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Building Classroom Relationships Pages 68-70

Start the Day with Community

Done well, morning meetings can foster a caring classroom culture.

Roxann Kriete

Every morning at 8:30 a.m., 5th grade teacher Ms. London rings an old-fashioned school bell, the signal in her classroom for everyone to stop and listen. "Morning meeting time," she announces. Students finish hanging up backpacks, return papers and books to cubbies, place art supplies and games on shelves, and in a practiced, quiet choreography, bring chairs from throughout the room to the meeting area to form a circle.

Meanwhile, from a kindergarten classroom below, a simple melody drifts down the hallway: "It's time, it's time, it's time for morning meeting now." Begun by the teacher and picked up by the students as they scurry to put away lunches and coats, the song ends when all 25 students are seated in a circle on the rug, facing one another and ready to begin their morning meeting.

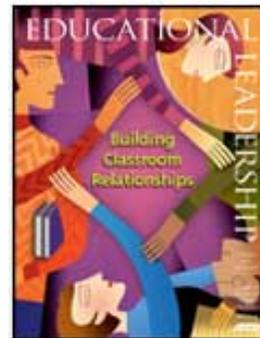
In elementary and middle schools across the United States, students and teachers launch their school day with a half-hour daily ritual that builds community and expresses important beliefs about the value of relationships in the classroom. Developed as part of the Responsive Classroom approach of the Northeast Foundation for Children, this routine works in kindergarten through 8th grade, in schools urban and rural, in classrooms large and small.

The Morning Meeting

During these morning meetings, students and teachers gather in a circle to greet one another, to listen and respond to one another's news, to practice academic and social skills, and to look forward to the day's events. The meetings have four sequential components: greeting, sharing, group activity, and news and announcements. Embedded in each are opportunities to practice the skills of being a caring community.

Greeting

The meeting begins with students and teachers greeting one another by name. Varying the greetings keeps students interested. Some greetings are simple and straightforward. Amanda might start by turning to the classmate on her left with a "Good morning, Steven Michael," a smile, and a handshake. Steven Michael, who this year does not like being just Steven, and even more dislikes Steve or Stevie, responds, "Good morning, Amanda," and turns to his



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neighbor—"Good morning, Chandra."

Other greetings are more complex. For example, children might name themselves, then say their nickname, and then choose another designation, such as "soccer player" or "big sister" or "reader." Simple or fanciful, all greetings help children learn one another's names and ensure that each child receives the warmth of a peer's greeting. These greetings provide practice in the verbal and nonverbal communication skills central to relationship building, in and out of school.

Sharing

Each day, a few students share information about themselves with the class, concluding their statements with an invitation: "I'm ready for questions and comments." The responses show interest in the subject and the sharer. Being a sharer offers children practice at taking turns, orally expressing ideas, and shaping their presentation for a particular audience.

The information that students share extends their knowledge of one another, and the respectful reception of their news builds students' sense of significance. "My grandma is in the hospital." "My soccer team won Saturday." "We're getting a dog from the animal shelter this weekend." Children often spot common ground for further conversations at lunch or other times, which enlarges each student's circle of friends. Sometimes the teacher assigns a topic, perhaps tying it to the current classroom curriculum. For example, one week the topic for sharing might be "an interesting fact you learned in the biography you are reading."

Responding to classmates' sharing helps students develop a repertoire of responses appropriate to different kinds of information. Good questions show a genuine interest in the sharer and his or her news. Offering comments requires students to see events from someone else's perspective. "I'll bet you're excited to be getting a dog." "You must be sad that your grandma is so sick." Empathy, a cornerstone of caring, informs these comments.

Group Activity

Next, the whole class does a short activity together, building class cohesion. The activities are short and often fast-paced, involving everyone in the class. Some have clear academic skill-building components, such as math exercises or vocabulary building; others appear to be just for fun, although they may also offer practice in such crucial skills as following directions or exercising self-control.

Group activities build a class's common collection of songs, games, chants, and poems, thereby nurturing the sense of familiarity and comfort that makes for a feeling of belonging. By knowing the shared words, the common tunes, and the familiar dance steps, each student possesses a valuable currency in the community.

News and Announcements

During the final component of the morning meeting, students learn about events in the day ahead and develop language skills by reading and discussing the messages that their teacher has prepared and posted on a chart before the meeting. Even before the meeting begins, the chart's words welcome students, orient them, and get them excited about their day. The words

on the chart also provide opportunities for quick, warm-up skill builders. For example, the chart's message may ask students to find and circle the ten punctuation mistakes that the teacher has deliberately inserted. It may acknowledge individual students' accomplishments; sometimes it may refer to past group events.

