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NEWSLINE

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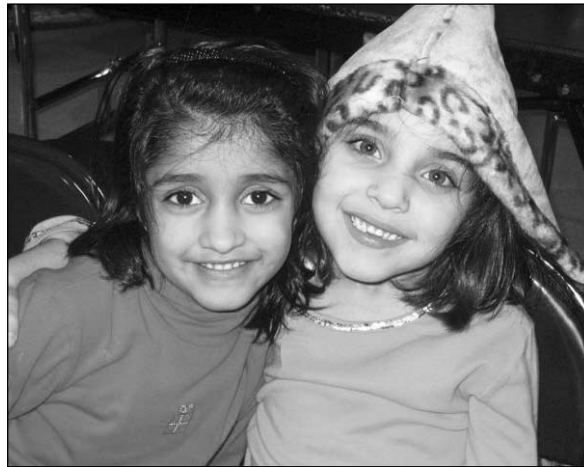
The McAvinnue School: Inclusive by Design

By Peg Sawyer and Jim Vetter

At the Joseph A. McAvinnue School in Lowell, Massachusetts, "Including One Another" isn't just the title of an Open Circle lesson; valuing diversity and including others are core values in the school. From the beginning of its involvement with the Open Circle program in 2004, the McAvinnue School has broadened its leadership to involve a wide range of staff, parents, and students in creating a caring school community. Now, almost three years into implementing Open Circle, the ethical and caring values are evidenced in every corner of the school. From the hallways to the classrooms, from the literacy center to the main office, from the music room to the cafeteria, the school has a unified, inclusive approach to social and emotional learning.

McAvinnue is one of Lowell's "Specialty Schools;" in addition to focusing on technology and science, the school provides special programming and staffing targeted for students whose primary language is Spanish and the Indian language of Gujarati. This sensitivity and support to the whole community helps make Open Circle available to everyone in the school, regardless of language or cultural background.

Open Circle first came to the attention of the McAvinnue community when Kelly Clough joined the staff as Vice Principal in 2003. She had used Open Circle in her fourth-grade classroom in Newton, Massachusetts, a system that



Valuing diversity and including others are core values at the McAvinnue School.

has implemented Open Circle in all of its elementary schools. Kelly suggested forming a Social Competency Committee to examine McAvinnue's goals around social and emotional learning, and to evaluate programs that would build on the Responsive Classroom and Crisis Prevention and Intervention programs

already in place at the school. The Committee included staff members from all grade levels and specialties at the school. After exploring several options, the Committee presented its findings to the wider staff, who selected Open Circle as the preferred social competency program for McAvinnue. The Committee continued to operate, changing its name to the Open Circle Committee. According to Kelly, who moved into the role of Principal in 2005, having such a large number of staff involved from the beginning has given the program credibility and authenticity.

After selecting Open Circle, a coordinating group laid out a comprehensive three-year implementation plan. Securing sufficient funding was critical to the ambitious plan for success. The underwriting dollars for Open Circle at McAvinnue have come partly from the City's share of the Federal Safe and Drug-Free Schools (SDFS) program funds. Other funding comes from the professional development component of the school district's budget.

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Going Deeper with Open Circle

Each year, several schools work more intensively with Open Circle to pursue their own particular vision of the Open Circle program and to deepen their school community's commitment to social and emotional learning. Beginning with an initial Summer Institute at Wellesley College, followed by several group meetings, site visits, and ongoing contact throughout the year, the Open Circle Sustainability Leadership Team Program helps schools develop and implement plans tailored to their specific strengths and needs. This innovative program was developed with generous support from the DuBarry Foundation.

We are currently scheduling visits to schools that are interested in participating in next year's Sustainability Leadership Team Program. For more information or to schedule a visit, please contact Jim Vetter at (781) 283-2819 or jvetter@wellesley.edu.

Solving the “Problem Solving” Problem

By Julia Boehm, Grade 2 teacher, Memorial School, Natick

“He took my marker!”

“She hogged the swings at recess again!”

“They keep bugging me!”

As I listened to these common second grade problems and felt the teachers’ struggle between quickly solving problems for students and taking the time to help with each problem, I began to wonder if there was a way to empower second grade students to handle social problems independently.

Last year as part of the DuBarry Open Circle New Teacher Group, I had the opportunity to work on a teacher research project and I chose the issue of problem-solving. This was an area in which I was certain my students needed work, but it wasn’t until after my students completed the Open Circle Student Self-Evaluation Tool that I realized that they thought so, too. Of the 18 students who used the Self-Evaluation Tool, 13 responded that they felt they needed more practice “handling annoying behaviors.” In response to this need, and considering my own interest in helping students handle their problems more independently, we began discussing annoying behaviors and what could be done about them. Through these discussions in Open Circle, I realized that we needed to look more at their problem-solving strategies than at the annoying behaviors themselves. Thus, for three weeks last year my class worked hard on studying, discussing, and practicing

the six problem-solving steps identified in the Open Circle curriculum.

