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Opening Remarks *By Barbara Blazej*

It will surely be spring as you read this newsletter, but I'd like to reflect a bit on some experiences I had this past winter. In February I found myself driving *north* to Fort Kent (reasoning the whole way that I might as well see this part of Maine for the first time in all its wintry glory! It was, indeed, beautiful). I was helping the National Center for Student Aspirations organize two all-day student summits on issues of harassment, conflict resolution, leadership and diversity. At the end of the middle school day, I joined a small group of 6th-8th grade students as they prepared skits to present to the entire school body summarizing what they had learned that day. As we walked to the cafeteria to do the presentations, one 6th grade girl looked at me and said in a terrified voice, "I can't do this, I can't do this!" Somehow I convinced her that she *could* do it and she summoned up enough courage to proceed with the skit. As she left the stage area and passed by me, she said with a big smile on her face, "I'm glad I did that!" As you can imagine, my heart melted in that moment—despite the freezing temperatures outside!

One month later, I was working with a group of 48 Orono High School students in a one-day Circles of Connection facilitator training (I will be writing more about this circle process in the next newsletter). My colleague and I spent some time explaining the model of Circles of Connection and the role of the facilitator in guiding these conversations. Then the students were on their own in practicing circle facilitation skills. We observed them engage in this process with serious intention (in varying degrees, of course!)—listening carefully and respectfully to each other, willing to try on this role that was unfamiliar to most of them. For some students, this model challenged them and they struggled with what we were asking them to do. Yet they all persisted and in their evaluations at the end of the day, they all felt ready to facilitate circle conversations with their peers in their school.

Both of these experiences deeply moved and inspired me during our long, cold winter. They represent for me the potential for young people to truly "shine" when given the opportunity and support to do so. One of my favorite writers, Donella Meadows, an environmental educator, columnist, and adjunct professor at Dartmouth College, who sadly died in 2001, explains what "shine" means to her: "There's a part of me—it feels as if it's buried deep—that shines. It literally shines, or so it seems to me, with a warm, steady glow. It's where my deepest wisdom and best instincts come from." She goes on to say that too often, this inner shine lies buried under "a sludge of busyness, complaints, schemes, worries, and fears" created by ourselves and our culture—a culture, she sadly admits, that "powerfully encourages sludge and...does not lead people to experience the shining place inside themselves." Donella devoted her life to uncovering and sharing her own inner wisdom and creating opportunities for others to do that as well.

In this context, "opportunity" means some combination of space, time, resources, support, guidance and even love. Given these essential ingredients, each of us has what we need to open up, explore our interests and passions, and offer them to the world. A few weeks ago, as the Maine winter plodded on, I was fortunate enough to be in Cuba again, where I witnessed two more exciting examples of students' "brilliance" when given the opportunity to shine.

On this trip, I accompanied a group of 12 university students—most in their early to mid twenties, and two in their 30's and 40's. I watched this group of curious, interested students go through a wide range of emotions and changes during our 10 days in Cuba: from confusion to understanding to compassion, from anger (at US policies) to absolute determination to do something about that on their return. Once again, as on my previous trips, the Cuban people accepted us with open arms and hearts, helped us to see their lives through their own eyes, and

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shared with us their struggles, concerns, hopes, joys and dreams for the future. As you can imagine, this experience did nothing less than *transform* these students. I continue to marvel at the power of this particular experience to so profoundly move these students and elicit from them such intensity and passion.

While we were in the city of Santa Clara, east of Havana, we visited the Samuel Feijoo School, a high school for the performing arts: instrument, voice, theater and dance. (In my previous Spring 2002 opening remarks on Cuba, I wrote about visiting the Cartula School in Havana, an elementary/middle school for the performing arts. Many similar schools exist throughout the country, and all offer free education to all students who qualify.) Several Cuban students performed for us, and I was struck, again, by the brilliance and great potential of these young people. Given the opportunity—space, time, resources (limited as they are in this developing country), support, guidance and love (seemingly unlimited in Cuba)—students can and will discover their inner shine and proudly present it to the world.

