

Nice to Meet You: Building Classroom Community with Morning Meeting

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Abstract

For children, the beginning of a new school year means entering an unfamiliar classroom with a new teacher and attempting to make new friends. Elementary teachers often spend time establishing a positive rapport with and among students in the first few weeks of school, but maintaining a classroom community requires ongoing effort. The Responsive Classroom approach to teaching suggests using a daily Morning Meeting to promote a positive, cooperative environment. This research study examined how to use Morning Meeting to build a supportive community in a third grade classroom. Findings indicate that Morning Meeting provides valuable opportunities to create a supportive climate, but teachers must also continue to intentionally reinforce the social skills needed to preserve the sense of community.

Question in Context

School Background

This is my fifth year teaching third grade at an elementary school in a rural area of central New Jersey. Stripes Elementary School serves just over 400 students in first through fourth grades. The school's population is 67% Caucasian, 14% African-American, 14% Hispanic, and 5% Asian or a combination of races (New Jersey Department of Education, 2015). English is the primary language spoken by 95% of our students, and a variety of socioeconomic groups are represented. The demographics suggest that my school is similar to others in the area, but there is one major factor that separates us from almost all other districts in New Jersey.

My school district is unique in that we are located next to a military base, so our student body is comprised of both military children who live on base and civilian children who live in the township. Military families are stationed on the base for various lengths of time, often between one and three years. They come from all over the United States and many of these children have already lived in different areas of the country before arriving in New Jersey, and several have even lived abroad. By contrast, Countryside Township is a small, rural farming community, and some residents have lived in the area their entire lives.

Of the 1,225 students enrolled in the school district, approximately 70% are military and 30% are civilian (Genesis Educational Services, 2016). We have four schools that serve pre-kindergarten through sixth grade students, and then students attend a nearby regional middle and high school for grades seven through twelve. One of our schools houses only pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes. Where students attend first and second grade is determined by where they live: there is a first and second grade building on base for military students, but township residents are housed in my school, Stripes Elementary. Then, all students join together to attend

third and fourth grade in my building and continue on to another school for fifth and sixth grade.

Because of the way our schools are structured with first and second graders attending one of two schools based on where they live, third grade is the first time that most of the military and civilian students intermingle. Although they all attend kindergarten together and some students may still remember each other after their years apart in first and second grades, third graders discover that the military population is so transient that many former classmates have moved away and many new, unfamiliar students have moved in. The transience of the military families poses challenges to building class relationships that children in traditional school districts with a majority of permanent community residents do not face.

While military families frequently move in and out of the district, the township residents do quite the opposite. The civilian children often come from families who are longtime friends, neighbors, and residents of the community. They participate in township activities and events while military families mostly focus on integrating into the military base community. Consequently, up until third grade, civilian and military students have very little, if any, interaction with each other in the community. The tight-knit nature of the township residents leads to civilian students already knowing many of their classmates by third grade, having formed friendships over several years both in and out of school. However, entering third grade brings about 110 military students into the school that the township children shared with only about 50 classmates during first and second grade. Suddenly, the civilian students are the minority in their grade levels, surrounded by new classmates who live on the military base instead of in their neighborhoods.

The Blending of Two

As a teacher of third grade, the year when civilian and military students first join

together, I have the unique responsibility of helping civilian students from my school, military students who attended the school on base, and brand new students who just moved to the area all meld into one cohesive class. It is common practice, especially in elementary school, for teachers to build positive relationships with and among their students. While teachers across the country spend time at the beginning of every school year on getting-to-know-you activities, the composition of my district's student body means that this looks and feels different – and takes considerably longer – in my classroom than in a class where most students have known each other since kindergarten.

I began this school year with 8 civilian students, 14 military students, and 1 brand new student. This diverse mixture meant that helping students get to know one another was a major task that was critical for creating a positive classroom environment. In addition to meeting new classmates, the military and new students had to familiarize themselves with a school that the civilians had attended for the past two years. Building a classroom community certainly starts with making students feel comfortable as they acclimate to their new environment, but creating a supportive climate that centers on teamwork and encouragement extends well beyond the first few days of school.

The question of how to best transform a group of eight-year-olds who are mostly strangers into a third grade classroom “family” had been running through my mind for over a year by the time this school year began. Now that I am in my fifth year of teaching, my idea of a true classroom community goes deeper than it did when I first entered the profession. I want more than an environment where students merely tolerate each other and show respect to please the teacher. I want more than a place where students prefer to stick with their familiar, old friends and hesitate to invest in new friendships. With an increased emphasis on teamwork and

cooperative learning nowadays, I want to see and hear students genuinely interested in learning from each other and capitalizing on each other's strengths to make their entire group successful. I always plan activities that help students meet their new classmates at the beginning of the year, but I have realized that this is not nearly enough. A supportive atmosphere does not automatically follow after students participate in a few teambuilding activities and getting-to-you-know games, and constructing it takes time.

To me, a *supportive* community includes students who build up their classmates, encourage them to take risks and rise to challenges, cooperate instead of compete, and help each other move forward after failure. There is a strong push for teaching and fostering these types of 21st century skills because they are necessary for 21st century jobs and careers, which value teamwork over individualism. The focus on collaboration means that children cannot successfully acquire these skills without being invested in the success of their peers.

Over the past four years, I have watched countless combinations of third graders work in partnerships and groups. True collaboration where each group member is appreciated and plays an equal role does not come easily to eight-year-olds. Even after explicitly teaching and demonstrating strategies for working together, I have never felt that group work or cooperative learning structures have run as effectively as I would like them to. In my ideal classroom, students would be able to work well with anyone, whether they are best friends or have nothing in common. Unfortunately, this was not the case in my past classes; students always gravitated toward the same friends and complained about working with unfamiliar classmates. In the beginning of every school year, there is a clear divide between military and civilian students; it becomes less pronounced as the year goes on, but may never fully disappear. This naturally made me wonder how I could improve the sense of community among my students in order to

then raise the level of collaboration and cooperation.

Introduction to Responsive Classroom

In searching for new community-building strategies, I came across the Responsive Classroom approach to teaching two years ago. The philosophy of the research-based program is that investing time in social and emotional learning improves the classroom climate and minimizes unwanted, negative social interactions and behaviors (Kriete & Davis, 2014). It includes practices, strategies, and resources for teachers that hit four key domains: engaging academics, positive community, effective management, and developmental awareness (Center for Responsive Schools, 2016). Responsive Classroom is a comprehensive approach with many facets that take significant time and effort to implement, but one of its major components, which falls into the “positive community” domain, is something I have dabbled in and could finally fully implement this year: Morning Meeting.

Morning Meeting occurs during the first 20 to 30 minutes of every school day and involves the students and teacher gathering in a circle to start the day on a positive note. The meeting includes a greeting, share, group activity, and morning message from the teacher to the class. I had never had enough time in my jam-packed daily schedule to allow for a full meeting, so for the past two years, I was only able to do short, modified meetings that usually included a quick greeting and a group activity. Since we were always rushed, though, the activities often ended up cultivating competition instead of teaching teamwork and respect. My students enjoyed Morning Meeting, yet it did not have the effect I had been yearning for. I was frustrated that I had found an appealing community-building strategy but could not make it work effectively because I did not have enough time to devote to it.

Finally, this year, I am so grateful to have time built into my schedule for a full-blown,

30-minute Morning Meeting. Right from the start, I was eager to see not only how this would change the way my meetings ran, but how this would affect my entire school day. The desire for an effective way to bring my third graders together into a cohesive group coupled with the newly available time to hold full Morning Meetings led me to create my research question: *How can I use Morning Meeting to build a supportive classroom community?* My goal was to cultivate a sense of community that grew out of Morning Meeting and continued to exist well after each meeting ended. The meetings create a positive atmosphere of belonging and fun, but they also teach social-emotional and 21st century skills that can be applied to instructional (and non-instructional) tasks throughout the entire day.

I did not expect Morning Meeting to be a magical solution to maintaining a supportive classroom climate, so my research question raised several other questions for me to also consider. First, how do I help students connect with each other and build bonds that make them want to support their classmates? If I want students to form relationships that allow for teamwork and support, how do I make sure that group activities during Morning Meeting have a positive effect on classroom climate? During group sharing, how can I help students learn to respond to and about each other instead of talking only about themselves? Exploring these topics led me to further discover how to best build a supportive classroom through Morning Meeting.

