

## All My Life's a Circle

*He aha te mea nui i tenei ao  
maku e ki atu  
He tangata! He tangata! He tangata!*

*Ask me what is most important in this world  
Let me tell you.  
It is people! It is people! It is people!  
Maori Proverb*

Schools that model and reflect the values of including all their students are those that are systematically building connections between the school and the school community participants. Building such community connections are essential in order to foster a sense of belonging to the school community (O'Brien & Mount, 1991, Strully & Strully, 1985). These community connections and friendships are critical for many reasons. In order to avoid loneliness; in order to develop social, communicative, and even cognitive skills; in order to feel like a valued member of the community; and in order to develop the support needed to co-exist in a community are just a few of the reasons for building community connections and friendships (Stainback & Stainback, 1990; and Stainback, Stainback, & Wilkinson, 1992).

One of the key characteristics of building connections and friendships is that people have close proximity and frequent opportunities to interact with each other (Asher, Odem, & Gottman, 1977; Hartup, 1975; Howes, 1983; Lewis & Rosenblum, 1975). This research has demonstrated that in order for children and adults to form the necessary bonds for friendships, they must have frequent access to one another. This access is facilitated when students are regularly in close proximity to one another. So it follows that students who attend the same school as the other students who live in their neighborhood are more likely to form bonds that are strong enough to result in friendship (Grenot-Scheyer, Coots, & Falvey, 1989).

Traditionally, special educators have been training and teaching students to be independent. Recently, emphasis has been placed on Interdependence (O'Brien & Mount 1991; Condeluci, 1991). Interdependence is the ability to connect with individuals within one's own community and develop a network of supports to assist in accomplishing life goals.

*The real voyage of  
discovery consists  
not in seeking  
new landscapes  
but in having  
new eyes.*

*Marcel Proust*

There are too many unhappy, unloving, untrusting, and just mediocre schools. These schools do not teach nor do they emulate such principles as love, passion, openness and the love for learning. The academic subjects are important only if they are used to teach these principles, as illustrated in a very powerful way by Ginott (1972) in his **Letter to Teachers:**

**Dear Teacher,**

**I am a survivor of a concentration camp.  
My eyes saw what no man  
should witness.**

**Gas chambers built by  
learned engineers.  
Children poisoned by  
educated physicians.  
Infants killed by trained nurses.  
Women & babies shot & burned  
by high school &  
college graduates.**

**So I am suspicious of education.**

**My request is that teachers help  
students become human.  
Your efforts must never produce  
learned monsters,  
skilled psychopaths,  
educated Eichmanns.**

**Reading, writing, arithmetic are important  
only  
if they serve to make our children  
more human.**

Teachers burn out in schools and classrooms that are teaching basic core academic skills out of the context of teaching values. Schools must be places where students are taught such skills as creating a just community and society, and caring for and helping one another.

## **Louise and Her Friends**

For five years, a group of teenagers fought a high school district in a western state who refused to allow one of their peers, Louise, to enter or attend the same high school as the rest of them. The high school district claimed that because of her diabetes and other severe cognitive and physical disability labels, she had to attend a special education segregated class in a different high school. Since Louise was in seventh grade, she had attended the same school and classes as her peers.

When the high school district forced Louise to attend a different high school her friends were outraged. They had learned about the United States Constitution in their eighth grade Civics class, and felt that by denying Louise access to her neighborhood high school, her rights and their rights were being violated. They launched a campaign seeking support from advocates and their community. Their plight and their struggle were frequently written about in the newspaper; they appeared on local television news programs; and they presented to local governmental and advocacy groups, including the local city council and the board of education. In addition, they wrote and performed a "rap" song entitled "Friends" which tells their story, what they wanted and why. In April, 1993, the students' struggle was over, the school district reversed its decision and granted Louise the opportunity to attend the same school and classes as her peers and friends. What is so compelling about this true story, is that the students, Louise and her circle of friends, formed their relationship and subsequent friendships based upon their opportunity to go to school and classes together while in junior high school. There were no adults who told the students to care about Louise because she was "special", or to treat her different because she had diabetes and/or severe disability labels. Going to school and classes together gave these students the opportunity to know each other and become friends, they just wanted that opportunity back.

