

Positive Interaction Among Fifth Graders: Is it a Possibility?
The Effects of Classroom Meetings on Fifth-Grade Student Behavior

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By

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As I walk slowly down the hall to the music room and hesitantly peak my head through the door, I hope to be greeted by a brilliant smile on the lips of the music teacher. Instead, my heart sinks when I hear the familiar refrain, "Miss Potter, could I speak to you about your class?"

I heard these words on an all-too-often basis during the fall of my first year of teaching. My class was full of bright children who could not get along and had trouble restraining their impulses. Even after attempting several methods to improve student behavior, my class continued to have quite a reputation among other teachers. As Christmas rolled around, I was still asking myself, "How can I keep my students on task, improve their cooperative skills, and decrease their impulsivity?" At this point, I made the decision to implement positive discipline and classroom meetings with my fifth graders.

In this article, I will a) provide an overview of positive discipline and classroom meeting research, b) discuss the implementation of classroom meetings in my classroom, and c) share the results of my action research.

Literature Review

In light of the recent rash of violence in our schools nationwide, interpersonal and problem-solving skills are becoming an educational priority. As a teacher, I knew the importance and value of interpersonal and problem solving skills in my classroom, and I wanted to discover a way to convey these skills to my students. The solution I found while researching this topic was classroom meetings.

In 1991, the United States Department of Labor issued the SCANS report (Secretary's Commission of Acquiring Necessary Skills) for America 2000. This report

detailed qualities that business professionals thought to be vital to our children's future. The skills identified in the report included the ability to work with peers, make decisions, solve problems, and manage oneself (Nelsen et al., 1996)

In *Positive Discipline: A Teacher's A-Z Guide*, Jane Nelson states, "Positive discipline class meetings address all of the emotional intelligence skills..." (1996, p. 56). Emotional intelligence is defined by Daniel Goleman as "skills in empathy, cooperation, persuasion, consensus building, reading one's own feelings, con-

trolling one's own impulses and anger, calming oneself down, and maintaining resolve and hope in the face of setbacks" (Nelsen et al, 1996, p. 55). Nelsen also mentions the benefits of these meetings in the classroom environment, referring to the fact that classroom meetings often result in fewer discipline problems. This decrease in negative behavior allows more time for teaching of the content areas. Lois Gail McClurg (1998), a first grade teacher who implements classroom meetings with her students, also recognizes the importance of targeting social skills in the classroom. She refers to the curriculum directed to the ethical and social development of children, noting that "the strengthening of community and communicative competence of future citizens is basic to a healthy and democratic society" (p. 30).

Like McClurg, Nancy Lindquist (1997), a fourth-grade teacher, found success in classroom meetings with her students. She, along with her colleagues, points out that meetings create a classroom community by building trust among students, encouraging positive and respectful group interaction, and providing the children with opportunities to experience success (Lundeberg, Emmett, Osland, and Lindquist).

In their study, Sorsdahl and Sanche (1990) focused on the effects of classroom meetings on student self-concept and behavior. Their findings indicate that "children participating in meetings improved significantly in ratings of classroom behavior" (Myrick, et al., p. 357). They add that classroom meetings prove beneficial to students by "enhancing their problem-solving skills, their decision-making skills, their acceptance of responsibility, and their interpersonal skills" (Myrick et al., 1990, p. 358).

Purpose

My review of related literature reinforced my belief that it was imperative to teach interpersonal skills and gave proof of the success of classroom meetings implemented by other teachers. I identified the following research questions:

- 1) Do classroom meetings decrease the number of minor behavior infractions by the students?
- 2) Do classroom meetings increase the students' ability to interact positively at school?
- 3) Do classroom meetings increase the students' ability to interact positively at home? Methods

and Procedures

The participants consisted of twenty-three fifth-grade students from an intermediate school in the San Marcos Consolidated Independent School District. Demographically, the school is seventy-five percent Hispanic, twenty percent Caucasian, and five percent African-American.. Approximately sixty percent of the children receive free or reduced lunch. The research was conducted in a classroom containing twelve girls and eleven boys. Of the twenty-three students, seven students received special education services.

I began the study by introducing my students to classroom meeting procedures. Classroom meetings were held at least three times a week for eight weeks. For the first two weeks, we discussed the eight building blocks for effective class meetings. The students learned to form a circle, practice compliments and appreciations, and create an agenda. Activities from Positive Discipline in the Classroom helped them to develop communication skills, learn about separate realities, recognize the four reasons people do what they do, practice role playing and brainstorming, and focus on nonpunitive solutions (Nelsen, Lott, and Glenn, 1997). Once the students were familiar with classroom meeting procedures, we began solving problems together. Problems addressed were items chosen from our agenda box. Agenda items included ideas on how to improve our classroom or problems that students needed help in solving.

I used four methods for collecting data. The methods included a teacher journal, student journals, self-correction sheets, and parent surveys.

After each class meeting, my students and I wrote in our journals. In the teacher journal, I made observations about the success of the class meeting, interesting occurrences throughout the day, or changes in student attitude or behavior. I also documented positive comments from elective teachers and administrators, along with positive interaction among students.

In their journals, the students wrote about classroom events or information pertaining to the class meeting. I used the students' journals to assess their attitudes towards classroom meetings. I also gained insight into positive interactions among the students.