Literature Review

In reviewing literature pertaining to my research question, I focused on pieces about building a classroom community and implementing Morning Meeting. Several of the articles and books I selected provided similar definitions of a classroom community, which refined and solidified my vision of a community. Barnett and Fallon (2007) summarized the term by simply explaining, “A classroom community is generally thought of as a group (teachers and students) sharing a space and engaging in democratic decision making” (as cited in Gardner, 2012, p. 61). While the teacher does hold authority, a classroom community values each member’s contributions and ideas and operates within a respectful atmosphere, which Morning Meeting helps create (Kriete & Davis, 2014). The literature I reviewed contained five common themes that helped me delve deeper into the topics associated with my research question: Morning Meeting should follow a predictable structure every day; building a community takes time and effort; teaching social and emotional skills is crucial to creating a positive climate; academics and community building intertwine; and a sense of community can carry throughout the day, beyond Morning Meeting, once it is firmly established.

Morning Meeting Follows a Predictable Structure

The most basic idea about implementing Morning Meeting is that every meeting follows the same predictable structure with four components. I had only ever known the Responsive Classroom version of Morning Meeting, so when I began searching for literature on the subject, I was surprised to find that there are other types of “morning meetings,” sometimes called morning circle or class meetings (Croom & Davis, 2006). No matter what you call it, the general purpose of these meetings seems to be common: to gather the class together as a cohesive group and begin the school day on a positive note. However, because my school district has been

encouraging teachers to use Responsive Classroom techniques and provided us with a brief training two years ago, I knew that I had to (and wanted to) stick with the Responsive Classroom format for Morning Meeting.

Kriete and Davis (2014) have written an entire book devoted to Responsive Classroom's Morning Meeting, where they lay out the philosophy behind it and how to get it up and running in the classroom. Morning Meeting is based on research that confirms the benefits of teaching and practicing social-emotional skills, and the authors explain how the skills cultivated through Morning Meeting transfer into other academic areas and into our 21st century global society. This is the third edition of *The Morning Meeting Book*; Kriete's first edition was published in 1999, so Responsive Classroom has been promoting the power of Morning Meeting for almost two decades. While the third edition includes some updates, the purposes of Morning Meeting have remained the same: to create a climate of belonging, respect, trust, and fun; to build connections between classmates and their teachers; and to intertwine social, academic, and emotional learning (p. 11). The creators of Morning Meeting outlined four parts that deliberately lend themselves to reaching these goals.

The four components included in every Morning Meeting, in sequential order, are the greeting, share, group activity, and morning message (Kriete & Davis, 2014). The entire class, including the teacher(s), gathers for the meeting and sits in a circle on the floor or in chairs in an open area of the classroom. Meetings begin with a greeting where every child gets personal attention from a classmate or teacher. The greeting might go around the circle with a friendly "Good morning," or it might be a welcoming song that the class sings together. Next, students have a chance to discuss news or announcements during the sharing portion of the meeting. Sharing can occur as an around-the-circle share where every child shares a sentence or two on a

given topic, a partner share where two or three students discuss the topic together, or an open dialogue share where three to five students share something with the whole class and then take questions and comments from the group. After sharing, the class moves into the group activity, which is usually a fun game, song, or chant in which the entire group can participate. Finally, the class turns their attention to the morning message, which is prominently displayed for students to read and respond to before the meeting begins. The message is a short letter from the teacher to the class and can include a question for students to answer, important information about the upcoming school day, a review of something that happened the previous day, or reinforcement of an academic concept the students have been studying. During the final component of Morning Meeting, the class reads the morning message aloud and discusses any responses that students had to the message.

Each of Morning Meeting's four parts serves its own specific purpose, which Davis (2012) summarizes nicely. Greetings, the part where children hear their names and see that someone notices their presence, help students feel a sense of belonging in the classroom. Sharing provides a chance for classmates to learn about each other and practice communication skills. Group activities promote fun, cooperation, and a group identity. The morning message reviews academic skills and ignites curiosity about the school day.

The four parts of Morning Meeting appeal to and satisfy our basic human needs, which must be met before real learning can occur, and which drive our intrinsic motivation. Erwin (2005) examines how meeting the five basic needs of survival, belonging, power, freedom, and fun drastically improves the quality of the learning environment. When we become aware of the importance of meeting these needs, we can understand how starting each day with a Morning Meeting that addresses all five basic needs sets a positive tone for the classroom and motivates

children to become invested in their classroom community. Because every component of Morning Meeting plays a role in motivating students and building a positive climate, I will follow the outlined format and use suggested activities from the authors of Morning Meeting books in my own meetings.

Building a Community Takes Time and Effort

Based on my past experience, I believe that building a classroom community takes time and effort, and much of the literature I read confirms my idea. Gardner (2012) and Kent and Simpson (2012) agree that community does not exist automatically, so teachers must develop it in the classroom. Facilitating peer interactions is crucial to creating community, especially at the beginning of the school year. In a study where third grade students had to mix up their lunch tables one day and sit next to students outside of their social circle, the researchers discovered that many students sat in silence, stating, “Simply placing students in an inclusive and diverse setting does not guarantee interaction” (Kindziarski et al., p. 18). While I think my students would probably find something to talk about with their new peers in this situation, this finding is still relevant. It affirms that helping students get to know one another, especially in the first few days of school, involves much more than just putting a new group of students together and expecting them to form their own bonds. It is the teacher’s role to employ strategies for turning a group of unfamiliar students into a community of learners.

My means for creating community will be through a daily Morning Meeting. My past meetings have been abbreviated versions of true Morning Meeting because of time constraints, but holding full 30-minute meetings should have a positive effect on my classroom this year. One first grade teacher researcher was in a similar situation to mine, where she increased the time she spent on addressing social-emotional needs from only a few minutes to 30 minutes each

morning with class meetings that included lessons on social skills (Croom & Davis, 2006). She was pleased to find that devoting more time paid off immensely in improving students' behavior and the classroom environment. I hope to find similar results, though this study points out the importance of using the 30 minutes wisely like she did. I realize that I need to spend more time planning Morning Meetings so I can intentionally address skills and issues based on my students' needs. Longer Morning Meetings would likely not make as much of a difference if they were just improvised without clear learning goals. Croom and Davis (2006) proved that spending more time intentionally teaching social skills is beneficial, so I need to make the most of those precious 30 minutes.

Teaching Social and Emotional Skills

The need for explicitly teaching social-emotional skills appeared in much of the literature I read. Kindzierski and colleagues (2013) noticed that in their study of third graders who had to mix up their lunch tables, many students reacted positively to the change even though they reported that they did not talk to the students around them. The researchers concluded that students are generally open to meeting new peers but need help learning how to interact with unfamiliar people; they therefore recommend that social skills and teambuilding activities be integrated into daily classroom teaching. Croom and Davis's (2006) study centered on teaching and implementing social skills because they realized that previously spending only a few minutes per day on social skills was not enough for their first graders. I agree that there is a pressing need to address these skills in school, but finding the time to weave social skills into a packed curriculum is not easy. Morning Meeting becomes a perfect vehicle for introducing and practicing the social and emotional skills that research proves are necessary for successful peer interactions but are often neglected.

Kriete and Davis (2014) state in *The Morning Meeting Book* that meetings are specifically meant to combine academic, social, and emotional learning. The sharing component, where students report on news or announcements and their classmates respond, particularly requires applying social-emotional skills like active listening, self-management, social awareness, and decision making.

Before students can use those social skills in sharing and other situations, they must learn the basics of how to appropriately display them. Gardner (2012) and Croom and Davis (2006) discuss using their daily class meetings to not only practice those skills, like during the sharing component, but to explicitly teach and model them first. They both recommend creating a T-chart of what a skill looks like and sounds like, which I plan to try. Social-emotional skills can also be introduced or reinforced through read alouds when teachers choose texts that include characters displaying or not displaying these skills (Croom & Davis, 2006; Kent & Simpson, 2012). The teacher and students can then refer back to those texts during Morning Meeting activities and throughout the day. Morning Meeting doubles as a time to explicitly introduce social-emotional skills and to put them into practice in a low-stakes environment.

Intertwining Academics and Community Building

While addressing social-emotional needs strongly promotes a positive classroom environment, teachers can also involve academics in fostering a classroom community. Kent and Simpson (2012) discuss the role of literature in community building, stating that texts create common connections among students and can demonstrate the trusting relationships that we want students to emulate. Literature also provides opportunities to analyze the differences and interactions among characters, which can be related to the individual differences present in the classroom. Celebrating students' differences can help them better understand and appreciate

each other and thus cultivate a sense of community. This is another strategy I will keep in mind as I build my classroom community this year. I read aloud to students every day, but if I can relate the literature to our own class and use it to demonstrate trust and how people work together, it can strengthen our sense of community.

