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How can the use of the morning meeting foster a sense of community in the fifth grade classroom?

Lindsey Giannantonio

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**HOW CAN THE USE OF THE MORNING MEETING FOSTER A SENSE OF
COMMUNITY IN THE FIFTH GRADE CLASSROOM?**

by
Lindsey Giannantonio

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Teacher Education
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
Master of Sciences in Teaching
at
Rowan University
June 22, 2011

Thesis Chair: Marjorie Madden, Ph.D.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this manuscript to my professor and mentor, Dr. Janet Moss.

It is under your guidance and unwavering dedication that I have developed the appreciation for what it means to teach, and to truly care for your students. You have helped me understand the true power of developing a learning community, and that has inspired me to develop and conduct this study. Thank you for helping me grow to be the professional and individual that I am today.

Acknowledgements

I would like to give a special thanks to my cooperating teachers in my student teaching placement for allowing me to conduct this study in their classroom. I would like to thank my students for helping me to learn from their experiences and interactions.

I would like to extend a special thanks to my family and friends, and especially to my parents, Maureen Bassinger and Frank Giannantonio, for their continued support throughout the completion of my thesis study and my entire educational experience at Rowan University.

I would like to thank all of my Co-Teach professors and Co-Teach Cohort c/o 2011 for your support and guidance. You have made this experience truly special and memorable. It is within this cohort and under the guidance of our wonderful professors that I developed my appreciation for the power of the classroom community. Our wonderful experience together inspired me to conduct this study and dedicate my time to understanding the true effects of developing a classroom community.

I would like to extend a special thanks to Dr. Midge Madden, my professor and thesis advisor. Your continued support and the security of knowing that you were with me every step of the way gave me the strength and confidence it took to design and conduct this study.

Abstract

Lindsey Giannantonio

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LEARNINGS IN THE FIFTH GRADE CLASSROOM?

HOW CAN THE USE OF THE MORNING MEETING FOSTER A SENSE OF
COMMUNITY IN THE FIFTH GRADE CLASSROOM?

2010/11

Dr. Marjorie Madden, Ph.D.

Master of Science in Teaching: Collaborative Teaching

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of incorporating the Morning Meeting as part of the daily routine in the fifth grade classroom. This study examines the effects of developing a classroom community and incorporating talk as a tool in the classroom through the use of the Morning Meeting. The Morning Meeting is part of the Responsive Classroom approach, and its purpose is to help foster a sense of community and spark student readiness for learning during the school day. This qualitative teacher research used student response journals, a teacher research journal, student surveys, audio recordings of student discussion groups, audio recordings of the Morning Meeting, and interviews with individual students to gather data surrounding the effects of implementing the Morning Meeting and the development of the sense of community. The collected data was analyzed, coded, and triangulated to find common themes that emerged throughout the various sources. This study found that the implementation of the Morning Meeting helps foster a sense of community, develops a sense of respect among students, increases student participation, and improves student attitudes and motivation toward learning.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“Changes in marriage and family life are beginning to reveal the cracks in the image of the home as a ‘haven in a heartless world’” - Elkind (1990, p. 2)

The prevalence of the nuclear family as the norm is a thing of the past. Pressures put on the family unit in the home create stress for young children, and they carry these burdens into the classroom with them on a daily basis. It is important to create a safe and caring environment for students to learn in the classroom and to make the school a safe-haven for children. In considering the new responsibilities being placed upon American schools, Elkind (1990) urges the importance of fostering a sense of community within the classroom in order to meet these needs.

The job of the teacher has evolved over the decades; we are no longer in charge of simply teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic. Due to the demanding work schedules of parents, we as teachers may spend more time with our students than our students spend with their parents and families. These new responsibilities do not make our career any easier, but I feel that it makes being a teacher that much more meaningful. We are playing a much more important role in the lives of our students, and impacting their development at such a deeper level.

It is important to establish a classroom atmosphere in which students feel that they are valued members of a community, where they feel safe, and somewhere they look forward to coming to each day. The Responsive Classroom approach values the development of the classroom community and strategically implements components to

foster this community. Rimm-Kaufman and Chiu (2007) define the Responsive Classroom as an approach, which “integrates social and academic learning in order to produce classroom environments that are conducive to learning by integrating social and academic learning” (p. 397). One of the important components of the Responsive Classroom is beginning each day with the Morning Meeting. Bondy (2001) states that the Morning Meeting is “like being at the breakfast table,” which is a novelty that unfortunately many students are unfamiliar with due to the hectic schedule of the morning routine. Since many students and teachers alike are not unfortunately enough to experience the daily breakfast table interaction with their own families at home, it is a nice way to start each day, welcoming every member in a respectful and comfortable manner, and sparking the student’s readiness to learn for the day (Bondy, 2001).

The Morning Meeting is a time when the students and teachers greet each other, share something important going on in their lives, engage in a group activity, and complete a morning message, which helps transition from the Morning Meeting into the rest of the school day. The Morning Meeting is a nice way to enter the classroom and smoothly shift gears from home life to school and learning mode (Bondy, 2001; Kriete, 1999; Kriete, 2002).

Purpose Statement

The teacher’s role in education is ever-evolving; there has been a drastic climate change in education and the role of the teacher over the past three decades (Straughan, 1988; Pearson & Nicholson, 2000; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Straughan (1988) reports that in the mid- 1980-1990’s there was a movement to incorporate character education into the classroom, and “pupils’ personal and social development [was] given

the highest priority by teachers, both in school [organization] and in curriculum design” (p. 23). Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) reflect that the prevailing sentiments during that time period which included “the calls for professionalization of teaching, the enlarged role of teachers, and enhanced teacher leadership,” have since diminished, and instead are replaced by the domination of “the standards movement, intensification of pressures for accountability, the emerging rhetoric of best practices, and the increasing prominence of outsiders designing plans for whole-school improvement” (p. 6).

Ohanian (2009) is an educator who pronounces this new movement since No Child Left Behind (NCLB) as an “assault on teacher professionalism” (p. 374). Ohanian (2009) argues that the professional integrity of teachers is being stripped as school and district administrations put increasingly more restrictive limitations on teacher autonomy and creativity in the classroom, in order to meet state standardized proficiency, uphold accountability, and dictate methods of collection and reporting data.

Furthermore, Ohanian (2009) argues that she has seen too many “assaults on childhood in the name of accountability cross [her] desk ... Students are being labeled failures before they learn to tie their shoes” (p. 372). Ohanian feels that the new movement is stripping school personnel of their conscience, as it takes the caring and compassionate nature out of teaching, which is after all why we have become teachers in the first place.

We have begun to base too much of student achievement on statistical data and standardized tests. We seem to be losing sight of the fact that we are developing whole individuals. The demands that the federal government are putting on the districts due to the NCLB and standardization movement is conflicting with the new responsibilities

being placed on schools due to societal demands that were once restricted to the home and family sector.

Wong (2001) reasons against taking on the “pessimistic view that teachers have been de-skilled and rendered virtually helpless by the principles of hierarchy, segmentation, and control that govern public schooling” (p. 127). In considering these new responsibilities being placed upon American schools due to recent changes family and societal norms, Elkind (1990) urges the importance of fostering a sense of community within the classroom. While the need for character and social education are at odds with the demands of the NCLB movement, Rimm-Kaufman and Chiu (2007) identify the Responsive Classroom approach as a successful means of incorporating social learning and character education into the academic schedule. A sense of community within the classroom helps foster an environment for positive and engaged learning to take place (Ackerman, 1996; Horsch, 1999; Bondy, 2001). Bondy (2001) argues that, “the classroom social environment has a significant effect on student attitudes, productivity, engagement in learning, and academic achievement” (p. 145).

The Virginia Education Association (2000) defines the classroom community as the “virtual space in the classroom where students feel valued and respected, where care and trust abound, and students have a major role in making meaningful decisions about their learning and relationships. It is a place of healthy connectedness” (Allen, 2000, p. 1). The sense of classroom community has a positive impact on student learning as it allows the students to express themselves and ask more meaningful questions (Ackerman, 1996; Bondy, 2001; Horsch, Chen, & Nelson, 1999; Horsch, Chen, & Wagner, 2002).

Brain researchers and social learning theorists address the child's innate desire to gain approval and acceptance (Piaget, 1954; Kohlberg, 1968; Mosak, 1995; Pearson & Nicholson, 2000; Wong 2001; Hurtes, 2002). Research studies have proven that creating a classroom community helps create an environment more conducive to learning; students are able to focus better, they express themselves more freely, ask more meaningful questions, are more likely to take risks, and develop a more positive attitude towards learning (Ackerman, 1996; Bondy, 2001; Horsch et al., 1999; Horsch et al., 2002).

Creating a sense of community is contingent on the ability to unify the group of students as a whole. Edmonds, Killen, & McGlothlin (2008) argue that the perception of similarity between individuals is an important factor in determining children's choice regarding personal relationships and friendships. Their argument cites social psychology research on friendship that proves this perception of similarity increases attraction among individuals and plays an important role on both friendship selection and maintenance. The task of unifying a group of students is becoming ever more difficult as the American school age population continues to diversify based on indicators such as race, socio-economic status, family structure, academic achievement, medical issues affecting learning and physical abilities, and general overall lifestyle culture (Wong, 2001; Edmonds, et al., Sleeter, 2005). As the population continues to diversify, students begin to notice more and more differences among their peers rather than focusing on the commonalities they share.

Miller-Lachmann and Taylor (1995) warn that "the growing diversity of America's population is certain to have a major impact on the schools of the future," and

they argue that “the need for multicultural education in our schools is both obvious and urgent” (p. 62). Current research supports these findings (Wong, 2001; Sleeter, 2005; Nieto, 2004; Edmonds, et al., 2008). While statistics prove that American diversity will continue to increase in our future, multicultural education invites diverse cultural perspectives into the classroom. Studies show that proactively addressing areas of student difference, rather than attempting to maintain a color-blind perspective, is more beneficial and reduces the possibilities of students developing negative cultural views (Wong, 2001; Sleeter, 2005).

It is important for teachers to get to know their students as individuals outside of the classroom, and understand what perspectives, backgrounds, and experiences they bring into the classroom with them each day. Student sharing is a great way for teachers to gain deeper insights into their students’ lives; interests, strengths and weaknesses, responsibilities, and a general overview of the students’ and families’ approach toward school and education. This knowledge helps teachers to better understand their students and help motivate and engage their students during classroom instruction, therefore, helping students make connections between lessons learned in the classrooms and applying it to their lives (Schultz, 2003). Sharing is also a great way for students to develop peer relationships as they identify similarities amongst each other, rather than focusing on differences based on the unknown. Sharing is a great method of highlighting similarities amongst a diverse group, bonding diverse students together, and encouraging respect and acceptance of peers within the classroom (Csak, 2002; Edmonds, Killen, & McGlothlin, 2008).

