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**CLASS MEETINGS: BUILDING COMMUNITY  
IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This teacher action research study investigated the experiences of the classroom teacher and students when holding weekly class meetings within a middle-level social studies classroom. Fifteen eighth grade students participated in the study conducted in an urban 6<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade school containing 318 students in the northeastern United States. Methods of gathering data included teacher observation, student surveys, student open-ended responses, and behavior and academic checklists. Methods of data analysis included coding of field log, surveys, and open-ended questions, development of theme statements, and the writing of reflective memos. The students participated in weekly thirty minute class meetings throughout the study. Findings suggest that during a class meeting students were able to share their feelings and perceptions about a variety of issues, examine their behaviors and relationships with others, and felt like they were solving problems important to them. Students also believe class meetings are beneficial to their behavior and academic achievement. Finally, class meetings provided the teacher with the opportunity to share his or her feelings and perceptions with the students.

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## **RESEARCHER STANCE**

### **My Story: The Impact of 4.6 Miles**

4.6 miles is the exact measured distance from the door of my house to the door of my school. But before I began my first and only teaching job I was completely unaware that I was about to enter into a different environment than what I had been accustomed to my entire life. Even as a first year teacher, I could see the challenges were to go far beyond teaching my students social studies. Teaching in an inner city, culturally unique, and high-poverty school has provided for a rich, diverse, and challenging teaching experience. Student attendance, parental involvement, and the students' home environments are all issues that impact and affect my classroom. The unique lives of my seventh and eighth grade students and their many challenging behaviors often spill into my classroom. How would I learn to convince my students to care and want to be in my classroom at all? Very few of my students could see any connection between the daily existence of their lives and the school's official curriculum as it was experienced within my four classroom walls. This initial lack of connection, caring, and investment from my students in their school, my subject matter, my classroom, and yes, even in me was a definite recipe for a classroom management nightmare. It did not take long for me to realize I needed to find a better way to help my students become invested in my class, my physical classroom, their

peers, and their school in order to help control unwanted student behaviors and provide an environment in which actual learning could and would occur.

I followed the path of many new teachers at this point – I begged and pleaded for help. My assigned mentor, a high school social studies teacher, passed along his strategy for building a positive classroom environment: class meetings. These, he insisted, would offer me the opportunity to connect with my students in a way that is not likely to occur during directed or formal instruction. Class meetings demonstrate to my classes that we are part of a community of learners and a community of care. This then creates a relationship within the classroom where students do not want to cause problems or issues, simply out of mutual respect for one another and respect for me and my classroom. Since first adopting class meetings during a pilot teacher action research study I have, as a matter of record a minimum number of administrative referrals, almost no students removed from my classroom, and have never had a physical altercation between students during my teaching time. This decrease in classroom disruptions increases the amount of teaching time in each class period. However, it does more than that. Class meetings allow me to implement a structured, consistent, routine that helps my students know exactly what to expect when they enter my room, which is something many do not experience once they leave the school building and enter their home environment. Class meetings have helped to bridge

the massive chasm I initially experienced within the 4.6 miles between my home and school.

However, class meetings are all too likely the first activity to be eliminated from weekly lesson plans as high stakes testing, forced curriculum, and disruptions to the school calendar affect teaching time. Once the school calendar arrives at mid-November, and Fall Break, Winter Break, and the threat of snow days loom ahead, I have trouble continuing to make time for class meetings in my weekly lesson plans. I can't help but notice, though, that this is also the time when student motivation and behavior tend to decrease. This decrease may partly be due to the excitement of the upcoming 'Break' season and partly due to the fact that the newness of the school year has worn off.

Unfortunately, I've seen this trend continue through the winter months as the school focus shifts to preparing students for the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) test. As class meetings are removed from my weekly plans, I find that many of the initial discipline and management issues I had when I first started teaching are beginning to creep back into my classroom. I know I need to take action to keep this trend from continuing. I have a deep belief that consistent class meetings help to create a productive classroom community where discipline and management issues are greatly reduced, and students are therefore able to focus on learning. Hence I have set out to determine the observed and reported

experiences of students in my middle-level social studies classroom when I  
conduct consistent class meetings.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Class Meeting: What is it?**

A class meeting, by definition, is a time set aside within the classroom schedule that is specifically designated for building community and strengthening student to student relationships as well as student to teacher relationships.

According to Nelsen, Lott, & Glenn, who have researched positive discipline techniques for preschoolers, adolescents, and students within a classroom (2000), these class meetings are designed to teach students necessary relationship life skills that are important and often neglected in the academic community.

However, the method and means for carrying out a class meeting vary greatly depending upon the strategies a teacher wishes to utilize.

#### ***Purpose***

The purpose of a class meeting can vary greatly from class to class, depending on the age of the student, classroom schedule, desired frequency of meetings, and overall goals and objectives of the class meeting. In the elementary setting class meetings can also be identified as Morning Meetings and are utilized with concrete goals in mind, such as establishing a predictable routine for the morning or reviewing the schedule of the day. However, there are larger goals and purposes for the Morning (Class) Meeting at this level. These include setting a tone of respect and trust within a classroom, creating a sense of belonging

within the students, and offering the opportunity to combine social, emotional and intellectual learning (Kriete, 2002).

In a secondary setting often the class meeting is an integral part of a larger positive classroom discipline plan. The purpose of the class meeting is to collaboratively establish norms for behavior, develop a sense of community, and maintain positive communication skills between all members of the community (Caring School Community, 2007). The class meeting, if driven by the teacher, can be utilized to reinforce schedule concerns, review classroom procedures before they become neglected, and connect with student achievement and concerns. If driven by the student, the class meeting can become a time for students to solve problems presented by classmates, work through issues and concerns that may be affecting the entire school, or discuss current events occurring that often are not discussed within a core curriculum subject. In their third published book about positive discipline, Nelsen, Lott, & Glenn suggested (2000) that ideally, there should be a combination of teacher control and student input for a class meeting on a secondary level to achieve its designated objectives and goals.

### ***Rules/Structure***

While the purpose of a class meeting can vary depending upon student age and the overall objectives of the meeting, the rules and structure can also vary from meeting to meeting. Most educators find a meeting format that they decide

works best for them after experimenting with meetings. However, there are a few rules to the class meeting format that several researchers agree should be utilized by all. First, class meetings should be run in the form of a circle or square. The circle or square allows everyone (including the teacher) within the class to see the faces of all participating in the Meeting (Gathercoal, 2000; Nelsen, Lott, & Glenn, 2000). This allows everyone easy communication while no one member of the community is placing themselves in a position of power. One a seventh grade participant in class meetings explains: “I think if you just sit down at tables and on chairs and discuss things it doesn’t really work. It doesn’t have as much effect, but if you can see them talking and hear them really well you can concentrate more” (Tew, 1998, p. 27). It is important that the entire community become part of the class meeting circle, including the teacher. This ‘circling up’ gives all students in the class a unique opportunity during a class meeting to witness their teacher as an active part in the class meeting process and building the community. The teacher sits in the circle, not outside or in the middle of the circle. According to Gathercoal, who has conducted research on holding democratic class meetings and establishing a classroom that utilizes judicious discipline (2000), this provides the teacher the opportunity to model respect and trust during a class meeting by actively listening to and valuing their students’ ideas. Often, this provides students with one, and potentially their only, opportunity to connect with an adult in their school environment.

Another consistent rule to a class meeting is that students should never be coerced to participate in a class meeting (Gathercoal, 2000). Forcing student participation may create a climate of distrust within the community, which would obviously be in direct conflict with the objective of creating a sense of trust and belonging to the community. Aside from these two basic rules, the class meeting rules and structure can vary greatly. The frequency and duration of class meetings is often dependent upon the age of the students, the objectives of the class meetings, and the active listening and participation level of the students. Strategies that may enhance the effectiveness of a class meeting include statements of appreciation and compliments, use of a talking tool to control multiple conversations at once, student agenda setting, teacher agenda setting, recording class meeting topics and events in a journal, and setting a goal or objective for each class meeting (Gathercoal, 2000; Nelsen, Lott, & Glenn, 2000).

### **Classroom Community**

Classroom Community is “characterized by attributes such as trust and respect for one another, feelings of personal safety, and common goals for exploring issues and course content together” (Larson, 1999). Class meetings are an integral part of developing a community of interconnected students that works to improve classroom management and the students’ social acceptance. In a study where classroom meetings were used over a period of 12 years, Feldhusen & Feldhusen (2004) found an improvement in classroom operations and an increase

in classroom morale. Throughout this study meetings were held on a weekly basis and lasted about 25 to 35 minutes. The meetings focused on identifying problems and solutions to classroom concerns. The meetings also focused on identifying methods to improve classroom learning. In a separate study there was also found a strong connection between a proficient classroom management system and the absence of bullying (Rowan, 2007). Utilizing class meetings to create an effective classroom management plan which will develop a classroom community may also work towards the prevention of bullying and other social and behavioral issues.

### ***Classroom Management***

There are many different methods suggested today to improve one of teacher's greatest challenges: effectively developing a classroom management system. Class meetings are a method for the teacher and the students to work as a group to establish the classroom rules and procedures, the heart of the classroom management system. The students and teacher, as a community, are much more likely to live by the laws within the classroom because all in the community were involved in establishing the laws (McCall, Janssen, & Riederer, 2008).

According to a study completed by Kariuki and Davis where class meetings were used in four language arts classes with 113 students as a positive discipline technique to decrease disruption during transition times (2000), class meetings empower students to make choices for their community, which then creates a

situation where the students and the teacher are on the same team. In classrooms where teachers authoritatively decide the rules the students and teacher are on opposite sides, which often lead to power struggles (Kariuki & Davis, 2000). Teachers and students who act as a social unit to form goals and rules work together throughout the school year to achieve those goals and maintain the established rules (Kariuki & Davis, 2000). According to Horsch, Chen, and Nelson (1999):

Developed at the beginning of the school year, rules are positive statements that establish guidelines and expectations for classroom behavior; they are the cornerstones of classroom life and are used to encourage conversation and problem solving related to ethical issues that arise at school. (p. 224)

In another study Landau (2000) found that the teacher did not need to make up new rules or try to eliminate unexpected behaviors, but rather she simply needed to remind the students of their previously agreed upon rules. The class meeting system also gives teachers and students the opportunity to not only mutually decide upon the rules, but also develop an entire classroom management system that will work for them. Kariuki and Davis (2000), who have focused their research on class meetings on the middle school level, found that as part of a management system students can create a menu of rewards that can be utilized if an agreed upon behavior criteria are met. In their study, they examined the

relationship between positive discipline techniques and classroom transition times (Kariuki & Davis, 2000). Class meetings were one of their suggested positive discipline techniques. These meetings allowed students to discuss behaviors, set goals, choose positive reinforcement rewards, and make suggestions for improvement. They found that middle school students that participate in solving classroom management problems during a class meeting had a great success in alleviating interruptions in the classroom (Kariuki & Davis, 2000). In Croom's classroom, the entire class discussed together how to decrease the amount of interruptions and established a goal that the group would work towards the following day. The class charted their interruptions over a time period of six weeks and found a significant decrease – from 33 per day to 13 (Croom & Davis, 2006). Utilizing a class meeting to identify the problem and set a goal, provided the framework for working toward that goal as a community effort which resulted in a more effectively managed classroom.

In the early 1980's many states examined the need to increase the length of the school year, but most states decided against this plan of action since increasing students' academic learning time was the key to increasing student achievement, not increasing the number of calendar days in a school year (Kariuki & Davis, 2000). Students' academic learning time is, however, frequently disrupted by discipline issues, which decreases the opportunity for students to demonstrate achievement (Kariuki & Davis, 2000). In classrooms where class

meetings are regularly practiced, research has shown a decrease in disruptive behavior as well as a decrease in the need for punitive discipline measures by the teacher (Croom & Davis, 2006; Nelson, 2000). A research study completed by Gathercoal found that only 6% of the students who participated in class meetings demonstrated rebellious behaviors (2000). In addition, 75% of the participating students ranked high in autonomy (Gathercoal, 2000). This is not to say that classrooms that utilize class meetings do not have some problems; however it has also been found that students in classrooms where class meetings are a part of the regular routine have an increase in students who utilize peaceful conflict resolution skills to solve their problems (Landau & Gathercoal, 2000). Landau (2000), for example, found that during one class meeting a student became upset with another for the use of a derogatory name. The incident led to a discussion within the rules and limits of a class meeting and the issue was resolved without lashing out in a verbal or physical way. Students who participate in class meetings are also more likely to help supervise their classroom, encouraging their peers to stay on task (Kariuki & Davis, 2000). Students may take a leadership role in encouraging disruptive peers to remember and follow the community-established rules (Kariuki & Davis, 2000). Overall, class meetings have been found to improve the daily routines and procedures of a classroom as well as aiding in the larger issues of conflict that can sometimes develop within a classroom.

### *Social Acceptance*

The classroom setting is just one of the social venues for students in a world filled with immediate contact and constant virtual interaction. This places the classroom teacher in a position of working with students who may not have the appropriate social interaction skills necessary to contribute positively in the classroom setting. An integral part of the class meeting format is to give the class an opportunity to work as a community or a social unit where acceptance and understanding are key (Horsch, Chen, & Nelson, 1999). When students are concerned or suspect that comments within a classroom may be mocked or used against them outside of class they are less likely to share their ideas (Larson, 1999). Class meetings give students a “safe venue for bringing up concerns, listening to others’ points of view, sorting through possible options and outcomes, and deciding what’s best for everyone” (Leachman & Victor, 2003). In extensive research, focusing on setting aside time within a classroom to discuss and share ideas and opinions that included classroom observations, recall interviews, and self-ratings, completed by Do & Schallert (2004), class meeting discussions encourage students to explain what they are thinking and feeling in a way that can be understood by their peers. These discussions also require the students within the classroom to listen to their classmates’ and teacher’s opinions and perspectives (Do & Schallert, 2004). The act of listening, talking, and understanding others’ perspectives during a class meeting creates a sense of

belonging and value (Gathercoal, 2000). Through class discussions during class meetings an environment of caring is created within a classroom. This environment of caring demonstrates to the students that the classroom community is invested in each student as an individual, but also in the success of the community as a whole (Goldstein, 1998).

After reviewing questionnaires and surveys given to students after a nine week module, it was found that in classrooms where class meetings are the norm, 81% of students feel comfortable enough in the classroom environment to share information they would not share in other classrooms (Tew, 1998). Students also feel more secure, not only in the classroom, but also in the larger world because of the caring and open communication skills they learn in the class meeting format (Leachman & Victor, 2003). Olweus (2005), a leader in the field of bullying prevention, whose writings, research, and bullying prevention programs are taught in schools world-wide, has found that this increase in comfort and social acceptance of their peers leads to a decline in reported bullying incidents. During class meetings, students also tend to form an attachment with the teacher in their classroom community. Those students with an attachment to an adult are more likely to have positive relationships with others and feel secure enough to explore the world around them (Leachman & Victor, 2003).

