

Employing NSRF Protocols in the Classroom to Teach Mindfulness Training and Conflict Resolution

By Kathy Boone, CFG Coach in Indiana, kathylboone@hotmail.com

Editor's Note: This article is one excerpt from a longer article about a major life-skills curriculum revision due to a particularly challenging year in a 5th-6th grade classroom. Another excerpt will be printed in the March issue of Connections.

Starting at the beginning of this academic year, our class learned to engage in mindful breathing and meditation practice throughout the school day as a stress reduction practice. Last year was particularly challenging, and since half the class returned (last year's fifth graders returning as sixth graders), we knew upfront that a classwide effort would be helpful. Of course, some days 5th & 6th graders can keep it together only a short time; however, they now appear to enjoy mindful breathing and simple meditation, and some kids even practice at home. Mindfulness training and conflict resolution provide practical strategies for all of us to use personally and with each other as we improve the classroom atmosphere. Early in the semester, we began conflict resolution training, as well.

Given that Harmony School and the National School Reform Faculty share space as divisions within Harmony Education Center, we had easy access to the mentorship of former Harmony teacher and current NSRF Director, Michele Mattoon. Last spring, when we presented her with our dilemma (lack of engagement in an apparently tired conflict resolution curriculum), she enthusiastically agreed to author a new one using NSRF protocols. She also offered to teach the new curriculum this fall, modeling the protocols so that we could

employ them in the classroom later in a wider variety of contexts.

Michele captured the students' attention using a [MicroLab](#). The first question asked students to define the meaning of conflict; the second, to discuss best and worst ways to handle conflict. The third question was my favorite, "What would have to change in your life so you could have a closer match between what you believe about the best ways to handle conflict and how you actually do handle conflict?"

I like that this protocol allows us to practice deep listening. It felt much more engaging than traditional lecture-based teaching and we seemed to arrive at deeper meaning than our typical group discussions. Students did not display nearly the restlessness in chairs and appeared more physically comfortable as they didn't sit in one place too long. Honestly, some of the students have independently connected to that last question in their goal-setting well after the class was over. One student told me later, "People have been telling me I have anger, so I'm going to write about that because I want to know what I have to change to have less anger." Debriefing at the end of this protocol serves an important purpose in practicing reflection and self-assessment.

The second seminar focused on feelings, beginning with a pair-share on mediation, negotiation, and how they relate to conflict. Pair-sharing definitely set the stage for more hands to go up during the whole group discussion that followed, so we've been starting more of our large



Kathy Boone has been a teacher at Harmony School in Bloomington, IN, for nearly 20 years, with most of her time in this 5th-6th grade classroom. Using NSRF protocols and activities enriches her and her students' learning every year. She says she appreciates working within a multiage classroom within this preK-12 school because it allows her and her co-teachers the opportunity to be "the first level of trusted adults" beyond a student's family, and she honors those deep connections.

Kathy invites your questions or comments at kathylboone@hotmail.com

group discussion with pair-share in other classes. **Block Party** was perhaps the most popular protocol among our group of kids. The first time, however, our energetic group benefited from clear reminders that “this wasn’t a 5th & 6th grade mosh pit.” I also recommend keeping a watchful eye on the body language of some of your more sensitive individuals and those who struggle with social cues. Once they have the experience under their belt, future **Block Party** experiences go without a hitch, so I really encourage you to try it.

We did have one student who clearly felt unsafe during this protocol. This turned out to be a positive learning experience for all, because it cued a conversation about how the student felt, what their needs were, and provided a context to develop self-advocacy strategies. The student in question has agreed to try this protocol again sometime and self-advocate if it doesn’t feel comfortable. Overall, though, the **Block Party** was popular among the kids. After all, learning is inherently social, and this technique satisfies social needs in the young and appears to make learning fun. As a language arts and social studies teacher, I see **Block Party** as very versatile in that it’s a fun and accessible way to make meaning out of virtually any short text.

In the third seminar, our students shared their feelings more deeply. As a NSRF-certified CFG coach, I have used protocols with this class before, so our kids were already familiar with **Chalk Talk**. Michele revealed the question, “What makes you angry?” Our students seemed very forthright with their responses, and since they were familiar with the protocol, they often branched off of others’ ideas more than they did the first several times we used **Chalk Talk** in other contexts.

Given the primary objective of our semester-long integrated theme was developing strategies for life skills, Michele used a modified **Affinity Map** and asked us to write Post It notes about what calms us down when we are angry. She posted three chart papers labeled “Distract,” “Remove,” and “Relax,” and invited the class to silently organize everyone’s Post-It Notes accordingly.



Sharing strategies for owning our anger and calming down gifted us with each other’s various methods so we could adopt them for ourselves. **Affinity Mapping** is very effective in helping develop life skills strategies: categorizing invoked higher order thinking skills and deepened their ability to access those strategies when their rational thinking brain shuts down due to anger. We observed that the more sensitive and neurologically diverse students who shied away from the more social protocols were particularly engaged in **Affinity Mapping**. I’m now inspired to try this protocol in other classroom contexts.

Of course, active listening plays an integral role in conflict resolution, and I would suggest that both Michele’s conflict resolution curriculum and the NSRF protocols practice in vital active listening will clearly help our students learn and have healthier relationships.

We never go a year without conflict resolution training. It’s an essential part of our curriculum. We believe we’ve better met the unique emergent needs of the new generation by using NSRF protocols and Michele’s curriculum. Eventually we’ll adapt it and make it more our own, but for now we are basking in the sunshine of far more healthy relationships and a kinder and more compassionate classroom community.

Look for part two of Kathy's article in the March issue of Connections.