Although it seems unlikely and perhaps even ironic that the small nation of Cuba can teach us something about opportunities for young people to reach their potential, I believe it can do just that. First, we can listen to a US diplomat at the US Interests Section (similar to an embassy) in Havana. At the end of a presentation in which this person had few positive things to say about Cuba, we heard what I consider a “gem” of great significance: “Cubans are passionate about their children.” Second, we can attend to the words of Larry Fish, Michael Yogman and Lou Casagrande, a Boston-area business executive, pediatrician and museum president, respectively, who visited Cuba two years ago. Upon their return, in a March 11, 2002 Boston Globe article, these three men concluded that, “If there is one society in North or South America where President Bush’s goal to leave no child behind is a reality, it can be found in Cuba...” While these men disagreed with some of Cuba’s political and economic policies, they recognized nonetheless that “children and education are of primary concern to Cuba,” and that “we can learn something from the Cubans—about how to raise our kids here [in the US], how to instill in them self-respect and cultural pride, and how to give all of them a chance to be happy, creative, and productive adults.”

If we are open to this “lesson” from Cuba, then our challenge as educators is this: With the resources we have, including our collective ingenuity, commitment and persistence, and because we, too, are “passionate about our children,” how can we create environments of safety, encouragement, nonjudgment, listening and opportunity for our students in which they can *all* connect with their “inner shine” and dazzle us with their brilliance?

Sources:

Fish, L., et al. “Cuba’s lessons on caring for children,” Boston Globe (on-line), March 11, 2002, page A15.

Meadows, D. “A two-step dance that displays our better and worse selves,” TIMELINE Magazine, November/December 1995.

Going Solo

By Maureen Block

Given the opportunity, most of us could easily bring to mind a special place we have visited in which we have found solace from our all-too-busy lives. It might be by a favorite tree deep in the woods, on a ledge high atop a hill, or somewhere close to the water’s edge. Perhaps it is simply in a favored chair by the stove or one that allows you to gaze out the window. It may even just be as we travel alone in the car. It is the place that inherently invites us to quiet our racing minds, calm our fears and anxieties, and allow ourselves to simply relax and breathe deeply.

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Now, look closely at the busy lives our children lead. From the minute they are nudged awake to begin their day, until they are finally settled into their beds at night, their days are filled with activities, expectations, images and any number of external stimuli, all centering on a clock.

Their lives are full and aside from Kindergarten rest time, our schools often only provide quiet time for reading or testing. We try to teach them strategies for managing their time by giving them planners, and then quickly fill them up. We encourage them to be aware, engaged and efficient in their endeavors, and then hurry them along as they go. We rarely invite them to rest, relax or restore their energies so they might feel and function better.

As Relational Skills Coordinator at the Monroe Elementary School, I was very aware of how social interactions and academic expectations add stress to students' young lives. I introduced "Going Solo" as a practice that I hoped would help students shape a healthier relationship with themselves, focus their energies back on learning, and perhaps even help them to find perspective about the relationships that can often disrupt their lives and learning environment during the day.

The practice is simple and easy to incorporate. It doesn't require much more than a few minutes, but that time can be very valuable. To begin, I simply ask students to recall a favorite spot where they remember finding a sense of peace and quiet. Most kids can name one right away and eagerly want to describe this special place. Giving them sufficient time to express their feelings about what they've experienced there is very important. Together, we go on to explore how, for many of us, we have so much going on in our heads at the same time that it often becomes difficult to deal with just one thing at a time. Sharing stories proves this is a common experience. After sufficient discussion, I then ask students to close their eyes and try to envision their favorite spot again, focusing most keenly on how their senses react to this solitude. I ask that they try to sit quietly in that space, in their minds, until they feel their breathing slow and their minds and bodies relax. They can remain quiet for as long as time allows.

The results are astounding. Giving students time to go solo doesn't require more than a brief interruption of routine. Many teachers decide that right after break or lunch is ideal. In fact, after introducing and honoring the practice, many teachers find students asking to go solo when things feel out of control or unbalanced in the classroom. Curled under a table, sitting on a windowsill, or just resting head down, students find they are able to regain some sense of that control and balance when they are allowed to "just be."