Academic learning fits right into the community building that occurs during Morning Meeting as well (Kriete & Davis, 2014). Many of the suggested greetings, sharing topics, group activities, and morning messages are designed to be infused with academic concepts or skills. For example, I have integrated math into Morning Meeting using Kriete and Davis' (2014) dice greeting, where students roll two dice and recite the resulting multiplication fact using those numbers as factors. With more time to implement all four components of Morning Meeting, I can insert more academics into my meetings to emphasize essential concepts. However, this again dictates the need to spend more time planning ahead; I will have to treat Morning Meeting like another subject that requires preparation and thoughtful consideration.

Carrying the Sense of Community Throughout the Day

The most important concept present in the literature, in my opinion, is that once a sense of community is established, it can indeed be carried throughout the school day both in and out of the classroom. This has been a major concern for me because I have tried to foster a positive rapport among students through my short Morning Meetings, but the rapport often faded away after the meetings ended. Fortunately, several researchers reported that the positive climate established through full Morning Meetings and other community building activities improved the overall classroom environment and student behaviors all day long.

Gardner (2012) found that the social skills she taught during Morning Meeting improved her students' ability to collaborate in science class. She intentionally discussed skills like active

listening in the context of science, and as students participated in science, she reminded them to draw on and repeat the behaviors they had already practiced in Morning Meeting. As my own instruction becomes increasingly dependent on collaboration and cooperative learning, I realize that applying social-emotional skills is vital to effective group work. By introducing those skills during Morning Meeting, I can later reinforce how to apply them in content areas. As a general elementary teacher, I see the opportunity to refer to strategies from Morning Meeting during partnership discussions in reading and writing, during problem-solving explanations in math, and certainly during group investigations and experiments in science. I hope to discover that students can successfully carry the positive tone set by Morning Meeting into academic lessons.

Croom and Davis (2006) also witnessed students using their newly developed social skills throughout the school day, and they found that students exhibited more positive behavior in specials classes like art, music, and physical education, which they had not previously done. They even stated that a substitute complimented the class's excellent behavior when the teacher was absent. Croom and Davis experienced this improved classroom environment after they implemented 30-minute class meetings, which leads me to hope that timing will make a significant difference in maintaining the positive climate beyond Morning Meeting. Lending more time to community building eventually led to that sense of community growing strong enough to remain intact outside of the general education classroom and outside of the teacher, which is my ultimate goal in implementing Morning Meeting.

Conclusion

Examining literature on building a classroom community and implementing Morning Meeting gave me further insight into my research question. Spending more time this year on full Morning Meetings should be very helpful in facilitating positive peer interactions that lead to

students viewing their class as a unified learning community. Increasing the time we spend on Morning Meeting is only the beginning, though. Creating a supportive climate involves explicitly teaching and practicing social-emotional skills in conjunction with academic skills. While the articles I read provided a few valid strategies for addressing social skills, I need to continue to search for effective techniques to better familiarize myself with this.

Searching for relevant literature was helpful but also revealed the lack of research directly examining the question I plan to study. While there is plenty of published information about the purpose, goals, and strategies for implementing Morning Meeting, I only came across two recent studies from teacher researchers looking at the actual effects of Morning Meeting (or some version of it) in their classrooms. These were conducted with first graders and fifth graders, so my research with a third grade class will offer findings from a middle elementary grade. The literature review also made clear to me that Morning Meeting is a chief component of building a classroom community, but it is not a guaranteed solution. I hope to discover that I can use Morning Meeting to lay the groundwork for establishing a classroom community, and that my students and I can successfully maintain our supportive community throughout the day.

Methodology

In my study, I explored how I could use Morning Meeting to build a supportive classroom community. When a new group of third grade students enters my classroom every September, most of them do not know each other. I help students get to know their classmates at the beginning of the school year, but the pressure to dive into the academic curriculum means community building activities soon take a backseat. I examined how to most effectively use a daily Morning Meeting to create strong bonds and trust among my students. My goal was for the sense of community to remain intact throughout the school day so that students could transfer the social and emotional skills they developed during Morning Meeting to collaborative tasks in academic subjects and special areas like physical education.

As I studied my main research question, I also considered several other related questions. Since I wanted to help students build bonds and be supportive of each other, what are effective strategies for this that I could tie into Morning Meeting? How can I make sure that group activities during Morning Meeting foster cooperation instead of competition? How can I teach students to respond to their classmates' news and announcements with a focus on the person who shared instead of relating the news back to themselves, as they so often do? Answering these questions allowed me to tweak and improve Morning Meetings, which established more ideal conditions for building a supportive community.

Study Setting

My school district comprises children who live in the rural township and on the nearby military base. Third grade is the year that military and civilian children join together in school after being separated in first and second grades. For the first two months of school, my third grade class was composed of 8 civilian students, 14 military students, and 1 brand new student

(who is a military child). On October 31, one of the female military students moved away, but the next day, a male civilian student with special needs transferred into our class from another third grade class in our school. Eight of my students are classified as special education students, so I co-teach with an in-class resource teacher for the entire school day. Some of those students receive instruction in a pull-out replacement classroom for certain subjects, so they leave and return to my general education classroom throughout the day. All eight of those students are present in my classroom for Morning Meeting.

As I previously mentioned, this is the first school year where the principal has built time into all homeroom teachers' schedules for Morning Meeting. From the very first day of school on September 6, I was able to hold Morning Meetings almost every day in my classroom. The only exceptions to this were one day each in September, October, and November when we attended a school-wide Morning Meeting in the multipurpose room to celebrate the Citizens of the Month and other awards for positive behavior.

During the first two weeks of school, as part of setting up Morning Meeting, the class worked together to create guidelines that would help meetings run smoothly. We decided the rules for meetings would be to sit crisscross in a circle, make sure everyone has space, let one person speak at a time, and keep your body in control. My Morning Meetings ran for about 45 minutes during the first few weeks because it took extra time to introduce the different parts of the meeting and to set (and practice) these norms and expectations. By the beginning of October, meetings usually lasted closer to 30 minutes, and in November, they generally remained within the 25 to 30 minute range. The students, my co-teacher, and I always gathered in a circle on the floor, unless we were playing a game requiring chairs, in which case we sat in chairs for the duration of the meeting.

Every Morning Meeting included a greeting, share, group activity, and morning message. I began the year following Morning Meeting plans written by one of my grade level partners, but soon switched to writing my own meeting plans. I first used the greetings, sharing topics, group activities, and morning messages suggested in *The Morning Meeting Book* (Kriete & Davis, 2014) and then started to incorporate activities from *80 Morning Meeting Ideas for Grades 3-6* (Davis, 2012) and online searches.

Data Sources and Collection

Because my research question dealt with building a community of support and trust, I collected data that helped me analyze our Morning Meetings and the students' relationships with each other and with me. I used my own observations to judge the sense of community within the classroom, but I also used students' viewpoints to gauge their opinion of the community we have built. I hoped that my observations would line up with students' outlooks, but I knew that students might have feelings about Morning Meeting, their classmates, or me that I was not aware of, so I looked at our community from both angles.

One main data source I used was my private journal, which I wrote in every week or two, depending on how much time I had. I focused on keeping track of how our Morning Meetings went, how well students were building relationships, how group work ran, and the general interactions that I noticed among classmates. I would have liked to write a quick reflection of Morning Meeting right after we finished it, but I could not stop and journal during instructional time, so I wrote in my journal after school instead. Journaling allowed me to examine how Morning Meetings and our classroom community changed throughout the first few months of school. Keeping a written account of my observations, thoughts, and questions provided a chance for me to reflect on our classroom community and make any necessary changes or

improvements along the way. I noted which strategies proved particularly effective in helping students build relationships or collaborate well so that I could refer back to, reinforce, and repeat these strategies if needed.

Another data source that provided an opportunity for reflection was a video recording of a Morning Meeting in my classroom. I used an iPad to record one of our Morning Meetings in November. While I wrote about our Morning Meetings in my journal entries, the video recording let me watch almost as an outsider, and I saw behaviors that I did not catch during the live meeting. Participating in meetings took some of my attention away from noticing students' actions and interactions, so playing back a video recording helped me observe the entire meeting. I had originally intended to record a Morning Meeting in September so I could compare it to one in November, but it took much longer than I had anticipated to introduce and get all parts of Morning Meeting running smoothly. Because Morning Meeting was not fully operational until October, I decided to only record a meeting at the end of my data collection period.

