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# Presidential Fellow: Progress at MARC: Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State College

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# Presidential Fellow

## Progress at MARC: The Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State College

by Elizabeth Englander



At two o'clock, on a cold February afternoon in 1996, a fourteen year old boy walked into his Washington Junior High School and behaved in a way that his teacher could never have anticipated. Armed with two guns, he shot and killed two of his classmates and his teacher. Had that teacher had the right kind of professional training, she might have been able to recognize the student's emotional and behavioral problems, and might also have been able to intervene earlier. Eight years later, the United States is reeling from a series of school shootings and requiring teachers, more than ever, to understand and intervene with students who have behavioral problems leading to violence.

K-12 educators today know that their job is not what it was two decades ago. For example, what should a fourth grade teacher do if she or he discovers that one of the students in the class has been extorting money from another student, threatening the victim with a beating if the money is not paid every week? Despite their hunger for training in behavioral problems and aggression, most teacher-training institutions, including Bridgewater State College, do not offer systematic education about childhood aggression. This remains true despite a renewed emphasis on researching the causes of childhood aggression among higher education faculty and other researchers. Psychology programs often offer elective courses focusing on this topic, and my own book, *Understanding Violence*, focuses entirely on a review of the vast array of experimental studies examining the causes and contributing factors to such behavior. However, many K-12 educators leave their training with little understanding about this topic, despite their desire to know more. During their professional lives, little knowledge filters down from the scientific journals in which most researchers publish such information.

My awareness of the extent of this problem is the direct result of the response I received to my book on violence. It clarified for me the education profession's lack of understanding of the causes of violence in children. For the last few years, much of my professional effort has been aimed at increasing the access K-12 educators have to expertise I have in this area.

In September 2003, I formed a group of concerned experts which was known as the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Partnership (MARP). The partners in this group were myself, other BSC faculty, experts in law and sociology, entertainers focusing on children's aggression, and educational group Facing History & Ourselves. MARP gave a Conference, here at BSC, in January 2004. This conference, which was essentially the kickoff for the group, was successful in tapping into an area of great need. Its coverage by the *Boston Globe* and other local papers and drew a large response, and we were ultimately filled up and obliged to turn away interested potential attendees. During the conference, breakaway sessions were designed specifically to cater to different educators' needs (e.g., some breakaway sessions were appropriate for K-3 educators, others for high school educators). We conducted outcomes assessment for research purposes. This data is awaiting analysis now and will be used to mold future workshops and conferences.

In March of 2004 I proposed to the President of Bridgewater State College, Dr. Dana Mohler-Faria, a year-long project aimed at setting in place a new BSC Center, the logical outgrowth of that Partnership, which would focus on a broad array of knowledge that could be successfully communicated to K-12 educators in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. I was thrilled to be awarded this first Presidential Fellowship. The Fellowship was created by Dr. Mohler-Faria to free a faculty member from all teaching responsibilities to pursue a project of value to the campus, in the form of a major research, scholarship or service project. The new Center I proposed was to include collaborations both within campus and with external partners (the Attorney General and the Plymouth County District Attorney), student research opportunities, mechanisms to attract external funding, and significant service to education in Massachusetts.



The Presidential Fellowship has allowed me to make great progress in establishing the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center (MARC) here at Bridgewater State College. It is designed to bring high-quality, low cost services to K–12 education in the area of understanding, coping with and preventing childhood aggression, bullying and violence. In that effort, a multitude of services have been developed within MARC. The Center has already hosted six conferences here at BSC on a variety of topics about children and violence. There is a MARC Anti-Bullying Program for K–12 schools—arguably our most popular program. It works intensively with children, teachers, administrators, and parents to begin to change school climates so bullying is no longer considered a high-status, desirable behavior. The program has age-appropriate curriculum, hands-on situation-centered faculty training and concrete suggestions for administration and policy so they can cope effectively with aggressive behavior by children in their schools. MARC, a training Center, has a strong focus on training BSC students to work as facilitators so they can teach adolescent students how to begin to think about their school climate, and how to begin to plan to change it. A major goal of MARC is to teach younger children to be conscious of bullying behaviors, and to empower older children to begin to address this problem among themselves.

The Student Associates and Facilitators are a critical part of our collaborations with schools. For example, three undergraduate facilitators recently worked with a group of students in a Middle School in southeastern Massachusetts. The group learned to identify bullying and harassment behaviors which they felt were objectionable. They discussed how they should take responsibility for starting to change the climate in their school, and they began to plan student-led programs which might reduce the bullying they saw on a daily basis. One such program was a Lunchtime Program, where 8th-graders would be trained to visit several lunch tables during each lunchtime to help guide the conversations to reduce bullying and abuse, and to help other students recognize the destructiveness of this behavior. This is a student-initiated, student-conceived, and student-led program, brought about through the facilitation and modeling offered by the students' older, collegiate peers.

Another example of how expertise from MARC has been employed during the initial year of its existence took place in an elementary school in Walpole. In that school it had long been the practice to require a child who was found to have been bullying a classmate, to write a letter of apology to his or her victim. Through

MARC training, we communicated to administration and faculty the drawbacks of involving victims in remedies for any bullying incident. In this case, having a bully write an apology letter to a victim can be counterproductive because such letters can readily be read by that victim as a further threat. In fact, the between-the-lines message sent by such a letter is often "I know that you told on me." Disciplining a bully in isolation from the victim actually increases the reporting of bullying if victims and potential victims don't have to be involved with their tormentor in any way.

Though MARC is only in its first year of operation, we can point at progress we have made toward fulfilling some of the important goals set out in the original proposal for the Center. We have increased collaboration between Arts & Sciences and Education by drawing student facilitators from both departments in both areas. Students in MARC programs are involved in efficacy research measuring the effectiveness of MARC programs. At the time this article is being written they are entering preliminary data and conducting simple data analysis. Several external grant proposals have already been sent out, and we anticipate using preliminary data in future grant proposals. MARC has become involved in regional and statewide planning, as a partner to the Massachusetts State Senate and the Attorney General, and is involved in the formulation of new state-wide law, policy and initiatives regarding school violence. Via MARC, partnerships have been formed with the Attorney General of Massachusetts and the District Attorney of Plymouth County. As the director of MARC, I am also working with several State Senators to help formulate effective legislation around school safety. Encouragingly, preliminary data indicates a positive reaction to the pragmatic, hands-on approach the MARC training takes in preparing educators to deal with violence and bullying among children.

—Elizabeth Englander is Professor of Psychology.