the beginning of the school year (Who am I? Who are you? Who are we?)*  
*Daily, weekly or regular “check in” (How are things going? What do you need?)*
2. To address difficult and/or controversial issues with students, staff, and community;  
*(bullying, derogatory language, substance abuse, budget concerns)*
3. To transform conflicts that involve groups *(for example, cliques)* or the whole school;
4. To gather and share ideas, points of view, or information;  
*(How can we improve our school? What do students need to be more motivated and engaged?)*
5. As a democratic, participatory process for making important decisions.

We have been fortunate over the past year or so to have had several opportunities to share, teach and use Circles of Connection. In some of these situations, participants have given us very positive feedback about their experiences in the Circles.

— In a youth/mentor program, we used Circles of Connection to address specific issues of respect and responsibility;

*continued from previous page*

— With Fort Kent High School students during a school-wide conference, Circles of Connection focused on conflicts between students;

— After being trained to facilitate Circle dialogues, approximately 50 Orono High School students led their peers in small group conversations after the students had watched a performance of *You The Man*, a show that explores sexual harassment and dating violence.

— The adult facilitator of some local middle school girls' groups used Circles of Connection to sort through difficult concerns they were struggling with. Afterwards, we received this feedback from the facilitator:

*"I think—and the girls agree—that the Circles of Connection exercise was very successful....[T]he girls said it made them feel more in control and made it a fairer process...so that the usual vocal girls didn't monopolize and girls got to hear what people were thinking first hand rather than by making assumptions. It really helped us..."*

— Both last fall and this past spring, hundreds of students and teachers participated in Circles of Connection at two conferences: the December 2003 Peer Mediation Association of Maine (PMAM) central/northern chapter high school gathering at UMaine, and the May 2004 statewide PMAM conference in Augusta for grades 5-12. These dialogues offered the opportunity for participants from different schools throughout Maine to meet and learn about each other in a fun, safe way. Some comments from both conferences:

*"I'd like to start Circles of Connection as a mixed K-5 activity once a month so kids could know each other better. It may help with bus issues, etc."* (teacher)

*"Extremely rewarding to hear students share their feelings."* (teacher)

*"Great icebreaker! Common interests...Learning about each other...."* (teacher)

*"It would be a great tool to discuss and explore...issues."* (teacher)

*"I learned a lot about other people and I think this would be good for new kids to make new friends."* (student)

*"The people were very friendly and open to hearing what I had to say."* (student)

*"I was able to see things from others' points of view. I enjoyed listening and understanding."* (student)

*"It could bring classes together and break down barriers that we ourselves create and could form unity."* (student)

*"I found out what people's passions were and came to understand things I'd never thought about."* (student)

*"My group had some very deep and meaningful conversations. I felt comfortable talking about my family and sister I have never met."* (student)

From our own experiences as Circle participants and from observing and listening to others who have taken part in these conversations, we are convinced that this dialogue process has great potential in terms of personal and collective change. If you'd like to learn more about Circles of Connection and how it might work in your school or community, please call me at 581-2625.

For details on George Mason University's UDRP Dialogue Project:

[www.gmu.edu/org/UDRP](http://www.gmu.edu/org/UDRP)

For details on A Public Peace Process:

[www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/example/saun7270.htm](http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/example/saun7270.htm)

---

---

## **Bullying Can Be Prevented**

*By Pam Anderson*

Bullying is a significant problem in Maine schools. In a 1999 statewide survey of over four thousand third graders, 40% reported being teased in a mean way, 40% said they were called hurtful names, 34% were left out of things on purpose, 22% were threatened and 37% were hit, kicked or pushed frequently (at least once or twice a week or month).

*continued from previous page*

Schools are responding to the bullying problem in various ways, including holding assemblies with speakers and skits about bullying, talking about it in classroom meetings, raising awareness with posters and school rules, teaching conflict resolution, and implementing whole-school programs for bullying prevention. Whole-school programs involve all school staff, students, and parents in bullying prevention strategies, with the adults taking responsibility for creating a safe and respectful school climate. School administrators consistently enforce school rules against bullying and harassment. Staff are trained and supported, and may form a school leadership committee to establish and maintain the program. This is a research-based approach to prevention that has proven effective in national studies.

The Maine Bullying Prevention Education Program, initiated by Maine Law & Civics Education at the University of Maine School of Law, has been adopted in 27 schools over the last three years. This whole-school program has been effective in reducing bullying behavior. Initial evaluation results for the first group of eight elementary and middle schools showed:

- a 14% decrease in students (mostly boys) who reported they were being teased in a mean way at least once a week;
- a 20% decrease in students (mostly boys) who reported they had been hit, kicked or pushed at least once a month; and
- a 21% decrease in boys who reported they were called hurtful names at least once a month.