Journal entries and a video recording helped me reflect on and improve our classroom community from my perspective, but I also collected data to determine students' outlooks. This data was essential to my research study because building a supportive community largely depends on students' feelings and viewpoints. I could not alone determine whether we were successful in creating a true community; if the students, who make up the majority of our classroom, did not feel that they were part of a community, then there ultimately was no community, no matter what my perspective was.

After three full weeks of school, I asked students to fill out a survey about their opinions of our classroom community (see Appendix C). I used questions from the Developmental Studies Center's (2015) elementary scales that pertain to students' sense of classroom

community. I had initially planned to administer this survey in the second week of school, but felt that I needed to give students more time to acclimate to their new classmates and our classroom procedures before offering opinions on them, so I pushed the survey administration back to the fourth week of school. The results of this survey gave me insight into how students felt about their classmates, me, and the classroom environment before we delved too deeply into community building. I then asked students to complete the same survey again at the end of my data collection period in late November so I could compare their answers and analyze how their feelings changed (or did not change) after participating in many Morning Meetings.

The last source of data I used were reflection sheets (see Appendix D) that students filled out periodically throughout the first three months of school. The reflection sheets offered valuable insight into students' opinions of our Morning Meetings and classroom environment on a regular basis, and also prompted students to think about and take responsibility for their own behavior and choices. I used students' responses to tweak Morning Meetings and classroom activities during the data collection period in hopes of making them as enjoyable and successful as possible, which again would add to developing a supportive classroom community.

Data Analysis

I began data analysis by tallying students' responses to my survey questions from September and November. I was surprised to see that the responses to each question largely remained the same. The overall results indicated a positive sense of community in our classroom at the time of both survey administrations, which I had not expected; I had anticipated a lesser degree of community in September. Since there was essentially no room to improve our community according to these answers, the survey did not end up providing me with rich data.

I then analyzed my journal entries and students' responses to reflection questions using a priori coding. I used my sub-questions to develop four a priori codes, which were making connections to others; support, cooperation, and teamwork; sharing; and group work. After examining my journal, student reflections, and the video recording of Morning Meeting, I also discovered emergent themes of student behavior and communication skills. I sorted my data according to the a priori and emergent themes, and condensed my findings into four overarching themes: the effects of student behavior on classroom community, intentionally teaching and applying communication skills, making connections to others, and support, cooperation, and teamwork.

Ethics Review

To protect the identities of all involved in this study, I used pseudonyms for the names of my school and district. Over the summer, I informed my principal in person that I would be conducting my research study. During the first week of school, I told my students that I was looking at how Morning Meeting affected our classroom, and I also mentioned it to parents at Back to School Night on September 22.

Conclusion

In the past, I tried my best to create a supportive classroom community, but had never cultivated the ideal community that I envisioned. I chose this as the focus of my research because it forced me to make community building, and thinking critically about the community-building process, a top priority in my classroom. Collecting several forms of data over three months provided me with opportunities to reflect upon what worked and what did not, and I can use my findings to make future changes that will improve my ability to facilitate the creation of a community.

Findings

My data sources provided me with information about Morning Meeting and my classroom community from both my perspective and my students' perspectives. Through data analysis, I discovered that students' viewpoints frequently aligned with mine, but I also gained new insight from some of the student reflections. Four key themes emerged from the data that I collected and examined.

Effects of Student Behavior on Classroom Community

A major theme that appeared not only in my personal journal but also in students' reflection responses was behavior. I knew through formative analysis of my journal entries that I was mentioning students' behavior, both positive and negative, quite often, but I was surprised to also find many instances where students noticed and commented on their own and their classmates' behavior without my prompting.

When coding my journal, I realized that I included notes about the class's behavior in almost all of my entries. I remarked about their behavior at Morning Meeting and throughout the rest of the day, and several students' names appeared repeatedly for requiring redirection and reminders to follow classroom rules and Morning Meeting guidelines. In my very first journal entry on September 13, I predicted that this year's class was going to be more behaviorally challenging than past classes, and this sentiment kept reappearing. On September 20, I wrote, "Many kids are not sitting crisscross during Morning Meetings – need to repeat expectations," and wrote a month later on October 19, "Of course, a select few still need constant reminders to sit still and crisscross on their bottoms the whole time." I made similar remarks in my journal entries from October 12, October 18, and November 1, and I even observed side conversations during greetings in the video recording on November 28. Sitting appropriately is part of our Morning Meeting guidelines; in fact, it is a rule that students must follow anytime they sit in the

meeting area (such as for mini lessons and read aloud). We had modeled and practiced this at the beginning of the school year, so students were well aware of the seating expectations.

On top of my own observations, classmates' behavior frequently appeared in student reflections as a negative part of meetings or as something we could improve. On October 19, students responded to three questions to gauge their opinions at that point in my research:

What is one thing you enjoy about Morning Meeting so far?

What is one thing you don't like about Morning Meeting so far?

How can we improve Morning Meeting?

Of the students who answered these questions (N=22), 50% (n=11) mentioned that we could improve Morning Meeting by being quiet, sitting respectfully, or listening more. Half the class recognized that there was too much extraneous talking and movement, but unsurprisingly, these respondents were not the guilty parties. The students who noticed and wrote about these behavior issues were the ones who consistently sat quietly and respectfully, following our meeting guidelines. They were essentially saying that the other half of the class needed to improve their behavior during meetings, which my co-teacher and I agreed with.

Over a month later, on November 28, students responded again to almost the exact same questions. I found somewhat similar results, but one striking difference was the question that the behavior-related answers matched with. In the October 19 reflections, students had written about behaviors as an answer for what we could do to *improve* Morning Meeting. On November 28, of the students who responded (N=19), 32% (n=6) still answered that we could improve meetings by being quieter or following directions, but now 26% (n=5) wrote that too much talking, disrupting, or doing the wrong thing was actually something they *disliked* about Morning Meeting. No one had offered a behavior-related answer as something they disliked the first time

they had answered these questions, but by the second time, five students chose negative behaviors as the thing they disliked. It is worth mentioning that no one named a component of Morning Meeting itself as their dislike; aside from negative behavior, other dislikes were specific greetings or activities and the length of time our meetings lasted (which was partially dependent on how often we had to stop and address unnecessary talking). This shows that students held positive views of the concept and practice of Morning Meeting, but their peers' disruptive behavior stood out in many of their minds as something that needed to change.

Clearly, my co-teacher and I were not alone in feeling frustration as a result of students constantly breaking our Morning Meeting rules and sometimes showing blatant disrespect during meetings by holding side conversations and not listening to the speaker. Getting all students to sit appropriately and quietly throughout a whole meeting was something my co-teacher and I continued to struggle with, and we never quite found the solution, so this is something I want to research and examine further.

In addition to the theme of behavior appearing in data I collected around Morning Meeting, I also discovered behavior-related answers when I analyzed another student reflection question. On November 9, after we had discussed trustworthiness being the citizen theme for that month, I explained that keeping your promises is one way to show that you are trustworthy. I asked students to make (and keep) a promise to their classmates, so they answered the open-ended question, "How do you promise to be a great classmate?" Fifty-five percent (n=11) of respondents (N=20) promised to respect others, listen to the teacher and other students, or make smart choices. All three of these concepts are part of our classroom rules, which we had developed together in September. Students and I had already agreed that these were important things to do in school, but by including these actions in their promises to each other, it looks as

though following our rules is something students want from their classmates. This data shows that over half the class equates displaying positive classroom behavior with being a good classmate.

Seeing student responses match my observations from journal entries really opened my eyes to the weight that behavior carries in determining a class's sense of community. I have always held high expectations for students' behavior in school, which is why I so frequently brought up the topic in my journal, and I already knew that behavior factored into my personal view of my classroom's climate and community. However, aside from teachers observing students' behavior, I discovered through my data that a majority of students notice and care about their classmates' behavior too. Many students expressed dislike of their peers' negative behavior in Morning Meeting, and over half the class believed that a good classmate shows appropriate behavior. Because the majority of students and I all commented on our common desire to see more positive behavior and our aversion toward rule-breaking and disrespect, it is clear that student behavior affects both the students' and teachers' perspective of the classroom community and its individual members.

Intentionally Teaching and Applying Communication Skills

Much of the literature I had reviewed taught me that Morning Meeting was an opportune time for students to practice communicating with others, but the requisite skills must be explicitly taught first. I kept this in mind as I got Morning Meeting on its feet at the beginning of the school year, and I discovered that meetings were indeed a perfect time to intentionally teach and apply communication skills.