After the problem-solving steps were introduced and posted in the classroom, I was interested to see if there would be a change in the types of problems the students reported or in the ways they handled their problems. As a way to track this, I created and introduced what I called the *Annoying Behavior Book*. This book was both a way for me to collect information about the students’ problem-solving and a way for them to communicate problems to me without talking to me directly. Although I introduced the *Annoying Behavior Book* as a way to document problems, I found that it had a significant impact on the number of problems reported in the room. The pages of the book began to fill with problems with bossiness, recess arguments, and general annoyances. The Double D problems (those that were Dangerous or Destructive) were still reported to me, but many of the smaller, more trivial problems seemed to disappear after being written in the book. It seemed that for many children, it was enough to know that I was going to read about a problem they experienced; they didn’t actually need my help to handle it.

While the *Annoying Behavior Book* helped, I still wondered if there was a tool that could facilitate the use of the problem-solving steps among students. Understanding

Open Circle Problem-Solving Steps:

- 1) Calm down
- 2) Identify the problem
- 3) Decide on a positive goal
- 4) Think of several solutions
- 5) Evaluate the solutions
- 6) Make a plan and try it

that six steps are a lot for second graders to follow independently when faced with a problem, I developed the *Problem Solver Sheet* and introduced it to the class in Open Circle. The sheet guides students through the problem solving process by asking them questions about each step like, “Have you calmed down?” and, “What is the problem?”

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The Problem Solver Sheet

Have you calmed down? yes no
(if no, practice calm breathing to help cool down)

What is the problem? How are you feeling?

I feel _____

because _____

What is your goal? _____

What have you tried and what happened?

What are 2 other solutions you could try?

1. _____

2. _____

Which one will you try next? #1 #2

Do you have a plan now?

When? _____

Problem Solvers: _____

Date: _____



OPEN CIRCLE LITERATURE CONNECTIONS UPDATE: Literature that Highlights Dimensions of Difference and Similarity

By Peg Sawyer

An important step in building positive relationships at school is to recognize and respect differences in others. The following books describe characters who appreciate cultural or physical differences and develop friendships built on valuing their differences as well as their common values and experiences.



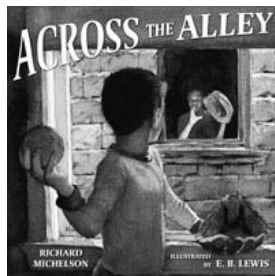
Maggie's Amerikay
by Barbara Timberlake Russell
(picture book, 40 pages)
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.
Grades 3-5
Open Circle

Themes: Recognizing Differences, Including One Another, Recognizing Discrimination, Speaking Up, Positive Self-Talk

In 1898, members of different cultural groups merged in New Orleans, Louisiana, hoping to find freedom and opportunity. In this setting, Maggie McCrary, daughter of Irish immigrants, encounters Nathan, a young African-American boy who loves to play music. Their friendship grows, but only after they overcome mutual distrust passed on to them by their families. Nathan and Maggie's friendship deepens as they learn about challenges and hopes for the future that they and their families have in common.

(Readers might want to make connections between *Maggie's Amerikay* and *Mrs. Katz and Tush*, by Patricia Polacco.)

Across the Alley
by Richard Michelson
(picture book, 32 pages)
Putnam Juvenile Books, 2006. Grades 1-3
Open Circle Themes:



Recognizing Differences, Including One Another, Recognizing Discrimination

Even though Willie and Abe are pals who live in adjacent apartment buildings, they must keep their friendship a secret. Because of negative attitudes among different racial and cultural backgrounds in the mid-1940's, Willie, who is African-American, and Abe, who is Jewish, are only able to stealthily talk to each other at night through their bedroom windows across the alley. They spend their evenings sharing stories and teaching each other their special skills: Willie teaches Abe to pitch a baseball, and Abe teaches Willie to play the violin. Eventually, the boys' family members let go of deep-rooted prejudice and support their children's unique talents, as well as their friendship.

Rules
by Cynthia Lord
(fiction, 208 pages)
Scholastic Inc., 2006. (Newbery Honor Book)
Grades 4-5
Open Circle
Themes: Speaking Up, Recognizing Differences, Group Membership, Dealing with Teasing, Leadership, Nonverbal Communication



One of the ways that Catherine tries to help her younger brother, who has autism, is to remind him of important social rules such as "Say 'thank you' when someone gives you a present." Catherine often feels torn between her brother's world and the world of her peers. As much as she loves her brother, Catherine worries that David's differences will make her friends uncomfortable when they are around him. Life takes a dramatic turn when Catherine befriends Jason, who is confined

to a wheelchair and communicates through picture cards. As her relationship with Jason becomes more important to her, Catherine finds a way to merge her two worlds with confidence and courage.