Studies continue to prove the importance of using talk as a tool for learning in the classroom (Gills & Pierce, 2003; Sleeter, 2005; Bondy, 2001; Csak, 2002; Ackerman, 1996; Schultz, 2003). Gilles & Pierce (2003) argue that language “is both essential to learning and enhanced by learning” (p. 60), and their experience and studies suggest that, “talk wasn’t just an avenue for learning but was a powerful vehicle through which learning occurs” (p. 65). Talk is also an important tool for teachers to use as a window for teachers to assess student learning (Gilles & Pierce, 2003; Schultz, 2003). Schultz (2003) also argues the importance of listening in the classroom in order to get know students as learners and individuals and to assess the classroom environment of learning. Csak (2002) further asserts that the use of oral language is necessary for establishing the classroom community.

Statement of Research Problem and Question

Developmental theories suggest that elementary aged students strive for acceptance among peers (Piaget, 1954; Kohlberg, 1968; Mosak, 1995; Pearson & Nicholson, 2000; Wong, 2001). Studies like the Child Development Project and the Seattle Social Development Project have found that a classroom community of caring learners helps foster better learning (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Hawkins, Catalano, Morrison, O’Donnell, Abbott & Day, 1992; Ackerman, 1996; Horsch et al., 1999; Bondy, 2001). As the American school-aged population continues to diversify, it creates a greater challenge to develop a sense of unity among differences. Creating opportunities for students to share and form connections and realize similarities among their peers helps develop the classroom community (Miller-Lachmann & Taylor, 1995; Wong, 2001; Sleeter, 2005; Edmonds, et al., 2008). A positive learning

environment and classroom community can be created by incorporating the Morning Meetings into the daily routine (Kriete, 2002; Horsch, et al., 1999; Bondy, 2001). Thus, the question of this research study becomes: How Can the Use of the Morning Meeting Foster a Sense of Community the Fifth Grade Classroom?

Story of the Question

The Rowan University teacher education program places a major emphasis on the importance of creating learning communities within the classroom. In the Collaborative Education program, I not only learned the importance of a learning community in the classroom in theory, but was privileged to experience these benefits firsthand with my cohort of peers over the course of our five year program. I found that I grew as both a student and an individual within this setting of respect, trust, and connectedness. I was comfortable enough to take risks, ask questions, and share my views without the fear of being judged. I also expanded my worldview as I eagerly listened to the viewpoints of my respected peers. I found that when I felt that my viewpoints were respected by my peers, I took on a more welcoming and open stance to learn from my peers. Experiencing this learning environment at Rowan, I knew that I needed to create a community within my classroom, but how? What steps must be taken to foster this sense of respect, unity, trust, and belonging?

During my practicum experience in Fall 2010, I was placed in a culturally diverse school district. Working in this type of demographic setting was nothing new to me, because I had grown up in a very diverse town myself and had attended diverse schools. From a young age, I was exposed to and interacted with peers that were different in terms of socio-economic status, ethnicity, religious beliefs, family structure, and general

lifestyle culture. This placement made me reflect on my own experience; I could not recall any specific instances in my schooling where these differences had been proactively and positively addressed in the classroom. Instead, my schools' approach to our diverse population took on more of a color-blind perspective. As we grew up and moved from elementary to intermediate school, I noticed cliques begin to form as my peers moved into groups where they found similarities; by the time we reached high school, the population was based on indicators and visible groupings of culture, race, and socio-economic status.

From my experience, I have observed that as students grow up, they become more aware of societal views of racial identity and racial relations. How can we stop the negative effects associated with developing racial identity and prevent this segregation from happening? In what way can we proactively use awareness to bridge differences? How can we maintain the relations that young students develop in the blissful, youthful ignorance of the elementary years?

A number of my teacher education courses at Rowan focused on the importance of multicultural and cross-cultural education. Studying Schultz (2003), I realized the significance of listening as a tool in the classroom in order to learn about my students as learners and as individuals, and to give me feedback on the effectiveness of my teaching practices. I began to observe my classroom through the four lenses Schultz describes: listening to know particular students, listening to the rhythm and balance of the classroom, listening to the context of students' lives, and listening for acts of silencing in the classroom (2003). Taking on this stance, I gained a new understanding for the value of listening and began to analyze the information gained through listening to my students

through new perspectives. At the same time, I began to realize the general trend of silencing students in the classroom. I observed other teachers, and even found myself silencing students during classroom instruction. Although unintentional, student silencing is such a common practice for a number of reasons. One reason is that student talk and sharing throughout a lesson is typically distracting to both the teacher and peers and it is so easy for the lesson to get off track. Another reason is that if a student gets the opportunity to share his/her perspective, it may be a different perspective than the teacher's instructional approach or out of her personal realm of meaning making; therefore, being deemed incorrect.

The more I observed the classroom through these lenses, the more I reflected on myself as a learner. I always wanted to share my experiences and connections; it was hard for me to contain my excitement when I had an "ah-ha" moment and could actually make the connection between the information being presented in the classroom and my own life experiences outside of the classroom. Students are typically penalized for calling out, and are silenced when their questions and comments are not relevant to the topic at hand. If the student is making a connection to share with the class, there is obviously some relevance between the topic and his/her life. While I understand that allowing students to make connections and talk during class can easily take the lesson off topic, making connections are an important tool in creating meaning! How can I make room for meaningful talk, sharing, and connections in the classroom?

I observed many classrooms during my field placements at Rowan. While the primary grades typically started the day with circle time, as I moved into the older grades, I began finding that the morning work time lost the sense of class unification and

welcoming start and became generally less structured. With the hustle and bustle of students unpacking, writing down homework, talking to friends, ordering lunch, handing in assignments, a number of the students never even make it to the morning-activity worksheet. How can we use this time in more valuable ways? How can this entrance be more structured and productive? How can I create a sense of welcoming initiate a more concrete start to the day? I began to view this morning time as the perfect opportunity to structure time for constructive student sharing and community building. Why not implement a refined version of circle time that the students had become so familiar with as the start of their school day in their earlier years of school?

Organization of the Thesis

Chapter Two examines the literature and research related to the importance of promoting a classroom community of respectful and understanding students and studying ways that community building helps foster learning. The topics discussed in Chapter Two include the importance of community building, the use of personal storytelling, ways to bring students together in increasingly diverse American classrooms, using talk as a tool for learning, and the Morning Meeting as a means of developing the classroom community. Chapter Three discusses the context of this study, the research design, including data collection methods and data analysis. Chapter Four discusses the findings of the study and the major themes that emerged. Chapter Five discusses the conclusions of the study, limitations of the study, and suggests further research and implications of the study for learning and teaching.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

“In many ways, the classroom is a curious setting. Assigned to classes that may contain strangers, perhaps even adversaries, students are expected to interact harmoniously. Crowded together, they are required to ignore the presence of others. Urged to cooperate, they usually work in competition. Pressed to take responsibility for their learning, they must follow the dictates of a dominant individual - the teacher”

(Edwards & Mullis, 2003, p.20).

Introduction

This study strives to use the Morning Meeting to foster a sense of community in the fifth grade classroom. Chapter II examines the literature related to the importance of fostering a classroom community. The first section addresses the necessity of creating a community within the classroom. The second section explores the growing diversity of the population in American schools and discusses the importance of multicultural education. The third section focuses on the importance of using talk in the classroom. The final section discusses the Responsive Classroom approach, specifically focusing on the Morning Meeting and its ability to foster community and acceptance.

Creating a Classroom Community

The central focus of this study is creating a sense of community within the classroom. Theories of child development address a child's innate desire to gain approval and acceptance from others (Wong, 2001; Pearson & Nicholson 2000; Piaget, 1954; Kohlberg, 1968, Mosak, 1995; Hurtes, 2002). Worzby (2004) cites that “children are motivated to achieve social interest in their desire to belong, to contribute, and to secure a meaningful place in the groups to which they belong” (p. 205). Developmental

theorists Piaget and Kohlberg prove that upper elementary students are developmentally sociocentric and strive for social conformity as a means of developing moral meaning (Pearson & Nicholson, 2000). Students at this level strive for peer acceptance, and either engage or refrain from engagement in specific behaviors in order to uphold a sense of belonging (Hurtes, 2002; Pearson & Nicholson, 2000; Covington, 1984; Piaget, 1954; Kohlberg, 1968; Worzbyt, 2004).

Creating a sense of community is crucial in order for meaningful learning to take place within the classroom (Ackerman, 1996; Horsch et al., 1999; Horsch et al., 2002; Bondy, 2001; Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu, 2007). Once students feel accepted within the community, the anxiety of gaining approval is settled, and the student can focus on the task of learning (Horsch et al., 1999; Horsch et al., 2001; Bondy, 2001; Battistich et al., 1997; Hawkins et al., 1992; Ackerman, 1996). Horsch et al. (1999) indicates that children have a “natural desire to engage in learning when they feel safe, valued, and respected” (p. 2). The Virginia Education Association (2000) defines the classroom community as the “virtual space in the classroom where students feel valued and respected, where care and trust abound, and students have a major role in making meaningful decisions about their learning and relationships. It is a place of healthy connectedness” (Allen, 2000, p. 1).

Further, Bondy (2001) argues that, “the classroom social environment has a significant effect on student attitudes, productivity, engagement in learning, and academic achievement” (p. 145). Developing a community allows students to express themselves and ask more meaningful questions (Ackerman, 1996). In order to foster an environment conducive to quality learning, it is important to create an atmosphere where

students feel safe and supported by their teachers and peers. Horsch et al., (2002) explains that while “a classroom environment of criticism and disapproval would have a negative effect on achievement” (p. 367), a supportive classroom environment is much more conducive to learning, because students are able to focus better and are more likely to take risks (Horsch et al., 1999; Horsch et al., 2002).

Establishing a learning community where students feel safe, welcomed, and accepted help students be in a state of mind more prepared for meaningful learning to take place. Brain research studies cite the interconnection between emotion, cognition, and the ability to make meaning of concepts (Bondy, 2001; Caine & Caine, 1994; Jensen, 1998). Bondy (2001) argues that students must feel safe in order for learning to take place; in fact, “stress and feeling threatened may be the greatest contributors to impaired academic learning” (p. 146). Ultimately, “emotions drive attention and create meaning; they are at the heart of learning” (p. 146).

Studies suggest that students’ home environment and the sociodemographic factors of their families play a role in student behavior, academic success, and student readiness for learning (Horsch et al., 2002; Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu, 2007). Bondy (2001) urges teachers to consider the fact that students come from a diversity of home environments which play a role in their attitude as they enter the classroom. Bondy (2001) reports that many of the third grade students in her study entered the classroom “upset, frazzled, and rushed,” on a daily basis (p. 148). Bondy’s 2001 study suggests positive outcomes in student achievement and motivation when a space for learning was developed by creating a safe and predictable environment for to look forward to entering into each day.