On October 12, I introduced dialogue sharing to the class, where one person shared news or a special item while the rest of the class listened. We had previously done around-the-circle

sharing where each person shared an answer to a question or topic, but those answers were limited to one sentence. Our new dialogue sharing allowed the speaker to tell us about something using several sentences, and then the speaker could take a few responses from his or her audience. I had always been frustrated in the past with students becoming distracted or daydreaming while a classmate was speaking, so I knew this was a perfect chance for me to test out intentionally including a communication skill – active listening – in our Morning Meeting.

Before sharing took place that day, I reviewed with the class an active listening strategy called “Say back what you heard” (Serravallo, 2015, p. 331). The strategy requires students to listen to a speaker and then use a given sentence frame (“I heard you say ___”) to repeat the information they heard; this forces them to listen closely and process what the speaker says. I had already taught the strategy in reading, and we quickly revisited it during this Morning Meeting.

After my co-teacher and I each modeled dialogue sharing by showing and explaining items that were special to us, students very effectively used the “Say back what you heard” (Serravallo, 2015, p. 331) strategy to repeat the details each of us had given them. I wrote in my journal that day, “I didn’t expect them to remember all the details but they did without repeating, and there was a lot of participation.”

Over the next week, the class continued to successfully respond to each other this way as we cycled through the students sharing their special items. I was pleased to see that students were transferring these active listening skills between Morning Meeting and partner work in reading. I chose a group activity on October 18 that would also ask students to apply these skills by repeating an item that the person before them chose to bring on an imaginary vacation. While about seven students had difficulty remembering the item they were supposed to repeat, the rest

of the class did very well with the activity. The students who struggled may not have been paying attention, but they also may have not drawn the connection between the previous “Say back what you heard” (Serravallo, 2015, p. 331) strategy and repeating the item in this new group activity. This inconsistency tells me that students need regular practice using their communication skills in a variety of settings and even in different components of Morning Meeting. It may also be beneficial for me to point out when and how they should be applying skills they have already learned, in case that was the reason for students not being able to repeat what the previous student had said.

Upon seeing the effectiveness of offering a sentence stem for repeating what a speaker said, I stayed on that path when teaching students how to ask questions and offer comments to the speaker. In my October 18 journal entry, I wrote, “Yesterday...we listed question words (who, what, when, where, why, how) on the board. Then we brainstormed a list of possible questions that started with each of those six words. Students came up with great questions that made sense and referred back to the list when it was their turn to ask the sharer a question.” Providing examples of comments using the word “you” also helped students offer comments centered on the sharer, not themselves. In past years, I felt that students listened to a classmate’s story and then raised their hand to comment about how something in the story related to themselves, and then attention was no longer on the person who shared the story. In the same October 18 entry, I remarked, “I said [comments] all have to include the word ‘you’ and all commenters except one did this.” Subsequent journal entries (October 19, November 2) and the video recording of the Morning Meeting on November 28 also show students’ ability to offer comments to the speaker using “you” as a guideline.

Communication skills such as listening and responding to a speaker are necessary for sharing and other parts of Morning Meeting. Explicitly teaching these skills with sentence stems and other strategies helped my students learn how to use and apply these skills in Morning Meeting and in other subject areas.

Making Connections to Others

One of my a priori codes was making connections because I hoped that Morning Meeting would prove to offer a continuous opportunity for my students, co-teacher, and I to form connections and bonds with each other. Using this code to analyze my data helped me determine whether this was true.

My journal entries did not contain too much material related to making connections or getting to know each other, but the few that did all involved connecting through Morning Meeting. In an early entry from September 20, I commented on how a particular greeting was helping students learn each other's names, how more students were now willing to speak during sharing instead of passing on their turn, and how I saw all positive interactions so far during group activities. On October 18 and 19, I wrote about the success we were having in our first round of dialogue sharing, where students brought in an object that was special to them to share with the class, and the class asked questions and gave comments to the speaker. Sharing these special items helped students get to know more about their classmates and they were engaged in these group shares. Finally, on November 19, I recapped a successful sharing activity where my co-teacher and I matched up students who were not already close friends and sent partners off to have a conversation to find two things they had in common. The group reconvened in our Morning Meeting circle, and each partner told the class one commonality that the pair had discovered.

I greatly enjoyed that activity because every pair successfully found at least two meaningful things in common, with many excitedly coming up to tell me that they had actually found five or ten commonalities. I gave students a reflection sheet after this activity because I wanted their opinions and feelings about it. Responses were overwhelmingly positive and every student said that they had learned something new about their partner. When asked how they felt about finding things in common with their partner, typical answers were “happy,” “good,” or “awesome,” but one student even wrote “I feel happy and tingaly [sic]” and another responded he felt “like a friend.” On the other hand, one student expressed, “It felt a little weird,” perhaps because he was working with an unfamiliar classmate with whom he had never interacted much.

Another student reflection also pointed out the value of Morning Meeting in relation to forming peer connections. On November 21, students answered the question, “What has helped you meet new classmates [since the first day of school]?” Two students said that Morning Meeting helped with this, and one student wrote about having connections with peers. On that same reflection sheet, when asked, “What can we do to make our class more like a family?” another student’s response was, “Spend more time at Morning Meeting.” Although this reflection sheet was not specifically about Morning Meeting, three students volunteered positive opinions of the power of Morning Meeting in making new friends, and one student recognized that finding connections (after we had done the commonality sharing activity) helped her meet new classmates.

On students’ last reflection sheet on November 28, two students included the theme of making peer connections as something they liked about Morning Meeting. I transcribed both of their answers (separately). One boy told me that he enjoyed getting to interact with other students and it made him feel good that Morning Meeting let him “catch up on what other people

are doing.” The other boy said something he enjoyed about Morning Meeting was “that we’re all together and we learn more about our classmates when we do our activities.” While other students wrote that they liked sharing as part of meetings, it was not clear whether they like sharing because they get to hear from others or because they get to be the sharer who tells something to the class. Both of these boys, though, plainly stated that they love being able to hear from and learn about their peers during meetings. These boys also happen to have IEPs and attend counseling for social skills, so hearing them articulate answers that focused on connecting to others showed me that Morning Meeting can be a very effective tool for helping students develop their social skills in a safe setting.

I was pleased to find evidence across my data sources regarding the positive impact of Morning Meeting on forming connections and new friendships, but I was happier that I could read and hear about this theme directly from my students. Morning Meeting improved peer relationships and connections among my third graders, and students identified meetings as being helpful in learning about and connecting to their classmates.

Support, Cooperation, and Teamwork

The final theme that I found in my data centered on the a priori code of support, cooperation, and teamwork. My research question was about using Morning Meeting to build a *supportive* classroom community, which I previously defined as a community that includes students who build up their classmates, encourage them to take risks and rise to challenges, cooperate instead of compete, and help each other move forward after failure. Based on my definition, support encompasses cooperation and teamwork, so I combined these three interconnected concepts into one overall theme. I considered support and cooperation to be similar in that they involve working agreeably with others, but I distinguished teamwork from

the other two concepts. I first thought that cooperation and teamwork were interchangeable, but I realized that teamwork involves more than simple cooperation. Igel and Urquhart (2012) explain that teamwork occurs when members work toward a common goal and depend on each other for success, so I assigned the code of teamwork to entries where groups tried to reach a shared goal.

The codes of support, cooperation, or teamwork appeared in every journal entry that I wrote, since that was a main focus of my research and I consciously tried to record observations associated with these ideas. In exploring whether my class could build a supportive community during meetings and then maintain it throughout the day, I found instances where we were successful and unsuccessful.

When coding my journal, I tagged eight entries as evidence of a supportive community where students built up and cooperated with their classmates, but no entries showed a lack of support or cooperation. I wrote about students helping others succeed, cheering for both teammates and opponents who correctly answered trivia questions, and encouraging each other with positive phrases. I noticed that when we discussed examples of positive language, students did use those phrases and exclamations to show support for each other.

My favorite observation of a supportive community was at our school-wide Morning Meeting on October 19, where my principal announced each class's Citizen of the Month and other award winners. I was so impressed to see the entire school excitedly cheer for the winners rather than groan and complain about not winning themselves. When my class's Citizen of the Month was revealed, many students congratulated her and gave her high-fives, and this was a common occurrence across all classes that morning. I was not the only one who was moved by this; I wrote in my journal entry, "Many of us (including the principal) remarked that it was so

nice to see kids supporting each other and being happy for the winners.” This behavior perfectly epitomized the view I held of a supportive community. I was pleasantly surprised that my journal entries showed so many examples of my students supporting each other.