Going solo invites students to slow down, reflect quietly, and momentarily be able to let go of any anxieties and fears that may be overwhelming them. By making time for a simple, brief classroom contemplative practice, we suggest to our children that academic expectations are not our only priority. Finding balance in our lives is extremely important and challenging to all of us, often taking a lifetime of practice. Why not start early?

Restorative Discipline Bits and Pieces

By Eileen McCue

"We Were Just Kidding" – How many times have parents and teachers heard these words from young people after comforting the child who was the brunt of their teasing? April Fools Day, the day for jokes and pranks, also the day for unintended hurt and embarrassment, has the potential for this type of disaster. However, this type of incident can provide invaluable social lessons, as in this example from a middle school in central Maine.

In one class two students decided to play a prank on a female classmate whose friend had just changed schools. In their adolescent "wisdom," they decided to tell the girl that her friend had been arrested. Understandably she was

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very upset and started to cry while other classmates corroborated and spread the story. Inevitably, the truth came out. The girl was just as, if not more upset, to learn that she had been the brunt of a joke and the boys were sent to be dealt with by the principal and school counselor.

Instead of doling out the traditional punishment of detention or suspension to these students, the two adults decided that a more *relational* consequence would provide a better lesson. The students were removed from class and spent this time in reflection and conversation around how they could repair the harm they had done. In talking with the practical jokers, it was clear that the joke did not go as they had planned. They were surprised at the girl's reaction and did not intend to upset her so much, let alone make her cry. The two agreed that they needed to apologize, and not just to the girl, but to the whole class since the joke had disrupted everyone's day, especially those friends of the girl. Remarkably, after the two students spoke, other members of the class stood up to offer apologies for taking part in spreading the rumor and hurting the girl. What a wonderful lesson these students learned. Instead of the boys being ostracized and digging their heels in further, they were given the opportunity to repair the harm they had done by taking responsibility and becoming leaders in making amends. The girl, instead of having an unresolved harm, was able to forgive and leave the incident behind.

Going On Record – Winthrop High School has made significant progress in creating a restorative discipline component of their student code of conduct. In January, members of the administration, guidance, and faculty attended a daylong training in restorative processes to inform the work of including restorative measures as another discipline option at the high school level. With this information, a proposal was made to and accepted by the Winthrop Board of Education to include restorative discipline in policy.

The policy under consideration includes restorative discipline as one option among others, including the traditional method of discipline, as well as the newly proposed in-school suspension plan. This in-school suspension model is also partially restorative, reserving time for reflection on the student's behavior, community service, and academic work. The restorative discipline policy is based, in part, upon Ron and Roxanne Claassen's "Discipline That Restores" program. Winthrop High School has a highly successful peer mediation program, which will be included in the restorative process should the policy be adopted.

Currently, a draft of this policy is being reviewed by student leadership and faculty members and will soon be brought to the Board for further input. The intention is to have the policy in place at the start of the coming school year. Pending Board of Education approval, it will be published in the new student handbook, which is received by each student at the beginning of the school year.

Statewide Restorative Discipline Initiative – On Friday, April 2, 2004, an educators' gathering was held in Augusta to discuss the possibilities and implications for restorative discipline at individual schools and statewide. Grades K-16 were represented, as well as those from administrative, classroom, and guidance positions. It became clear that a network for sharing discipline issues and practices at all levels is needed. In addition, the group felt that raising awareness about restorative discipline among a broader audience would be helpful. To do this, we are looking into presenting at professional educators' meetings, developing a website to post restorative discipline

Creating Emotionally Safe Classrooms

By Jacinthe D. Sirois, M. Ed.

When we look at the human hierarchy of needs, safety is basic to survival like food and shelter. In recent years, much has been said and done about "Safe Schools." However the main focus has mostly remained on weapons,

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drugs and physical violence. While mandating school safety plans is certainly necessary, the need to go beyond creating crisis response plans cannot be overlooked. There must also be an emphasis on providing emotionally safe learning environments for all students and adults.