Classroom teachers who utilize class meetings also reap the benefits of students who, through an increased comfort level, are willing to take risks and

chances in their learning. Students who participate in class meetings are more willing to read out loud and risk making mistakes in front of class mates (Nelson, 2000). The social acceptance that is borne from class meetings also made students feel like they could more easily ask the teacher and other students for help than in their other classes (Miller, 1999). A strong sense of community and social acceptance also leads to students who are able to work with others in a group setting, which will carry over to working with their co-workers in the adult world (Miller, 1999). The positive classroom community and social acceptance do not end with the students. Students who participate in class meetings also indicate that they have a positive relationship with their teacher and feel accepted and encouraged by their teacher (Tew, 1998).

### **Student Achievement**

In the world of high stakes testing, rigor, and standards, Class meetings also work to improve and increase student motivation and higher order thinking skills. According to a study completed by Johnson and Johnson and quoted by Miller (1999), “a sense of classroom community results in greater learning, retention, and critical thinking...greater employability and career success” (p. 5).

### ***Student Motivation***

The classroom meeting creates an environment where students feel they are an active part of a greater community. Once the community has set the rules and procedures for the classroom it can begin to focus on the learning styles and

preferred learning methods for the community. The community (keeping in mind that the community is the teacher and the students) often selects readings and topics for discussion. Because of this active participation, there is greater student motivation to take part in the assignments and discussions. In a study completed by Tew, only one student in the Circle Time (class meeting) group did not enjoy the selected class meeting lessons because he or she “knew everything and it wasn’t much fun” (1998). Class meetings offer an excellent opportunity for children to participate in the operations of the classroom, advance their best and creative ideas, identify and solve problems, and advance their own learning (Feldhusen & Feldhusen, 2004). In classrooms that build community through Class meetings, there is an increase in active student listening during classroom discussions (Do & Schallert, 2004). This active listening to their classmates during the class meeting process increases the students’ ability to actively listening to the content matter as well (Do & Schallert, 2004). The community has worked to create a feeling of acceptance and safety, which increases the students’ motivation to perform in all types of classroom activities. Children who participate in a class meeting learn and practice skills such as speaking in front of others, actively listening to classmates and asking appropriate questions, and working cooperatively (Horsch, Chen, & Nelson, 1999). These skills are often difficult for students to learn and continue to practice; however these skills make taking risks in other subjects and areas easier (Horsch, Chen, & Nelson, 1999).

This increased motivation to perform in class and take risks extends to reading out loud, creative writing, and also high stakes testing (Simone, 2001). The class meeting format allows students to deal specifically with issues that might concern or stress them when dealing with the high-stakes testing environment. This feeling of community and acceptance provides the encouragement and motivation many students need to perform to the best of their ability on tests of any kind.

### ***Higher Order Thinking***

Higher order thinking skills are defined as those skills that require the ability to synthesize, analyze, and evaluate information presented to the students rather than simply identify or recall information presented to them. Teachers work to increase opportunities for students to practice higher order thinking skills. Class meetings, through their democratic discussion process, require students to think creatively to solve problems and continue discussions. During a class meeting, students are also required to maintain positive communication, build upon, and expand upon the opinions and thoughts of their classmates (Caring School Community, 2007). This ability to analyze, synthesize, and add to another's thoughts is an example of the higher order thinking skills developed during a class meeting. Class meetings often utilize goal setting skills that require students to participate in problem solving skills and increase student autonomy (Landau & Gathercoal, 2000). Class meetings also create authentic learning environments and situations where the citizens of the class are involved in

problem solving skills to solve real-world problems and problems within their immediate community (McCall, Janssen, & Riederer, 2008). Croom and Davis (2006) found that students began relying on themselves and each other to solve their problems, rather than going immediately to the teacher to solve the problem for them (Croom & Davis, 2006). In classes where class meetings are utilized, problem solving skills are also extended to include effective conflict resolution skills. Listening to their peers and developing a plan of action or actions to be taken to best solve the problem is an integral part of the class meeting process. As an example, in one Minnesota classroom the students agreed that they were not functioning well for a specialist teacher. They discussed the why they felt things were not working well within the classroom and what actions could be taken to resolve the problem (Landau & Gathercoal, 2000). Decision making skills, goal setting, and problem solving skills are all utilized throughout the class meeting process that works to increase and improve students' higher order thinking skills.

### **Summary**

Overall, class meetings have been found to have a tremendous positive effect on many aspects of a classroom. Classrooms where class meetings are utilized see a decrease in disruptive behaviors, an increase in respectful interactions, and an increase in peaceful conflict resolution skills, which all work together to create a more peaceful classroom environment (Kariuki & Davis,

2000; Feldhusen & Feldhusen, 2004). Students feel accepted by their peers and their teacher, which decreases reported incidents of bullying, but also increases student motivation, risk taking, and achievement (Olweus, 2005; Leachman & Victor, 2003). Class meetings provide the community of students the opportunity to work together through democratic discussions to assess a problem, develop several methods to solve the problem, and eventually come to a mutually agreed upon conclusion about which method to enact to solve the problem (Landau & Gathercoal, 2000). The class meeting builds higher order thinking skills necessary for the achievement of students in all phases of their lives (Caring School Community, 2007). The benefits and rewards of conducting class meetings go far beyond a teacher solving immediate discipline concerns. Class meetings work to create a peaceful, supportive, accepting community that is beneficial to the student, teacher, and entire school community as a whole.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Setting**

This study took place in an 8<sup>th</sup> grade social studies classroom in an inner-city school in eastern Pennsylvania. The school is comprised of 99% Latino students and 97% of the student population participates in the free or reduced lunch program. The school includes grades 6 through 12 with a total student population of 318 students. Each grade averages 48 students split evenly between two classes. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes are grouped heterogeneously with student social interactions kept in mind while placing the students. Individualized Education Plan (IEP) students are placed in one section and English as a Second Language (ESL) students are placed in the other section to help ensure that students receive the extra services they need. The classroom contains individual desks for each student arranged in a stadium style format, which allows the students to face each other during class. There are two white boards in the room used for announcements and a word wall. The room is also equipped with a Smart Board which is used for classroom notes, geography, and video lessons.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were students in my 8<sup>th</sup> grade social studies class. Of the 24 students enrolled in the class, 15 opted to sign on as research participants, including 9 girls and 6 boys. This 8<sup>th</sup> grade section included three students identified as English language learners. One of these students was a

Level 2 ESL and the other two students were Level 3. This section did not include any students with an IEP.

### **Procedures and Data Collection**

To collect data for this teacher action research study, I utilized the procedures and methods listed below:

- I administered a pre-study survey to the students in the classroom concerning their feelings of classroom community, classroom management, discipline, and social relationship (Appendix A). The pre-study survey titled “Measuring Classroom Community” was found in research completed by Miller (1999).
- I began conducting class meetings on a weekly basis, with a limit of 30 minutes per class meeting session.
- The first class meeting conducted in my study specifically focused on class meeting rules, classroom procedures, and creating a functioning community.
- Consecutive class meetings followed the standard class meeting format but allowed for student-chosen topics. Class meetings topics were only teacher-driven if the students are unable to focus their discussion.
- During each class meeting I completed a written observation regarding topics of conversation, student participation, and on-task behaviors and discussions. All of these observations were organized in my field log. My field log was kept in a double-entry journal format throughout the study and was coded to

record topics of conversations of the class meetings, behavioral observations during class meetings, and student involvement in class meetings. I utilized the left side of the double-entry journal to record behaviors, statements, and interactions that were taking place during the class meeting. This side of the journal was specifically used to record exactly what was happening and what was being said during the class meeting. It was in this section of the field log where I recorded class meeting topics, number of appreciations, and general class comments. At a later time I would then go back and use the right side of the double-entry journal to record my feelings, impressions, and opinions of the events that transpired during the class meeting. This double-entry journal format allowed me to record the participant conversations and behaviors during the class meeting then use the other portion of the journal to record, after reflection, my understanding of the events that occurred (MacLean & Mohr, 1999). The double-entry portion of my field log was added to on a weekly basis as class meetings were held. My field log also contained pages of journal reflections based on the distribution of surveys and open-ended questions. Because I was conducting surveys and open-ended questions at multiple times throughout my study I thought it was important to make notes and reflect on the actual process of completing the surveys and questions as well as my students attention to the task and completion of the task. This allowed for me to make adjustments in procedure and directions when

completing these tasks for the second time during the study. Finally, my field log was also used to catalog all of the completed checklists (both behavior and motivation), surveys (both pre and post), and both sets of open-ended questions. This information was maintained in a separate section of the field log than my double-entry journal as to keep the log organized and easy to use throughout my study. My field log really was as Ely suggests, a “repository of all the data that have been gathered” (1991, p. 74).

- Throughout my study I completed two separate checklists on a weekly basis. One checklist monitored behaviors (Appendix B) and tracked both the positive and negative behaviors that occurred during instructional time (Croom & Davis, 2006). I did not, however, use the list to track the behavior during class meetings. Instead I used the class meeting observations recorded in the field log was used to track behavior during the class meetings). The behavior checklist included behaviors such as calling out, gum chewing, invading personal space, raising hand to speak, and polite interaction with classmates. I also used a checklist to track weekly completion of student homework, extra credit, and overall grade point average (Appendix C).
- I also had my students complete a post-study survey at the end of the research study. The class completed a survey (identical to the pre-study survey), that specifically asked questions relating to classroom community, classroom

management and rewards procedures, and social relationships within the classroom (Appendix D).

- Students completed two writing prompts throughout my research study. The first prompt was at approximately the mid-point of the study and the second prompt was given at the end of the research time (Appendix E, Appendix F). The mid-study prompt asked for opinions concerning the effectiveness of class meetings on the students' social interactions, behavioral patterns, and academic achievement. The responses to this prompt were in essay format. The prompt at the end of the study asked for opinions concerning the effectiveness of class meetings. For this prompt I asked the students to respond in list format.

### **Trustworthiness Statement**

For me, teaching and researching are by definition inter-related. Each new practice or procedure requires trial and error, recording the results of that trial and error, and adapting teaching methods to reflect analysis of data. Throughout the planning and data collection phases of my action research thesis program at Moravian College, I tried to incorporate many different ways to increase the validity and trustworthiness of my study.

Initially, I obtained approval from the Moravian College Human Subjects Instructional Review Board for my study. This formal approval allowed me the ability to proceed with the process of obtaining all of the necessary consent forms.

Both my principal completed a consent form and the students within the classroom also completed a consent form (Appendix G, Appendix H). These consent forms clearly stated that there would be no penalty for not participating in the study or any penalty for withdrawal from the study (Hendricks, 2009). These letters also specifically outlined the timeline (from the beginning of the school year through December 24, 2009) for the study and ensured the anonymity of the all participants. I also explicitly explained my research to my students, allowing for questions, and reinforcing the fact that they are active participants in the study. I informed my students that any questions, concerns, or suggestions about the research would be welcomed and responded to. This was consistently reinforced throughout the study which helped to build a relationship of trust with my students throughout the research process (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2005).

I assured the validity of my data by using numerous data sources throughout the action research process. I kept a field log where researcher observations were recorded during my research. These observations included as much thick description of what was transpiring throughout the action research process as possible. The field log also provided me the opportunity to reflect consistently upon how the study was progressing and what adaptations needed to be made. As indicated earlier, this was not the only data source that was utilized. Students also completed a pre and post survey concerning their feelings toward classroom community and relationships within the classroom (Appendix A,

Appendix D). In addition to the survey, I also utilized a checklist for behavior frequency (Appendix B). This checklist included both positive and negative behaviors that are often exhibited during regular classroom instruction. This checklist monitored students' weekly grade average, homework completed, and extra credit assignments completed (Appendix C). These checklists were both used throughout the study to provide potential class meeting topics. I was also hoping the checklists would demonstrate an increase in motivation (completed assignments and extra credit), and increase in positive behaviors listed on the checklist, and a decrease in negative behaviors listed on the checklist. I also utilized a checklist to monitor academic success. Finally, students completed two open-ended questions regarding their opinions about class meetings (Appendix E, Appendix F). By utilizing the above mentioned sources throughout the research process I believe I provided a sufficient amount sources that allowed me to effectively triangulate my data. According to Hendricks (2009), triangulation is "the process in which multiple forms of data are collected and analyzed" (p. 80). These multiple forms of data provided me with a way to evaluate and monitor my research throughout the research process. I utilized the checklists and open-ended responses throughout my study to determine class meeting topics and also evaluate if student recorded statements during the class meetings reflected their opinions about class meetings in the surveys and open-ended questions. The

ability to triangulate was a necessary step in helping me answer “why” questions and one that increased the credibility of my findings (Hendricks, 2009).

One of the most challenging parts of teacher action research was remaining open to any and all of the potential outcomes witnessed throughout the research process. While I was hoping to witness positive results from the consistent use of class meetings within my classroom, I also needed to be prepared to see other results. To do so, I routinely reviewed and discussed what I was learning with my teacher inquiry support group.

## **MY RESEARCH STORY**

### **Introduction**

A day in the life of an inner-city middle school teacher is one that consistently involves questioning teaching methods, learning styles, and management plans. Student achievement, motivation and interest in the workings of the classroom require active trial, error, and reflection. This trial, error, and reflection is the motivation behind my research story involving the consistent use of class meetings within my classroom.

### **Week 1: Decisions, Decisions**

At the start of the school year, my students and I spend a tremendous amount of time working on classroom procedures, developing rules, getting to know each other, and diving into our first class meeting. It was during this week that I also needed to select a class in which to conduct my teacher research study. Having four classes to choose from (two 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes and two 7<sup>th</sup> grade classes) I found myself in a position of trying to determine which class would benefit most from my planned inquiry. As the first week progressed, I realized that because I had already established a previous relationship with many of my 8<sup>th</sup> grade students as their 7<sup>th</sup> grade social studies teacher, the foundation was already laid to begin our work on class meetings together. Since the study was to take place at the beginning of the school year, I felt this previous relationship would be a useful tool in gaining the interest from the students to serve as research

participants and who would return the required consent forms. So, one key decision in many ways took care of itself.