By contrast, when I coded my observations for teamwork, I discovered four examples of students using teamwork and four cases involving a lack of teamwork. I assigned all of these situations the code of teamwork because they required students to work together toward a common goal. Two of the four “lack of teamwork” examples came from small group work and the other two occurred during whole-class tasks. Both of those group work scenarios overlapped with positive uses of teamwork, though; I noticed some groups working harmoniously together while other groups struggled to agree and collaborate, so this naturally led me to wonder about the discrepancy.

In one such case, on November 2, I asked the groups to debrief and decide why they were either successful or unsuccessful at working together on a science lab. The successful groups stated that they asked for each other’s ideas and combined them before testing them out. The groups that did not use teamwork said that they want to listen to each other better next time, which had also been an issue back on October 19 when my co-teacher and I challenged the entire math class of 17 students to work together to teach us how to solve a word problem. I wrote in my entry about how the class argued over who would write on the SMART Board and how they would present their answer, and one student even spoke over the others to point out that they were not making any progress. He named a student who could write on the board because she had been respectfully listening to others and not engaging in the argument. The class got completely silent while he spoke, so I thought his speech prompted them to reevaluate their behavior. Unfortunately, I observed, “While everyone did stop to listen to him, they quickly

resumed arguing and didn't execute his idea." Another example where students did not use teamwork in a Morning Meeting group activity also stemmed from students not listening to one another. Since a lack of teamwork resulted from a lack of listening to others on multiple occasions, I believe there is a strong connection between teamwork and listening.

This gives me important information about my students and emphasizes that teaching listening skills is required for successful teamwork in third grade. Despite students successfully applying an active listening strategy that I taught in both Morning Meeting and reading, they did not use this same strategy in science. Making a point to remind students about their active listening skills may have helped them transfer those skills into science, but I think this also necessitates lessons on other listening strategies that lend themselves to teamwork in science, math, and other subjects.

After analyzing many of my observations and journal entries, I found key ideas about support, cooperation, and teamwork. Providing students with examples of positive talk and brainstorming other ways to encourage each other was useful because students did use those phrases and ideas throughout the day. Since this strategy fostered a supportive community, it might also be used to improve teamwork. Listening skills were at the root of most of my students' teamwork problems, so demonstrating and teaching multiple listening strategies might address and hopefully fix the issues that arose with teamwork.

Implications

Holding full Morning Meetings this year has been valuable in cultivating classroom community, but reflecting on the entire research process has revealed several important implications. My experience can help other teachers who want to try Morning Meeting anticipate and prepare for difficulties that might arise.

A key lesson I learned is that planning ahead for Morning Meeting makes a significant difference in getting the most out of those meetings. In the beginning of the year, I relied on my grade level team's meeting plans, which resulted in me feeling unprepared and those meetings not flowing smoothly. Once I took the reins, I was able to tie the four meeting components together in a way that worked for my class. By taking time to strategically select greetings, topics and methods for sharing, group activities, and morning messages, I was able to successfully integrate social and communication skills that I wanted students to learn and apply outside of Morning Meeting. I also incorporated our school's monthly citizen trait and other relevant school activities. As teachers who already have full plates with lesson planning, grading, and other commitments, it is difficult to add another task to our workload. Nevertheless, it is necessary to dedicate time and effort to Morning Meeting in order to maximize its impact on the classroom community.

Much of that time and effort is required at the very beginning of the school year, or when a teacher first implements Morning Meeting. Teachers must decide how to best present Morning Meeting to their students; this is essential to meetings becoming cooperative and fun instead of spiraling out of control. The creators of Morning Meeting believe meetings should be simple at first but still include all four components (Kriete & Davis, 2014), but teachers can scaffold for their class by introducing the parts one at a time (Davis, 2012). For my third grade students who

were mostly unfamiliar with Morning Meeting, I found that it was easier to phase in the four parts so that students had a thorough understanding of the purpose of and expectations for each component. In classrooms where students have participated in Morning Meeting before, simple but full meetings could probably be successful right from the start. However, younger elementary students in particular would benefit more from a slower introduction to Morning Meeting. Reflecting on the mistakes I made this year gives me the foresight to set up Morning Meeting slowly and more effectively within the first two or three weeks of school in the future, and I would recommend that teachers who are just beginning Morning Meeting take their time as well.

Along with scaffolding the introduction of Morning Meeting, teachers can also scaffold within meetings to help students learn and practice speaking, listening, and teamwork skills. It is important to remember, especially with younger elementary students, that children must see firsthand how to demonstrate these skills. Using sentence starters and frames provided my students with access to supportive, respectful language to use when conversing with their peers. While I had some success in coaching students on social and communication skills, I realized that I did not know much about those types of skills, which made them difficult to teach compared to academic skills. The Morning Meeting creators offer a helpful starting point, but teachers who do not have experience teaching these skills will need to seek additional resources. Because my own findings align with the research that has proven the value and benefits of incorporating social-emotional learning into classrooms (Center for Responsive Schools, 2016; Croom & Davis, 2006; Gardner, 2012; Kent & Simpson, 2012; Kindzierski et al., 2013; Kriete & Davis, 2014), I will continue to search for useful resources on which skills to address and how to best present them.

So far, I have witnessed the positive effects of Morning Meeting on my class, but it is certainly not a total and complete solution for teachers aiming to build community. I would love to add a closing circle, which is Morning Meeting's simpler, afternoon counterpart, to end each school day with a calm, thoughtful reflection (Responsive Classroom, 2015). This is not possible with my current schedule, but I hope to implement a closing circle in the future as another community-building tool.

In building community this year, I wanted the atmosphere and relationships established during Morning Meeting to carry over throughout the day, and this occurred best when I actively reminded students to use the skills they had developed in meetings. Positive reinforcement from my co-teacher and me prompted students to use more supportive comments in partner and group work. I had assumed this would become second nature to me, but I forgot to encourage students to draw on their Morning Meeting skills more often than I expected to. When teachers reminds students that they have tools and strategies for teamwork and other tasks, students are more likely to use them. If I can improve my ability to reinforce cooperation and teamwork skills in other subjects, I believe students will eventually internalize them and employ them without prompting. Ideally, this will further improve the supportive community in the classroom.

Analyzing the implementation of Morning Meeting and the sense of community in my class led me to important conclusions that I know I would never have reached without the research process. Morning Meeting did not miraculously produce a tight-knit classroom community overnight, but it did significantly move my class in that direction, so I will absolutely continue to practice Morning Meetings with my future classes. Because of my findings and reflections, I can improve my planning and execution of meetings as well as my creation of a supportive classroom climate. Other teachers facing the same challenges can also use this

research to enhance their own community-building strategies, and I hope it inspires teachers to consider starting Morning Meeting as a classroom practice.

Obstacles

The composition of my class this year presented several obstacles in conducting my research. I have eight special education students, seven of whom leave my classroom at some point for instruction in a pull-out resource classroom. Seven attend math class in the resource room, four attend reading there, and four learn writing there. These students also see specialists for speech, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and counseling sessions at various times throughout the week. While those students are present in the classroom for Morning Meeting and some academic subjects, the classroom climate changes when some of these students leave and return later. Our classroom community of readers is different from our community of writers, which is different still from our community of mathematicians. Because we lose and regain members of our class throughout the day, collecting data about our classroom community was different than it would be with a class where all students remained in my classroom the entire day.

Even with students coming and going throughout the day, the most difficult obstacle in examining the sense of community in my classroom was the addition of a student on November 1. This student was transferred into my class from another third grade class in my school. He has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and he has great difficulty following classroom rules and procedures. He frequently screams, refuses to follow directions, and talks back to his teachers and classmates, as I documented in my journal. During Morning Meeting, he often talks out of turn and makes noises while other students are speaking. His arrival greatly changed the dynamics in the classroom and he takes up much of my co-teacher's time and attention, whereas she used to be more available for the rest of the class. The addition of new students in the middle of a school year always requires some adjustments and the class has to welcome a new

member into its community; however, when the new student's behavior affects the learning of the other students, the community and camaraderie in the classroom is altered much more drastically. Many students remarked that they could not concentrate or they were scared when the student had screaming outbursts, which could have negatively impacted their opinion of him as a member of our community.

When he joined the class, my co-teacher and I had to respond to the behaviors of the new student, but we also had to do our best to explain his actions to the other students while reiterating the classroom expectations and rules we had all created together in the first two weeks of school. If this student had been part of our class since the first day of school, I wonder how our sense of community might have been different. After two months of 23 students and 2 teachers getting to know each other and building a class community, it was certainly an obstacle to help a behaviorally-challenged student join that community and follow the expectations the class had already become accustomed to, while simultaneously trying to ensure that the rest of the students did not start to mimic his negative behaviors.