*Whatever you can do  
or dream...  
Begin it.  
Boldness has  
the power  
and magic in it.  
Goethe*

What this true story dramatizes is the need that children naturally feel to develop friendships. This natural phenomenon would continue if policy makers and educators just gave all students a chance. Unfortunately, frequent opportunities and close proximity are not always enough in order for children and adolescents to feel connected and build a network of friends. Several tools have been used to successfully facilitate such connections and eventual friendships. These tools are designed to tap into the creative energy of students and educators. The Circle of Friends is the foundation, followed by Making Action Plans (MAPs) and then Planning Alternatives Tomorrows with Hope (PATH). All three of these tools are person centered and assume the capacity theory where everyone is valued. They are based on hope for the future and begin with the assumptions that all people belong, all can learn, we are better off together, and diversity is one of our most critical strengths. These tools, Circles of Friends, MAPs, and PATH will be described in detail in the remainder of this booklet.

## **CIRCLE OF SUPPORT (FRIENDS)**

A circle of friends is something that many of us take for granted unless we do not have one. A circle of friends provides us with a network of support of family and friends. A circle of friends is available when one needs someone to listen, to give loving advice, and to provide support when it is needed (Perske, 1989). In the absence of a naturally formed circle of friends, educators can facilitate a circle process, which can be used to enlist the involvement and commitment of peers around an individual student. For a student who is not well connected or does not have an extensive network of friends, the circle of friends process can be useful.

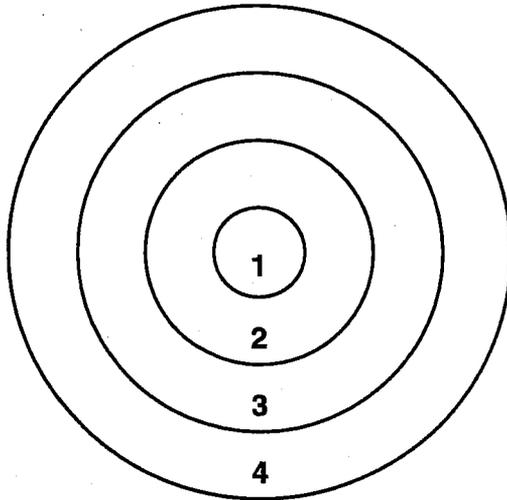
*Friends do not live  
in harmony merely,  
but in melody.*

*Thoreau*

A circle of friends involves gathering together a group of students for the purpose of discovering their own networks and then reflecting on each others circles (Sherwood, 1990). Figure 1 provides a list of the steps involved in conducting a circle of friends process.

Often adults prefer to call this tool the circle of support, but children and teenagers we have talked to clearly have told us they like the term Circle of Friends.

## CIRCLE OF SUPPORT (FRIENDS)



First Circle: **Circle of INTIMACY**

Second Circle: **Circle of FRIENDSHIP**

Third Circle: **Circle of PARTICIPATION**

Fourth Circle: **Circle of EXCHANGE**

**Fill Circles from the Outside-In!**

This exercise is a social scan. It will give a quick picture of who is in your life. It is very useful to gain clarity about who might be involved in certain activities, or circles that need to be filled. We recommend it personally and consider it an essential preventive health check for students, teachers and citizens. The hidden key question is: "Who loves this person?"

### **Instructions:**

- Draw four concentric circles.
- Put yourself in the middle then take a few minutes to fill in the people in each of your four circles.

- **FIRST Circle: The Circle of INTIMACY**

List the people most intimate in your life – those you cannot imagine living without.

- **SECOND Circle: The Circle of FRIENDSHIP**

List good friends – those who almost made the first circle.

- **THIRD Circle: The Circle of PARTICIPATION**

List people, organizations, networks you are involved with (work colleagues, the choir, the square dance club, your soft ball team, etc. – people/groups you participate in.

- **FOURTH Circle: The Circle of EXCHANGE**

List people you PAY to provide services in your life. (medical professionals, tax accountants, mechanics, hair dressers, barbers, teachers, etc.)

Note: People can be in more than one circle. Example: your doctor or teacher could also be a very close friend; a deceased parent/friend or even a pet, might be an intimate personal supporter, etc.

To illustrate, a high school teacher's experience using a circle of friends process will be described. This teacher decided to avoid burning out and wanted to inject life back into her students, herself, and the school. She knew she could not change everything, but she could make some changes for at least a few of her students who had been labeled "at risk", severely disabled and who were on the verge of dropping out of school. Her goal was to restore hope, and build relationships with other students.

**Circle 1:  
The Circle  
of Intimacy**

The teacher gathered about 50 students together and told them she wanted to have a frank discussion about friends and how to build more solid relationships in the school. She did not single out any individual, but talked in general for about half an hour about her own vision and beliefs in relationships and friendship as the core of a good school. She played music softly in the background and drew colorful images as she spoke. She then drew four concentric circles on the chalk board. She gave each student a sheet of paper that also had four concentric circles and requested that they put their name in the center of the inner circle. She modeled this by putting her name in the center of her circle. Then she directed them to write, on the first and smallest circle, the names of all the people closest to their heart and those that would make them miserable if they were no longer in their lives. She gave an example of her own life by putting her husband, her mother, her two children, and for fun her computer as she was an avid computer fan. She also put in the spirit of a friend of hers who had died two years prior.