I now was faced with the decision of which 8<sup>th</sup> grade group to choose. I decided to reserve my decision until after the first class meeting where we would set up the format, rules, and procedures that we would use throughout the school year ahead. As had been the case with most first-week class meetings, both meetings went smoothly. I introduced the basic class meeting format and procedures. We practiced ‘circling up’ so we could do so quickly and quietly without classroom disruption. I demonstrated the sharing of ‘appreciations,’ which is how each class meeting begins. I shared examples like, “I appreciate Joe for giving me a piece of gum,” and “I appreciate Stacy for helping me with my homework.” I took the time to explain that appreciations are just a simple way of saying thank you to a classmate. I also shared nonexamples of appreciations, as I feel this is a requirement to eliminate potential problems before they arise. I explained that an appreciation like, “I appreciate Kevin for keeping my deepest darkest secret” is probably best kept private since all it does is make everyone in the classroom wonder what that secret is and how they can get Kevin to share it. I also very specifically demonstrated a ‘back-handed’ appreciation. This is a term I have developed for the appreciation that sounds somewhat like, “I want to appreciate Susan for wearing that top today; it’s so much nicer than the hateful

thing she wore yesterday.” This is obviously not meant to appreciate Susan, but rather to ‘cut’ her down in some way.

Once the process of appreciations has been established we move on to the very few class meeting rules that I enforce. The first is the use of Captain Hook, the talking tool for class meetings. If a student doesn’t have “the Hook” then he or she shouldn’t be talking. I also enforced the rule that comments that are made in a class meeting need to be respectful. Having questions or concerns about other people in the school is totally appropriate; however those questions and concerns needed to be voiced in a respectful, appropriate way. At this point I mentioned that there is never a reason in a class meeting to say anything about another person’s physical features. Finally, and this was extremely important, I emphasize the fact that class meetings are not for airing drama or nit-picking at other students. My intent for the first class meeting was to build a cohesive unit, so phrases like, “Alice needs to mind her business and not talk behind my back,” or “Jenny is two-faced” are not to be mentioned in the class meeting format. This is often the hardest rule for the students to follow, but it is the one that I am most adamant about.

After successful first class meetings with both groups I was still torn between which group to choose. There were students in each group whom I knew would contribute to class meetings in a positive way, and there were students in each group whom I knew would be likely to challenge the conventions we had

just established. Ultimately, I decided that choosing my homeroom would be the best choice for my action research study. This decision was primarily based on the simple fact that I felt the time in homeroom and space on my homeroom board could be used to remind students to bring in consent forms. Week 1 came to an end, decisions had been made, consent forms handed out, and I was ready to really begin my role as a teacher action researcher.

### **Week 2: This is why I Became a Teacher**

I utilized the time before the week's class meeting to distribute the Pre-study survey. All students in the class completed the survey in approximately fifteen minutes. I did need to provide some vocabulary assistance to some students who were unsure of the meanings of words within the survey including *opinion*, *seriously*, and *valued*. Overall, though, I was happy with the survey process. The students were focused throughout the survey time period, asking appropriate and relevant questions. I had quite a few students who expressed the desire to "do well," at which point I reminded them that all they needed to do to "do well" was answer the questions as honestly as possible. I was happy to see that a new student to the school, one who did not know many of the other students, answered many of the questions with the option "unsure." This seemed to me to be the most logical response to someone new to the environment. I did run into one major problem with the pre-study survey. Many students circled multiple answers in an attempt to demonstrate that sometimes they agree and

sometimes they disagree. I felt it necessary to address this in the distribution of the post-study survey. Upon examining the survey responses I was happy to see that 93% of the survey participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that, “When I’m having trouble with my work, at least one classmate will try to help” (See Question 11, Table 1). Also, 71% agreed or strongly agreed with the notion that the teacher and students decide together what the rules will be (see Question 21, Table 1). I was also pleased to see that questions of a negative nature had very low percentages of “Agree” or “Strongly Agree”. For example, only 21% of respondents believe that their peers just look out for themselves (See Question 9, Table 1). That is not to say, however, that there were not positive questions that had a largely negative response. Only 36% of respondents believe that, “Students in my class help others learn” (See Question 6, Table 1). I was excited by the survey responses and hopeful for increases in percentages in the post-study survey. However, I did reflect in my field log that I had to be “open to the realization that by the end of the study there could be cliques or other social situations and that develop between classmates and myself that could greatly impact post-survey results”. I was greatly concerned and expressed the concern in my field log that the school year was very new and the students are still in their “honeymoon phase.”

Pre-Study Survey Questions

1. Students in my class are willing to go out of their way to help someone.
2. My classmates care about my work just as much as their own.
3. My class is like a family.
4. The students in my class do not really care about each other.
5. A lot of students in my class like to seriously put each other down.
6. Students in my class help each other learn.
7. Students in my class help each other, even if they are not friends.
8. Students in my class do not really get along together well.
9. Students in my class just look out for themselves.
10. Students in my class are mean to each other.
11. When I'm having trouble with my work, at least one classmate will try to help.
12. Students in my class treat each other with respect.
13. Students in my class work together to solve problems.
14. When someone in my class does well, many people in the class feel good.
15. Students have a say in what goes on in the classroom.
16. The teacher lets us do things our own way.
17. The teacher is the only one who decides on the rules.
18. The teacher lets me choose what I will work on.
19. The teacher and the students together plan what we will do.
20. I get to do things in the class that I want to do.
21. The teacher and students decide together what the rules will be.
22. The teacher asks the students to help decide what the class should do.
23. Students in my class can get a rule changed if they think it is unfair.
24. Students in my class get to help plan what they will do.
25. I feel like my opinion is valued in the classroom.

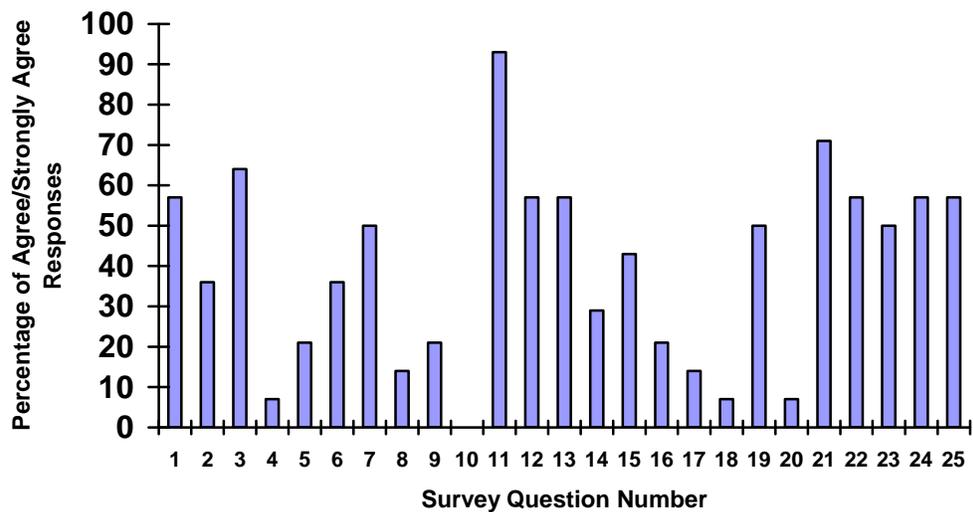


Figure 1. Pre-Study Questions and Responses

It was finally time for our class meeting and the students were eager to 'circle up' and get started. Up to this point I had received 13 out of 24 consent forms. While I was happy that these 13 students were interested in serving as research participants, a part of me that was disappointed that not more were interested in doing so. I had hoped all of my students would eagerly return their forms, but I reminded myself that this was not realistic since all of my students had never returned all of their forms in the past for anything, including field trips that they really wanted to attend. The students and I quickly and quietly circled up and our first official class meeting began. The class struggled at first with appreciations, but I reminded them of the format and again modeled my expectations for them. In the end there were a total of six genuine appreciations to start off the meeting. After the appreciations I made the necessary classroom announcements and also remind them of the class meeting rules we had established the previous week. At this point I asked my next (and usually last) conversation-starting question: "Are there any problems, questions, or concerns?" And with that we were off and rolling. The class was just waiting to share the week's events. I called on Tara, whose hand was the first to be seen, passed her "the Hook" and encouraged her to share her story with the class. Tara began the class discussion by recounting an interaction with a teacher's aid during the dreaded "sustained silent reading"(SSR) within the lunch period. Tara shared that they were all talking and joking with the teacher's assistant at the beginning of

SSR when suddenly the teacher's assistant was no longer joking and "flipped out and cursed at them." At this point I paused Tara's story to ask for a classroom consensus on the chain of events as Tara had related them. I felt doing this was important to include the group in the discussion and determine how others might corroborate Tara's story. Students around the circle nodded their head in agreement with Tara's version of the story and added their own quick comments of verification. At this point I regained control of the "Hook" and asked the class what they felt, if anything, they could do about this situation. There was discussion among three of the major players within this particular story: Tara, Sandy, and Thia. These three were of the same opinion that they should go to the administration and explain what happened. At this point I introduced to the class the concept of an objective witness. Since Sandy and Tara are best friends, and Sandy is often prone to being involved in drama, which she and the rest of the class agreed was true, we discussed that perhaps she would not be the best person to take along to argue their case. The class had an open discussion about who else might be a more appropriate witness, and they chose another student to represent the class with Tara and Thia.

Throughout this particular conversation, the students in the class were actively involved in discussion, listened attentively to whoever was talking, and remained open to my suggestions. While they were upset and venting, they were doing so in an honest and open way. They were logical and rational in expressing

their views. The students' responses to one another were honest (as in the example of reminding Sandy that she may not be the best objective witness in the class) and had value. On one occasion Tara needed to be reminded about respectful and appropriate language; however, she responded and refrained from further cursing with a simple verbal reminder. It was a class meeting that had a purpose: a problem was presented that needed to be discussed, and the students agreed upon a solution. These 24 students, who are not all friends, who do not all, even really like each other, were able to arrive at a solution to a problem that they felt impacted them all and I was proud of this early accomplishment.

### **Week 3: This is Awesome!**

The next week's class meeting opened with eight genuine, easy-flowing appreciations. After a general group discussion about the fun time they were having in gym class with their new gym teacher, I initiated a conversation revolving around the fact that there were new teachers in the building. As a school we are constantly combating high teacher turnover and this seemed like an excellent opportunity to see how the kids felt about it. After a brief class discussion where students shared their opinions about some of the new teachers, I asked a very pointed question: "Why do you think teachers leave this school?"

At this point Chris provided the simple answer "because this ain't a real school."

Tara chimed in, “The rooms are too small, and we don’t have money.”

Other students within the class meeting circle added various opinions all revolving around issues with the school building, administration, and even the food in the cafeteria.

I then followed up with the question: “Do you think it ever has anything to do with your behaviors as students?” Multiple students immediately rejected this.

Gabby was quick to point out that if there were student behavior problems, then “teachers like you wouldn’t stay here.”

There was such a resounding chorus of “no” that I decided to use the opportunity to share with them the number of random outbursts I had recorded on the behavior checklist during that week’s direct instruction activities. They were shocked to realize that there had been 9 episodes of “calling out” during a 10-minute instructional window. I asked how we could solve the problem. Karla, who was no stranger to random outbursts of her own, laughed and suggested I utilize the “post-it note” plan. This would involve me simply covering her mouth with a post-it anytime she had an outburst. The class and I both laughed at the image of Karla wearing a post-it everyday, and yes, we all agreed it would definitely be every day. At this point I took a quick classroom poll, by a show of hands to determine if the class overall felt like they have a problem with interrupting instruction. The class had definitely reached consensus. However after a short discussion between Karla, Tara, and Thia, with involvement from

others, they determined that it was something they thought they could work on controlling now that they realized how many times it was happening.

There was still time after these two discussions had ended, and Joel brought up the problem of backpacks in the cafeteria. There was a new school rule in effect that did not allow students to take their backpacks into the cafeteria. According to Joel, the halls were too crowded to go to their lockers after lunch, get their backpacks, and still make it to their next class on time, and in my opinion he was right. I explained that the rule was necessary due to the fact that students smuggled anything from milk, to juice, to pop-tarts, to apples out of the cafeteria and into classrooms. I also explained that this was an entire staff recommendation; the students had previously been quick to blame the administration, so I thought it was important for them to know that in this case the administration had not been solely responsible for the rule.

After a round of complaining about the stupidity of the rule and the idiocy of the plan because, after all, according to Joel, “we just put the food in our blazer pockets now,” I tried to refocus the group on potential solutions to the problem.

Tara immediately suggested the school put “cubbies, like in the art room” outside the cafeteria.

I congratulated her for her suggestion, but pointed out that cubbies would cost money and it might be better if we tried first to arrive at a solution that did not involve money or additional support from the administration. Joel, who

initiated the discussion in the first place, provided the next suggestion. He asked if the students in the class could drop their backpacks in my room before going to lunch. My room was on the way to the cafeteria and right next to their classroom after lunch. I thought for a moment and decided there was absolutely no reason they could not do this and, honestly, I was amazed at how effectively it would solve the problem. The class was happy with the result and was eager not to have to fight the “locker hallway” after lunch.

Throughout this class meeting the students were focused on the topics discussed. I had to regain control of the conversation only three times throughout the meeting and this was easily done by the simple verbal cue of “Who has the Hook?” The students had real, genuine discussions with little complaining or ranting. Upon reflection I was shocked to realize I did not, even once, have to remind any of the students about appropriateness of comments or language. The fact that the students solved the backpack problem and had an open, honest discussion about their own behavior left me feeling excited at the thought of continuing these weekly 30 minute meetings. This truly was awesome!

#### **Week 4: Let the Complaining Begin**

By the time our next class meeting was scheduled the following Friday the week had already seemed long, and the students were immediately ready to circle up. In fact, some had already indicated in homeroom how much they were looking forward to talking about the week’s problems. I was happy they were

ready and eager to begin but also concerned about issues that had crept up in the classroom throughout the week that I knew needed to be discussed. As always, the class meeting began with appreciations, and I immediately saw that the students had reached a comfort level with each other and with the class meeting process. Nine separate appreciations were given, but to my frustration, four of these were not genuine in their feeling and intent. After correcting the appreciations, I reminded the students of the proper format for a class meeting and the need to be respectful. At this point instead of turning the class meeting over to the students to share their problems and concerns, I began with my greatest frustration: that they were being uncooperative for the guidance counselor as she came into homeroom to do guidance lessons throughout the week. I asked the students why they were largely being uncooperative and found myself honestly shocked at their responses.

Karla was first to point out that homeroom was “too long” and “useless.” She also felt that it should be time set aside for them to “talk to their friends” since this is what it was used for last year. When I reminded her that homeroom was 20 minutes longer this year than last specifically so we could accomplish certain tasks, she responded simply by saying, “Well that’s just stupid.”

Another student, Kristina, jumped into the conversation by claiming that the guidance counselor had “madd attitude.” She also asked where the former guidance counselor was. When I reminded her that the former guidance

counselor had left for another position, she responded, “We need to get her back. She’s good.”