The number of students who witnessed bullying incidents at least once a week or once a month also showed decreases:

- a 17% reduction in incidents witnessed on the playground;
- a 17% reduction in incidents witnessed on the bus;
- a 30% reduction in incidents witnessed at the bus stop;
- a 16% reduction in incidents witnessed in their classrooms; and
- a 15% reduction in incidents witnessed in the hallways.

The largest reductions in bullying behavior were reported by those who were doing the bullying, which is consistent with national studies. The evaluation surveys showed:

- a 27% reduction in percent of students who reported they said mean things to others at least once a week;
- a 27% reduction in percent of students who reported they teased others at least once a week; and
- a 17% reduction in percent of students who reported they hit, kicked or pushed others at least once a month.

Over one thousand students in these eight schools responded to the pre- and post- program surveys, which were administered initially in 2001 and re-administered from 10-13 months later in 2002. All these schools fully implemented the bullying prevention program school-wide.

Evaluation results continue to be collected and analyzed from other schools that have implemented the program. The program is funded in substantial part through grants from the Division of Community Health, Bureau of Health, Maine Department of Health and Human Services.

For more information, contact:

Pamela B. Anderson, J.D.

Maine Law & Civics Education

University of Maine School of Law

246 Deering Ave.

## **Building Relationships through Student Assistance Teams**

*By Cathy McCue*

As any principal can tell you, negative student behavior and staff response to that behavior makes up significant amount of the work done on a daily basis. In this age of accountability there is an added dimension. We must address these behaviors in such a way that minimizes the impact on the learning environment as a whole and for the individual student. The goal becomes supporting behavioral change while continuing to enforce rules and procedures agreed upon by both teachers and students. In our school we regularly have disagreements on that fine line between “discipline” and “punishment” especially when it involves students with behaviors that are chronically problematic. One of the ways that we have been able to productively talk about response to student behavior is through our Student Assistance Teams.

These teams are made up of teachers and the school counselor, with one team per grade level. The teams meet monthly (or more often if necessary) to discuss individual student issues and to develop plans to address these issues. They work to engage students and parents in these planning discussions. Underlying causes for the behavior are identified and plans to address these needs are put in place. Mentoring, frequent check-ins with a trusted adult, and home/school communication are implemented along with some innovative approaches. Students are regularly asked to talk with an adult about their behavior and what corrective action the student is taking to address it. The benefit of this exchange is that it allows both parties to hear each other’s thinking and reactions and to come to an agreement about how to proceed in the next situation that may arise. This is not to say that detentions and suspensions are not used at our school; on the contrary, every student is held responsible for their actions as a component of understanding and changing their own behavior. The conversations with and among the adults are the component that has the greatest impact. Teachers reflect on their own reactions to student behavior and expand their repertoire of behavior interventions while developing relationships with students, parents and with each other.

Student Assistance Teams at Carrie Ricker Middle School work to develop relationships that impact on student behavior and increase self-awareness. By including all teachers in the school, this model allows connections between students and teachers. The success of the plans developed and implemented by the teams depends on problem solving and willingness to go beyond detentions and suspensions to address underlying needs of students that influence behavior.

*Cathy McCue is the principal of the Litchfield Schools, Carrie Ricker Middle and Libby-Tozier, a K-8 system. She can be reached at [mccuec@su44.org](mailto:mccuec@su44.org).*

---

## **Creating Conditions that Encourage All Learners (Part 2 of 3)**

*By Carla Ritchie and Sharon Wilson-Barker*

Many educators today complain of disengaged students. They bemoan the fact that their students are apathetic and unmotivated or unwilling to be the students the teachers want them to be. This fall we had the opportunity to observe and work with two wonderful groups of students whose openness to new ideas, whose willingness to try new things and whose obvious enjoyment of education flies in the face of the complaints we hear so often. The first was a group of sixth graders in western Maine who are now attending the “big” middle school. During an activity in which groups of students were given \$100,000 to bid on values such as “being looked up to,” “knowing I did my best” and “feeling safe,” one group excitedly bid half of their total money—\$50,000—on “being accepted for who I am.” At the National Center for Student Aspirations (NCSA), we would term this *Belonging*, and *Belonging* is one of the three social support conditions for higher student aspirations—*Belonging*, *Heroes* and *Sense of Accomplishment*—that we discussed in this newsletter last spring.

*continued from previous page*

The next tier of the NCSA pyramid consists of the three conditions that are linked to intrinsic motivation in students—*Fun & Excitement*, *Curiosity & Creativity* and *Spirit of Adventure*. The second group of students that we observed seemed to have all three of these conditions in place. These students were a group of high school students attending a technical school for part of their day. They were engaged, excited and motivated to learn. We asked the director why he thought this was the case. He replied, “because these students all want to be here. They chose to come.” Intrinsic motivation is linked with student choice, and these three conditions work hand-in-hand to give students choice in the educational setting.