**Circle 2:  
The Circle  
of Friendship**

Then she explained that the second circle was for people who were friends but not as close as those identified in the first circle. Again, she modeled this by using examples from her own life, she had six friends that she called all the time and two others who she saw once year but who called frequently. She also included some family members, a few teachers that she worked with, and her cat. She then asked the students to fill in their second circle, and found that the classroom was very quiet and that the students were taking this activity very seriously.

**Circle 3:  
The Circle  
of Participation**

The teacher explained that the third circle was for individuals or groups of people who they really liked but who were not very close. She modeled by identifying teachers at the high school, members of the church choir where she sings, her tennis partners, and members of her exercise class. She also listed individuals she sees occasionally, but who come and go, and three relatives she likes but seldom sees.

**Circle 4:  
The Circle  
of Exchange**

After the students had completed their third circle, she explained that the fourth circle was for people who are paid to be in their lives, such as teachers and doctors. She identified her doctor, chiropractor, and housekeeper as those people who were paid to be in her life. The students followed by identifying those people in their lives who were paid to be there. The circles were now complete.

The teacher told the students that she could tell a lot about a person by looking at their completed circles. She asked for a student to volunteer to share their completed circles. She held up the completed circles of the student who volunteered and read the names of the people in each circle. See Figure 2 for actual completed set of circles of a student who has a high quality of life experiences and opportunities. She stated that she had a full life, but not perfect. Then she showed the students, Jane, a completed set of circles that reflected a student who had disability and "at risk" labels and asked them to describe how they would feel if those were their circles. See Figure 3 for a completed set of circles reflecting students with disabilities and "at risk" labels. The most frequent response was that "the only people who are involved in this student's life were her family and those people who were paid to be there".

In addition the students also responded with the following descriptors:

**How would you feel if you had no friends?**

<i>lonely</i>	<i>depressed</i>
<i>confused</i>	<i>unwanted</i>
<i>upset</i>	<i>isolated</i>
<i>rejected</i>	<i>horrible</i>
<i>isolated</i>	<i>humorless</i>
<i>distraught</i>	<i>frustrated</i>
<i>suicidal</i>	

Then she asked the students to identify what they would do if this were representative of their life, and their responses were:

*Grief can take  
care of itself,  
but to get  
the full value  
of joy  
you must have  
somebody to  
divide it with.*

*Mark Twain*

**What would you do if you had no friends?**

*commit suicide*

*die*

*try to make friends*

*move to a deserted island*

*do something really drastic*

*stay in bed*

*get a tutor*

*kick*

*have a baby*

*take drugs*

*drink*

*kill someone*

A passionate discussion poured out of the students. They began talking about all the pressures they feel from their families, the school, their teachers, and society in general. They identified that they felt "pressure" as they put it, "to look good, to do well and to achieve a lot." They felt the general attitude of teachers was that if they could not make it to university they were a total failure. The teacher listened and contributed to the discussion. She explained that she started the discussion to see how many students would be interested in helping her figure out how to fill in the circles of those students who were isolated and without friends.

**For Friends  
and Intimacy:  
Build  
from the  
Outside In**

She explained that her strategy would be to fill in circles from the outside circle inward. For example, if Jane were lonely, we would start by getting Jane involved in groups and organizations in order to gradually find people who would be more interested in more personal commitments. She explained that she was not asking "Who wants to be Jane's friend?" which is a question searching for failure. Rather, she would ask "Who knows Jane and is willing to brainstorm with me ideas for getting Jane more involved?". For example, if Jane likes films, maybe we could identify someone who could invite her to the film club.

The teacher asked the students if there was anyone who wanted to carry on this discussion and help to figure out ways to build community and circles in their school. To her surprise, all but three students signed up and said they wanted to meet again and often.

Circle of Friends is not a trick or a gimmick, it is a powerful tool. Like a chisel, it can be used to pry open ones heart, soul, and thoughts; or to create a work of art. A work of art does not happen overnight; neither does building circles or communities. Circles and community building is a commitment. It is as important as math, physics, or history. It is part of a curriculum of caring. It is holistic, powerful and not a thing you do once, then walk away. It is an ongoing strategy for growth, change, and development. A young man named Tracy, learned to read and write at the age of 33, after years believing he was "learning disabled" and a "retard". As an adult he spent time at a high school that was implementing circles and including all students in general education. He wondered what would have happened if someone would have gently and slowly helped him to build circles of friends and understand the difference between a drug pusher and a friend, a "gang" and a group of friends.