Diversity in Schools and Multicultural Education

The American school population continues to diversify based on indicators such as race, socio-economic status, family structure, academic achievement, medical issues effecting learning and physical abilities, and general overall lifestyle culture (Wong, 2001; Edmonds et al., 2008; Sleeter, 2005). Miller-Lachmann and Taylor (1995) state that, “the growing diversity of America’s population is certain to have a major impact on the schools of the future” (p. 62). Current research supports these findings (Wong, 2001; Sleeter, 2005; Nieto, 2004; Edmonds et al., 2008). With statistics suggesting that diversity in both the United States and in the classroom will continue to increase in future years, Miller-Lachmann and Taylor (1995) state that “the need for multicultural education in our schools is both obvious and urgent” (p.65). The need for multicultural education is supported by current researchers (Marulis, 2000; Nieto, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Geisler-Brenstein, Schmeck, & Hetherington (1996) state that United States schools have adapted curricula and instructional practices in order to meet the needs of culturally diverse groups of students and make the material more relevant. Creating opportunities for students to share information about their lives becomes ever more important as our schools’ populations continue to diversify. Taking a proactive approach helps prevent perceptions of difference from coming up unexpectedly in the classroom and the potential for students developing feelings of inferiority (Sleeter, 2005; Powell & Caseau, 2004; Edmonds et al., 2008; Wong, 2001).

Promoting positive cultural relations is an important task on the global agenda. Edmonds et al., (2008) argue that “the impact of negative intergroup attitudes is still felt today at the global level as well as more local levels” (p. 425). They also argue that

increased contact amongst diverse groups often relates to less prejudice. Multicultural education is the practice of incorporating aspects of different cultures into the classroom and increases student awareness of different cultural practices and conditions. As the population of American schools continues to diversify, it becomes increasingly important for students to develop diverse perspectives and helps develop positive peer relationships. Exposing children to multicultural perspectives help them identify similarities between themselves and their peers. Research proves that taking a multicultural approach and proactively addressing student cultural differences actually increases the sense of a classroom community (Wong, 2001; Sleeter, 2005). Wong (2001) theorizes that some teachers may avoid drawing attention to the differences among students within a classroom in an attempt to create or “maintain a color-blind perspective” (p. 117). Edmonds et al., (2008) cite that by the early age of six years old, children judge potential friends on the basis of whether or not they share group norms. The perception of similarity between children and peers is a relevant factor in determining their choice and maintenance of peer relationships. Studies prove that the amount of same-culture peer friendships is significantly higher than cross-cultural (Hirschfield, 2008).

Hirschfield (2008) argues that cultural convictions are not acquired through accidental wrong information, but that “children’s robust prepared curiosity about the social world and deeply-grounded willingness (and capability) to essentialize social groups play a central, arguably predominant, role in their developing knowledge” (p. 48). Sleeter (2005) warns against ignoring differences within the classroom, arguing that students develop ideas of superiority and inferiority through observing social interactions. Hirschfield (2008) argues that, “one of the most important and daunting tasks for the

young child is developing the capacity to interpret and to explain the behavior of others (p. 37). These facts combined suggest that it is much more likely for students to internalize inaccurate and unintended feelings about diverse cultures. Proactively addressing these areas has the potential for developing positive perspectives and acceptance across differences (Sleeter, 2005; Wong, 2001; Hirschfield, 2008; Ackerman, 1996).

Sleeter (2005) argues that “students learn a tremendous amount about others, themselves in relationship to others, and social systems by observing the world around them” (p. 105). Promoting broad multicultural perspectives in the classroom by inviting the students to share aspects of their life allows students to observe these different practices in a positive setting. Ackerman (1996) reports that promoting multicultural discussion in her classroom has the ability to build a sense of community and belonging for individuals in the classroom, fosters cooperation, addresses issues of race and prejudice, and gives students an ability to get a deeper look into peers’ lives and share important aspects of their own. Edmonds et al., (2008) argue that children’s “social judgments are influenced by the reasoning processes that individuals apply to the evaluations of events” (p. 439). Exploring multicultural perspectives and practices proactively in the classroom environment can have a positive effect on students’ reaction when they encounter these events in other contexts of life (Sleeter, 2005; Powell & Caseau, 2004; Edmonds et al., 2008).

Csak (2002) conducted a research study encouraging student story-telling of autobiographical narratives in her classroom. Csak found that storytelling is an important factor in developing community. She found that encouraging students to share different

aspects of their life with their peers created a sense of unity rather than difference. Sharing and identifying similarities serves as a necessary tool in the students' quest to be accepted by their peers. Sleeter (2005) reminds that, "even in classrooms that appear homogeneous, students bring different viewpoints" (p. 116). By allowing students to openly share, they begin to build upon each others' stories and experiences, and identify similarities amongst themselves. Building not only allows students to identify similarities and build bonds, but "can also develop or cement a sense of community" (Csak, 2002, p. 494). Allen (2000) attests that a teacher's aspiration of reaching every student in his/her classroom will remain an unattainable goal without developing a sense of community. With the growing diversity throughout our schools, the challenge of learning each of our students continues to grow.

The Morning Meeting

The classroom environment presents many challenges greater than simply teaching academic material. The classroom environment is the stage that either allows or prohibits successful learning from taking place. The "Morning Meeting is a structured way to begin each day 'as a community of caring and respectful learners'" (Bondy, 2001). Incorporating the Morning Meeting as part of the classroom's daily schedule helps create a safe and predictable environment for students to look forward to upon entering the classroom on a daily basis (Bondy, 2001; Anderson 2010). "A caring atmosphere and an effective style of classroom management foster children's development and guides them to respect other people, their environment, and their own learning" (Horsch et al., 1999, p. 2). Establishing this environment is vital considering the fact that home setting events have a major impact on student attitudes and behavior in school, along with the

research linking emotion and attitude to learning and achievement (Horsch et al., 2002; Bondy, 2001; Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu, 2007; Gilles & Pierce 2003). Anderson (2010) explains that the “Morning Meeting is an important anchor for students” (p. 2), and that establishing and following routines help the school day go more smoothly and productively.

The Morning Meeting is one of the main components of the Responsive Classroom approach, a social curriculum approach developed by the Northeast Foundation for Children, that addresses the child’s need to develop a sense of significance, belonging, and enjoyment as members of the classroom community (Horsch et al., 1999). The components of the Responsive Classroom approach “work alone and in concert to help students develop the social skills of cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control and also to promote in them a deeper knowledge of academic subject areas, reasoned decision making, and motivation for learning” (Horsch et al., 1999, p. 367).

During the Morning Meeting, the students and teacher move out of their desks and gather into a designated area of the classroom. Ackerman (1996) explains that the physical closeness during the meeting gathering helps foster the sense of community that the teacher is working to build. The Morning Meeting contains four sections: greeting, sharing, group activity, and the news and announcements (Kriete, 2002; Bondy, 2001; Horsch et al., 1999).

The first component of the Morning Meeting is the *Greeting* to welcome everyone to the class (Kriete, 2002; Bondy, 2001; Horsch et al., 1999). A variety of greetings can be used, but it is important to maintain the basic principles of respect, eye contact, tone of

voice, and equal acknowledgement for all individuals in the class. In Bondy's study, students developed their own greetings that involved different physical and balancing skills, and introduced greetings in foreign languages. She found that incorporating a variety of greeting activities helped each student develop a sense of belonging as they build connections to the group. When the students initiate the different greetings, they practice "verbal and nonverbal communication skills that are central to relationship building and participating in group activities in and out of school" (Bondy, 2001, p.144).

Sharing is the second component of the Morning Meeting which helps develop social relationships and academic skills (Kriete, 2002; Bondy, 2001; Horsch et al., 1999). Bondy (2001) explains that Sharing is a time designed to encourage face-to-face conversation time within the classroom and helps the teacher and students develop deeper insight into each other's lives. During this segment, the students are encouraged to share news that is meaningful and important in their lives, and the class is invited to ask questions and engage in open discussion to gain further information and demonstrate their interest in the sharer's news. This section of the morning meeting gives the students an opportunity to "develop and practice skills of listening, presenting to a group, taking turns, formulating relevant questions, and taking different perspectives" (Bondy, 2001, p. 145). Open sharing during Morning Meeting creates the stage for structured and insightful conversation, which helps students to develop vocabulary skills and broaden their worldview (Bondy, 2001; Sleeter, 2005). When the teacher invites students to share meaningful stories, it is welcoming diverse perspectives into the classroom. Sleeter (2005) further suggests that teachers incorporate these perspectives into the curriculum and use the connections as a way to engage students in learning.

The *Group Activity* is the third component of the Morning Meeting. This brief, fast-paced segment is often referred to as “game” time and involves all members of the class in a community building activity. The teacher in Bondy’s 2001 study incorporated activities that promoted team-building and conflict resolution. She suggests finding activity ideas from social groups that value the ideas of team-building and community, like Boy and Girl Scouts, summer camps, and athletic teams.

News and Announcements brings the meeting to a close and transitions the class into the rest of the school day. During this time, the teacher incorporates an interactive activity that either develops new skills or reinforces a recently learned skill. Presenting material in this fashion is beneficial because classroom discussion of topics being learned provides an opportunity for students to explore the ideas in a “natural context, and the richness of [this] talk enhances their work” (Power, 1999, p. 37). Furthermore, such talk fosters a deeper understanding and promotes student responsibility for their own learning (Power, 1999). As the students become more familiar with the Morning Meeting, this responsibility can be turned over to the students. Developing this sense of ownership increases student motivation to learn (Horsch et al., 1999).

Talk in the Classroom

Some may look at the conduct of the Morning Meeting and deem it unproductive based on traditional practices of classroom management. While many educators strive to have order and silence in their classroom during instructional time, talk can be a powerful tool for learning in the classroom (Gilles & Pierce, 2003; Csak, 2002; Power, 1999; Ackerman, 1993). Gilles and Pierce (2003) argue that, “the role of talk in the classroom is both a way for students to learn as well as a central window on what is learned” (p. 56). Power (1999) and Schultz (2003) argue the importance of using talk as a means of

assessing student work and achievement. Schultz (2003) also argues the importance of listening to student talk in order to assess the rhythm and balance of the classroom workflow and comprehension, as well as a tool for the teacher to learn about his/her students. This section examines the various ways in which talk in the classroom is beneficial to the quality of student learning, the teacher's understanding of student learning, and how it can be used to build the classroom community.

