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## Excerpts from CHANGING WAYS / *Building Skills*

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Exploring conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Maine schools

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### Opening Remarks *By Barbara Blazej*

As educational activities go, traveling deserves high marks for its ability to broaden our understanding of the world, and ourselves, in profound ways. Traveling to Cuba, a land shrouded in mystery for many of us in the US, may be the quintessential learning experience. This island nation of 11 million sits just 90 miles off the Florida coast, yet aside from a young boy named Elián González, we know so little about these close neighbors. When I asked a handful of people to do a quick “word association” game—to spontaneously list the first words that came to mind around the name Cuba—I heard these responses: “Castro, cigars, communism, poverty, primitive, Cuban Missile Crisis, refugees, boat people.” This would certainly have been my own response before visiting Cuba, and represents, I believe, the view of Cuba held by many in this country. This is not surprising, given the US travel ban and economic, political, and media embargo against Cuba in place for more than four decades.

This past February, I had the great privilege of visiting Cuba with 24 other individuals from across the US on a Witness for Peace delegation. A national organization with eight regional sections around the country, Witness for Peace is a “politically independent, grassroots organization...committed to nonviolence” with the following mission: “To support peace, justice and sustainable economies in the Americas by changing US policies and corporate practices which contribute to poverty and oppression in Latin America and the Caribbean. We stand with people who seek justice.” Our group was in Cuba to listen and learn, to experience daily life, and to understand the impact of the US embargo on the Cuban people. In terms of conflict resolution and peacebuilding, my journey to Cuba highlighted some of the processes essential for working through conflict from the interpersonal to the international level.

For example, in many disputes each “side” will often cling to its own version of the situation and will have great difficulty acknowledging or hearing the “other’s” story. As I mentioned above, I began my trip with certain preconceptions about Cuba and its people and with a limited understanding of US-Cuba relations during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I half expected to see a paranoid, repressed population wandering hopelessly through the streets of Havana. *Castro, communism, poverty, primitive, refugees....* Fortunately, this trip challenged all of us on the delegation to be open-minded and openhearted, to at least temporarily suspend our own “Americanized” view of Cuba and to carefully listen to the Cuban people tell “their” version of the story. Toward that end, our group engaged in conversations with many Cuban people—doctors, teachers, government representatives, ordinary citizens, farmers, musicians, religious leaders, and others.

We witnessed the resourcefulness and resilience of the Cuban people, their pride in their health care, education, religion, housing, community development, child care, and other social institutions, their concerns about the ongoing conflict with the US, and their recognition of the need for economic and political reforms. “The current system is not perfect, not complete,” acknowledged Dr. José Ramón Vidal, former professor of communications at the University of Havana, “but it’s ‘our’ system and we will continue to improve. We will not go back to corruption, poverty, high unemployment, and the end of our independence” [i.e., life in Cuba before the 1959 revolution]. Others we spoke with who had lived in Cuba both before and after the revolution expressed a similar sentiment: despite hardships, their lives are better now since the revolutionary changes of 1959, which was and continues to be a movement that is focused on meeting people’s needs.

Of course, perspective-taking offers the greatest opportunity for growth and understanding *as a two-way process*: in addition to learning so many important things about the Cuban people (including “unlearning” stereotypes and

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misinformation), I also had the humbling experience that one can only gain from stepping outside one's own culture and society—seeing oneself (seeing myself, seeing my country) from the Cuban perspective. I felt welcomed and respected as a US citizen at all times while I was in Cuba, *and* I heard some thoughtful and even painful comments (though none were said with bitterness or malice) on certain US policies and structures, such as:

...that Guantanamo Naval Base is the only military base in the world maintained against the will of the host country, maintained “as a knife in the heart of Cuba”;

...that our US belief that one cannot oppose the Cuban government is an untrue “obsession” created and fueled by the US media. [In reality, “honest” dissidents—i.e., those not funded by the US government or other groups to undermine the Cuban system—have the right to organize and express their opposition, although not without restrictions];

...that American “liberal democracy” means that political parties change and presidents change, but conditions stay the same for the poor;

...that the US is a nation of money and consuming, and Cuba is a “nation of sacrifice,” or, as expressed by Reverend Raul Suarez, pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Havana and a deputy in the Cuban National Assembly, “We [Cubans] live by an ethic of being, not having.”