At this point the class meeting dissolved into numerous side conversations that were too loud and too widespread to even attempt to discern one from another. I reclaimed the “Hook” and reminded the students of the need to talk one at a time. I asked for volunteers who may have something to contribute to the conversation. Immediately six hands shot up, the students were ready to talk, and the “Hook” began his journey around the room.

Tara’s complaint was that the teacher’s aide was “picking on the 8<sup>th</sup> graders in lunch.” She went on to further explain that she stared at them throughout the lunch period and it was like she was “attacking them with her eyes”.

She quickly tossed the “Hook” to Sandy who added that the Librarian was “giving them attitude” during SSR. Sandy also pointed out the SSR during lunch was “unfair since it’s the only time we get to talk with our friends.”

Before I could even think about responding, the “Hook” flew across the room to Karla who was quick to point out that the Librarian aide “screamed” at them when they walked into SSR. According to Karla it was “random” and “maybe she’s on her period.”

At this point I reminded the class of the need to be appropriate and respectful in their opinions. I also asked for a class consensus at this point in an

attempt to determine if the stories shared up to this point had been accurate. The general opinion, determined by the nodding of heads, was that the stories had been honestly depicted. There were still students who wanted to talk and so the “Hook” moved on. In addition to the teacher aide, the librarian, the librarian aide, and the guidance counselor, the assistant principal, security officer, and a special education teacher all fell into their list of staff members with issues. They describe staff as “having attitude,” “screaming” at them, being “argumentative,” “getting in their faces,” and being “racist.” I regained control of the “Hook” in an attempt to focus the conversation on solutions to solve the problems they had articulated. I asked the students what they had done to elicit such responses from so many staff members. This question opened a wave of denial.

Tara was quick to point out that they were not doing anything wrong, that the school and the teachers were simply being “madd OD” with what they wanted the students to do.

Others agreed that the required SSR during lunch was unfair and that they should be able to do what they wanted in the cafeteria. The class identified no connections between their behaviors and the responses of the staff and offered no solutions to any problems. First, they didn’t believe there were any problems. Second, their long list of complaints left little time for them to view the stories from points of view other than their own.

Our class meeting time was rapidly coming to an end when I decided to introduce them to the concept of the “honeymoon period.” I informed them that, at this point, we were all back to the “grind” of school. The newness and excitement of starting a new year were rapidly fading and the reality of the day to day functioning of the school year had taken over. The students understood what I was saying, but placed blame on the school for too many “new rules” causing the issues that had occurred that week. I also pointed out that the following week’s class meeting could again be used to complain but that class meetings would lose their value if we didn’t at least make an attempt to solve the problems they identified. The bell rang, and the students filed out, still complaining, complaining, complaining. What a frustrating class meeting for all!

### **Week 5: What a World**

As we moved into our fifth week of the school year the class meeting routine was clearly established and circling up became a welcomed diversion to the weekly instructional pattern we had all enacted. This week the class meeting began with three genuine appreciations. The negativity of the previous week’s appreciations was not repeated, which allowed us to begin the class meeting on a positive note. While normally I encourage at least five appreciations to start a class meeting, I was willing to be flexible since the students were all eager to hear and for me to hear the story of their fellow student, Chris, who had much he wanted to share.

What follows is the story Chris shared in his own words:

*Me, Anthony, and his little brother were down at the park, playin a little basketball. We got in a game, me and Anthony, with these two white boys. I had this great shot Miss, this great shot, and when I came down after the shot I kissed my fingers – you know, kissin and pointin to the basket when it went in. [At this point Chris demonstrated the move and the entire class meeting circle was entranced]. Oh my Miss, did that ever piss them off. They started pushin and shovin me and Anthony and one of them went over to this box. You know the kind of box, Miss, the kind that you keep fishing stuff in. He pulled a knife, Miss, a KNIFE out of the box and came runnin after us. This white kid was craaazzyy, Miss. We've seen him down there before, and he always has a problem with someone. So at this point we start running, me, Anthony, and his little brother. But you know Anthony has asthma and he was having a hard time running. The white kid grabbed Anthony's hoodie and that's when I ran back and hit him. Anthony and I ran away and got Anthony's dad. He was already on his way because his little brother made it home and told him what was goin on. His dad called the police, but the kid threw the knife away before the police got there. And would you believe it Miss, would you believe they believed the white kid because they couldn't find the knife? They said*

*there was nothin they could do since there was no knife. Those cops were racist.*

As Chris finished his story the comments from other students began in earnest.

Thia immediately asked Chris, “What was wrong with you that you “couldn’t beat up a white boy?”

As some started to protest Thia’s comment itself as a racist statement another student asked Chris, “Were you scared when all this went down?”

Chris responded that he was indeed scared, scared enough, in fact, that he felt he was “running for his life.”

I utilized this opportunity to ask my students to raise their hands if they had, at one point in their lives, felt genuine fear for their life. The number of hands that went up, ten in all, astounded me. I then encouraged the students to share, if they wanted to, their stories of fear. These stories ranged from a “guy yelling and chasing” to “two guys rolling down the car window and yelling at us,” and from “a crazy guy wandering the street with a knife pretending to be the joker” to a “drug bust that had the cops and helicopters around all night” and a “freaky guy taking pictures at the park.” I was shocked and horrified by their stories, reminded all too clearly of the difference in the worlds where we live. At this point I shared that, “While it may not be the smartest thing, I am perfectly

comfortable in my little town to walk the dog at night. During the summer, I've even realized that the front door was standing open all night."

The students admonished me for my carelessness, and I decided at this point to ask the question "Do you want your children to feel these same fears, and what do you think you could do to change it?"

Tara responded quietly, "Of course I want something different, but it is hard if you don't have the money." She went on to point out that in order to "live in a safe spot, you need money for rent or money for a house." I asked them what they thought they could do to get the money, and Chris made the connection to "getting an education and going to college."

This class meeting, with its stories of fear and the desire to change provided quite a contrast to the staff complaints issued from the previous week. The students were focused on Chris's story and intent on sharing their own stories with the group, providing them the opportunity to compare their fears with those of their classmates. The ten research participants who shared stories and opinions were not all from the same clique or even all friendly with one another. And yet they all listened and respected each other's stories and fears because they could all relate to them. While the class meeting stories were sad and tragic for me to listen to, they also served as a learning experience. These stories reminded me, that while I should not make any excuses for my students' poor performance on

some measures of standardized achievement, I needed to remember that they do live in a very different world than I experienced on a daily basis.

### **Week Six: We are Back in a Groove**

I began this week's class by utilizing the 20 minutes previous to our class meeting to distribute an open-ended question survey to the students (Appendix E). I told them that they were expected to answer the prompt to the best of their ability and that they should write at least three to five sentences for each of the two questions. "UGHHH!!! WHAT A DISASTER," I heard without knowing who said it. My students, whom I assumed would try their best and take the questions seriously, did anything but give their full attention to the task at hand. I was forced to constantly redirect their attention to the questions, forced to put them on silent time to effectively manage behaviors, and spent much of the twenty minutes reminding them that their answers were helping me understand their experience with class meetings. All of this was to no avail; most of the students continued to be off-task and generally did not complete the assignment to the best of their ability. It proved to be a very frustrating experience for us all and when I reviewed the question format, I realized I needed to do something different for the post study questions. In retrospect, I realized that I had written these questions for a thesis paper, not for my students. Upon additional review and reflection, I realized the required length of responses was intimidating to my students. Despite the frustrating experience, the student responses still showed

that they had a favorable impression of our class meetings. In fact, every student responded that class meetings were meaningful and helped in a variety of ways from “expressing ourselves,” to “solving problems,” to “hearing others’ stories” (Figure 2). All students in the study also reported that class meetings help encourage both positive behavior and academic success (Figure 3).

So, after 20 minutes of mutual torture, the class quickly circled up, anxious to be done with the writing assignment and ready to move onto the actual class meeting. Students began with six very good, genuine appreciations. Students thanked one another for gum, candy, pencils, and helping study for a test. The class did not need any reinforcing about appropriateness or behavior during the appreciations. The students were eager to talk about problems this week, specifically problems with staff members. I reminded them of the fact that two weeks ago the class meeting involved a lot of complaining without generating any solutions. The students remembered this was true and agreed to allow me to ask questions at the end of each of their complaints to try to focus on problem solving rather than just venting.

Tara began the flow of conversation by talking about the cafeteria aide who “stares” and “picks on” the students in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Tara was quick to point out that if the aide does not like children she should “not work in a school.” I asked her why she felt the aide does not like children and Tara responded that she must not since “she is always screaming at us.”

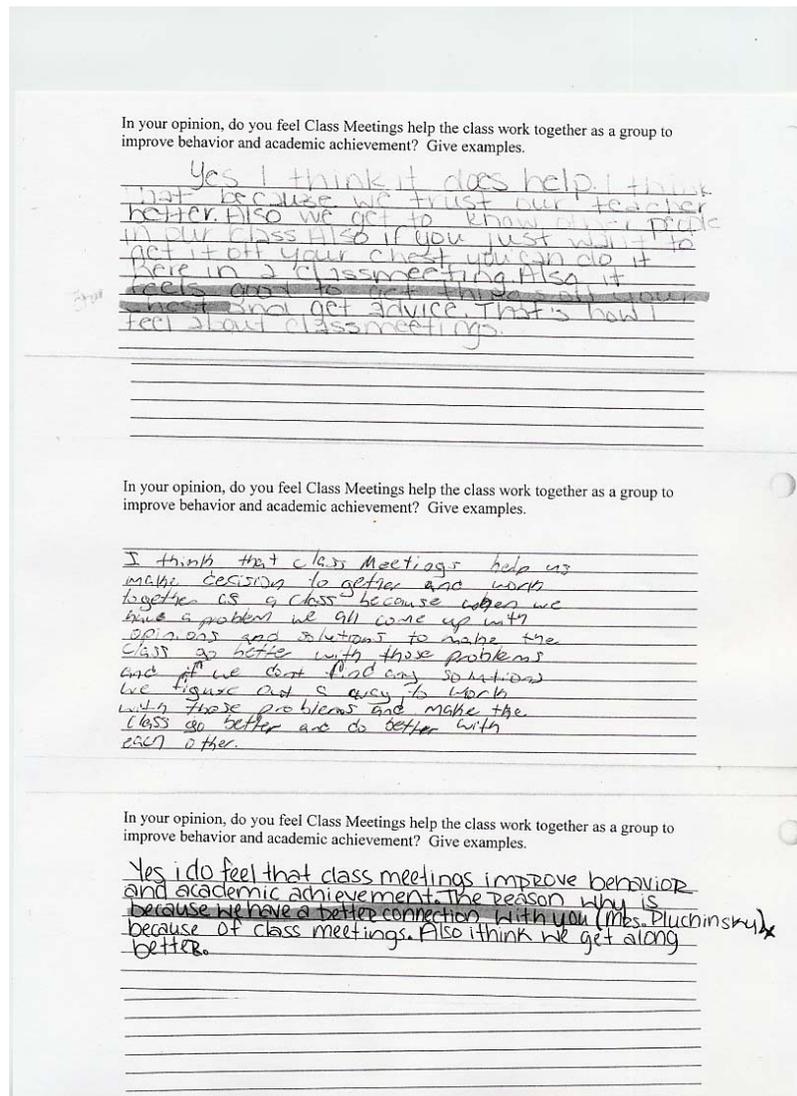


Figure 2. Student Open-Ended Responses – Question 1

I asked her what specific behaviors the 8<sup>th</sup> graders were doing in the cafeteria to gain the aide's attention, and at this point, Kristina jumped into the conversation. She admitted that they were loud in the cafeteria, they do rock their

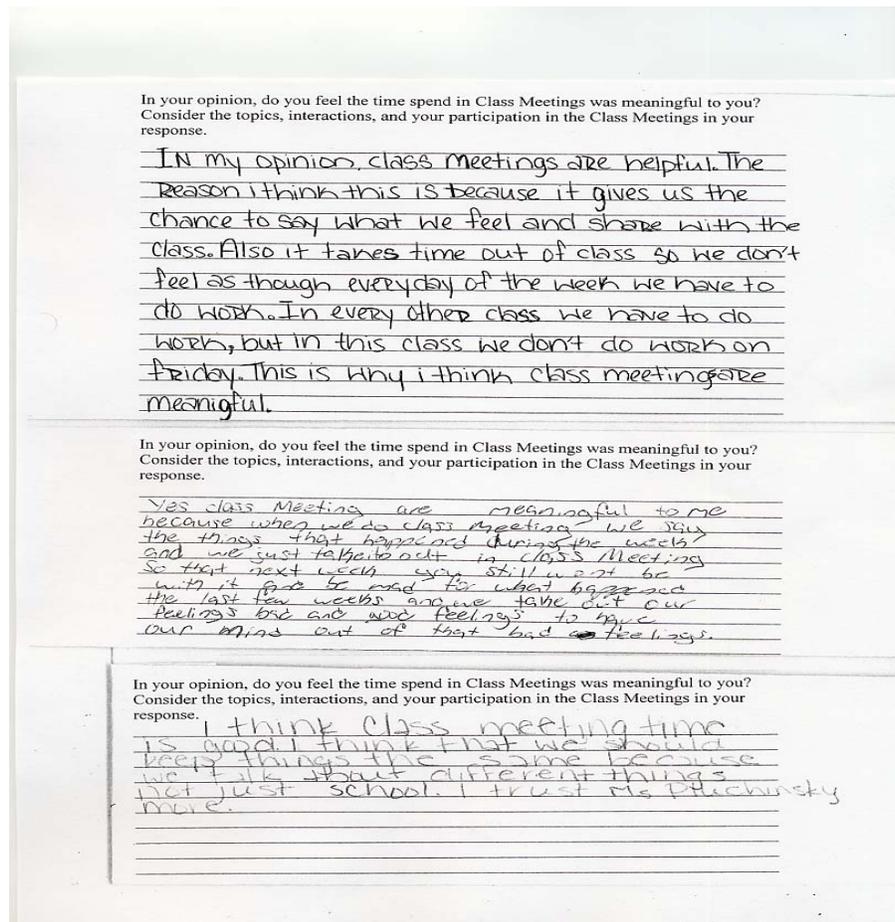


Figure 3. Student Open-Ended Responses – Question 2

chairs, and they do sit six to a table instead of five but, that the “7<sup>th</sup> graders do it too and don’t get in trouble”. “She NEVER yells at the 7<sup>th</sup> graders.” At this point I gained control of Captain Hook and asked what students could do to solve the problem.

“There is nothing we can do,” Tara answered. “We aren’t doin anything. It is up to HER to be nice to US.”

With this response, I was reminded of why exactly I have class meetings. My students and I had a definite different plan to solve the problem. I suggested they stop yelling, rocking, and sitting six to a table, at which point they agreed they could TRY to do those things. They listened attentively and respectfully to my suggestions, but there was a classroom consensus (by show of hands) that my suggestions would not work because their perception is that even when they are quiet, the aide yells at them anyway.