After hearing about and observing "circles" in action, he wrote the following powerful poem describing how circles are helping teachers and students not to pass each other without stopping, listening, and really seeing. This poem reflects the needs to be connected.

**Don't Pass Me By**

by Tracy LeQuere

I'm a man at thirty-three  
Who just learned to read,

I was here all the time  
But people passed me by

One day a woman said  
    I will show you a lie.  
I know you can read with  
    a little time.

But people just passed me by

So I gave me a little time,  
And I gave her a little time.

See this writing,  
I will have more time.

Don't pass me by.

# MEN SCHOOL STUDENTS Circle of Friends

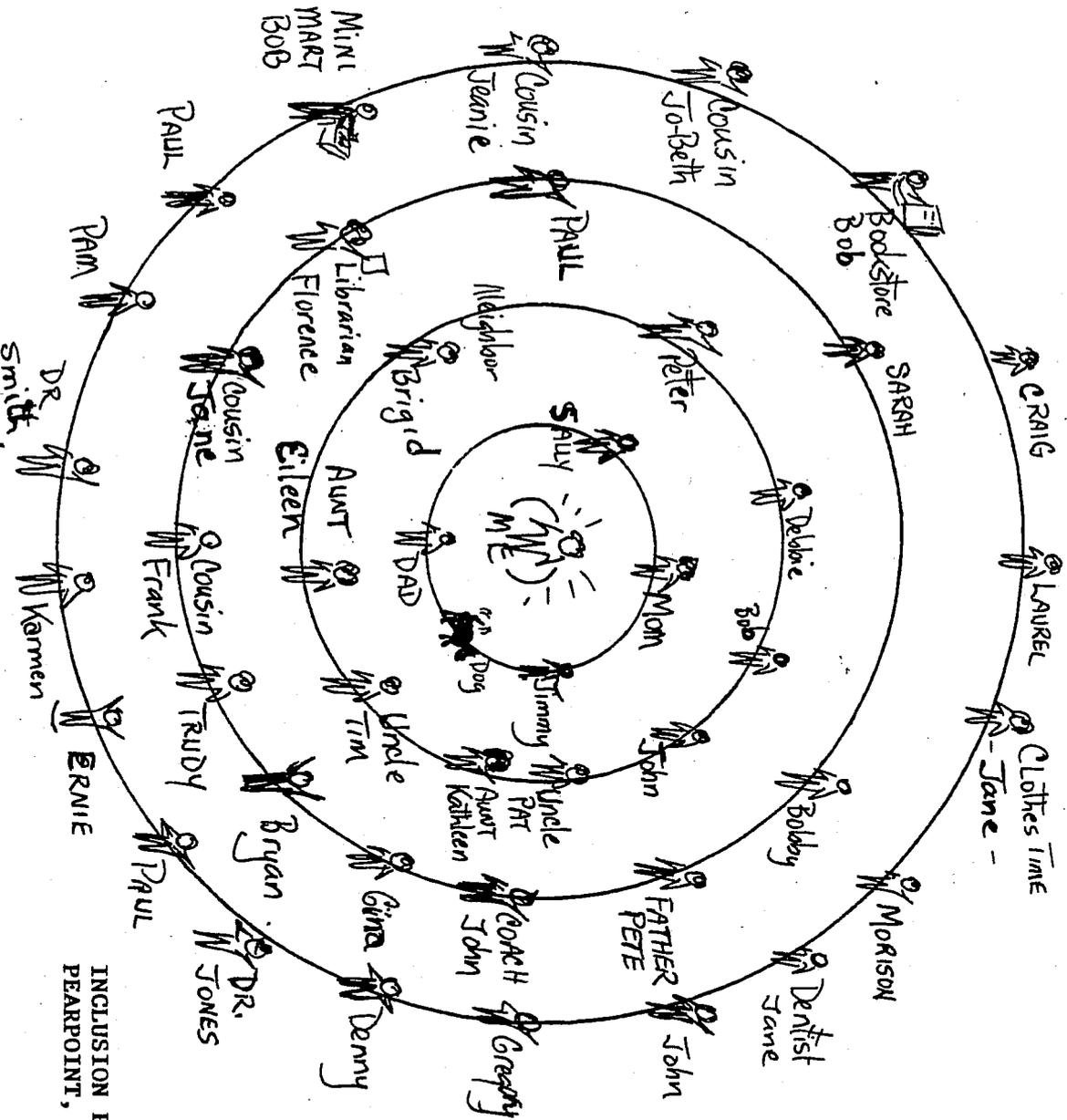
## FIGURE 2

CIRCLE ONE  
- INTIMACY -

CIRCLE TWO  
- FRIENDSHIP -

CIRCLE THREE  
- PARTICIPATION -

CIRCLE FOUR  
- EXPERIENCES -



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# PERSON with "at risk" label