Clearly, the Cuban and US political and economic systems differ in some fundamental ways. Yet in the end, the greatest lesson for me, in terms of peacebuilding and conflict resolution between “enemies,” revolves around the wonderful *similarities* between the people of Cuba and the US. (Interestingly, the word “enemies” may sound like a ludicrous exaggeration, but, in fact, if a US citizen travels “illegally” to Cuba—that is, without a US government license—and spends even one penny there, he/she risks prosecution for violating the US Trading with the Enemy Act.) Wherever we went, we met friendly, helpful people who work hard each day, who care deeply about their families, who have concerns about their society, who dream about a better future, who eat, dance, pray, cry, and laugh just like we do.

I will never forget our visit to the Cartula Music School in the Marianao neighborhood of Havana. This highly competitive, public institution (i.e., open to all who qualify, and free to all who attend) specializes in voice and instrument training for 251 students between the ages of 8-14. Many students honored us with performances on flute, guitar, piano, drums, violin, and song. As we entered the school, I noticed a plaque above the door with the following words engraved on it: *Amar, Tolerar, Responsabilidad, Respeto, Honestidad, Patriotismo, Honradez, Solidaridad*—Love, Tolerance, Responsibility, Respect, Honesty, Patriotism, Integrity, Solidarity. This Cuban educational philosophy sounds remarkably similar to the core values underlying Maine's *Common Core of Learning* and the Guiding Principles of the Maine *Learning Results*, and most recently listed in the 2001 *Taking Responsibility* document produced by the Maine Commission for Ethical and Responsible Student Behavior.

As we were leaving the Cartula School, the director said goodbye to us with these words: “Come back, because this is now your home.” In the span of a few hours, we had become one family. Our differences had faded into the background as we all—citizens of Cuba and the US alike—enjoyed the beautiful sounds of children making music. We all learned an important truth that day, as the poet Maya Angelou emphasizes in her wonderful piece, *Human Family*: “We are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike. We are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike.” *Neighbors, enemies, friends, teachers, parents, children, human family....*

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(Note: As someone pointed out to me, we often use the word “American” thinking we are the only ones with a claim to that name. However, all citizens of “The Americas”—including folks in Central and South America—are every bit American as we are. Therefore, “US citizen” is probably a better choice in terms of being less ethnocentric and more clear, and I have tried to use this term whenever possible.)

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## CHECK IT OUT...ONLINE

Some useful websites on bullying and name-calling.

**<http://lincoln.midcoast.com/~wps/against/bullying.html>**

The Maine Project Against Bullying website, includes A Survey of Bullying Behavior Among Maine Third Graders, links to many other related websites, lists of bullying resources, etc.

**<http://www.cary-memorial.lib.me.us/bullyweb/>**

“Stop Bullying Now. Recent incidents of school violence have focused new attention on childhood bullying and harassment. As we watch children being crushed by bullying, we often feel powerless. No more! There are ways to stop bullying and harassment, based on decades of research.” Website created by Stan Davis, a Maine educator and consultant who works in the field of bullying prevention and intervention.

**[http://www.education-world.com/a\\_issues/issues102.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_issues/issues102.shtml)**

An excellent website on bullying from *Education World*, features Dan Olweus’ Ten Myths About Bullying, many lesson plans, articles, projects, links to related sites (on conflict resolution, for ex.), etc.

**<http://www.sucessunlimited.co.uk/bullycide/school.htm>**

An excellent site from the UK providing information and numerous links on child bullying, school bullying, and “bullycide” (youth suicide due to bullying). Part of the Bully OnLine site, “The world’s leading website on bullying.”

**<http://ericass.uncg.edu/virtuallib/bullying/bullyingbook.html>**

A significant number of students are the target of bullying episodes that result in serious, long-term academic, physical, and emotional consequences. This comprehensive site examines all aspects of bullying including effective elementary, secondary and international programs.

**<http://www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content3/bullies.k12.2.html>**

This site explores bullying in many ways: the extent of the problem, characteristics of bullies and victims, consequences of bullying, intervention programs and more.

**<http://www.bullybeware.com/>**

Detailed information about bullying, including taking action against bullying for schools.

**<http://ericecece.org/pubs/digests/1997/banks97.html>**

A general, research-based overview of bullying.

**<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/living/DailyNews/bullying010424.html>**

Several interesting news stories on bullying, youth violence and school shootings.