At this point Chris gained control of the Hook and changed the conversation to share concerns he had about his math teacher.

Chris explained that he was required to complete an “improved behavior plan” for his teacher for talking, even though he had said nothing. Karla quickly pointed out that Chris was telling the truth. She knew this because she was the one talking and Chris got blamed for it. Others began to contribute to the conversation about their experiences in the math classroom. It was at this point that I shared with them that the math teacher had been having some health issues up to that point in the week. She had been suffering from vertigo and was having a very challenging time just staying upright, let alone teaching with any effectiveness. The students were actually quite accepting of the explanation I provided. They shared that the math teacher did mention she wasn’t feeling well, but they also thought she had been just “making an excuse.”

When I asked them why they were willing to listen and understand when I gave the explanation, Chris responded “because it is different with you, Miss. You listen to us, so we listen to you.”

I took advantage of this opportunity to share with them again that this week’s behavior chart showed seven instances of “calling out”, two instances of “eating in class” then also arguing about eating in class, and one instance of “disrespect to another student.” I pointed out to them that their behavior was slipping in my class, they needed to be aware of it, and we were going to need to develop a plan to keep this slippage from continuing. I also shared with them my concern that they were rapidly getting the reputation around the school as being the most challenging class. They were not surprised by this and agreed that they needed to try to be more aware of their behaviors.

At this point Thia ended the meeting by simply saying, “It’s hard, Miss. We’re just kids.”

As the students filed out of the class at the end of the period I reflected on what Thia had said. She was right; they are only kids; however this cannot be an excuse for their inappropriate behaviors. It was comments like Thia’s that continued to motivate me to hold class meetings. I was happy with this class meeting. The students were willing to listen to reasonable explanations, problem solving ideas, and suggestions. I need to remember that even if they do not

always embrace my ideas and suggestions, at least they were willing to listen. It really did seem like we were back in the groove with a good class meeting.

### **Week 7: Hmmm, Is it Me or Class Meetings?**

Our next class meeting began with a shortened amount of time available. While we usually designate 30 minutes every Friday for our class meeting, this period we were down to 20 as a direct result of student behavior throughout the instructional time during the week. We were behind in what we needed to accomplish due to consistent negative disruptive behaviors. After we accomplished five appreciations, I reminded them that this was a teacher-driven class meeting due to their behaviors, I had been warning them of this all week, and now I needed to follow through. This is how the class meeting progressed:

**Me:** What can I do in class to improve your behaviors?

(Students eagerly raise hands to speak).

**Me:** Pass Captain Hook to Tara, please.

**Tara:** We do the same things all the time in class. We want to do something different.

**Me:** Can you give me a specific example of what you mean?

**Tara:** We ALWAYS do those lesson summary sheets and take notes, all the time.

**Me:** Ok, that's true. That takes only one day of the week. But then, the other three we are always doing some kind of project, web quest, or group work, right?

(Students nod and voice agreement)

**Me:** And we have class meeting time on Fridays.

**Tara:** That's true, it is just one day, but maybe we could try it differently or you could make the notes different. You know, use different power point backgrounds. They are always the same.

**Me:** Ok, I can try that, but will that really help your behavior?

**Tara:** Oh, right, probably not. Well, maybe if there are good pictures.  
(Class and I agree this is an easy solution to try).

**Me:** Okay, what else?

**Karla:** We never get a chance to talk to our friends. It's always just notes.

**Me:** But Karla, we just said notes are only one day a week. But, yes I do need you to be silent if I am talking about the notes. Isn't it reasonable to expect that you can be silent one day a week?

(Students nod and agree that this was reasonable).

**Karla:** But Miss, you know it is impossible for me to be silent. I just can't do it.

**Me:** You have to try your best. I'll remind you that it's only one day and don't forget, I do allow you to talk while you are writing the notes if you are on task and quiet, but sometimes the class can't do that, and then I have to put you on silent time.

**Karla:** It's hard to be quiet.

**Me:** You have to try.

**Me:** All right, you must have more suggestions. What else?

**Jose:** We want more time in the computer lab.

**Me:** More? Seriously?

(At this point class laughs as “seriously” is one of my consistent sayings that the kids think is funny.)

**Me:** Ok, you know I try to give you some kind of web quest or fact-finding mission in the computer lab once a week. So far we only haven’t gone one week. What more would you like to see?

**Jose:** Well, how about two or three?

**Me:** SERIOUSLY?

(class laughter)

**Kristina:** Wait, Jose, Miss takes us more than any other teacher. You’re asking too much now.

**Me:** Thank You, Kristina.

**Jose:** I know, Miss, but you can’t blame me for trying.

**Chris:** We want candy rewards or prizes.

(The class is on a roll now; they don’t need me to ask for suggestions).

**Me:** Ok, that I just have to say no to. I’m sorry, but the school rule is no food in the classroom as rewards. We have the wellness policy. I just can’t do it, I’d be breaking the rules. I can’t expect you to follow the rules if I don’t.

**Chris:** But we get candy in the science room.

**Me:** That is the science teacher's choice. I will not break the rules. Besides, I give you homework passes, bonus points, and free time reward. Do you like those rewards? Raise your hands if you like those rewards.

(All but two hands go up).

**Chris:** All right, but I really would like candy.

**Me:** Pass the year, see me the last day of school, and I'll give you a piece of candy to eat on the way home.

**Chris:** Really?

**Me:** Yeah, sure, but it's your job to remember to come the last day of school.

**Chris:** Ok, got it. Jose, remind me to come the last day.

**Me:** We are running out of time. You had all these suggestions, which I listened to. I think I try to do a pretty good job, and yet some of you still talk.

**Tara and Thia:** It's just the way it is.

**Me:** So, I just need to keep reminding you not to talk and not feel bad that I am constantly nagging you.

**Class:** YES.

**Me:** Ok, thank you for talking to me honestly. And thank you, I know you do try hard in here and you are better behaved for me than you are elsewhere in the building. Why is this?

**Karla:** Miss, you're you and we listen to you.

(Class nods in agreement)

**Me:** But WHY?

**Tara:** Because you listen and respect our opinion. Because you're you.

(The bell rings and another meeting is over).

This class meeting led me to a serious question in my research. Is it really class meetings that made a difference or was it teacher willingness to listen and make changes accordingly? This was a discussion that I brought up with my teacher support group. I was greatly concerned that I was giving class meetings credit for something that was simply part of my teaching style. Thank goodness for my support group. We had a discussion about the fact that it was no doubt a combination of the two. My style allowed me to have class meetings and create the environment where they trust and respect me as their teacher. Clearly there was a combination of factors that were working together to build a classroom community, and my support group and I agreed that this was something to be celebrated and not something that needed to be a source of concern.

### **Week Eight: Wow – What Great Discussions**

Friday came incredibly quickly as we entered the eighth week of class meeting sessions. At this point in my research I was thrilled to have actually had class meetings consistently every Friday. I had not allowed anything to interfere with our time together. The class eagerly circled up and I was, as usual, amazed at how quickly they got themselves in a circle and silent for appreciations to start.

The class meeting began with 11 appreciations, all of which were good and genuine, and I was excited at the positive start to the meeting. Since last week's meeting had gone so well, I asked them if I could start the meeting off with a very specific question. They responded favorably so I asked simply: "How are your other classes going?" The class, as a group, murmured to their friends and me that things were going well. There were some volunteers who shared specific stories, but each of them was able to be honest about the teachers' behaviors and their own behaviors.

As an example, Karla commented that she was having some problems with her math teacher. I asked her if she had done anything to make the math teacher angry and she responded, "No. Well, wait. Yes". She revealed that she "continued to talk" and "just ignored" the teacher when the teacher spoke to her. At this point Karla admitted in the circle that she had become "very good at finding out what bothers teachers." Then she just "keeps going on that one thing." In the math teacher's class, Karla has determined that totally ignoring requests is an excellent way to "push the teacher over the edge." Then Karla admitted that she enjoyed "watching the show" when the teacher became angry. She then provided me with the information that she never gets in trouble for anything at home so when teachers call home it's "no big deal." Talk about eye-opening honesty.

The class was doing so well with respectful and genuine discussions and that I decided to utilize the class meeting time to ask specific questions about class meetings and teacher personality. Since this was something that I was truly concerned about I decided to get their opinions about the subject as well. I began by asking if they thought they behave better for me than others. I asked for a show of hands if they thought this was the case and every hand went up. Next I asked if they thought it was class meetings that helped their behavior. Again, every hand went up to the affirmative. Then I asked if they thought it was really class meetings OR just my approach to teaching. A few of the students immediately wanted to respond. Tara was quick to point out that my humor and sarcasm made class interesting and fun. Sandy added that it is my personality made her comfortable in class meetings. Karla added, though, that class meetings motivate the class to behave because they want to be able to have time to have the class meeting. She also felt that the structure helped them be nicer to each other in class than they otherwise would have been. At this point Karla shared a story:

*You know, Miss, like this morning. You were madd grumpy in homeroom. When you're madd grumpy I can't help but make it worse because you can't help but pick on me. Because you're grumpy and I'm loud. So, you remember, this morning, I told you to go get more coffee cuz clearly the first cup wasn't enough. Or it didn't work. Or it wasn't strong enough. [At this point I chuckled and told Karla that of course I*

*remembered]. Homeroom went bad today. But we could still get together in a class meeting. I knew even though I said those things to you that in the class meeting circle it would be ok. That I would still be able to talk and joke. Well, Miss, this is what I'm talkin about. Even if we have a bad day or a bad week, we know we can get together in a class meeting and you'll listen to us and try to help us.*

Time was up, and class meeting was over for the week. And I was sad. It was such a good class meeting. It worked to put the class and me back into a positive place. Honestly, my students were becoming more and more challenging for me to manage as the year progressed, in fact one of my most challenging classes since I had begun teaching. I had to agree with Karla's assessment, though, since the class meeting did give us an opportunity to interact with each other in a positive way. These positive interactions made class meetings a worthwhile use of our time and energy. I ended the meeting feeling very positive about not only the discussion, but also the validity of running class meetings on a weekly basis.

### **Week Nine: Complaining With Purpose**

Interestingly, while reviewing my field journal for this week I realized my analysis provided a much more in-depth reflection than the actual class meeting notes. The class meeting notes, on the left-hand side of my field log contained a list of student complaints about a variety of teachers, teachers aides, and other

school staff members. To read the left-hand side of my field log is to assume that this was a repeat of week four, where complaining and venting without purpose reigned supreme over the class meeting. During the class meeting six different students shared concerns about different issues within classrooms or other areas of the school. From those six initial comments a variety of other students added to the discussion during the class meeting. Because of this revelation that the right-hand, reflective side of my field log had more quality, I have decided to share the reflections from this class meeting as they were directly written in my field log:

*While rereading the notes to the left it appears that this was yet another “complaining” class meeting. However, the students weren’t as much in a complaining mood, as in a sharing mood. As best as I can describe the difference is that they were calm in their discussions and explanations. There was very little yelling or raised voices. I said almost nothing all class meeting simply because the students went from one topic to the next in an organized fashion. I interjected where necessary, but most times it was a simple reminder about listening when someone was talking. There was one teacher-directed question where I asked specifically about their concerns in math class. When I asked them if there was learning going on in the math classroom the students shared that it is out-of-control and difficult to listen (not, that I feel, they are*

*trying to listen). The students identified that the math teacher does not have consistent rules then when she tries to enforce them they don't listen or respond to her. They were open and honest about their role, but still held the teacher accountable for hers as well. This was as close to a student-led class meeting as I had ever run.*

I considered this class meeting so much more successful than the one that had occurred during week four, even though many of the complaints were actually the same. However, the students had obviously, through the weeks of class meetings, come to realize the benefits to sharing and open discussion, rather than only to express anger and to engage in venting. Throughout the meeting almost every member of the class participated at one point or another. Because the discussion was under control and respectful throughout the class meeting time period they were able to have an open forum discussion. Captain Hook never left my hands; he was not necessary on this day. Students acted as a cohesive group throughout the class meeting. The students were sharing their stories of complaint with each other, much more so than complaining to make a point or prove their point.

### **Week Ten: Seriously? What Was I Thinking?**

Before I can even begin to relate the events of the week's class meeting it is necessary for me to set the tone. Homeroom and our school's annual canned food drive created an unbelievable negative tone for this class meeting. Because

of an interaction between some of my girls “stealing” canned food from another homeroom to put into our box I began my day needing to have an extremely authoritative interaction with some of the “major players” in my homeroom. This set the tone for poor attitudes and even poorer behaviors. Because of this, Tara, Thia, and Karla, were unable to control their behavior during the 20 minute activity before the class meeting, which resulted in the entire class being placed on silent time during the activity. I learned quite a valuable lesson during this time: It is next to impossible to conduct a class meeting when I don’t like my class! The stage had been set, and now the class meeting began.

Students were very good offering appreciations. Six different appreciations were given and all were good, genuine appreciations. At this point Karla, Tara, and Thia had not participated in the class meeting, even though they usually do during the appreciation phase. Clearly they had decided not to engage here as they usually do. As the appreciations wrapped up, I asked my usual “Are there any questions, concerns, or problems that need to be discussed?” And off they went. Tara began by sharing the story of how she got kicked out of computers. She insisted she didn’t do anything bad; she just simply mentioned that a student was going to get hit by the door if it closed.

At this point I would like to point out that I had already had a discussion with the computer teacher and he informed me that Tara said, “It will be funny

when Sandy gets hit by the door.” Sandy and Tara have a long history of not getting along, and Tara was usually the one who initiated the problems.

At this point Tara pointed out that the computer teacher was being “madd OD” and put her “outside the classroom in the hall.” However, that is not where the incident stopped. Because Tara was continuing to disrupt the class he also had to pull the blind almost all the way down over the window. Tara laughed the entire way through this story, because she thought her behavior was funny.

Karla then shifted the class meeting to share that she was mad at the science teacher for making them all write. When I asked what happened to make them have a writing assignment, she shared that they were being loud, not listening, and talking when the teacher was. When I pointed out that it appeared to me that they needed to improve their behavior, Karla was adamant that they didn’t “do anything different than normal.”

At this point Thia shifted the meeting conversation to the fact that four of them were kicked out of their SSR time during lunch. Thia was quick in noting that they didn’t “do anything; the teacher must be on her period”. At this point I could stand it no longer. I reminded them that all of these events had happened on the same day. I asked the students (specifically the three major players, Karla, Thia, and Tara) if all of these events throughout the school had anything to do with their behaviors.

Tara responded “Absolutely not.”

Thia commented, “We act the same way all the time, but the teachers reacted differently.”

Karla added, “The teachers all were in a bad mood. Didn’t they have coffee today”?