It is imperative that the classroom present opportunities for students to engage in discussion as they attempt to form meaning about new concepts and apply new concepts to real life. Halliday conducted studies on the social aspects of language and maintained that "meaning is an interactive process, not something you do on your own... meaning takes place in social contexts that are shared with 'significant others' that are part of the child's meaning (1980, p.10). Power (1999) encourages teachers "to find time to talk to [students] in ways that encourage them to think more deeply and respond more thoughtfully" ... "over time, words mark the quality of thinking and learning" (p. 37). She argues the importance of classroom discussions of topics being learned, as they provide the opportunity for students to explore the ideas in a "natural context, and the richness of the talk enhances their work" (p. 37). Such talk fosters a deeper understanding, and promotes student responsibility for their own learning (Power, 1999).

Barnes (1992) and Gilles and Pierce (2003) present the concept of "exploratory talk" in the argument for the importance of talk in the classroom. Exploratory talk is described as "a kind of tentative, hesitant, rough-draft form of talk" that is used when learners attempt to understand and make meaning of new concepts (p. 56). Exploratory talk is so important for students to engage in during the learning process as they struggle

to grasp new concepts, create meaning and connections of new information, and store these concepts into their knowledge bank.

Gilles and Pierce (2003) conducted a study on the role of talk in the classroom. They drew upon many theorists and philosophers linking the connection between talk and learning. Dewey (1938) argues that education and learning are social experiences; therefore schools are ultimately social institutions. Halliday (1980) asserts that there is a vital link between language and learning; students learn through language, because meaning is developed and expressed through words. He explains that language is the resource used to create meaning, and “meaning is an interactive process, not something you do on your own,” which implies that the environment in which learning and meaning take place is in social contexts (p. 10). Gilles and Pierce (2003) continue asserting this connection by arguing that, “language cannot be separated from learning, because it is both essential to learning and enhanced by learning. Neither can language and learning be separated from interaction with others” (p. 60).

Vygotsky further draws connections between language, learning, and making meaning with his theory of the “Zone of Proximal Development,” which compares the developmental level for learners to achieve on an independent level versus the potential level achieved in collaboration with either adults or peers. This suggests the importance of collaboration in learning because, “what a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow” (Vygotski, 1978, p. 86). When children collaborate in learning, they engage in Barnes’ (1992) concept of “exploratory talk,” which enhances learning as they work through their language knowledge base to make meaning of new concepts (Gilles & Pierce, 2003).

Many teachers encourage rigid, controlled talk in order to prevent losing control over the class. As a means of keeping order, many teachers engage in an “Initiation-Response-Evaluation” (IRE) pattern of talk. Power (1999) cautions teachers to avoid falling into the trap of IRE, because it is not necessarily meaningful classroom talk. This scripted interaction between teacher and student can actually hinder the development of student independence, inquiry, critical thinking, and the skill of self-questioning (Power, 1999). Productive talk in the classroom is extremely beneficial, but students must learn how to effectively communicate with each other. Power (1999) suggests using the Morning Meeting as a method of building classroom conversation skills. Furthermore, Power suggests establishing and practicing new language and communication norms early on so that students become more comfortable to formulate and share rich questions and responses.

Csak (2002) identified evidence from her study that students feel silenced in the classroom and feel that their opportunities to share with the class are rare. Csak (2002) argues that incorporating talk in the classroom is a way to help students develop a sense of importance and “allows them to feel they can make a worthwhile contribution to the classroom community” (p. 488).

Schultz (2003) encourages the teacher to pay close attention to *how* the student approaches school, and examine the student’s learning as a means of listening to his/her individuality. Once the teacher has this understanding, it becomes easier for her to develop a learner-centered instructional approach that targets the students as individuals and as a group (Schultz, 2003). Promoting the use of productive talk in the classroom is essential in order to utilize listening as a means of learning about your students. Schultz

(2003) discusses the impact that listening to the rhythm and balance of the classroom can have on student learning. Through listening, the teacher can time her entrance into the conversation and add new knowledge or prod thinking to encourage students to develop solutions on their own rather than supplying the answers. Schultz (2003) describes a teacher who listens to gain knowledge about her students through interaction, writing, and talking, and fashions her teaching based on a deep understanding of her students' social and academic strengths.

Benefits of the Morning Meeting

Bondy interviewed third grade teacher Sharon Ketts (2001) to find out the effects of incorporating the Morning Meetings into her daily routine; her responses were organized into three categories: immediate impact, cumulative impact, and impact on teaching practices. Ketts rationalizes that regardless of what is going on in an individual's life outside of school, when the students enter her classroom, "they moved into the very accepting environment of Morning Meeting, where they had fun and laughed together. This got them ready to be on task and ready to work" (Bondy, 2001, p. 148).

Bondy asserts that the Morning Meeting is a major indicator when measuring the quality of the classroom community (2001). Ketts identifies that the cumulative impact of the Morning Meeting was based on the sense of community, and the "family" climate that evolved. Ketts found that this promoted more peer helping. She further notes the positive impact that the Morning Meeting routine has on new students entering the class mid-year; "because the class became a 'family,' ... [Ketts] found that 'new students were made to feel part of everything. So, perhaps they didn't lose as much ground as students often do when they move to a new school mid-year'" (Bondy, 2001, p. 148).

The Morning Meetings also “increased student assertiveness and responsibility.” Ketts’s students exhibited assertiveness in both the Morning Meeting and in their academic work. Viewing this success within the Morning Meeting, Ketts developed a greater confidence in her students’ abilities. Her increased confidence in the students enhanced the classroom learning experience and “allowed her to give them more opportunities for independence, leadership, and collaboration” (Bondy, 2001, p. 148). As Ketts observed the students taking on more responsibility during the Morning Meeting and demonstrating successful social interactions, she turned more power over to them in other areas of the school day.

Bondy rationalizes that, all “academic learning aside, Morning Meeting is worth doing because it helps create the qualities we generally want our children to have. As Nelsen, Lott, and Glenn (1997) write, “All the academic knowledge in the world will not help those who lack self-discipline, judgment, social interest, the ability to make good choices, and the sense of responsibility that enables them to act effectively in life” (2001, p. 146).

The two studies conducted by Horsch, Chen, and Nelson (1999) and Horsch, Chen, and Wagner (2002) were conducted in schools that incorporated the Responsive Classroom approach and the Morning Meeting into their daily classroom routine. Teachers reported that they “loved interacting as a group in this new way, and the teachers found that they learned more about their students as individuals, which enabled them to structure learning activities more effectively” (Horsch, et al., 1999 p.3) Teachers felt that the approach contributed directly to students’ cognitive development. They also reflected that “children began to develop a love for school” (p. 379), which was both

gratifying and inspiring for teachers. Teachers also reported that “as children’s behavior improved and their sense of belonging grew, their capacity for learning increased” (Horsch, et al., p. 379).

Conclusion

Research supports the need to foster a sense of community in the classroom. As American school age population continues to diversify, the task of unifying students and establishing a sense of community becomes more difficult. Sharing is an important way for students to identify similarities among their diverse peers. Making room for productive student talk in the classroom increases student learning, and helps students develop motivation and a sense of ownership of learning that is important in the classroom. The Morning Meeting is a method that helps foster community, allows students to practice productive talk, develop social skills, and values of respect and acceptance.

Chapter 3

Setting and Design

Context

District

Deptford Township Public School District is made up of nine schools, serving over 4,500 preschool through twelfth grade students, and employs over 330 classroom teachers. Deptford Township Public School District is the third largest district in Gloucester County. The district provides education for general education students, students with special needs, as well as an enrichment program for their gifted and talented students (State of New Jersey Department of Education). The New Jersey Department of Education has developed District Factor Groups based on the average socioeconomic characteristics of local districts in order to compare student performance on statewide assessments. Deptford Township Public School district was classified as a “CD” district, which is the sixth out of the eight categories ranked highest to lowest, based on socioeconomic indicators like adults’ educational degrees, occupational statuses, unemployment rate, the median family income, and the percentage of individuals living in poverty (New Jersey Department of Education).

School

Little Creek Elementary School is one of Deptford School District’s six elementary schools and is located in Westville, New Jersey. According to the *New Jersey Department of Education 2009-2010 School Report Card*, Little Creek educates 525 students from kindergarten through sixth grade. This is the only elementary school in the district, which educates students for the extended period of time from kindergarten

through sixth grade in the same facility, and it is suggested that this helps lend to the school-wide learning community (New Jersey Department of Education, 2010). Little Creek Elementary School has a very diverse population of students in terms of student and family culture, ethnicity, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Little Creek Elementary is a learning environment rich in technology. In addition to the fully equipped instructional computer lab, there are computers in every classroom, SmartBoards in every classroom second through sixth grade, mobile SmartBoards for the kindergarten and first grade classrooms, mobile laptop carts, and Elmo document image projectors in most classrooms third through sixth grade.

The school day is approximately six and a half hours; beginning at 9:10 am and dismissal beginning at 3:30 pm. There are before and after school programs in place to accommodate students whose parents' work schedules extend past school hours. There is an after school tutoring program in place to provide struggling students with educational interventional services based on state assessment scores, report card grades, and teacher recommendation. Students are acknowledged school-wide for outstanding educational accomplishments, acts of kindness, student of the month, and various accomplishments made in the community outside of school.

Little Creek encourages the participation and input from families and the community. There is a School Leadership Team in place to develop school improvement objectives and action plans. There is a Parent Task Force who meets with the building principal to collaborate and share ideas for the development of school goals. There is also an active Parent Teacher Association to support the school, develop student activities, implement fundraisers, and administer awards for student achievement. The Little Creek

staff and student body forges a connection between the school and surrounding community through the development and participation in projects to raise money and other donations for local charities.

Little Creek enforces a zero tolerance bullying policy. The classroom teachers and principal are the main enforcers of the policy. The school guidance counselor rotates throughout the various elementary schools in the district. He visits classrooms for thirty minute time slots once a week to deliver character building and college prep lessons. The school places a strong emphasis on the goal of each student attending college. The school guidance counselor is also the advisor for the peer mediation team, which is in place to help mediate student conflicts before they escalate. Issues are brought to the team by teacher referral or by student request. The peer mediators are sixth grade volunteers who receive training in conflict resolution. It is an at-will program, and all parties involved in the conflict must be willing to participate in mediation.

Participants of the Study

There are nineteen fifth grade students involved in this study. All of the students in one fifth grade inclusion classroom were solicited for this study. I administered parental consent forms to permit the data collection on their child's participation and feedback in the classroom research. The participants were both male and female students ranging from the ages of ten through twelve years old. Four out of the twenty-one students in the classroom (approximately 20% of the students) are classified and have Individualized Educational Plans (IEP). One of the students in the class is involved in LEAP, the school's Gifted and Talented Program. Two of the students, both of whom are classified and have IEPs, receive Speech services. Due to the nature of the inclusion

classroom, students remain in the classroom for the school day's entirety, except for the LEAP program, Speech services, and band lessons.