**<http://www.project10.org/Namecall.html>**

This site explores name-calling and ways to educate against it in the classroom. Includes exercises for establishing classroom rules and creating a code of discipline.

# Building Community with Class Meetings

By Jacinthe D. Sirois

## **Introduction:**

I was an educator for three decades. For many years, I used to make most of the classroom decisions on my own and then inform my students on what was going to happen, how, when and where. After all, I “knew what was best.” It was much quicker and easier for me to make the decisions than trying to involve 20 to 25 students in the process. However, enforcing these decisions was sometimes a daunting task and not always a popular one! Clearly, human beings respond more positively to a situation when they have been given a voice.

All this changed when I began implementing the class meeting process. In this article I will share with you my experience in using class meetings and hope it will inspire you to establish a similar routine with your own students.

## **What are Class Meetings?**

Class meetings are regular, scheduled times for both students and teacher to get together to talk to each other, reflect, and decide on how we want our class to be. These meetings are an excellent mechanism to promote caring, kindness and learning. Through this process, students and teacher together can effectively address academic and social issues encountered in the daily life of the classroom.

When I first started conducting weekly class meetings many years ago, I was somewhat skeptical about their real value, and also concerned about the amount of time it would take away from “my teaching time.” After all, thirty minutes a week is significant to anyone with a tight schedule! I soon realized how important and beneficial these meetings were to my students and me. What an efficient classroom management tool class meetings had become! I no longer had to make all the decisions; I was able to share the load with my students. Furthermore, they were taking ownership for the decisions we made together. Even though not every meeting was a roaring success, soon my students and I were looking forward to our next meeting.

## **Frequency:**

In order to be effective, I believe class meetings need to be a part of the classroom curriculum, instead of an add-on when there is time. We held ours on a weekly basis, always scheduled at the same time so that it became part of our routine. They can also take place daily. The students are the main participants. The teacher becomes a participant as well as a facilitator who models positive behaviors, shows respect for different viewpoints and makes sure everyone gets a chance to participate. I found it helpful to record in our special “Class Meetings Notebook” all decisions made. This way we could revisit them during the following meeting to see if they were working or in need of some fine-tuning.

## **Purposes:**

Class meetings are used for developing common goals (social or academic), reflecting upon the progress in achieving those goals, discussing and solving problems together, focusing on skill building using role-playing, and for checking-in to see how things are going. And let’s not forget the importance of celebrating our progress and successes together.

## **Benefits:**

Through class meetings, my students had become empowered to make decisions, developed leadership skills, learned to express their opinions, felt listened to and respected. They were learning and practicing important communication skills—life skills.

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**Requirements:**

In order for all the students to participate, they must know that they will be respected. Consequently it is important to work at developing trust and respect prior to having class meetings. A good way to do this is by using many “getting-to-know-you” activities.

The physical set up of the class is also important for conducting class meetings. Students should be able to easily make eye contact with each other. I found the most effective arrangement was to bring my students with their chairs in a circle. I remember trying different alternatives, but the circle with the chairs worked best for us. At first it was time consuming, but all we really had to do was to learn to move in an orderly and speedy fashion. After that, it was a breeze!

Developing a few ground rules (2 or 3) regarding behaviors is best done at the beginning of the first class meeting. Establish with students what rules they need in order to feel safe and respected during the meetings. Keep the list short and simple: listen to each other, one person speaks at a time, respect everyone’s opinions are some examples. It’s a good idea to review these ground rules at the beginning of each meeting.

Involving the students in developing an agenda can be as simple as posting a sheet of paper titled *Agenda*, and reminding them to jot down problems, topics, etc., that they want to address at the next class meeting. During the first few weeks of the school year, I model by writing items on the agenda and encourage them to do the same. We never have a blank agenda.

The length of a class meeting varies according to the age of the children, the topic(s), and the purpose of the meeting. There is a danger of having the meetings too short, and children not having a chance to express their opinions, or too long, during which their interest might wane. I suggest starting with short meetings and modest objectives. Gradually you can increase the length up to fifteen minutes for students in grade 1 and 2 and a maximum of thirty minutes for grades 3 and up.

Before adjourning, sum up the ideas discussed and decisions made. Provide time for children to talk about how it went, what they liked or disliked, and what they might want to do differently next time.

Class meetings are definitely worth the time and effort. Looking back, I’m glad that I had the opportunity to introduce this process to my students, as an important tool for community building, student empowerment and shared decision-making.

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