The Year of the Dog
by Grace Lin
(fiction, 134 pages)
Little, Brown and Company, 2006.
Grades 3-5
Open Circle
Themes: Recognizing Differences, Group Membership, Positive Self-Talk, Problem Solving, What Students Have in Common



Pacy is like most elementary school students her age; among other characteristics, she hopes for a good grade on her science project and she wonders what the school cafeteria will offer for lunch. However, unlike most of her classmates, she is only one of three students of Asian descent at the school. As she celebrates the Chinese New Year with her Taiwanese-American family, she learns that "The Year of the Dog" means finding both true friendship and one's true role in life. She decides to focus on both goals during the year. From that point on, all of her actions, whether she is trying out for a role in the school play or helping her family prepare for an Asian Red Egg party to celebrate the birth of a new baby, Pacy moves between two cultures with a respect for the traditions of both. Author Grace Lin states that she wrote this book because "it was the book I wished I had had when I was growing up - a book that had me in it." Lin wrote the *The Year of the Dog* because she wanted children to have a book that addresses differences in a real and upbeat way.

The McAvinnue School

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With funding secured, the Open Circle Committee moved to train the entire school staff in Open Circle as quickly as possible. Seventeen classroom teachers, two administrators, and eight specialists were trained in the first year. The initial three-year budget even anticipated the need to train teachers who would be hired in the future. By the end of the third year, all school staff had been trained, including specialists, paraprofessionals, secretaries, and custodians. In addition, three teachers were trained to be Open Circle peer consultants for the school, a step designed to help ensure ongoing in-house leadership.

The school recently took a significant step to sustain Open Circle at the school. Five staff members with a variety of roles formed a Open Circle “Sustainability Team” and participated in Open Circle’s year-long Sustainability Program. Funded by the



The members of McAvinnue’s Sustainability Team bring a broad range of skills and perspectives to their work.

DuBarry Foundation, this program aims to strengthen the school’s commitment to social and emotional learning and integrate the program into the fabric of the school. The Sustainability Team at the McAvinnue School is driving this effort and is reaching out to the whole school community for input and involvement. The Team stays connected to the entire staff through the Open Circle Committee, which is currently comprised of twenty teachers, specialists, and paraprofessionals.

The members of McAvinnue’s Sustainability Team bring a broad range of skills and perspectives to their work. Team leader Janet Koza, the music teacher, integrates Open Circle into her work with all the students in the school. As a social worker, Arlene DeLaLuz’s role includes a strong focus on the social and emotional well-being of all students, and especially those with special social and emotional needs. She also works diligently to promote parental involvement in all aspects of the school, including Open Circle. Cari-Ann Edwards, Grade 1, and Melissa Burns, Grade 3, bring the grade-level teachers’ needs, concerns, and perspectives to the Team. Ana Vasconcelos, Assistant Principal, provides the administrator’s viewpoint and works to incorporate Open Circle’s vocabulary and problem-solving process into the McAvinnue School’s school-wide discipline plan.

When we spoke to the various members of the Sustainability Team, each of them highlighted a different aspect of the social and emotional learning initiative. Janet loves the fact that there is common vocabulary among children and staff, particularly because as a specialist, she

sees all the children in the school. She can ask with confidence, “Is that a Double D behavior?” or say, “I need the School Listening Look,” and know that everyone gets the message.

Both Kelly and Ana see Open Circle helping improve how teachers and students interact. One dramatic change is the 50% reduction in suspensions at the school. Kelly and Ana have seen that Open Circle sets a tone and expectation

for respectful conversations, which is especially useful when problems arise. Both administrators display Open Circle posters in their offices to help children and adults

“The Open Circle curriculum makes my job easier. Many of the concepts and skills are things I have been trying to teach all along. When I first opened the curriculum notebook, I thought, ‘Oh! Someone is going to help me out!’”

remember such Open Circle strategies as the problem-solving steps, or words to use when dealing with annoying behavior.

Arlene comments, “The Open Circle curriculum makes my job easier. Many of the concepts and skills are things I have been trying to teach all along. When I first opened the curriculum notebook, I thought, ‘Oh! Someone is going to help me out!’”

“Open Circle gives students a point of reference,” notes Arlene. “Does it eliminate what is happening outside? No. Does it help them become less vulnerable, more resilient? Yes. Twelve years ago, we were having different types of crises. Things are much better now. Children still get upset, but now they have more

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Open Circle Newsline

Open Circle Newsline is published by the Open Circle Program, Wellesley Centers for Women, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA. We welcome contributions of articles and photographs for this newsletter from teachers, students, parents and others in the school community.