Even before the new student joined our class, I faced other obstacles in conducting my research. Planning time was a huge problem for me in the beginning of my data collection period, which was the beginning of the school year. I knew from the literature I had read that it would be necessary to devote time to planning Morning Meeting activities, but when the school year actually started, Morning Meeting planning quickly and regrettably fell by the wayside. I was overwhelmed with preparing lessons for the major academic subjects, finishing classroom setup, trying to coordinate with my co-teacher and third grade team, and completing administrative tasks related to the beginning of a school year.

Three other teachers and I intended to follow the daily schedules and lessons, including Morning Meeting plans, laid out in Responsive Classroom's *The First Six Weeks of School* (2015). I agreed to let one of the other teachers use the book to plan Morning Meeting for the first few weeks of school because I hoped it would alleviate some of my workload and stress. Unfortunately, it was difficult for me to follow plans that I did not write myself, and by the third week of school, I was unhappy with how I was running Morning Meeting. Since I had done abbreviated Morning Meetings in past years, I was familiar with some of the greetings and group activities, and I knew which ones I wanted to use in the beginning of the year and which ones would be better later in the year. I had to change some of my daily meeting plans on the fly to account for this, and consequently, I felt like my Morning Meetings were too improvised and out of my control. I finally decided I had to take back ownership of Morning Meeting, so in the third week of school, I stopped following the third grade team's plans and created my own plans for Morning Meeting. Although I appreciated the time and effort that my grade level partner put into those plans, I knew I had to make Morning Meeting my own in order to feel comfortable with it. I continued to write my own plans for the remainder of the data collection period, and I was much happier and felt like I had my bearings again.

My original reasoning for not writing my Morning Meeting plans stemmed from a lack of time, and the obstacle of time never fully disappeared from my research journey. Morning Meeting added time to my weekly lesson planning, but collecting data on my classroom community required time out of my busy schedule as well. I did not get a chance to write in my journal as often as I had planned to, especially in September. By October, I was able to journal approximately once a week, and I wonder if I could have journaled more often had I conducted my research later in the school year. It also took time to collect and analyze data from my

students, so again, time might not have been as big an obstacle if I collected data in the middle of the year.

Collecting data in the first three months of school was also difficult because it took longer than I had anticipated to get Morning Meeting fully up and running. I had originally wanted to incorporate pieces of Morning Meeting slowly, as suggested by Kriete and Davis (2014) in *The Morning Meeting Book*, but I did not follow my instincts since I was trying to keep up with the other teachers' plans. Once I branched out on my own, I chose to backpedal and take several days to present and explain each of the four components of a meeting, which I should have done during the first two weeks of school. We also had to take time to set procedures and expectations for Morning Meeting and for the classroom itself. Slowing down the whole process meant that my class did not hold complete Morning Meetings until late September, which I had not accounted for and delayed my data collection process. I changed my original plan of video recording a meeting in September because we were still learning different sharing methods and ways to respond to sharing through questions and comments. I decided to just write in my journal about our meetings in September and October, and then record one meeting in November.

All of these obstacles added to the already daunting task of conducting teacher research. Some, like planning and dedicating time to research, were within my control and I was able to overcome them. Others, like the makeup of my class, were not so easily changed. Reflecting upon these obstacles helps me realize that teacher research involves so many factors that we may not account for but can play an important part in shaping our data and findings. The time and effort necessary for conducting my research was worth it to discover new insights around a topic that had been a persistent puzzle to me.

Emerging Questions

Researching community-building strategies, especially Morning Meeting and other Responsive Classroom programs, has been an interest of mine for a few years now. The data that I collected and analyzed gave me insight into how to build community in my third grade classroom, but the research process and results also leave me with new emerging questions.

A question that I would actually like to start exploring soon is something that I have read a bit about: What happens when students lead Morning Meeting? I would still plan each day's greeting, share topic, group activity, and morning message, but a student would lead the class through each component and would essentially step into the teacher's role. Of course, this would require much explanation and modeling before students could smoothly facilitate a meeting from beginning to end, but I would be interested in the outcome. I think it would tap into students' sense of responsibility and even increase student engagement. Would this help decrease some of the negative behavior that has been plaguing our Morning Meetings? How would the class respond to a peer taking charge, calling out directions, and making decisions for everyone? I think students could rise to the challenge and I am optimistic that classmates would listen and respond respectfully to the meeting leader. This is something I plan to investigate later in the year, after students have had plenty of time to participate in Morning Meeting and are ready for a novel approach to the usual routine.

Another question that arose from my research project relates to student behavior, which was a prominent theme in my data analysis. What are the best ways to manage and improve behavior, especially during Morning Meeting? Every greeting and group activity allows students to move around (sometimes sitting, sometimes standing), so they are never sitting still for the entire 30 minutes. I know that eight-year-olds have short attention spans and movement is

necessary, but even with the fun, active components of Morning Meeting, many children still do not sit crisscross and listen quietly when necessary (i.e. during the sharing and morning message portions). We decided as a group that sitting crisscross and listening to others are important rules to follow to make our meetings run smoothly. Is it acceptable to let children break these rules by squirming around and sitting on their knees if that is what they need? On the other hand, what about the students who always follow the meeting guidelines and sit still out of respect for their neighbors in our meeting circle? How can I get the students who always call out or make comments when others are talking to realize that this is disrespectful to the speaker and to their neighbors? It has been challenging to decide how to best address students not sitting appropriately, especially in a class with several students diagnosed with ADHD (Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder). My co-teacher and I will have to continue trying different strategies, but this could turn into an entire research topic in itself.

Finally, now that I have implemented full-length Morning Meetings and received positive feedback from my students, what are some other effective strategies for promoting a positive classroom climate? I was glad that my findings confirmed the power of Morning Meeting in fostering a sense of community and providing daily opportunities to build relationships, but I feel ready to examine other methods that will enhance the positive effects of Morning Meeting. The success of Morning Meeting makes me wonder what other beneficial Responsive Classroom techniques I could add into my classroom. What kind of approach to discipline does Responsive Classroom suggest? What other teaching strategies and structures support community building and the development of skills like cooperation and collaboration? While I am eager to add more Responsive Classroom ideas to my professional practice, there are so many techniques that I know I need to thoroughly study them and slowly incorporate one or two at a time.

Understanding the philosophy and research behind Morning Meeting helped me execute more effective meetings that served various purposes and incorporated academic, social, and communication skills. I want to achieve the same level of understanding of other Responsive Classroom techniques before implementing them so they yield the best possible results.

Although I will likely not research the answers to my emerging questions as formally and systematically as I did my main research question, I am certainly interesting in exploring these ideas further. I always strive to improve both my teaching practice and the learning experience that I offer my students, especially being a young teacher who is still honing her craft. My research and findings have presented me with new questions that will push me forward in refining my professional practice.

Conclusion

I entered my research study with high hopes of finding effective methods for building classroom community and maximizing the positive impact Morning Meeting can have on a class. I discovered worthwhile advice in reviewing relevant literature, and researchers' positive results with Morning Meeting and community building led me to create an optimistic vision for my research journey. Collecting data with the students I have this year was not always easy, but I thoroughly enjoyed gathering and reading their opinions on Morning Meeting and our supportive environment. Their feedback allowed me to make changes to improve our meetings; I probably would not have thought to ask for students' viewpoints had I not been researching this topic. Similarly, I learned that keeping a personal journal offers a wealth of opportunity for reflection, which can result in personal and professional growth. This experience shows me how far my class has come in the first three months of school, and I realize now that our community-building journey is not over. Fostering a truly supportive atmosphere is an ongoing process; my research helped me begin and steadily advance our progress, and I will continue to apply what I have learned to this enduring process. My research experience was challenging but offered informative findings and conclusions for me and for other teachers exploring the concept of building community. After gaining such valuable insight from my reflections and analyses, I am looking forward to examining more aspects of my practice through the lens of a teacher researcher.

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Appendix A: Subjectivity

In teacher research, though we try our best to collect and analyze data as objectively as possible in order to make our findings valuable to others, subjectivity is inevitable. My own assumptions and biases affected my research, especially because of the nature of my topic. My entire question was ultimately based on my subjective opinion that community is a necessary notion in a classroom. I have spoken to middle and high school teachers about how difficult it is and how long it takes for them to form relationships with their students, since their students change classes and teachers many times in a school day. As an elementary school teacher, I keep almost all of my students for seven hours a day, and some of those students wind up spending more waking hours with me than with their parents or guardians. Because of this, I have always believed in the importance of creating a welcoming, safe atmosphere for my students and myself. I feel that taking time to form bonds with my students helps them become more successful in school, but there are probably many teachers who do not make this a priority and some who might actually disagree. My personal belief that I must create a cooperative environment where students and the teacher feel connected is what propelled me to devise a research question around classroom community.