I then followed with the question, “Well, what happened this morning in homeroom? Did that have anything to do with your behavior”? Again there was denial. According to Tara they were all “just playin” and that I overreacted.

This was one of those class meetings where I was convinced there was not enough money in the world to convince me to ever hold another one. The students were in the exact opposite behavior pattern from the week before. They were argumentative, obstinate, and aggressive about every comment or suggestion I made. They were unwilling to listen, reason, or be logical about any of the events that were brought up during the class meeting. They were simply using the class meeting time to yell, vent, rant, and rage against the system that holds them hostage every day. The students left after the bell rang and all I could think was “Seriously? What was I thinking ever picking this group to be my study group?”

### **Week Eleven: Victory is Ours!**

Friday came again, and we were getting ready to start our eleventh class meeting of the year. I was not totally enthusiastic at the prospect after last week’s class meeting debacle. However, this week started on a much more positive note

since it was announced that my homeroom won the canned food drive that the school had organized. This was a wonderful, positive start to our class meeting time. The students contributed eight appreciations at the start of the class meeting and all were positive. So far, it was good; there was no complaining. I decided to direct class meeting conversation away from issues within the school and asked about the upcoming Thanksgiving Break. This turned out to be a wonderful strategy. I was shocked and amazed when I looked back in my field log for the day and realized that 13 out of the 15 research participants shared a story in the class meeting. This was, by far, the greatest number of active participants to date. Students took turns speaking and the conversation simply progressed around the circle with those students who wanted to participate sharing their Thanksgiving break plans. I was surprised to realize that 11 students would be traveling to New York City to visit family and friends for the break. I was amazed that so many of my students identify themselves as “New Yorkers.” When our class meeting was coming to an end I was also happy to have had the students ask me what I was planning on doing with my break. While I am always active in circle discussions, when the students are sharing in this way I tend to sit back and let it happen. I was happy, especially considering some of the challenges this group caused me throughout the week, that they included me in the discussion and were genuinely interested in how I would be spending my time away from them. The thirty minutes we spent together, as a group, discussing the numerous ways we would

be spending our break was, really and truly, a victory for our group. It served as an important reminder that the students and I both enjoyed and needed to have the opportunity to share the details of our lives with each other.

### **Chapter Twelve: The Days Go On**

It was at this point in the study that I utilized time in my academic class to complete the post-study survey and post-study open-ended questions (Appendix, D, Appendix, F). Students completed the post –study survey in approximately 15 minutes of homeroom before our final class meeting. Students completed the survey quietly and with very few questions this time. I did make the correction in directions when distributing the survey, explaining to them the need to circle only one response to each question. This eliminated the problem from the pre-study survey, where students circled two options for questions that they sometimes agreed with and sometimes disagreed with. The post-study survey questions were tabulated in the same fashion as the pre-study survey questions (Figure 4). I also compared the percentage responses from the pre and post study surveys. The table clearly showed that while some responses increased, others decreased. The overall increase in percentages was not as evident as I hoped it would be.

I also utilized time at the beginning of the academic social studies class to distribute the post-study open-ended questions. In order to correct some of the challenges my students experienced with the first round of open-ended questions I

Post-Survey Questions

1. Students in my class are willing to go out of their way to help someone.
2. My classmates care about my work just as much as their own.
3. My class is like a family.
4. The students in my class do not really care about each other.
5. A lot of students in my class like to seriously put each other down.
6. Students in my class help each other learn.
7. Students in my class help each other, even if they are not friends.
8. Students in my class do not really get along together well.
9. Students in my class just look out for themselves.
10. Students in my class are mean to each other.
11. When I'm having trouble with my work, at least one classmate will try to help.
12. Students in my class treat each other with respect.
13. Students in my class work together to solve problems.
14. When someone in my class does well, many people in the class feel good.
15. Students have a say in what goes on in the classroom.
16. The teacher lets us do things our own way.
17. The teacher is the only one who decides on the rules.
18. The teacher lets me choose what I will work on.
19. The teacher and the students together plan what we will do.
20. I get to do things in the class that I want to do.
21. The teacher and students decide together what the rules will be.
22. The teacher asks the students to help decide what the class should do.
23. Students in my class can get a rule changed if they think it is unfair.
24. Students in my class get to help plan what they will do.
25. I feel like my opinion is valued in the classroom.

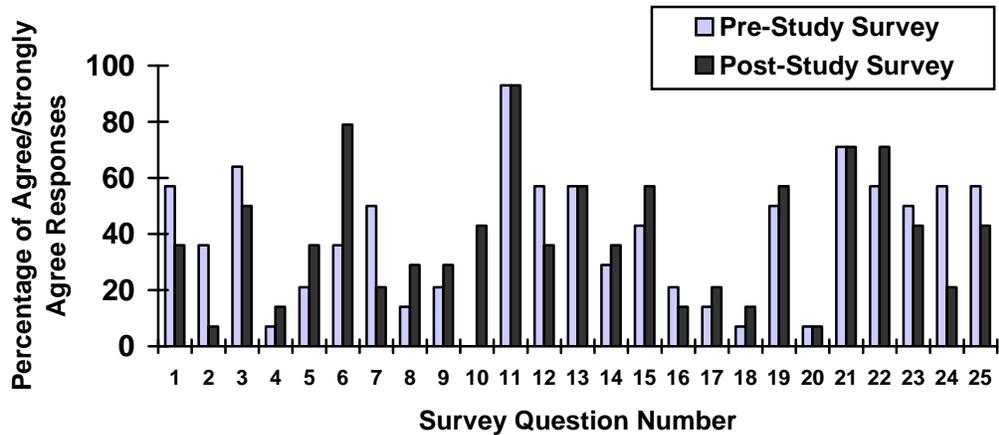


Figure 4. Post-Study Questions and Responses

changed the questions from paragraph format to questions that required listing responses.

This worked much better than the paragraph format of previous open-ended questions; students completed the lists with little complaining or questions. Students listed a variety of things they enjoy about class meetings including: sharing and talking to each other, solving problems, getting out of class work, and having time to relax (Figure 5). Their lists regarding ways they think class meetings are positive included: problem solving, classroom discussions, getting to know each other better, getting to know the teacher better, and telling the truth (Figure 5).

Students largely did not fully complete the list of things they do not enjoy about class meetings; however some of the items that appeared on this list were: not enough time, talking when other people were talking, out of control behavior, loud noise level, and people not waiting their turn to speak.

One student, Kristina, who was largely quiet during class meetings, responded to the prompt for one example of how our social studies classroom functioned better than others supplied this answer: “I know my classmates better and how I don’t feel like the only people I know are my friends” (Figure 6).

It was hard to believe we had reached the end of our research time together. This was the week I had decided would be my last for recording class meeting information in my field log.

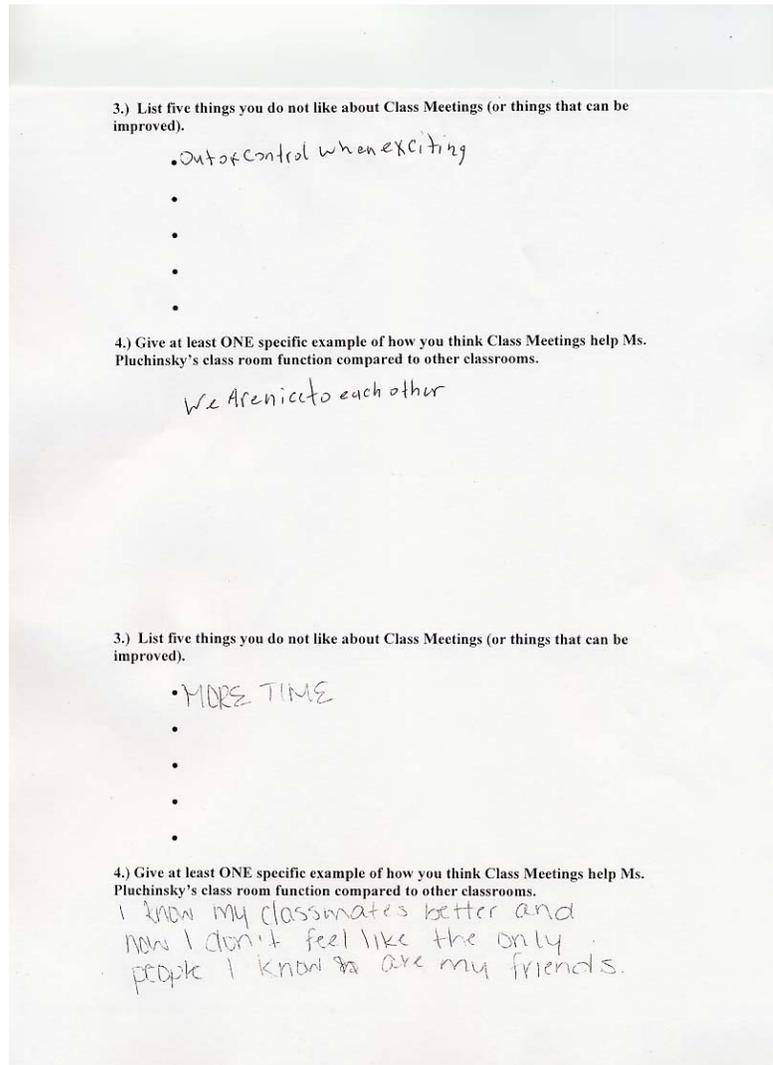


Figure 5. Post-Study Student List Question 1 and 2

This meeting began with 11 appreciations. The students were positive and excited to start the class meeting. The students spent this class meeting discussing various topics within the school. The students participated in discussions regarding several staff members and teachers. These discussions

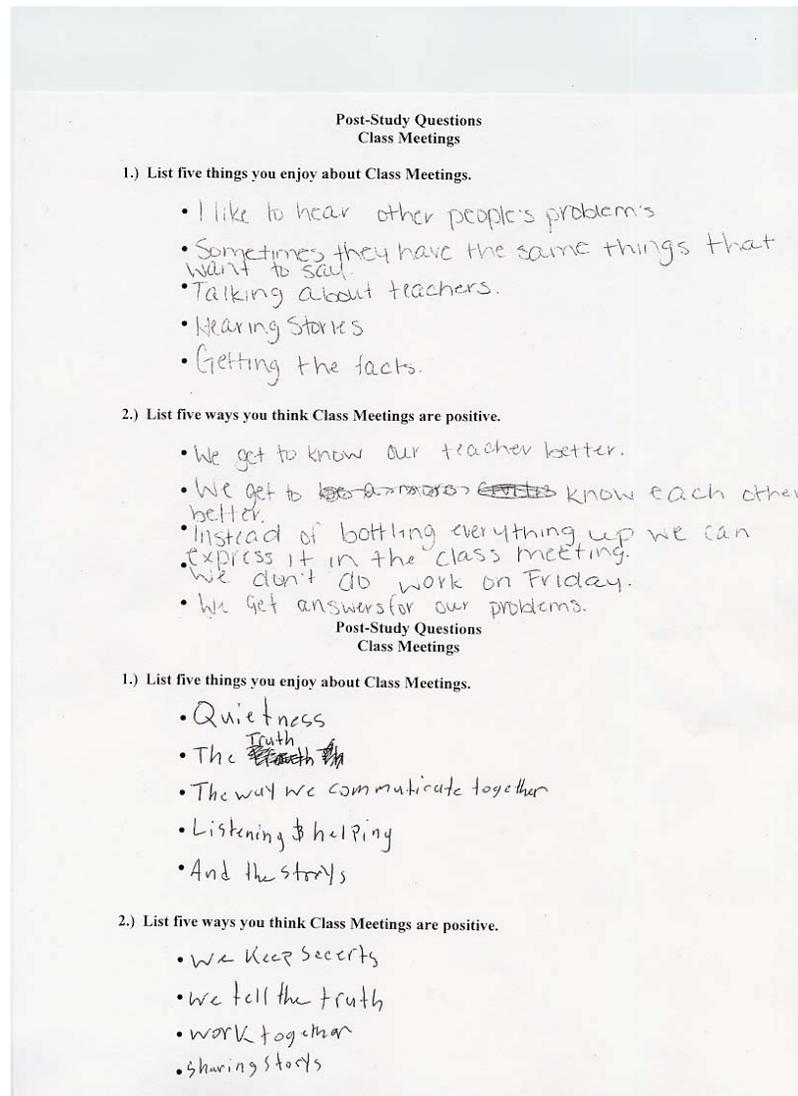


Figure 6. Post-Study Student List Question 3 and 4

were generally positive and thoughtful in nature. This was another class meeting where the students were focused on listening, approaching problems rationally, and looking for solutions to the problems they presented.

As we ended the class meeting and I reflected on the events, not only in this meeting, but in meetings since the beginning of the study, I realized that there were many weeks when our class meeting was the only time I had any positive interactions with certain of my students. Thia, Tara, and Sandy were mostly negative about anything school related. They tended to resist anything having to do with schoolwork, school rules, and largely, anything they were not in control of. Class meetings gave us, throughout the twelve-week study, one time a week where we could interact without many of the restraints of the organized academic school day. I had found, throughout my field log notes and reflections, that a good class meeting (which there were more good ones than challenging ones) often refreshed me and motivated me to be prepared to return the next week for the challenges and joys of the academic, school world.

## DATA ANALYSIS

I utilized the following methods of data analysis throughout my action research study. One decision I had made early on in my research study that aided in my data analysis was narrowing my data sets to a very manageable amount. I felt it was important to narrow the scope of the data collecting to what was feasible and manageable to me so I did not become overwhelmed with the amount of data to analyze throughout the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

- Throughout my research study I frequently, read, reread, and reflected on my field log. After reading my field log numerous times I then coded the log throughout the research to locate similarities of ideas, statements, thoughts, and interest in class meeting topics. Coding is defined as the process of creating categories and patterns found in the data (Ely, Vinz, Anzul, & Downing, 2007). I also recorded, by tallies, the number of times each code was found in my log and recorded these findings at three separate times in reflective journals in my field log. I also documented and coded behaviors, engagement, as well as student activity during the class meetings in my field log. Upon coding the information in my field log I then also identified similarities in these codes and placed similar codes in bins. Bins titled “Problem Solving,” “Student Behaviors,” and “Student Perceptions and Feelings” were just some of the bins I created in this process. I then utilized these bins to aid me in developing theme statements that were relevant to the

information found in my study. By studying the bins and reviewing information within my field log I was able to develop one theme statement per bin, based on the codes within that bin. These themes are identified as “statements of meaning that run through all or most of the pertinent data or one in the minority that carries heavy emotional or factual impact” (Ely, Vinz, Anzul, & Downing, p. 206).