There are two full time teachers in the fifth grade inclusion classroom, one general education teacher, and one special education teacher. The two teachers share the classroom instructional and management responsibilities. During the time of the study, I was a third adult in the classroom, as the student teacher and teacher-researcher. Given the age and maturity level of the students in my class, I was able to explain the background and purpose of the study, which they were participating in. A majority of the students exhibited great enthusiasm to participate and contribute to the study. They were very eager to return their permission slips which allowed them to be active members in the study, volunteer to give up their lunch and/or recess time in order participate in focus group meetings, as well as engage in the morning meetings.

Methodology and Research Design

The context of this study is qualitative, teacher research. Qualitative research studies appear broad and panoramic, rather than a typical micro-analysis found in different types of research studies. Qualitative research takes a holistic approach to the social phenomena; the more complex, interactive, and encompassing the narrative, the better the qualitative study (Cresswell & Brown, 1992). Qualitative research methods are emergent rather than tightly fitted. Rather than pre-figuring the answer to the research question, the qualitative research question possibilities are left open-ended.

Qualitative research takes place in the natural setting, and the researcher does not disturb the site more than necessary for the study. Qualitative researchers strive to build rapport and credibility with the participants of their research, and also try to use data

collection methods that involve their research participants. Qualitative research methods are interactive and humanistic. Qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive. The researchers job of interpreting the data includes developing a description of an individual or setting, analyzing data for themes or categories, and finally making an interpretation or drawing conclusions about its meaning personally and theoretically, stating the lessons learned, and offering further questions to be asked (Wolcott, 1994).

All qualitative inquiry is laden with values, and the personal-self is inseparable from the researcher-self (Mertens, 2003). The qualitative researcher is cognizant of her personal biographical background, how it shapes the study, and how it influences the interpretation of the data. She systematically reflects on this background and how it impacts the development of the study and the interpretation of the data. During the interpretation of qualitative research data, the researcher is looking through her particular lens oriented in a specific sociopolitical background; one cannot escape the personal interpretation brought to the qualitative data analysis.

Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2003) reason that teacher research is, by nature, qualitative research. They emphasize the importance of teacher research in making significant changes and impacting the quality of education, citing the importance of research conducted by those who are “closest to the day-to-day work of teaching and learning” (p. 6). The movement is dynamic as each teacher research project brings a unique experience with different perspectives to the table. As the body of knowledge continues to grow, the teacher research provides a broad basis for teachers to learn from and improve practices, and also a basis to draw from for further research.

For the purposes of this study, as a teacher researcher during my clinical internship practice, I will be fully immersed in the daily activities of the fifth grade classroom where my study will take place. The methods of this particular study are both interactive and humanistic because, not only will I be interacting with these students on a daily basis, but I will be encouraging the interaction between students within the classroom and enhancing the quality of the classroom and environment for learning.

Teacher research is most appropriate for my study because it centers on the development of a classroom community through the use of Morning Meeting, as opposed to quantitative research consisting of variables and having a predetermined outcome. Like teacher research, my study uses multiple sources of data such as teacher research journals, observations, dialogues, focus group meetings, and other forms of data that are collected throughout the school day (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990).

Sources of Data

There are several ways in which data was collected for this study. The first source of data was the use of a teacher research journal with field notes and observations. Observations were conducted on individuals and the whole class. Initial documentation was recorded in note-taking form, which was then elaborated on at a later time in order to get a full picture of the classroom at that specific period of time. I recorded instances of student interactions, instances of student sharing aspects from their life outside of the classroom, how students entered the classroom, student attitudes and classroom participation.

The second source of data collection was through the use of Student Response Journals. Each morning either before or after the Morning Meeting, I would put a prompt

on the board. I had explained to students that this was the general question to get their thoughts rolling, but they could feel free to stray from the topic and share other information and insights. This was an important source of data because it gave me a deeper insight than can be gathered from observation of student actions within the classroom. Here I gathered information about student attitudes, views of themselves as members of the classroom, approach toward school, issues of diversity, friendship, impact of the Morning Meeting, etc.

The third source of data collection was the use of student discussion group, which were audio recorded. I met with a group of six students periodically for thirty minute time periods over the course of the study. During this time, I asked specific questions and opened the floor for discussion. This was a rich source of insight into the students' viewpoints, because here they were able to really open up with their peers, elaborate on insights, and build upon each other's thoughts.

A fourth source of data was interviews with individual students. I chose a few students whom I had identified as having low motivation, low participation, and frequently had issues with other peers or teachers. During these interviews, I really dug into sources of motivation, how the student viewed him/herself as a member of the class, and the possible connection between home and school issues.

The fifth method of data collection was student surveys, which allowed me to get a broad sampling of student responses to general questions. These were short five to ten question surveys where students were asked to provide their definition of community, asked to describe how that definition does or does not relate to their classroom, how their seating in the classroom effected their concentration, etc.

The sixth and final source of data collection was audio recording the actual Morning Meetings. This was a rich source of data because it allowed me to focus on engaging during the Morning Meeting, and being able to go back and revisit the meeting to analyze the events. Significant sections of the meeting like examples of student sharing and questioning, as well as student engagement were transcribed and used as hard evidence.

Analysis of Data

Data was analyzed and interpreted through triangulation and categorization and coding of student discussion groups, student response journals, teacher research journal, student interviews, and transcriptions from audiotapes. Triangulation involves “the use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, or theories (at least three) to confirm findings (Hubbard & Power, 1999, p. 120). Data was reviewed and analyzed in order to identify specific themes and patterns that were evident across the different methods of data collection.

Chapter 4

Findings of the Study

Introduction

This chapter is constructed around the analysis of the data collected during the study in an attempt to answer the research question: How Can the Use of the Morning Meeting Foster a Sense of Community in the Fifth Grade Classroom? I begin by describing the classroom prior to the implementation of the study, and present evidence that suggests a lack of community within the classroom and the absence of productive student talk in the classroom. I continue by describing the students' developing understanding of community. I then present the analysis of the data findings. The results are organized into repeating themes that became evident across the data. The themes are: (1) a developing sense of respect, (2) effects of starting the day with a positive tone (3) improving student attitudes and motivation, and (4) helping a true community emerge.

We Can Use an Intervention

Lack of Community

Prior to the implementation of this study, the general atmosphere of the classroom and student interactions were documented in my Teacher Research Journal entries. These entries were based on classroom observations, full participation in classroom instruction and management, as well as discussions with the classroom teachers. The students were experiencing a great deal of peer conflict, student work habits were poor, there were many issues with classroom participation, completion of work assignments, and student motivation. As indicated in the Teacher Research Journal, it was evident that the class needed an intervention.

There is a very little sense of community. The class feels very disjointed. The kids have a very poor attitude toward their work. It's becoming very stressful for teachers, I feel like we're constantly mediating between peer conflicts, redirecting attention, and trying to get the kids back on task. The class is constantly talking during instruction, group and independent work time, and they are off-task during centers. The students are arguing back and forth during instructional time. The conflicts are spreading across the class, not just within a small group. The arguing is interrupting instructional time. (Teacher Research Journal, 2/28/11).

Teacher efforts to neutralize peer conflicts were unsuccessful. Parents were calling in to voice concerns that students were coming home complaining about conflicts with classmates. The classroom teachers were receiving bad reports or excessive talking and student conflicts from special area teachers as well as lunch and recess aides. Students reported in Student Response Journals and Student Surveys that “nobody gets along,” “people are very disrespectful towards each other,” and “everyone’s always fighting.”

My cooperating teachers reported that parent contacts were at an all time high due to lack of student performance in the classroom, disrespect toward peers and teachers, and general classroom behavior problems. We had two separate groups of students’ conflicts that were referred to the Peer Mediation team. Many students were receiving lunch detention and were even removed from special area classes due to excessive amounts of incomplete work, and behavioral issues of disrespect and acting out. A group of students were sent to the principal during lunch time due to peer conflict that escalated into a disrespectful outburst toward the lunch aides. The multiple means being taken to

improve student work and behavior did not seem to have an effect on student behaviors and attitudes within the classroom. It was my belief that it gotten to the point that the more we took away, the less the students looked forward to, and the further away our control slipped. The negative behaviors seemed to be spreading across the class to a wider group of students rather than lessening.

Use of Talk in the Classroom Prior to the Study

Prior to the implementation of this study, there were not many opportunities for students to engage in productive talk in the classroom. It was evident that talk was not viewed as a tool for learning, but rather as a means of disruption to classroom instruction and work time. In my Teacher Research Journal, I questioned:

We're not allowing any talk in the classroom, is this backfiring? Is this extreme attempt to control student interactions having a negative effect and making them rebel? (Teacher Research Journal, 3/31/11).

Observations suggested that talk was not incorporated as common instructional practice in the classroom, but viewed as a privilege for the students. When the class was experiencing behavioral issues throughout the day, opportunities for group work and peer interaction were taken away. As indicated in the Teacher Research Journal, the following excerpt identifies that talk was prohibiting learning in the classroom.

The excessive talking is prohibiting learning from taking place... as a consequence for their behavior, we can't "reward" them by allowing them to talk more by working together in groups on creative assignments. We are taking away the opportunities for productive talk in the classroom as a result of students' excessive unproductive talk and poor behavior. (Teacher Research Journal, 3/31/11).

Observations suggested that once the students were reprimanded for behavioral issues like excessive talking, the student attitudes became poor, and they were less likely ask questions, raise their hands to volunteer answers, or share connections made throughout the lessons.

Developing an Understanding of Community

Before implementing the study, I wanted to get an understanding of how students defined *community*, and how they related the term *community* to their classroom environment. I administered a student survey, and analyzed this data source to identify specific themes underlying the definition and the atmosphere of the classroom. Common themes that were evident across student definitions of the term *community* were the physical being of the group and the interactions of the group. The themes identified an overall positive atmosphere, a group of people in close vicinity, friends and neighbors getting along, working together toward a common goal, good communication, and a sense of caring.

In the same survey, students were asked if the term *community* applied to their classroom. Students reflected on the different indicators they identified in their definitions of the term *community*, and applied it to their classroom. Out of the nine students surveyed, four reported positively that yes, they did feel that their classroom was a community.

Leah defined community as, “*When people are all together in a place where people get along nicely, learning about new things, or just being together*” reported that the term *community* does apply to her classroom “*because it is all of the students and teachers together learning and having fun*” (Student Survey 3/28). Mark defined

community as *“People that come together, to talk about certain things,”* reported that *“Yes, I do think our classroom is a community because we’re going to be together for a long time and we will talk out some problems and help each other”* (Student Survey 3/28). Joel, defined community as: *“People who work together to develop a better place,”* reported that, *“The word fits our classroom because we are one group working together”*(Student Survey 3/28).