Let’s talk about motivation—both intrinsic and extrinsic—in the educational context. Most schools reinforce extrinsic motivation with external rewards and expectations, such as grades, academic/sports awards and honor rolls. For students whose intrinsic motivation aligns with the external rewards and expectations of schools, the system works well, and these students function productively within it.

But what about those students who do not care about the external rewards and expectations of school? What about the students who do not find value in getting on the honor roll or who find that sitting and listening passively for hours actually interferes with learning? We often refer to these students as “un-motivated,” but actually their intrinsic motivation simply does not align with the external rewards of our educational system.

As educators it is important that we reach out to unmotivated students as well as supporting the motivation of students who are performing well. Our conditions of *Fun and Excitement*, *Curiosity & Creativity* and *Spirit of Adventure* provide educators with a framework to accomplish this.

Let’s examine these conditions—*Fun & Excitement*, *Curiosity & Creativity* and *Spirit of Adventure*—more closely. First up, *Fun & Excitement*. When asking pre-service teachers why certain teachers were their own favorites, they often reply, “because they made learning fun.” So, how can you do this? Spontaneity can be one method of making your classroom fun for students; getting to know your students and learning what interests them is another way. Teachers, who incorporate their own interests and ideas into their curriculum, as well as those of their students, find they have *Fun & Exciting* classrooms. One of our pre-service teachers recently explained it this way: “When I really enjoyed a class, it wasn’t the big things the teacher did. We probably didn’t even have fieldtrips. It was more subtle than that. It was the little things, like teachers who had real conversations with us and made us feel like we were their equals, that made their class fun for us.” And it is a win-win situation; making classrooms *Fun & Exciting* is stimulating to both students and teachers.

“Schools today do not instill enough curiosity in their students.” Senator John Glenn, spoke these words at the Maine Center for the Arts at the University of Maine in May, 2001. Glenn’s concerns about education today resonated with us at the NCSA. We agree that the lack of true inquiry in the classroom and the disregard we observe in teachers for igniting the spark of curiosity in students are problematic. Glenn spoke of the many changes in transportation, technology and medicine that he had seen and the role that curiosity played in those developments. He spoke of the importance of *Curiosity & Creativity* in challenging the status quo. We, too, are concerned about the routine sameness of studies in schools today. How many of our classrooms incorporate problem-solving, exploration or inquisitiveness on a daily basis? Not only are these things necessary for developing motivated learners, but if we listen to John Glenn, they may be necessary for the future of our world as well.

If you look up “risk-taking” on the Internet, you will find information related to drug abuse and financial risks. But the healthy risk-taking we are talking about is quite different than that. It means stretching ourselves out of our comfort zone in order to grow. *Spirit of Adventure* means creating environments where students can take healthy risks—and succeed or fail—without fear of being ridiculed. If we learn from our mistakes, as most agree that we

*continued from previous page*

do, then it must be safe for students to take risks and make mistakes in order to learn from them. By creating an atmosphere that allows for healthy risk-taking, students become more confident and resilient. When was the last time your students asked a question like, “Why do we have to read this boring book? Why can’t we do such and such?” Respond to your students by asking them “How?” and “Why?” And then be willing to take a risk with your students.

What is unique about these three conditions and the concept of intrinsic motivation is individualization. What one person finds fun, another finds boring; what stimulates curiosity for one is common knowledge for another; what is risky for one person is routinely accomplished by another. For teachers this is both the challenge and the reward. How can we, as educators, work to establish these three conditions for all our students? By knowing our students, by sitting and talking with them, by fostering and embracing a spirit of inquisitiveness, and sometimes, by going out on a limb with our students. Challenging? You bet. Rewarding and satisfying? Incredibly! When students are given choice in the educational setting, they are intrinsically motivated to learn, behavior problems disappear and the classroom becomes an exciting and invigorating place.

We can make a difference in the lives of our students. Stay tuned to the next issue of the Peace Studies newsletter, *Changing Ways*, to learn more about the last two of the 8 Conditions for high student aspirations. Next time, we’ll tackle the conditions that are the desired outcomes of the NCSA framework and are inherent in the development of student’s self-efficacy.

*Carla Ritchie and Sharon Wilson-Barker are co-directors of the National Center for Student Aspirations at The University of Maine. You can contact them at 581-2492 or by email: [Carla.Ritchie@umit.maine.edu](mailto:Carla.Ritchie@umit.maine.edu) or [Sharon.Wilson-Barker@umit.maine.edu](mailto:Sharon.Wilson-Barker@umit.maine.edu).*