The assumption of shared interest and identity that informs the teacher's construction of the chart—even the salutation—reinforces a sense of group identity. “Dear Upper Primes,” one chart might begin. Or “Greetings, super scientists” to a group that spent the day before in an outdoor classroom, studying insects. Or “Welcome, soggy students” on the morning of a torrential rain.

Teacher reading, choral reading, echo reading, or individual student reading of assigned sentences vary the pace, followed by short, related activities or brief conversations that may focus on academic skills or anticipate the day ahead.

Moving from Group to Community

When students and teachers come together on the first day of school, they are a group, but not yet a community. Developing community and the sense of belonging that defines it takes time. Members of a community must first know one another, starting with learning one another's names and how to pronounce them. Then they gradually learn about one another—favorite foods, hobbies, pets, families, hopes, strengths, and struggles. They also share a common vocabulary and culture, know the same words to songs, the same rules to games. They laugh about the same silly shared moments and lament the same shared losses.

Transforming a classroom group into a caring community of learners requires many ingredients. The teacher's purpose and set of expectations are essential beginning ingredients, but alone they are not enough. The teacher also needs time, patience, and good tools for turning intention and expectation into action and behavior. Done well, morning meetings can transform classroom groups into caring communities by offering daily instruction and practice in building a community. Over time, this daily practice weaves a web that binds a class together in community.

Setting the Tone for Learning

The way that teachers begin each day in the classroom sets the tone for learning and speaks volumes about what and whom they value, about their expectations for the way people will treat one another, and about the way they believe learning occurs.

Children's learning about what school is like begins the moment they walk in the doors of the building. It matters whether adults and peers greet them warmly or overlook them, whether the classroom feels chaotic and unpredictable or ordered and comforting. A child who says, “My cat got hit by a car last night but it's gonna be all right,” may find an interested, supportive audience or one that turns away. Every detail of students' experience informs them about their classroom and their place in it.

Teachers who start the day with everyone together, face to face, welcoming one another,

sharing news, listening to individual voices, and communicating as a caring group, are sharing the message that every person matters and that individual and group interactions matter. They foster a classroom culture that is friendly, thoughtful, courteous, warm, and safe.

To learn, individuals must take risks, perhaps offering up a tentative answer that they are far from sure is right or trying out a new part in the choir when they are not sure whether they can hit the notes. People can take these risks only when they know that others will respect and value them, no matter the outcome. Students must trust in order to risk, and morning meetings help create a climate of trust.

Meeting Students' Needs

Humans strive to fulfill their needs in whatever way they can, whether those ways are positive or negative. The child whose friendly contributions are not recognized will seek recognition through trouble making.

Having fun is also a universal human need. Being fully engaged in what we are doing—being playful and lighthearted even when the activity is hard and the challenge great—fosters the joy of learning. And when our classrooms don't provide constructive ways to meet our students' universal need for fun, students will devise their own, often not-so-constructive ways.

Morning meetings offer opportunities for every class member to have fun and feel a sense of significance and belonging. The cumulative effect of morning meetings can be quite powerful, as the following story shows.

Pete was a 4th grade boy who struggled with anger and bullying tendencies at school. One day, while the principal was talking with Pete about his challenges and progress, the subject of morning meetings came up.

"I hate morning meetings!" Pete blurted out.

This reaction startled the principal. "Most kids really like morning meetings. What do you hate about them?"

Pete had his reasons:

Well, you get to know kids, and you listen to them, and you do stuff together, and sometimes you like them, and then it makes it so you don't want to beat them up on the playground.

Morning meetings were putting Pete in considerable inner conflict. It's a lot easier to take a swing, verbal or physical, at someone whose name you don't know, whose voice you haven't heard, and whose story you don't have a clue about. Or to frame it more positively, when children know and feel connected to others, they treat one another better.

The daily ritual of "doing stuff together"—learning and using names, sharing stories, building a common repertoire of songs and experiences—is perhaps the greatest contribution of these morning gatherings. The sense of belonging, caring, and trust developed during morning meetings is a foundation for handling every lesson, every transition time, every lining-up, every upset and conflict, all day and all year. The morning meeting is a microcosm of the way

we wish our schools to be—communities that are filled with learning and caring, classrooms that are safe and respectful and challenging for all.

Roxann Kriete is Executive Director of the Northeast Foundation for Children, 39 Montague City Rd., Greenfield, MA 01301; (800) 360-6332; roxy@responsiveclassroom.org; www.responsiveclassroom.org. She is the author of *The Morning Meeting Book* (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2002) and coauthor of *The First Six Weeks of School* (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2000).

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