Two of the nine students identified that they do view their classroom as a community, but negatively reflected on peer conflict within the classroom. Joe defined the term community as, *“a good place and sometimes bad depending on your lifestyle, your neighbors, and your neighborhood,”* and reflected that, *“I think our classroom is a community because we sometimes get along and sometimes don’t. So I think that it’s normal not to like everybody all the time”* (Student Survey 3/28). Kara who defined the term community as *“An environment that’s filled with people who care for one another”* initially responded that the term does not fit her classroom because, *“some people disrespect other people,”* but added to her response that, *“maybe yes, because I think everyone cares for everyone in here somewhere, somehow”* (Student Survey 3/28).

The evidence suggests that in identifying a community, the students look for aspects of whom they are surrounded by, if the group of people gets along, if there is good communication, and if a sense of caring and helping are evident. Many students compare the term *community* to the neighborhood where they live and the lifestyle of the people within the community.

The three students who reported that *community* does not fit their classroom reasoned that there was a sense of disrespect within the classroom environment, a lack of

communication, and a disconnect among the students in the classroom. Tony defined community as “a place where you or your friends live and hang out.” In explaining why he does not feel that the term *community* fits his classroom, he reasoned that his classmates “don’t live or see the things that happen in your neighborhood, and people in the classroom don’t know much about you or where you live.” Erin defined *community* as “neighbors and environment that are maybe nice,” responded that “it doesn’t really fit our class because your friends can or can’t be nice and you may or may not have a neighbor (like someone to sit next to)” (Student Survey 3/28). Devon who defined *community* as simply, “the people around you,” responded that he does not feel the term fits his classroom “because we can never talk, we get yelled at every 2 seconds, and nobody gets along” (Student Survey 3/28).

The analysis of student understanding of community within their classroom sets a good stage for the results of the study. In analyzing the data, I asked myself the following questions: How will increased positive student interactions and inviting student sharing into the classroom improve peer relationships? How can this affect the way that students view their classroom and their peers?

Off to an Uncomfortable Start: This Respect and Allowing Talk is Weird!

I introduced a standard Greeting for the first few Morning Meetings to get the students used to the routine and practice the important aspects of making eye contact and using a positive tone of voice. The students were asked to look at their classmate and say, “Good Morning [student name]”. It was evident that students felt uncomfortable with the new routine. I noted observations in my Teacher Research Journal that students seemed uncomfortable and shy to initiate this new type of formal greeting.

Even the students who are typically outgoing, loud, and talkative were very timid and quiet during the greeting. Many students were hesitant to make eye-contact with their peers. The students' body language is showing that they are uncomfortable with this formality, they almost seem sunken and their heads are kept low. They give a little giggle after the greeting (Teacher Research Journal, 4/6/11).

When students were asked to respond in their Student Response Journals to the question, *“How has being greeted by name by your classmates for the past two days made you feel?”* it became evident this formal, respectful greeting that required the students to sit in close vicinity, make eye contact, and state their peers' name was a completely new experience for many students. Some students reflected that it was strange because they typically do not greet their classmates.

Jayden: *“It felt weird because it has never happened.”*

Tyler: *“It felt weird because it was strange that we were greeting.”*

Devon: *“It felt unusual.”*

Catherine: *“It was odd because people don't really get to greeting everyone”*

Other students reflected that the specific greeting felt weird or silly because this was a new greeting where they were required to state each other's name.

Joel: *“It was weird because nobody ever says my name when they say hi.”*

Leah: *“It kind of felt silly. I think it made me feel this way because I guess I'm just not used to being greeted in that way and it's not how I would normally greet someone.”*

Lauren: *“I, unlike some others, think it is quite silly. All you do is turn to the person next to you and say ‘good morning ____!’” Everyone is cracking up because it's so silly and almost pointless. I know it should make you feel good, but I just don't get it.”*

This was a major change to the typical morning routine the students had been accustomed to for the school year. Whereas before morning meeting, the students were expected to be relatively quiet as they entered the classroom and start on their morning work; however, the side conversation volume typically got out of hand and the class was frequently reprimanded.

The students were asked to respond in their Student Response Journal how they typically greet their classmates in the morning. Many students responded that they say “hey,” give a nod, or that they do not greet because they do not want to get in trouble (Student Response Journals, 4/6/11). With the implementation of the Morning Meeting, their routine classroom arrival was being completely restructured and they were held to new expectations. Everyone was required to attend the Morning Meeting and participate in the Greeting. Right from the very start of the day, the students were required to respectfully greet each other and interact with each other in a productive, cooperative manner. Additionally, the students were required to participate and be engaged in the group.

Structured Talk During Meetings Helps the Students Develop a Sense of Respect

A theme that became evident from the data collected in the Student Response Journals and the Teacher Research Journal entries was that students began to feel more respected by classmates after being greeted. This suggests that the students were picking up on one of the most important principles underlying of the Morning Meeting Greeting.

Adam: “It felt kind of weird because I really haven’t been greeted like that too much. I’m not used to being called by my name, but it does feel a little more respectful.”

Lara: *“When I was greeted by my name for the past days, it made me feel weird... it was so proper and grown up.”*

Tony: *“It made me feel more respected as a student to be greeted by my name and not just a nod. It was nice being called by my name.”*

Karissa: *“I felt like if the person greets you by name they respect me. They look at me in the eye, smile, and said good morning Karissa.”*

The data suggests that this sense of respect extended beyond the Morning Meeting and into the school day. A student reflected in her Student Response Journal that although she did not notice a difference in her attitude toward the school day, she felt that, “the kids aren’t really laughing at each other or fighting anymore. They’re actually respectful! It’s sort of weird, but I like it a lot!” (Student Response Journal, 4/12/11).

In my Teacher Research Journal, I noted observations that:

I feel a difference! I feel a more pleasant atmosphere. The students are working. The sense of respect seems to have extended outside of the greeting and into the school day. The students are showing signs of respect for their peers and their teachers. Students are raising their hands to get out of their seat or to ask a question rather than just getting up or calling out. Adam said “please” and “thank you” when asking permission to get his notebook out of his book bag.

The students were picking up on the new atmosphere of respect within the classroom. During one of the Discussion Group Meetings, a student shared his observation of the class’ behavior: *“Miss Giannantonio, when we started the Morning Meeting, I think everyone started being quieter, and I think they started being like nicer to each other too, I don’t know, it’s weird.”* It also became evident through classroom

observations that students began following classroom rules more routinely, like staying in seats during instruction and raising hands instead of calling out.

I documented in my Teacher Researcher Journal that specific student interaction exhibited this sense of respect toward one another. As the Morning Meeting became more routine and students began to feel more comfortable, it began to lose its formality. I made it an important point to emphasize to the students that we maintain the important aspects of respect that underlie the Morning Meeting. I documented specific interactions during the Morning Meeting.

The students are politely signaling their peers to be quiet with a nod or putting their fingers to their lips. In the past if this would have happened in the classroom, it would have started an argument; “don’t tell me what to do... you’re always the one talking... etc.” however now, the students are respecting peers’ signals. (Teacher Research Journal, 4/15/11).

This was refreshing evidence to witness students respectfully interacting with each other and honoring suggestions to follow rules as a group. This evidence also suggested that students valued the sense of respect during the Morning Meeting and were taking the initiative to monitor Morning Meeting behavior and help ensure that their peers were given a respectful audience.

Greeting Sets a Positive Tone for the Day

After the first implementation of the Morning Meeting Greeting, the students were asked to respond in their Student Response Journals to the question: *Do you think the Morning Meeting Greeting can have an effect on the “tone” of the day?* Eleven out of the nineteen students who responded felt that the greeting could have an effect on the

tone of the day. The Student Response Journal entries suggested the following themes: interactions with peers effect student attitudes throughout the day, a greeting from a classmate can affect a student's mood, and when the day is started with a positive greeting it can create a more positive attitude that can extend throughout the day.

Karissa: *"I think yes, that a greeting can have a positive effect on the tone of the day because if you say good morning in a low or mean voice, that means you are not going to have a good day. Also, if you are in a happy and cheerful voice that means you are going to have a good and nice day. To have a good or bad day, it starts the greeting when you walk into the classroom."*

Erin: *"I do think a greeting can have a positive effect because say you say 'hello' to someone in a mean tone, then that will change the person's attitude and make them a little mean for the rest of the day"*

Leah: *"yes, because if you had a bad day then if someone greeted you in a positive attitude, then it would possibly make your day better"*

Other themes that became evident from the Student Response Journal entries were: structured greetings initiate interaction between students and can help develop new relationships among peers, a friendly greeting can help students look forward to coming to school, and a positive greeting can help you feel like a more valued member of the class.

Tyler: *"I think greeting will effect me because the people who is going to greet me I think they're going to be kind to me."*

Kara: *"I think that greeting someone in a positive way makes people feel like their special and when they leave, you think of them"*

Karleyne: *“yes, because people in the class know that people are thinking of them and that you are going to have a good day.”*

The data suggests themes that the Morning Meeting Greeting can develop other positive feelings of happiness, feeling special within the classroom, and developing a positive outlook for the day.

Karissa: *“You feel good and start to think today is going to be a good day. Sometimes if nobody greets you, you feel all alone.”*

Marina: *“It made me so so happy because the person said it so happy.”*

Karleyne: *“It made me feel very special and that my classmates want to greet me. I get happy when I go here in the morning.”*

Kara: *“It made me feel like when I leave maybe I’m missed a little.”*

Nyle: *“Everyone turns happy.”*

Observations in my Teacher Research Journal have also documented a more positive tone among the classroom that has extended past the Morning Meeting.

I recorded in my teacher research journal after the first Morning Meeting was held:

I feel a difference! They’re working, there’s very minimal chatter, so far there is no bickering between the students. It just feels more pleasant. My cooperating teacher agreed that student attitudes had changed after the first meeting. She came up to me and said, “Whoa! Could this be working already? Do you see how well they’re working? AND they seem to be getting along!” (Teacher Research Journal 4/6/ 2011).

The class feels more in synch. The students seem more inclined to participate during lessons by raising their hands to volunteer answers or try to share a connection between the lesson and their lives. Students are listening to their peers’ questions and comments.

They are feeding off of each other in a positive manner. Teachers seem more welcoming to student connections during lessons as well (Teacher Research Journal, 4/10/11).

This evidence suggests that students look forward to these positive interactions with their peers. Students are entering the room positively looking forward to a routine where they get to interact with their peers in a way that sets a positive tone. This structured positive greeting initiates positive peer interactions right from the very beginning of the day. The positive interactions have created a positive feeling among the students. Students have also suggested that if they enter the classroom with a poor mood, the meeting creates an opportunity to improve their attitude.