- I administered an identical pre-study survey and post-study survey. Students completed the pre-study survey during the second week of the study and the post-study survey was completed in the twelfth week. In both surveys, the percentage of positive responses and negative responses for each question were tabulated and recorded in my field log. I also reviewed each of the questions and responses to determine if I needed to make adjustments to our class meeting format or topic choice. I also wrote a reflective journal entry at the end of each survey where I recorded my thoughts upon reviewing the survey data. At the end of the study the survey percentages were compared looking for similarities and differences in student opinion from the beginning of the research study to the end.
- I administered a checklist to record behaviors in the classroom. This checklist was utilized to focus class meeting conversation if I needed to utilize teacher-directed discussions within a class meeting. I tabulated the checklist for frequency of behaviors both positive and negative throughout the research

study. The behavior checklist was completed on a weekly basis during a regular instruction period. I was careful to choose lessons that required short time periods of teacher-directed instruction. The exact amount of instructional time in minutes the behaviors were recorded on the checklist was also documented on the checklist. On several different occasions I utilized information from the behavior checklist frequency count to select a class meeting topic of discussion. A separate checklist was also used to record academic progress. I tallied the number of completed assignments, extra credit assignments, and also changes in grade point average. I also completed this checklist on a weekly basis. At the end of the study I tallied the academic progress checklist based on the number of students each week that completed the required and extra assignments. I was looking for any increase or decrease in the amount of student work completed. I compared this information with the students' beliefs about class meetings and their relation to academic success (as asked in the student open-ended questions).

- I coded student opinion writing responses (both mid-study and post-study) for similarities in regards to opinion of the overall effectiveness of class meetings. These codes were then placed in bins and theme statements were developed in the same process with the field log.
- Throughout the research process I wrote numerous reflective memos that gave me the opportunity to reflect upon my research in multiple ways. In reading

and then reflecting on educational philosophers like Dewey (1997), Vygotsky (1978), and Freire (1970) I was able to analyze my data from progressive, dialogic, and social constructivist viewpoints, respectively. After reading each book I examined my field log looking for specific examples and instances where each philosopher's viewpoint yielded new insights into my data analysis. I then reflected, in writing, on the connections and relevancy of these viewpoints on my research. As part of the action research course requirements I also completed a figurative language memo that provided me the opportunity to examine the actual language used by both my research participants and me throughout my study. This figurative language analysis often focused on different metaphors and their use in both discussions during a class meeting and my own language choices during my reflections within my field log. As Saban (2007) points out, metaphors often provide insight into a teacher's professional thinking and cognition and may also be used as a tool to increase the critical awareness of teachers. My mid-study reflective memo gave me the opportunity to review and reflect on the information in my study at a point when I could have easily become overwhelmed in the details of my study. This memo was extremely important as it served as a time to organize the data I had collected to date. This memo focused my attention on reviewing and reflecting in writing on each of the relevant pieces of information in my study including: my research question and new questions

that had developed during the research, the observational data I had collected in my field log, my survey and open-ended questions, and my checklists. By reviewing the information, identifying early codes, and placing them in potential bins in the process previously discussed, I was able to begin identifying and locating initial themes in my research (Figure 7).

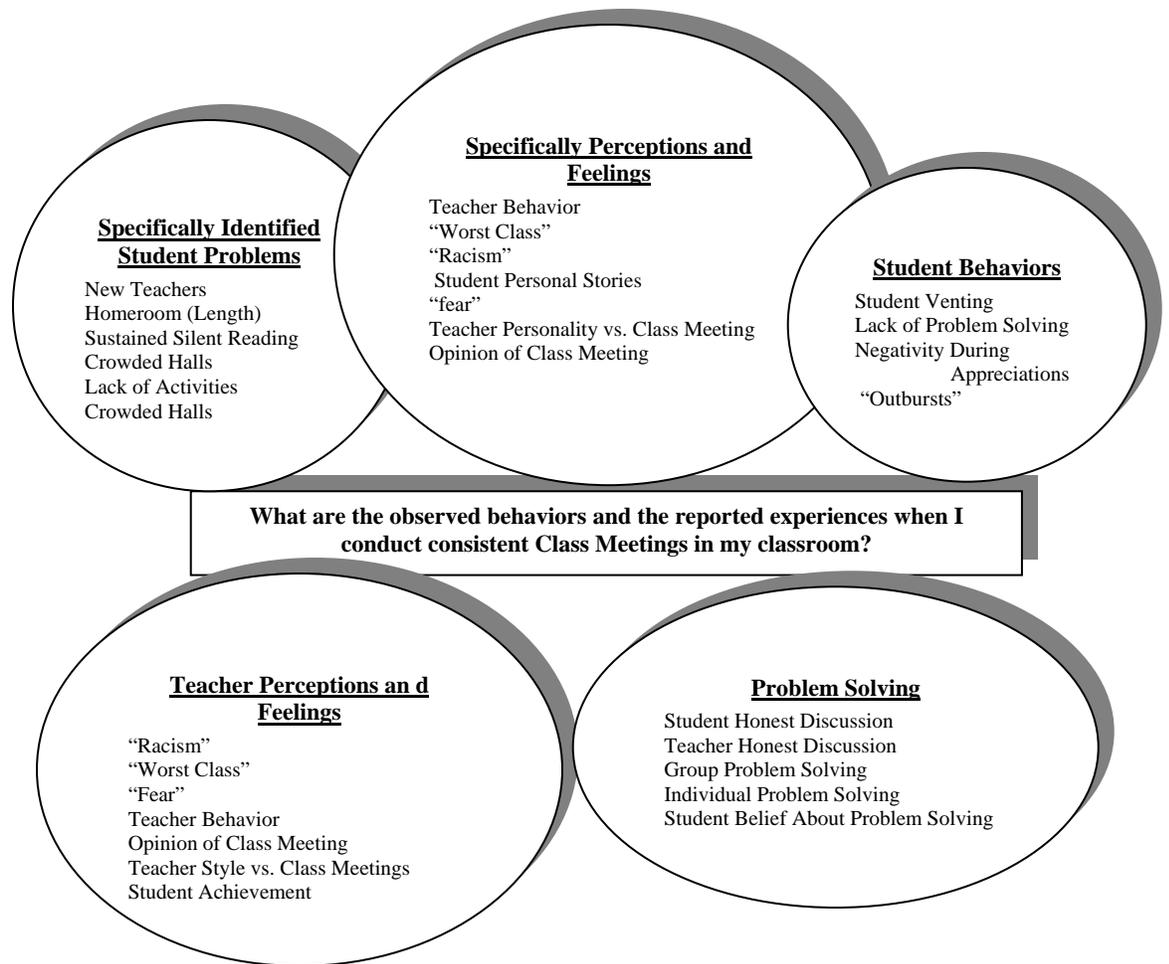


Figure 7. Coding Bins

## FINDINGS

**Student Perceptions and Feelings:** *During a class meeting, students are able to share their feelings and perceptions about a variety of issue which leads to a feeling of community and caring.*

Students are called upon, during their instructional day, to read, write, analyze, process, and produce finished products that demonstrate their achievement of the objectives for the day. However, there are few opportunities during the school day for students to share how they feel about events going on around them. They also have very little opportunity to share their perceptions of their school environment and the world with each other and their teacher. Class meetings provide the opportunity for students to share both their feelings and their perceptions about issues that are important to them. This ability to share creates a sense of community among students who might not otherwise develop a sense of caring for each other. Classroom community and caring is demonstrated in respect for one another, feelings of personal safety, and common goals for exploring issues and course content together (Larson, 1999). According to Dewey (1938), “community life does not organize itself in an enduring way purely spontaneously. It requires thought and planning ahead” (p. 56).

As I was facilitating class meetings throughout my research study, participants in the study shared opinions about a number of topics, including teacher and student behavior, personal stories about living in fear, stories about

racism, and the functionality of the class meeting itself. As Dewey suggested, it took thought and planning to encourage the students to share their feelings and perceptions about life. This thought and planning took the shape of teacher-directed focus questions in order to promote conversation rather than complaining. Teacher-directed questions were as simple as “What are you planning to do for Thanksgiving Break?” This type of question allowed maximum participation in the class meeting and demonstrated to students both their similarities with their classmates and their differences. However, teacher-directed questions also often required more students to share more personal thoughts. “How many of you have ever been in a situation where you felt truly afraid?” is an example of such a question that I had asked during a class meeting. This provided the students the opportunity to realize they are not living in isolation. It also provided me the opportunity to gain new insights into the struggles some of my student face in their lives. While participating in class meetings and completing open-ended questions, students expressed that class meetings allow them to “work together”. In response to the mid-study open-ended question, Chris responded that, “Class meetings are good because they bring the class together.” Also, Jose added that because of class meetings “We can all trust each other.”

This community does not simply include the students. Class meetings provide the teacher the opportunity to model respect and trust during a class

meeting by actively listening to and valuing their students' ideas (Gathercoal, 2000). As mentioned previously, students and I discussed during a class meeting that my role in the classroom and the community.

Chris pointed out that their behavior was better than in other areas of the building "because it is different with you, Miss. You listen to us, so we listen to you."

These types of responses were also evident in the open-ended responses, where students commented that, "We have a better connection with you because of class meetings" and according to Kristina, "I trust Ms. Pluchinsky more."

**Student Behaviors:** *Class meetings provide the students with an opportunity to examine their behaviors and relationships within the school setting.*

By the time students reach middle school, they are asked to move from one teacher to the next, in a certain order, at certain times. None of these things are under the middle school student's control. In most cases there is enough time in one class period to teach the curriculum established by the school district, with additional mandated time set aside for standardized test preparation. Students often have very little time to make connections to their teacher, their classroom, and each other. The class meeting provides a designated time with the intention of creating a classroom climate that is nurturing to the emotional needs of the student and the class as a community (Nelsen, Lott, & Glenn, 2000). It also

allows time to collaboratively establish norms for behavior, develop a sense of community, and maintain positive communication skills between members of the community (Caring School Community, 2007). The community that class meetings often develop provides the opportunity for students to share, discuss, and analyze their behaviors and relationships with others not only in the school setting, but also in the larger world. According to Friere, “The pursuit of full humanity, however, cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity” (1970, p. 54). The middle school class period schedule encourages isolation; the class meeting encourages fellowship.

During the class meetings conducted during this research, my students and I shared personal stories, discussed numerous relationship challenges and successes with those throughout the school, and discussed their behaviors and how these behaviors impacted their class and school environment. We discussed concepts like racism, fear, and poverty in society on a personal level, which made the concepts relevant to all of us involved. Specific class problematic behaviors like “outbursts” were discussed. However, we did not simply identify the behaviors; the discussion during class meeting also touched on how these behaviors impacted the entire classroom community, including me. According to Jose, “Class meetings help with friendship, trust, partnership, and relationships”. Manny stated, “Class meetings help us understand what some people like and some people don’t like. Class meetings help us work as a group.” The topics that

we discussed throughout the twelve weeks of class meetings allowed the students to build relationships with one another, even if they were not necessarily in the same circle of friends. On the post-study surveys students listed numerous ways class meetings are positive, noting that they bring us closer, we help each other, we share things, we get to talk to the teacher and know her better, it makes us know each other, and we are nice to each other.

Class meetings give students a safe venue for bringing up concerns and listening to others' points of view and the discussions encourage students to explain what they are thinking and feeling in a way that can be understood by their peers (Leachman & Victor, 2003; Do & Schallert, 2004). These discussions require students to listen to their classmates' and teacher's opinions and perspectives which then creates a sense of belonging and value (Do & Schallert, 2004; Gathercoal, 2000).

**Problem Solving:** *Through student and teacher honesty, class meetings provide an environment where students feel like they are solving problems that are affecting them within their school.*

Class meetings are designed with the idea of problem solving in mind. Class meetings create authentic learning environments and situations where students in the class are involved in solving real-world problems and problems within their immediate community (McCall, Janssen, & Riederer, 2008).

Students are often called upon within the class meeting format to listen to their peers and develop a plan of action to be taken to attempt to solve a problem. According to Friere (1970), “True dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking” (p. 92). Students in a class meeting are actively exchanging ideas to solve problems that they are experiencing within their classroom and the school. Also, according to Vygotsky (1978), “The most significant moments in the course of intellectual development, which gives birth to the purely human forms of practical and abstract intelligence, occurs when speech and practical activity, two previously completely independent lines of development converge (p. 24). The ability for the students to talk about their problems and actively use their discussions to develop a course of action to solve a problem is an integral part of the class meeting.

Throughout our class meetings the students identified many, many problems. Some of these problems were societal, such as racism and poverty. The discussion around these larger societal problems was, obviously, difficult to end by arriving at solutions. However, the students identified the problems, discussed how these problems affect them and tried to arrive at a solution that would be applicable to them. An example of this was the class meeting where Tara acknowledged that the lack of money to live in a safe neighborhood led to the presence of fear. Chris then was able to share that he believed getting an education would be helpful in ending his poverty.

The class meetings also gave us the opportunity to solve more immediate problems, ones that affected the students within the school. During a class meeting the students identified a problem being able to place their backpacks in their locker and still make it to lunch on time. The solution to this problem was to ask me if they could use my room for their backpacks since it was on the way to the cafeteria. This was a problem that was causing constant conflict between the students and administration but it was easily solved with a short class meeting conversation. That is not to say, however, that all problems were solved. The students, during class meetings, had a wonderful capacity for identifying problems, developing a course of action to solve the problem, then leaving the class meeting and never actually acting upon their decision and solving the problem. As an example, in the first class meeting the students developed a very in-depth plan for who was going to speak to administration to discuss a problem in silent reading. I explained the concept of 'objective' witness and the class agreed on which students from the class were going to represent them. Despite all of their plans, when they left the room no action was taken. The problem was not brought up again in a future class meeting; it seemed as though they lost their motivation to solve the problem when they left the class meeting circle. However, despite this obvious problem with follow-through, in open-ended questions, 13 out of the 15 research participants identified "solving problems" as a way the class meeting was positive. Even if the students did not always follow

through with their plan, they felt they were solving their problems by identifying them, discussing them, and planning to solve them. This was definitely an important new insight I gained as a result of conducting this research.

**Teacher Perceptions and Feelings:** *Class meetings provide the teacher the opportunity to share his or her feelings and perceptions with the students.*

Class meetings build and foster relationships and communication within the entire classroom community. This community obviously includes the teacher. Part of the structure of a class meeting includes the process of ‘circling up.’ The teacher sits in the circle, not outside of the circle or in the middle of the circle. Including the teacher in this community circle gives all students in the class a unique opportunity during the meeting to witness their teacher as an active part of the class meeting process. This provides the teacher the “opportunity to model respect and trust during a class meeting by actively listening to and valuing their students’ ideas” (Gathercoal, 2000). According to Friere, “The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with students” (p. 80). Also, Dewey states the development of experiences is “realized in the degree in which individuals form a community group. It is absurd to exclude the teacher from membership in this group” (p. 58).