“I was never afraid of my teachers, unless I didn’t know something, or forgot my book, or came late, or made a mistake.” *Hallie*

“Forty-five years later, there are two words that still strike an icy fear in my heart: gym class.” *Ron*

“I was a slow learner and a slow answerer. My learning style didn’t ‘work.’ I was terrified. I never understood anything right.” *Sheryl*

These comments, and similar ones, are all too real for many people.

Christine Mattise gives us a clear, concise definition of emotional safety: “The right to be myself and the freedom to learn, work and play in school without the fear of having my heart, my head or my body hurt.”* A safe classroom makes it possible for all children to achieve their potential: academically, socially and personally. It creates an atmosphere where they are treated with respect and dignity by all regardless of their mental ability, learning styles, emotional, social or physical challenges. A safe classroom provides children with someone to connect with, someone they can trust, and a place to succeed. Too many children endure silently, spending their days in fear: fear of being teased, called names, and ridiculed by classmates and educators; of being repeatedly excluded; of being hurt while riding the bus. Living in fear can be incapacitating and can severely affect learning. Children need to be emotionally safe in order to succeed. In the absence of a safe environment, physical & emotional, learning is much more difficult than it needs to be.

Adults must also feel respected for their skills, valued and supported by the administration and the community, and included in decision-making. Achieving emotional safety requires the inclusion of all stakeholders: students, staff, administration, parents and community members. While looking at the overall picture may seem overwhelming, starting small is often more realistic. How can educators begin creating an emotionally safe environment? Making their classroom a safe haven, a place where children feel secure and are able to establish a connection with a significant and empathetic adult is a great place to begin.

Children feel safe where calm adults are present, visible, attentive and fair; where the classroom environment is structured and predictable, has established routines and procedures, where they feel a sense of belonging and significance, where they have a voice and are involved in classroom decision-making, building a sense of “team,” where they believe their teachers care for them and support them.

Students’ sense of safety is affected when they perceive their teachers as angry, impatient or when they feel devalued by them. Their sense of safety is lessened when teachers allow hurtful behaviors among students or view unkind behaviors as innocuous rites of passage. “They will outgrow it. It’s just a phase. They all do that at that age,” they might say.

Educators are responsible for the climate in their classroom. Successful teaching is more than merely transmitting information; it’s about successful relationships and the importance of positive, meaningful and healthy connections with students.

With a better understanding of emotional safety and its importance in the classroom, the following examples of effective practices for developing an emotionally safe classroom climate may be helpful.

§ Create effective structure: Have clear, firm, positively stated rules and enforce them respectfully and consistently. Provide students with limited choices. Be clear and specific in your directions.

§ Make your words consistent with your actions: Send clear, consistent messages about unacceptable behavior, and follow with logical, respectful consequences. Always respect the student’s need for dignity.

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- § **Use natural and logical consequences:** Teach responsibility by holding students accountable for their choices and behavior.
- § **Treat students with equal respect:** Make sure all children are valued and respected.
- § **Eliminate double standards:** Model the behaviors you want to see in your students. “Walk the talk.” If you don’t want them to criticize, don’t criticize them.
- § **Make success possible for all:** Know your students, acknowledge their different learning styles, their limited ability, etc.
- § **Connect with your students:** Let the students know who you are as a human being. Recognize and admit your mistakes. Show a genuine interest in their activities outside the classroom. Connect with them on a personal basis regularly.
- § **Teach basic conflict resolution skills:** All children will benefit from learning and practicing these life skills. It is giving them a gift for life.
- § **Focus on the positive:** “Praise the deed, not the doer” (Ruth Charney). Keep in touch with parents especially when things are going well with their children.
- § **Getting to Know You:** Spend time early in the year for children and adults to learn about each other. It will pay off as they will become more caring and respectful. Numerous activities for icebreakers or energizers are available on the web (for example: <http://gamesforgroups.com/teamwork>).
- § **Promote safe & respectful behavior through regular class meetings:** Create regular opportunities for children to safely and respectfully talk together about the way they want their classroom to be; to share mutual goals and the behaviors they want or don’t want to see; to make suggestions & plan activities; to focus on skill building; to recognize & celebrate individual and class accomplishments; to enjoy each other’s company. Under the educators’ guidance, they learn to identify and recognize their rights and those of others, and develop compassion.
- § **Develop a common language:** Help students learn the vocabulary to describe and address emotional issues. For example: students brainstorm words or phrases that mean safety in the classroom. Post the list. Have them write about the ones they feel are most important or make bumper stickers.
- § **Teach cooperative work:** Sharing a common goal and working together toward its achievement makes the difference and seems to be the key to reducing prejudice and increasing empathy and tolerance.