Beginning with the first week of research, I kept record of the self-correction sheets received by my students. (See Sample A) Self-correction sheets were given to students for minor behavior infractions such as calling out in class, using inappropriate language, or not following classroom rules. Students were expected to

fill out the six-item sheets in response to their negative behavior.

To determine the participants' interaction skills at home, I administered a nine-question parent survey in the first and last week of my research. The survey asked parents to rate their child on a scale of 1-5 (almost always-almost never) on specific behaviors demonstrated by their child at home. Targeted behaviors included giving compliments, listening attentively, taking turns, and tolerating the views of others.

Data Analysis and Findings

The intent of the study was to determine whether classroom meetings had an effect on fifth-grade student behavior. More specifically, I was interested in determining whether class meetings could decrease minor behavior infractions in the classroom and increase positive interaction between the students.

Teacher Journal

The teacher journal was coded for two categories management concerns or complaints from other teachers, and positive communication among students or compliments received by the students. After completing the coding process, I constructed a frequency chart of the two types of entries. Using this chart, I created a line graph which demonstrates the number of positive and negative entries per week. As shown in Figure 1, I noticed an increase in positive interaction among my students as the study

progressed, as well as a decrease in management concerns and complaints from other teachers. For example, in the second week of research, my entry read, "Overall, the class was not attentive during class meeting today and a few of the boys were downright disrespectful". In contrast, during week eight I noted my pride in a child who had exhibited positive interaction skills. I wrote, "Today I was very proud of Joey. When Noel came to go to recess with us, Joey made a big deal out of being glad to see him and wanting to play with him". These findings indicate that participating in the classroom meeting process increases a child's ability to communicate and interact positively with others.

Student Journals (Author's Note: Children's quotes contain actual spellings.)

I coded student journals using similar categories. The categories were positive entries and negative entries concerning student interactions and class meetings. When coding the journals, I looked specifically at

the entries of six target students. The students were chosen in accordance with their behavior. Two target students rarely had behavior difficulties, two students demonstrated moderate behavior problems, and two students had frequent behavior difficulties. These journals revealed that the students had good attitudes towards class meetings. Fifty-seven entries were categorized as positive, while only 25 entries cited concerns. Several of the students' journal entries referenced the skills they had acquired through classroom meetings. For example, Lisa wrote, "I think we're getting better at respecting each other." She also commented, "I felt happy when I knew who shared the same view as I did". Kevin shared Lisa's enthusiasm for class meetings, saying "I like class meetings because I like to give compliments and appreciations and I like receiving compliments and appreciations and it's also fun talking about my other classmates' problems and fun trying to solve them". Terry notes another skill learned in class meetings, "Today at the class meeting I learned that you need to pay attention when someone is talking to you so they will feel good...". These student observations indicate that they were learning important interaction skills. Their positive comments, in addition to the examples of lessons learned, strongly suggest an increase in their ability to interact positively with one another.

Self-Correction Sheets

I used self-correction sheets to determine the impact of class meetings on my students' behavior. I tallied the number of self-correction sheets received by my students in each week of the study, and then found the average number of sheets issued per day. Next I organized this information in a line graph. As shown in Figure 2, during the first week of the study the class averaged 3 self-correction sheets per day. In week eight of the study, the class average was 2 sheets each day. This graph illustrates that classroom meetings did not have the desired outcome of decreasing minor behavior infractions of my students.

Parent Surveys

In the first and last week of the study, parents completed a nine-question survey concerning their child's behavior at home. I elected to analyze the six questions which had the most relevance to my study. In analyzing this data, I looked at the surveys of the six previously mentioned target students. For each of the items analyzed, I found the average score of the six students. I then compared the averages from the first and second parent surveys. These findings are shown in Figure 3. The target students made gains in four of the six specified behaviors and maintained their level of skill in the two remaining categories. This information seems

to indicate that classroom meetings do increase a fifth grader's ability to interact positively at home

Near the end of my research, I became aware of an unanticipated result of implementing classroom meetings with my students. My students were showing respect for one another and were becoming supportive of each other. Another teacher commented that she was impressed by my class' behavior at field day. She noticed that they stayed together when they were not participating in an event and that several students cheered for each other as they competed in the races. This incident suggests that classroom meetings helped my students foster a sense of community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the data collected from the research project implies that classroom meetings do increase a student's ability to interact positively both at school and at home. Teacher and student journals, in addition to parent surveys, indicate a growth in the students' positive interaction skills. My findings indicate that students who are given the opportunity to participate in classroom meetings can increase their skills in the following areas:

- o attentive listening

- o ability to compliment and appreciate others

- o respect for others

- o community building

I believe that eight weeks was not sufficient time to gain the desired result of decreasing minor behavior infractions. I feel that my classroom meetings will be even more effective next year when I implement

them at the beginning of the school year.

This action research project positively impacted my students by equipping them with interaction skills needed to become successful adults. However, I feel that I have made even greater gains as a teacher. In the process of implementing my research, I acquired researching skills which will allow me to learn about innovative instructional strategies throughout my teaching career. I learned how to implement an extensive program in my classroom and also how to systematically analyze data in order to determine the effectiveness of that program. I look forward to upcoming challenges, knowing that I have the ability to use my action research skills to overcome them.

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