Classroom community is not easily measured; it is not quantifiable and depends on many factors, some of which students and teachers cannot even control. Most teachers would probably have similar general ideas of what classroom community looks like, but it still leaves room for interpretation, and the examples of classroom community (or lack thereof) that I collected were based on my personal view of the concept. On top of that, I examined how to build a *supportive* classroom community, and I defined the term *supportive* based on my own beliefs and goals for my ideal third grade classroom. My standards for a supportive community are largely grounded

in past experience; I thought about what I liked and disliked about my previous third grade classes and their peer interactions, and I also considered what was missing from the abbreviated Morning Meetings I held in the last two school years. I chose to craft a research question around a supportive community in hopes of determining how to produce more positive behaviors and peer relationships. Had my experiences with my past third grade classes been different, my perspective of a supportive community might be completely different, and I might have altered my approach to data collection, analysis, or even to my entire research topic.

Since I collected data that would help me evaluate and reflect on my classroom community, much of the data was subjective. When I wrote in my personal journal about how Morning Meetings went and how I observed students using or not using teamwork and cooperation, the information I chose to write was inherently based on my own opinions and what stood out in my mind. I could obviously not remember everything that happened during a school day, so I jotted down what I could recall, particularly student actions and interactions that could directly relate to my research question. However, this raises the question of why I remembered those events that made it into my journal. Did I miss other instances relating to Morning Meeting or classroom community that I could have analyzed? Since I desperately wanted Morning Meeting to be successful and to see students support one another, did I hunt more for observations where students displayed positive peer interactions and behavior? Then again, I might have been overly aware of negative interactions because I did not want to see them and they always frustrated or upset me when they did occur, so they were entrenched in memory. Additionally, I began my research with a belief that Morning Meeting would improve as students learned our routine and the school year went on, so I probably also looked for observations that would support my theory. I think I was able to stay mostly objective in identifying and

describing the challenges that my co-teacher and I still faced by the end of my data collection period, though.

I tried hard to write objectively about what I observed during Morning Meetings and group projects, but how I then interpreted those observations depended on my own beliefs. Having a co-teacher helped me realize this; she and I have very different personalities, styles of teaching, and approaches to discipline, so we have opposite viewpoints on some situations. For example, while she does not mind lots of chatter and noise, I prefer a quieter atmosphere and might consequently interpret a loud classroom environment as being out of control or off task. Luckily, she and I have been able to combine our teaching styles so our classroom is a healthy mix of both of us, but this does not stop us from analyzing our observations differently. My journal entries contain impartial observations about what students did and said, but they also include my subjective commentary and feelings about those experiences. Likewise, what I found in students' reflection answers and the Morning Meeting video recording also come from me looking at our community through my individual lens, so I pulled examples and non-examples that matched my perception of a supportive community.

In addition to subjectivity playing a role in my journal entries and determining what kinds of interactions I looked for in my data, I wonder how accurate and truthful my students' reflection answers were. We started the school year by sharing our hopes and dreams for third grade, and I immediately told my students that I hoped our class would become a family. My co-teacher and I also publicly praised students for showing teamwork and supporting their peers. Because my students knew that I wanted to see positive behavior and cooperation among classmates, they might have answered their reflection questions with what they thought I wanted to hear. We had discussed giving honest responses because I wanted to use their thoughts to

improve our classroom, and I know that many students were certainly straightforward in expressing their opinions. I hope that their positive feedback and answers really reflected their true feelings and did not just mimic what I had been advocating for.

Reflecting on subjectivity makes me realize that so many biases came into play when I journaled and collected responses from the class about our community. My beliefs influenced my decisions about what kinds of data to collect and how I determined my findings. This is worth noting since my study focused on the fundamentally subjective concept of classroom community, but I believe my research is still useful for other educators who are interested in how to foster a supportive climate.

Appendix B: Implementation

My personal experience with conducting and analyzing research has already led me to make constructive changes in my Morning Meeting and community-building methods. Because my findings can help other teachers with the same dilemmas that I originally faced, it is important to share what I have discovered.

Now that my school district is building time into teachers' schedules for Morning Meeting, it is clear that the administration expects all teachers to conduct daily meetings. The only training the district provided was a half-day in-service on Responsive Classroom with a short portion about Morning Meeting. This training happened two years ago and only a limited amount of teachers were permitted to attend, so many of my colleagues have expressed that they feel unprepared to lead Morning Meetings in their classrooms, though they are trying their best.

To help my grade level team, I plan to share my findings with them during our upcoming professional learning community meetings and grade level meetings. I can share my Morning Meeting plans as a format to follow, and I will discuss my successes as well as the improvements I have deemed necessary. In particular, I will emphasize my major discoveries: the importance of planning ahead to incorporate relevant social and conversation skills, the most effective strategies I have found for helping students connect to each other, and how listening skills greatly affect teamwork. Having a professional discussion around community building with my colleagues might give even me some new ideas to try in my classroom.

I will also reach out to my principal to discuss sharing my research at the district's new teacher orientation over the summer. New teachers may not have any experience with Morning Meeting or community building, especially if they are first-year teachers, so I can create a

presentation for them outlining how to run Morning Meeting and the lessons I have learned about phasing in each component with careful planning.

Finally, I intend to share the results of my research with parents at the beginning of the school year from now on. Kriete and Davis (2014) offer a sample parent letter that informs guardians about Morning Meeting, but including my own personal experience will make it more relevant and powerful for parents. I will make Morning Meeting an important part of my Back to School Night presentations, and I will provide parents with ways to reinforce and expand upon the skills that students gain from meetings, such as conversation starters and explanations of some favorite group activities. Parents often stress the value of academics, but I want to communicate the equal importance of social emotional learning and how their children's actions affect the larger classroom community, as shown in my findings. Discussing my findings with parents at the beginning of the school year will prepare them for the community-building work that their children will do, and hopefully it will inspire parents to take an active interest in their children's educational lives so that our classroom community ultimately branches out to include parents.

I am more than willing to share the outcomes of my research with my colleagues, other teachers, and parents because it can create a larger conversation around Morning Meeting as a community-building method. I hope that my findings are useful to other educators in shaping their practices, but I also hope to gain feedback and ideas from those professionals that I can, in turn, incorporate into my teaching.

Appendix C: Student Survey




(Items Created by Developmental Studies Center)




Name _____ Date _____

Classroom Survey

Directions:

1. Read each statement.
2. Decide if you agree (think the sentence is true), disagree (don't think the sentence is true), or are not sure.
3. Put a **check mark (✓)** or an **X** in the box to show whether you agree, disagree, or aren't sure. You may only fill in one box for each statement.

	Agree 	Not Sure 	Disagree 
In my class students have a say in deciding what goes on.			
The teacher lets us do things our own way.			
In my class I get to do things that I want to do.			
In my class the teacher and students decide together what the rules will be.			
Students in my class are willing to go out of their way to help someone.			
My classmates care about my work just as much as their own.			
My class is like a family.			
The students in my class don't really care about each other.			
A lot of students in my class like to put others down.			
Students in my class help each other learn.			

	Agree 	Not Sure 	Disagree 
Students in my class help each other, even if they are not friends.			
Students in my class don't get along together very well.			
Students in my class just look out for themselves.			
Students in my class are mean to each other.			
When I'm having trouble with my schoolwork, at least one of my classmates will try to help.			
Students in my class treat each other with respect.			
Students in my class work together to solve problems.			
When someone in my class does well, everyone in the class feels good.			

Appendix D: Student Reflection Questions

What is one thing you enjoy about Morning Meeting so far?

What is one thing you don't like about Morning Meeting so far?

How can we improve Morning Meeting?

How did you show respect this week?

How do you plan to show respect next week?

Why is it important to respect others and our school?

When you worked with a group this week, how do you think it went?

What did your group do well?

What can your group improve for next time?

How can you promise to be a great classmate?

Have you made new friends in our class since the first day of school?

What has helped you meet new classmates?

What can we do to make our class more like a family?

Did you learn something new about your partner from Morning Meeting today?

How did you feel about finding things in common with your partner?

How will you use what you learned about you and your partner having things in common?

Do you think your classmates care about you?

If they do, how can you tell that they care about you?

How can we make sure that everyone cares about each other?

What do you enjoy about Morning Meeting?

What don't you like about Morning Meeting?

How does Morning Meeting make you feel?

How can we improve Morning Meeting?

Is there anything else you want your teachers to know about Morning Meeting?