When introducing the Morning Meeting Greeting, I expressed to the students the significance of the Greeting was to “help everyone be seen and be here” (Morning Meeting Audio Tape). In reviewing the audio recordings of the Morning Meetings, I realized that nearly each day after every member of the class was greeted, I closed the greeting with, “hello everyone, we’re all here!” (Morning Meeting Audio Tape). This evidence along with the evidence of the students’ attitudes suggests that the students benefitted by having their presence within the classroom acknowledged before the school day began.

Student Attitudes and Motivation Toward Learning

The new routine of the Morning Meeting requires every student to actively participate in the meeting’s components, to engage in peer interaction, and for their presence within the classroom to be acknowledged. It was documented in my Teacher Research Journal entries that, after the implementation of the Morning Meeting, there was a difference within the student behavior and performance. There were a few students

who had persistent behavior issues throughout the school year. These students were removed from the whole class seating arrangements because their talking, calling out, and off task behaviors were so excessive that it became a serious disruption to their neighbors and the class instruction. My observations prior to the implementation of the Morning Meeting suggested that these students were acting out in order to receive attention from their peers. It is my belief that since they were removed from the group at large, they were trying to find a way to be noticed throughout the day. During a student interview with one of these students, he explained that he feels like he's not part of the group because he has to sit far away from everybody, and it's embarrassing. He explained, "sometimes I'll try to make a funny joke or I'll burst out laughing cause I want to make sure people don't forget about me back here, like 'hello, I'm still sitting back here.'" My observations also suggest that these students' behavior seemed to affect the classroom climate; when they were acting out, it set the stage for other students to join in and become disruptive.

These few with the persistent behavioral issues are the students whom I noticed the greatest difference with after the implementation of the Morning Meeting. I found that the rate at which they were calling out, getting out of their seat, and disrupting the class was much lower. They were more on task during instructional and independent work time. In analyzing my observations recorded in my Teacher Research Journal, *It appears that they are more comfortable participating in the class after being acknowledged and included during this meeting time. Their behavior upon entering the classroom suggests that they really look forward to attending this meeting. At the Morning Meeting, they are equal members of the group. They are following the Morning*

Meeting rules, therefore they are not singled out during this time for their behavior (Teacher Research Journal 4/15/11).

The data suggests that the students felt that they were included members of the group rather than outcaste for their poor behaviors. The peer conflicts throughout the day began to decrease. Observations suggest that student participation increased and student work habits improved, and positive rather negative behaviors began spreading across the room. Students were asked if they noticed a change in their attitude since the Morning Meeting. Twelve out of twenty-one students reported that they did notice a change in their attitude. Three students reflected that the greeting affected their attitude toward learning.

Joel: *“Yes, I have noticed my attitude change since the Morning Meeting. I have started to become more on point and energetic for anything.”*

Tony: *“I have noticed a different attitude during the day I feel since we do the morning meeting. I want to learn more during the whole day.”*

Leah: *“Yes, I have noticed a difference in my attitude since the Morning Meeting. Normally when I come in, I am bored. But after the meeting I get excited to continue with the day.”*

I observed a change in the performance of two students in particular who had frequently experienced problems with behavior and completing work. I recorded an observation of one of the students who has frequent behavior issues and instigates problems with other students, “He’s being more polite and seems to have a more respectful attitude toward his classmates as well as his teachers. He is raising his hand to speak, and he’s said please and excuse me to both his teachers and classmates.”

I recorded observations in my Teacher Research Journal that Devon, a student who typically passively refused to take notes or complete assignments was actually doing work. He was also raising his hand to ask questions during the math test, where in the past he typically denied help and preferred to leave answers blank. He actively participated in note taking and raised his hand to answer questions during the grammar lesson.

In Devon's Student Response Journal, he had originally described his attitude upon entering the room each day as: "I feel mad, sad and depressed when I come in because we can't do anything fun and we get yelled at every 2 seconds. I don't greet my classmates and they don't greet me." In a later journal entry he reported that "I don't have a lot of friends in the class and I don't like talking to people in the classroom." In another journal entry, Devon reported that, "yes, I do notice a change in my attitude since we started the Morning Meeting because I like the Morning Meeting a lot. I guess it's kinda cool to learn about the other kids sometimes. I like being greeted, it feels a little unusual though."

During my Student Discussion Group Meetings, it became apparent that the class was picking up on the general improvement of the class' attitude and participation as well. The students shared during these meetings that they felt the day was running more smoothly because people weren't acting out as much. During this time, the students exhibited their motivation toward learning. The students reported that they were happy to see an improvement in the class' behavior because the day was running more smoothly, rather than enjoying the poor behavior that they could feed off of and aide to diverting instruction.

A True Community is Emerging

Being in the classroom and teaching these students on a daily basis, it became evident that the students were a more inclusive and cohesive group. Student interactions were respectful, and the social groups were expanding as I observed new groups of students interacting during the school day, lunchtime, and recess. Rather than students being singled out or hearing negative reactions spread across the class when partners or groups were called, it became apparent that everyone was accepted.

Students became more aware of the overall environment of the classroom community. Whereas prior to the study, the teachers were regularly redirecting student attention and behaviors, after the study, students began adhering to the general expectations, rules, and routines within the classroom. My observations of student behaviors and reactions to behavioral miscues suggest that students began to identify themselves as more of the group than an individual. Rather than trying to interrupt the flow of the classroom, students worked to maintain the positive atmosphere that each day began with at the Morning Meeting. Students were picking up on nonverbal cues from teachers and peers to redirect behavior and participation. Nearly all students were engaging in the general workflow and expectations upon entering the classroom in the morning: entering quietly, unpacking, getting their homework checked, and working on the morning work until the Morning Meeting was called to begin. The Morning Meeting set a purpose for the students to settle in quickly and quietly, rather than wandering around aimlessly and unproductively trying to avoid the start of the day.

Rather than having to single the students out, it appeared that they became more aware of social cues. Interpersonal relationship skills improved. Students were more

willing to help each other, lend a pencil, or explain an answer. During the Morning Meeting, students would call out, “Hey, we forgot to greet Joey!” They wanted to make sure everyone was included. This evidence suggests that they valued the feeling they received from the greeting and wanted their peers to receive this positive feeling of welcoming as well.

Students Love to Share

When I introduced the Sharing component of the Morning Meeting, the audio recording of the Morning Meeting sessions documented student reactions. You can hear the students’ positive reactions. A few students began clapping, giggling, and other students verbally responded with: “yes!” “cool!” “alright!”

Students were very eager to share information and interact with their classmates. For the first two days that the Morning Meeting Sharing component is introduced, I gave everyone the opportunity to share if they volunteered. When sharing began, I noted in my Teacher Research Journal on April 7, 2011 that:

Currently, the students are sharing general plans for the weekend and after school.

I documented in my Teacher research Journal on April 7, 2011

In MM, I prompted sharing by asking if someone would share what went on at Little Creek last night. Almost everyone raised their hand to share, and this extended past the Little Creek prompt, what they did in general the night before if they had not attended family night.

On April 8, 2011, I noted:

Students are beginning to find commonalities during the Sharing session. Students are raising their hands to share a similar story. Mrs. D shared that she was attending a

function at her church over the weekend, and two other students raised their hand to share what was going on in their own church.

Joel shared that he planned to watch the race over the weekend with his dad, Jayden raised his hand and asked, “do you like Nascar?” Joel responded “yes,” Jayden responded, “Cool, me too!”

During my observations, I noted that during the sharing time:

Students are respectful, quietly listen and wait to be called on, eager to ask questions and make comments, and are sharing appropriate topics and asking relevant questions.

This data suggests that the structured interaction initiated within the Morning Meeting creates positive attitudes towards the start of the school day and the evidence supports that it can have a positive effect on student motivation toward the school day and learning.

Conclusion

The Morning Meeting is a way to initiate structured interaction between students. The analysis of the data collected during this study suggests that this structured interaction has the ability to develop a sense of respect among peers and throughout the classroom environment. It can create a positive start for the day that sets a positive tone for the rest of the school day, improve student attitudes toward learning and motivation, and initiate and encourage student interaction and sharing. Overall, the Morning Meeting has the potential to develop positive attitudes and encourage engagement in classroom routines, enabling students to become more valued and productive members of the classroom community.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

Introduction

This study analyzes the effects of introducing the Morning Meeting into a fifth grade classroom's daily routine. The Morning Meeting is a positive way to begin each school day with structured peer interaction and engagement in the whole group gathering before moving into the day's academic schedule. This Morning Meeting helped foster a sense of community, respect, and developed positive attitudes and motivation toward learning. This chapter discusses the summary of findings, conclusions about the research, limitations of this study, and implications for the field and further research.

Summary of Findings

In studying the effects of establishing a classroom community and analyzing the results of incorporating the Morning Meeting into the daily routine of a fifth grade classroom, I have concluded that the Morning Meeting helps foster a sense of community, helps foster positive peer interactions, and develops positive attitudes and motivation toward learning. This study involved implementing the Morning Meeting as part of the daily routine in the fifth grade classroom for a period of five weeks, and this interactive and engaging start to the day helped set a positive tone for the rest of the school day. Students developed a more positive approach to the school day as they looked forward to this time to come together as a class and communicate with each other. The respectful interaction that was practiced during the Morning Meeting helped develop a tone of respect that extended throughout the school day that was evident in peer interactions and student conduct within the classroom. The sense of respect along with

the students' improved attitudes and motivation toward learning helped lead to the emergence of a true sense of community among the classroom. The students seemed to work more positively as a more cohesive group throughout the school day.

Introducing this structured way to begin the day develops feelings of respect and a sense of students' value within the classroom. Incorporating talk into the through the structured Morning Meeting helps set the stage for students to practice productive interaction with their peers. The structured interaction between students during the Morning Meeting provided opportunities for students helped form new relationships among within the classroom as students were given the opportunity to share and find commonalities among peers. The principles underlying the interaction during the Morning Meeting help establish a sense of respect within the classroom among peers and toward teachers. The student engagement and involvement that the Morning Meeting requires of each member of the classroom right from the start of the day inspires a greater rate of student participation. The students viewed the Morning Meeting as a positive way to begin their school day, and they felt that this positive start could help set a more positive tone for the rest of the day.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, supported with the existing literature and research relating to this study, conclusions can be drawn about the impact of the Morning Meeting, developing a classroom community, and the importance of incorporating talk in the classroom. The Virginia Education Association (2000) defines the classroom community as the "virtual space in the classroom where students feel valued and respected, where care and trust abound, and students have a major role in making

meaningful decisions about their learning and relationships. It is a place of healthy connectedness” (Allen, 2000, p. 1). The Morning Meeting is a successful way to foster a sense community and practice effective communication in the classroom (Power, 1999).