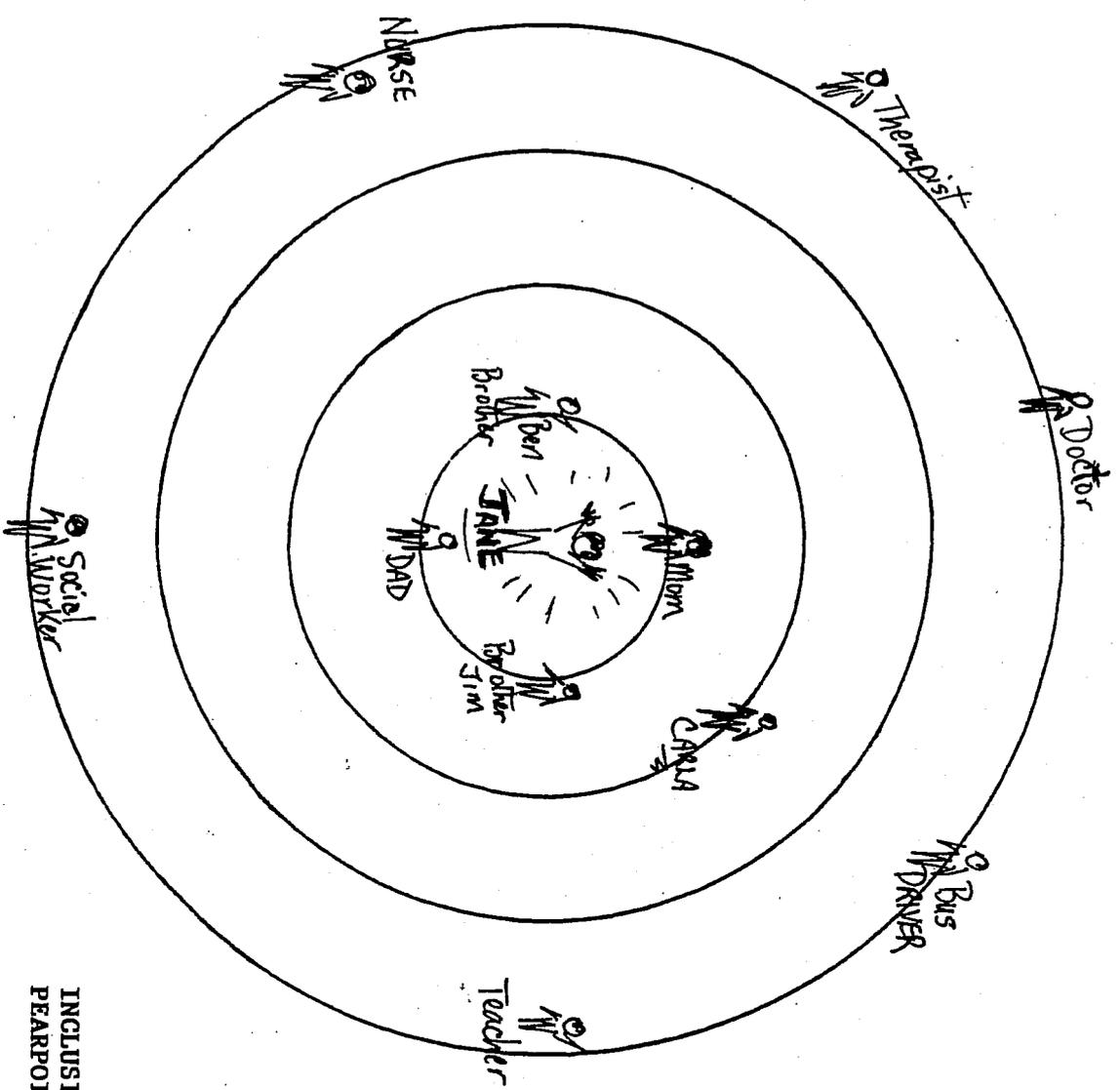
# FIGURE 3.3

# PERSON with "at risk" label

## Circle of Friends



Figure 3.3



CIRCLE ONE  
- WITNESSES -

CIRCLE TWO  
- FRIENDSHIP -

CIRCLE THREE  
- PARTICIPATION -

CIRCLE FOUR  
- EXCHANGE -