There were many times during our class meetings where I would begin a statement with “Do you honestly want to know what I think”? My students

always responded with a very resounding “yes.” Class meetings gave me the opportunity to share my opinions and beliefs with my students in a way that was not authoritarian. I was simply a member of the group, voicing my opinion. Sometimes students were open to accept my point of view; sometimes they were not. We, as a group, were able to have much more honest and open discussions in the class meeting format than in a regular instructional period. I was able to share details about my life, my daughter’s life, my educational background, and many of my life experiences. Because of this sharing and honest discussion my students were interested in my opinions about their behaviors and problems throughout the school environment. The relationships established during class meeting allowed us to discuss behaviors that occurred in our classroom. The students and I both felt comfortable enough with each other to be able to share our opinions with one another. I was, for example, able to say, “You are prone to outbursts which makes it very difficult to teach you” and they were able to say, “You need to drink more coffee, Miss”. These interactions were both during a class meeting and are just two short examples of how, because of class meetings and the relationships built during class meetings, my students and I came to share things in an honest and open way without fear. Because of honest exchanges we were able to work together and give each other feedback that we may not have been open to without the relationships established during class meetings.

According to Kariuki and Davis, class meetings empower students to make choices for their community, which then creates a situation where the students and teacher are on the same team (2000). Teachers and students that act as a social unit to form goals and rules work together throughout the year to achieve those goals and maintain the established rules (Kariuki & Davis, 2000). The teacher and students, through honest communication, create an environment of teamwork, caring, and a community where all (teacher and student) are invested in the success of the community.

**Student Behavior and Achievement:** *Students perceive class meetings as being beneficial to both their behavior and their academic achievement.*

Students, through the use of class meetings, feel a level of comfort and security which allows them to take risks and chances in their learning (Nelsen, 2000). In classrooms where class meetings are held students are also more willing to ask other students and the teacher for help if needed (Miller, 1999). Class meetings increase student motivation, since they increase the amount of decision making the students have in the selection of projects and learning styles. Students are offered the ability to create ideas, identify and solve problems, and advance their own learning (Feldhusen & Feldhusen, 2004). As mentioned previously, class meetings also encourage student participation in the community which increases their ‘investment’ into the community which decreases classroom

management issues. According to Vygotsky, “An essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is, learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation from his peers” (p. 90).

Throughout the research process, my students believe they are better behaved and perform better in my social studies class than in other classrooms. In tracking grades throughout the research time period, however, I did not see any clear connections between grade averages, homework completion. For example, the grade point average of the fifteen research participants fluctuated only four percentage points between September and December. Student completion of homework also deviated very little throughout the study. On average, from one week to the next, 12 out of 15 students completed their weekly homework assignments. In addition, an average of three students completed the extra credit opportunity provided to them on a weekly basis. There was little change in these numbers or the individual students who completed these assignments throughout the research period. As I reviewed the data, I could find no evidence that participation within a class meeting directly impacted student achievement.

Student perception, though, was another matter. On the mid-study open-ended question, Kristina responded that class meetings “help our grades because we talk about problems with teachers and their work.”

Also, according to Tara “Class meetings give us a chance to talk and blow off steam, which help us when we need to do our work.”

Eleven of the fifteen research participants felt that their grades were better than they otherwise would have been because of class meetings. While not all students could provide specific examples of why they think this, they still felt that class meetings help to improve their grades.

The same holds true for behavior. During the study, while I was tallying behavior from week to week, I did not find the steady improvement in behavior that I had hoped to see. However again, on open ended responses the students expressed that their behavior was better in my class because of class meetings. Students provided reasons why they believe this is so that included: “I never get written up in Ms. Pluchinsky’s class like I do in others,” “we get to sit where we want in your room because we are good,” “we earn rewards in your class and don’t in others because we are good for you.” While I did not see a marked improvement in my students’ behavior in my classroom during the research time, the students believe they are better behaved in my classroom than others because of class meetings.

Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development can only be achieved in an environment of cooperation. The zone of proximal development is also, as stated, an essential part of learning. Class meetings provide a community of cooperation where students work together to monitor each others behavior, work as study

partners, help each other with homework and assignments, and actively participate in cooperative learning groups (Gathercoal, 2000). Students that participate in class meetings have entered into a relationship with each other and the teacher where they can help each learn and grow through their respective zones of proximal development.

## **NOW WHAT?**

As I look back over the time I spent in class meetings during this research time, I realize that I have loved the experience. Class meetings have offered me so many opportunities to not only get to know my students, but learn from them. Class meetings provided my students the opportunities share their feelings and their stories with one another. However, completing the research process has left me with so many more questions that I would like to answer. Can I really continue to hold class meetings, uninterrupted every week? Can the class meeting community feeling be carried with the student throughout the school building, to other classrooms? Can I help other teachers, especially on the middle and secondary level, understand the benefits of class meetings? I have uncovered so many important new questions, and with time I hope I will be able to continue to search for answers.

Can I really continue to hold class meetings, uninterrupted every week? I see this as being one of the greatest challenges to my class meetings. I have always believed in class meetings, but prior to this research, have held them bi-weekly or even monthly. I found the 30 minute weekly class meeting to be more effective than the monthly 50 minute class meeting. However, as winter weather, school holidays, standardized testing, and testing preparation continue to interrupt the schedule, I am already finding that my ability to hold the weekly meeting has been negatively impacted. In the future I need to continue to find ways to be

creative in my teaching and scheduling so I can continue to make class meetings a weekly focus (even if 'weekly' turns into a set number of days apart rather than a set day of the week, as I utilized in my research).

Can the class meeting community feeling be carried with the student throughout the school building, to other classrooms? I would like to focus on this question with my students in future class meetings. I am curious to see if they feel the community can be carried outside of my four walls. Within our own classroom there is no doubt that class meetings provide a better working relationship; however I would like to see, at least, the student relationships carry through to other classes. It is always upsetting to hear from others that my students were not getting along with each other in other parts of the building. While I understand I am part of the community, I would like to see if there is a way to help the students carry the positive relationships they establish with each other even if I am not part of their immediate community.

Can I help other teachers, especially on the middle and secondary level, understand the benefits of class meetings? This is a question that I have constantly tried to work to answer. In the past I have presented information about class meetings at our professional development days, at new-staff orientation, and even at the Pennsylvania Coalition of Charter Schools (PCCS) state conference. It has always been very challenging for me to 'prove' to the teachers that class meetings should not be viewed as giving up content instructional time, but rather

developing multiple skills in students that will serve them well in their content area learning. When presenting at PCCS, almost my entire audience was comprised of elementary-level teachers, most of whom already believed in what I was espousing. I would like the opportunity to speak with more middle and high school teachers outside of my building about the benefits of class meetings. I feel with the addition of my experiences completing the research process and the information I have learned through research and practice that I would be better equipped to make these presentations than I was in the past. I am looking forward to exploring opportunities that might be available to me to lead this type of professional development.

While my study has ended, I look forward to continuing to utilize class meetings within my classroom. I look forward to exploring the scheduling options and possibilities that may make class meetings even more effective. I want to talk, explore, and think with my students about ways that we can spread our classroom community throughout the school and translate it into a school community. I look forward to opportunities to share the ideas, concepts, and benefits of creating community within a class with others. While this cycle of action research has ended, the passion that began the research continues.

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## APPENDIX A

### Pre-Study Student Survey

(Adapted from original survey in Miller, 1999)

Directions: Please answer the following questions as honestly as possible. Please circle the answer that you think is most true.

1. Students in my class are willing to go out of their way to help someone.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

2. My classmates care about my work just as much as their own.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

3. My class is like a family.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

4. The students in my class do not really care about each other.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

5. A lot of students in my class like to seriously put each other down.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

6. Students in my class help each other learn.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

7. Students in my class help each other, even if they are not friends.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

8. Students in my class do not really get along together well.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree      Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

9. Students in my class just look out for themselves.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

10. Students in my class are mean to each other.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

11. When I'm having trouble with my work, at least one classmate will try to help.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

12. Students in my class treat each other with respect.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

13. Students in my class work together to solve problems.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

14. When someone in my class does well, many people in the class feel good.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

15. Students have a say in what goes on in the classroom.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

16. The teacher lets us do things our own way.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

17. The teacher is the only one who decides on the rules.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

18. The teacher lets me choose what I will work on.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

19. The teacher and the students together plan what we will do.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

20. I get to do things in the class that I want to do.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

21. The teacher and students decide together what the rules will be.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

22. The teacher asks the students to help decide what the class should do.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

23. Students in my class can get a rule changed if they think it is unfair.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

24. Students in my class get to help plan what they will do.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

25. I feel like my opinion is valued in the classroom.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

**APPENDIX B**  
Behavior Checklist For Instructional Classes

Checklist Date: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>BEHAVIOR</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
Calling Out	
Invading a Classmate's Space	
Gum Chewing	
Disrespect to Teacher or Classmate	
Non-participation During Required Activity	
Raising Hand to Speak	
Polite Interaction with Teacher or Classmate	
Transition Between Activities 'Quick and Quiet' (as a class)	
Completed Task-on-Hand	



**APPENDIX D**  
Post-Study Student Survey

(Adapted from original survey in Miller, 1999)

Directions: Please answer the following questions as honestly as possible. Your name will not be on the survey so nobody else will know how you answered the questions. Please circle the answer that you think is most true.

1. Students in my class are willing to go out of their way to help someone.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

2. My classmates care about my work just as much as their own.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

3. My class is like a family.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

4. The students in my class do not really care about each other.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

5. A lot of students in my class like to seriously put each other down.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

6. Students in my class help each other learn.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

7. Students in my class help each other, even if they are not friends.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

8. Students in my class do not really get along together well.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

9. Students in my class just look out for themselves.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

10. Students in my class are mean to each other.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

11. When I'm having trouble with my work, at least one classmate will try to help.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

12. Students in my class treat each other with respect.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

13. Students in my class work together to solve problems.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

14. When someone in my class does well, many people in the class feel good.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

15. Students have a say in what goes on in the classroom.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

16. The teacher lets us do things our own way.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

17. The teacher is the only one who decides on the rules.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

18. The teacher lets me choose what I will work on.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

19. The teacher and the students together plan what we will do.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

20. I get to do things in the class that I want to do.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

21. The teacher and students decide together what the rules will be.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

22. The teacher asks the students to help decide what the class should do.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

23. Students in my class can get a rule changed if they think it is unfair.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

24. Students in my class get to help plan what they will do.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

25. I feel like my opinion is valued in the classroom.

Strongly Disagree      Disagree    Unsure      Agree      Agree Strongly

## **APPENDIX E**

### **Mid- Study Student Open-Ended Response Questions**

Directions: Read the following questions. Consider the time spent during Class Meetings. Answer each question with at least five sentences.

In your opinion, do you feel the time spend in Class Meetings was meaningful to you? Consider the topics, interactions, and your participation in the Class Meetings in your response.

In your opinion, do you feel Class Meetings help the class work together as a group to improve behavior and academic achievement? Give examples.

## APPENDIX F

### Post-Study Student Open-Ended Response Questions

1.) List five things you enjoy about Class Meetings.

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2.) List five ways you think Class Meetings are positive.

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3.) List five things you do not like about Class Meetings (or things that can be improved).

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4.) Give at least ONE specific example of how you think Class Meetings help Ms. Pluchinsky's class room function compared to other classrooms.

**APPENDIX G**  
Principal's Consent Form

Dear \_\_\_\_\_ :

I am completing a Master of Education degree at Moravian College. My courses have enabled me to learn about the most effective teaching methods. One of the requirements of the program is that I conduct a systematic study of my own teaching practices. This semester, I am focusing my research on our class time spent in Class Meetings. The title of my research is Class Meetings: Building Community in a Classroom. My students will benefit from being in the study by participating in class meetings, building a classroom community, creating a safer school environment, and increasing achievement.

As part of this study students will be asked to participate in the Class Meetings, complete a pre and post survey, and answer two essay questions regarding their opinions about Class Meetings. I will also complete checklists throughout the study that monitor behavior and achievement. The study will take place from September 8, 2009 through December 24, 2009.

The data will be collected and coded, and held in the strictest confidence. No one except me will have access to the data. My research results will be presented using pseudonyms – no one's identity will be used. I will store the data in a locked filing cabinet in my classroom. At the conclusion of the research, the data will be destroyed.

Students will be given the option to participate in the study and will not be penalized in any way if they do not. A student may choose at any time not to participate in this study. However, students must participate in all regular class activities. All students will participate in the Class Meetings and related assignments pertaining to the Class Meetings.

We welcome questions about this research at any time. The students' participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty or consequence. Any questions you have about the research or about the process of withdrawing can be directed to me, Lisa Pluchinsky (lisaplu30@yahoo.com), or to my advisor, Dr. Charlotte Zales (crzales@moravian.edu), Education Department, Moravian College, 610-652-7958.

Sincerely,

Lisa Pluchinsky

I agree to allow my student to take part in this project. I understand that my student can choose not to participate at any time.

---

Principal's Signature

Date

**APPENDIX H**  
Parent Consent Form

Dear Parent/Guardian:

I am completing a Master of Education degree at Moravian College. My courses have enabled me to learn about the most effective teaching methods. One of the requirements of the program is that I conduct a systematic study of my own teaching practices. This semester, I am focusing my research on our class time spent in Class Meetings. The title of my research is Class Meetings: Building Community in a Classroom. My students will benefit from being in the study by participating in class meetings, building a classroom community, creating a safer school environment, and increasing achievement.

As part of this study students will be asked to participate in the Class Meetings, complete a pre and post survey, and answer two essay questions regarding their opinions about Class Meetings. I will also complete checklists throughout the study that monitor behavior and achievement. The study will take place from September 8, 2009 through December 24, 2009.

The data will be collected and coded, and held in the strictest confidence. No one except me will have access to the data. My research results will be presented using pseudonyms – no one’s identity will be used. I will store the data in a locked filing cabinet in my classroom. At the conclusion of the research, the data will be destroyed.

Students will be given the option to participate in the study and will not be penalized in any way if they do not. A student may choose at any time not to participate in this study. However, students must participate in all regular class activities. All students will participate in the Class Meetings and related assignments pertaining to the Class Meetings.

We welcome questions about this research at any time. Your child’s participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty or consequence. Any questions you have about the research or about the process of withdrawing can be directed to me, Lisa Pluchinsky (lisaplu30@yahoo.com). Questions can also be directed to my advisor, Dr. Charlotte Zales (crzales@moravian.edu), Education Department, Moravian College, 610-652-7958.

Sincerely,

Lisa Pluchinsky

I agree to allow my student to take part in this project. I understand that my student can choose not to participate at any time.

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Parent/Guardian Signature

Date

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Student’s Signature