This study supports existing evidence that “the classroom social environment has a significant effect on student attitudes, productivity, engagement in learning, and academic achievement” (Bondy, 2001, p. 145). Developing a community allows students to express themselves and ask more meaningful questions (Ackerman, 1996). It is important to create an atmosphere where students feel safe and supported by their teachers and peers in order to foster an environment conducive to quality learning and engagement. Horsch et al. (2002) explains that while “a classroom environment of criticism and disapproval would have a negative effect on achievement” (p. 367), a supportive classroom environment is much more conducive to learning, because students are able to focus better and are more likely to take risks (Horsch et al., 1999; Horsch et al., 2002).

Establishing a learning community where students feel safe, welcomed, and accepted helps students be in a state of mind more prepared for meaningful learning to take place. Brain research studies cite the interconnection between emotion, cognition, and the ability to make meaning of concepts (Bondy, 2001; Caine & Caine, 1994; Jensen, 1998). Bondy (2001) argues that students must feel safe in order for learning to take place; in fact, “stress and feeling threatened may be the greatest contributors to impaired academic learning” (p. 146). Ultimately, “emotions drive attention and create meaning; they are at the heart of learning” (p. 146).

The need to develop a sense of community within the classroom becomes increasingly important as changes in societal norms place more demands on the schools. We are taking on more responsibilities that used to be reserved for the family and home sector. The Morning Meeting is a component of the Responsive Classroom approach, which values the development of the classroom community and strategically implements components to foster this community. Rimm-Kaufman and Chiu (2007) define the Responsive Classroom as an approach, which “integrates social and academic learning in order to produce classroom environments that are conducive to learning by integrating social and academic learning” (p. 397). This approach helps teachers develop a supportive classroom environment where students feel safe and accepted, therefore creating an environment that increases students’ readiness to learn.

Importance of Standardizing the Greeting for All and Encouraging Interaction

Many of my students shared positive reactions to the daily greeting and structured interaction. Students cited that being greeted helped them feel special, and it made them feel that someone cared that they were there. Kriete (2002) cites the importance of the Morning Meeting Greeting, arguing that all members of the classroom community are greeted equally, and that the greeting is not a privilege for only the popular few.

Hirschfield (2008) argues that, “one of the most important and daunting tasks for the young child is developing the capacity to interpret and to explain the behavior of others (p. 37). Furthermore, Sleeter (2005) argues that students develop ideas of superiority and inferiority through observing social interactions. These facts combined suggest that students are likely to misinterpret social cues based on peer interactions within the classroom, which can produce negative effects in the students developing a

sense of acceptance and approval within the classroom. The evidence from this study, as well as evidence from other studies (Bondy, 2001; Horsch et al., 1999; Horsch et al., 2002), suggest that the structure and principles of respect and equality underlying Morning Meeting conduct can produce positive feelings and develop positive social interactions between students within the classroom.

Student Sharing

The Morning Meeting Sharing component is a valuable tool in fostering the classroom community. The findings of this study suggest that the students found commonalities and learned about each other during the Sharing session of the Morning Meeting. This is important, because the perception of similarity between children and peers is a relevant factor in determining their choice and maintenance of peer relationships (Edmonds et al., 2008). Csak found that storytelling is an important factor in developing community. She found that encouraging students to share different aspects of their life with their peers created a sense of unity rather than difference. Sharing and identifying similarities serves as a necessary tool in the students' quest to be accepted by their peers. By allowing students to openly share, they begin to build upon each others' stories and experiences, and identify similarities amongst themselves. Building not only allows students to identify similarities and build bonds, but "can also develop or cement a sense of community" (Csak, 2002, p. 494).

Talk in the Classroom

Talk can be a powerful tool for learning (Gilles & Pierce, 2003; Csak, 2002; Power, 1999; Ackerman, 1993). Gilles and Pierce (2003) argue that, "the role of talk in the classroom is both a way for students to learn as well as a central window on what is

learned” (p. 56). Further, Schultz (2003) argues the importance of listening to student talk in order to assess the rhythm and balance of the classroom workflow and comprehension, as well as a tool for the teacher to learn about his/her students. Listening to the rhythm and balance of the classroom prior to the implementation of this study had suggested the students’ disengagement. After the implementation of this study, listening during morning work, center work, and instructional time, suggested that the rhythm and balance was much more in synch and the students and teacher were working together as one unit.

Classroom discussion of topics being learned provides an opportunity for students to explore the ideas in a “natural context, and the richness of [this] talk enhances their work” (Power, 1999, p. 37). Furthermore, such talk fosters a deeper understanding and promotes student responsibility for their own learning (Power, 1999). Power (1999) encourages teachers “to find time to talk to [students] in ways that encourage them to think more deeply and respond more thoughtfully” ... “over time, words mark the quality of thinking and learning” (p. 37). She argues the importance of classroom discussions of topics being learned, as they provide the opportunity for students to explore the ideas in a “natural context, and the richness of the talk enhances their work” (p. 37). Such talk fosters a deeper understanding, and promotes student responsibility for their own learning (Power, 1999).

The findings of my study suggest that the Morning Meeting was a successful way to begin incorporating productive talk in the classroom and allowing students to practice effective communication with their peers. Introducing and practicing talk in this structured and respectful way can help students become more comfortable using talk productively in the classroom. Once teachers see this talk being successfully incorporated

in this setting, they can feel more comfortable viewing talk as a tool for instruction and learning rather than a distraction. Developing respectful and effective communication habits in the setting of the Morning Meeting can extend into instructional settings throughout the day.

Limitations

During the implementation of this study, I encountered a number of limitations that could have hindered the implementation and/or the outcomes. One factor limiting this study was that this was not my own classroom. During this study, I was a student teacher, and a guest in the classroom in which this study took place. I was working within a classroom environment and with classroom management strategies and routines that had been established by other teachers with different styles than my own. In addition to being in someone else's classroom, I did not enter this placement until nearly halfway through the school year. The fact that I was not in the classroom from the beginning of the school year could have limited this study, because by the time I became a part of this classroom, the management rules and instructional routines were already been established. Beginning the day with the Morning Meeting was a new routine introduced to both the teachers and students mid-year, and everyone had to adjust to this change. Another limitation was that there was not as much time as I would have liked to conduct this study. With more time, I could have collected more data, and there would have been a longer period of time for the classroom community to develop.

Implications for the Field

After reviewing the findings of this study and considering the evidence suggested by existing research and studies in this field, it is my hope that teachers will make the

commitment to foster a sense of community in the classroom and invite the use of productive talk into the classroom. I hope that in reviewing this study, teachers will better understand the importance of addressing the social climate within the classroom and work to develop an environment conducive to learning. I hope that teachers will consider the importance of helping students develop positive attitudes toward learning in order to improve student participation and engagement.

The implications of this study support the wide body of research suggesting the importance of developing a sense of community within the classroom and its positive effects on student attitudes and motivation.

Suggestions for Future Research

The conclusions I have drawn from this study support previous research that has been conducted in the field of education. Incorporating the Morning Meeting helps develop a sense of community, respect, and positive attitudes and motivation toward learning, and it seems to show similar outcomes to findings in other research studies. I strongly feel that there is much to be learned from further investigation of implementing the Morning Meeting as part of the daily classroom routine.

Due to the limitations of this study, it would be beneficial for future researchers to incorporate the Morning Meeting from beginning of the school year. Although not incorporating the Morning Meeting until near the end of the school year was cited as a limitation in this study, a midyear implementation could be beneficial tool for future researchers to use. Waiting to incorporate the Morning Meeting midyear would allow future researchers studying community and talk in the classroom to compare student

participation and interaction before and after the implementation of the structured Morning Meeting where students practice constructive interaction.

Closing Thoughts

As societal norms continue to change, schools continue to take on additional challenges to meeting the academic needs of students. It becomes increasingly important to develop a sense of community in the classroom and help develop the classroom as a safe-haven for students. There is an important link between student attitudes, emotion, and the ability to create meaning. Fostering a sense of community and inviting talk in the classroom are powerful tools to develop positive attitudes toward school and enhance student learning. The Morning Meeting is a powerful way of meeting both challenges of fostering a sense of community and successfully introducing and practicing the use of productive talk in the classroom.

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Appendix A
Student Survey - Community

How do YOU define/describe the word “community?”

**For the following questions, refer to your definition above and
compare your definition to the way you view your
classroom environment/atmosphere.**

Do you think the word “community” applies to your classroom and/or school.

Would you describe your classroom as a “community?” Why or why not?
How does the word “community” *fit* or *not fit* your classroom’s description?

Appendix B
Student Survey Two – Classmates

*Think about the following questions regarding classroom seating.
Please answer honestly and with as much detail as you can provide.*

For the past few months you've been sitting in the same assigned seats. You've had the same neighbors and have been sitting around the same group of people. How did you feel when Miss Giannantonio told you that your seats were being switched and that you were moving into groups? How did you feel about the idea of having new neighbors and a new classroom set up?

Were you nervous or anxious to find out your groups and new neighbors? Why do you think you felt this way?

Do you think that your neighbors can have an effect on your learning in the classroom? Why or why not?

Do you think that your neighbors can have an effect on your attitude towards coming to school each day? Why or why not?

Do you think that your attitude towards school can have an effect on your learning? Why or why not?

Appendix C

Student Discussion Group Question Guide 1

I wasn't here in the beginning of the year; was there anything special that was done as like an "icebreaker" activity?

Did you know everyone in your class? How? How well?

What about the new students? Anything done to introduce them to the school/classroom?

Think back to that first day, try to remember and describe how you felt in a brand new classroom with brand new classmates....

How can this effect your school day/learning?

Can you think how the relationships evolved over the school year? Something particular or just time of randomly interacting with each other?

What specific things make you "worry about what your peers are thinking?"

How do you view yourself in the classroom?

Discussion about "community"

How do you typically greet your peers on a daily basis?

Do you greet everyone? When is the first time actually coming in contact with someone?

Would you say that you go more than 10 minutes once you're in the room before talking to any of your classmates?

How do you feel when someone greets you, specifically by name?

What factors would you say play a role in the students you become friendly with in class? (example, seating, grouping...)

Why do you think I'm asking you about all of this? What might its importance be?

Appendix D
Student Discussion Group Question Guide 2

4/14/11

Have you noticed any differences within the classroom? (interaction, attitudes, etc.)

In specials?

In lunch/recess?

Any increase/decrease in the sense of “community?”

Any difference in your personal approach/attitude upon entering the classroom each morning?

How can I improve the MM to continue to help the classroom grow?

Any suggestions?