Open Circle works with school communities to help children become ethical people, contributing citizens and successful learners. By helping schools implement the unique *Open Circle Curriculum* and approach, we foster the development of relationships that support safe, caring and respectful learning communities of children and adults.

For information about the *Open Circle Curriculum* or training for teachers, administrators, specialists, other school staff and parents, visit www.open-circle.org or call 781-283-2847.

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McAvinnue School

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strategies. Their way of reacting is much better and they can talk about their feelings. They will ask to go downstairs to talk to somebody. They come into my office all excited, announcing that they have a problem that needs to be solved.”

The McAvinnue School’s inclusive philosophy extends to the students’ role as respected members of the school community. McAvinnue believes that the children should feel ownership of the school. In that spirit, students conduct the morning announcements and run weekly all-school assemblies that incorporate Open Circle concepts. Students decide on the agenda and the content of the assemblies.

The Open Circle culture extends into the adult community at the school as well. The McAvinnue staff meetings are held in the Open Circle format; as many as 50 chairs are gathered to form a circle and each meeting starts with “Rainstorm” or another community-building activity. “If you don’t live it, it’s hard to teach it,” comments Kelly.

Arlene believes that including parents in the Open Circle Program helps families feel connected to the goals and expectations of the social competency program. To that end, Arlene has led five

Open Circle parent workshops in both Spanish and English. Through these presentations, parents discover how Open Circle can add important parenting tools and strategies to the ones they already have.

Building relationships based on trust with all members of the McAvinnue community, including parents and caregivers, teachers, staff, and students, is the key. “We believe you care about your children . . . we care, too,” says Arlene. “We’re on the same side.” As parents see their children succeed in social competence and academics, their confidence and trust in the school grows.

Janet sums up the school’s involvement with Open Circle this way: “Open Circle promotes acceptance and inclusiveness, just the way a music class can give all students an opportunity to feel that they fit in. I always say to the students: When you perform a piece of music well, it is not just because of each musician’s skill level, but rather how well they worked together. As a drummer, if you pound the drum as loudly as you can, you won’t hear anyone else. In making music together, you have to listen to the others and make your part work with the other members of the group. Open Circle is like a music class — when it works well, it is beautiful.”

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Problem Solving

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In this way, students are guided through the steps toward a plan while they alert me to the problem in writing. Over the course of two months, ten students used the *Problem Solver Sheet*. When I checked in on each situation afterwards, I was delighted to find that all the problems had been resolved without my help.

As the year progressed, we continued to practice the problem-solving steps and the children became even more independent and proficient in using them. Still, I was curious to see if they had noticed a change in their own ability to solve problems. Therefore, at the beginning of June, I asked each of my students to complete a self-evaluation about the work we had done with problem-solving. As a whole, the students’

responses reflected my feelings about our progress this year: 18 out of 19 students said they believed they had become better problem-solvers over the year. In response to a question about whether they regularly used the problem-solving steps when faced with a problem, the class was evenly divided. Some of the students who answered “yes” explained that they used the steps because “they are easy, simple steps,” “it will calm you down,” and “because every time I do it, it always works.” The students who said they did not use the steps explained why with one of two reasons: “I never think of it,” or “I don’t have any problems.” In response to another question, the majority of students (15 of 19) answered that they thought the *Problem Solver Sheet* was helpful in solving problems because, “It makes problem solving easy,” or “They ask you

questions that can help you solve your problem.”

I was pleased with the results of my class’s work on independent problem-solving, and very much enjoyed the experience of doing a teacher research project. The process of teacher research gave me a chance to reflect more than I usually do on a specific aspect of my own teaching and on the decisions I make in my classroom. As a result, I became better at empowering children to solve many of their own problems. This year I have a new class of students, and the familiar calls of “He took my marker,” and “They keep bugging me,” can be heard in my room. I am currently in the process of teaching the problem-solving steps to this class, and am excited to see what they have to teach me about how to empower them become independent problem-solvers.

2007- 2008 Open Circle Registration in Process

In early April, we mailed out registration materials for 2007-2008 Open Circle teacher training. If your school has not received a registration packet, please contact Heather Gallant at 781-283-2847 or info@open-circle.org and she will mail one to you. We have also posted registration materials on our website at www.open-circle.org. Registrations must be received by May 18, 2007, to receive training session assignment by mail in June. Registrations for any remaining slots received after May 18 for summer sessions must include a valid home address for confirmation.

Moving?

Have you moved?

Changed schools?

Have a new phone number

or email address?

Contact us!

These updates are crucial to keep you informed of Open Circle events and announcements.

Please send updates to Heather Gallant at 781-283-2847 or info@open-circle.org.

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