In conclusion, it’s important to remember there is no quick fix. Creating an emotionally safe environment requires time, effort and commitment. Learning new ways to promote positive, safe interactions needs to be an ongoing process throughout the year.

*Christine Mattise, a guidance counselor, wrote *The Hurt-Free School Program*, <http://www.hurt-free-character.com>

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Creating Conditions that Encourage All Learners

By Carla Ritchie and Sharon Wilson-Barker

What are aspirations and why do some students seem to have plenty of them while others are mired in apathy? Here at the National Center for Student Aspirations (NCSA), we define aspirations as having goals for the future

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while being inspired in the present to work toward those goals. This sounds so simple, yet many students today lack direction in their lives. Students across the state of Maine report everything from being very secure about their future to not knowing or even caring about their future. It is our goal at the NCSA to support students who are on their way to success and to foster the development of aspirations in those students who have yet to discover their way.

How do we hope to accomplish this? The NCSA in conjunction with the College of Education and Human Development (COEHD) at The University of Maine has for over two decades researched factors or conditions that affect aspirations. This research has identified 8 Conditions that seem to be positively correlated with high student aspirations. Our purpose is to provide knowledge about these conditions as well as to help parents, teachers and coaches foster the conditions for all students. Let's talk about the three foundational conditions of aspirations—*Belonging, Heroes* and *Sense of Accomplishment*.

The first of these conditions is *Belonging*. *Belonging* is defined as being a valued member of the school community while maintaining one's individuality. It is the universal need or desire of human beings to be accepted by others. Students who drop out of high school have told us over and over again that they just didn't belong, and research shows belonging is related to academic achievement. A recent study done at the University of California reported that rejection actually causes the pain center in our brain to become active. Think about that. The brain reads emotional pain in the same way as it reads physical pain! Suppose you were one of those students in schools, and we all know who they are, who experiences rejection by their peers daily. This research suggests that their brains read this emotional pain as physical pain. Given this finding, how can we blame these students for leaving our educational system?

Heroes are also very important to raising a student's aspirations. *Heroes* are the everyday people in a student's life who support and encourage them to succeed. As educators we are heroes by default. The students are certainly watching us, and so the question becomes, "What kind of heroes are we?" Several years ago we had a college student at the NCSA tell us the story of her "hero." She wrote about her high school English teacher who took the time to get to know her, helped her through her mother's illness and helped to instill in her the belief that she could go to college. "All she ever had to do was teach me English," she said, "but instead she changed my life." This teacher built her student's confidence to become who she is today and that is what we mean by heroes.

Children need to have people who believe in them, but they also need to experience a *Sense of Accomplishment*. Schools are very good at recognizing and supporting the athletic and academic accomplishments of students, but what about those students who do not excel in those categories? What do we do as educators to recognize effort and perseverance and encourage goal setting in our students? When talking with first-year education majors at the University of Maine in Orono about goal setting, we find it is usually athletes who have experienced this in school. Since one way for students to experience a sense of accomplishment is to set and achieve goals, why aren't we doing this with all students? Taking time to recognize and support student efforts encourages them to persevere through difficult tasks. This also contributes to a student's sense of accomplishment. By setting goals with students and celebrating their various accomplishments, teachers are fostering the development of high aspirations.

We can make a difference in the lives of our students. It takes time, effort and a willingness to look "outside the box," but fostering *Belonging, Heroes* and *Sense of Accomplishment* in the lives of our students means taking a giant step toward raising student aspirations. Stay tuned to the next issue of *Changing Ways* to learn more about the 8 Conditions for high student aspirations. Next time, we'll tackle the three conditions that are most closely linked with increased intrinsic motivation in students.

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