Exploring How Building a Classroom Community Affects a Sixth Grader’s Daily Experience in Middle School

PDS Inquiry 2008

Marcus A. Bouchillon & Carrie A. Rinehimer

The Pennsylvania State University
The College of Education
State College Area School District
Professional Development School
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table of Contents</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of Teaching Context</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main and Sub-Questions</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection and Analysis Process</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claims and Evidence</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection and Future Practices</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A: Student Survey 1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B: Student Survey 2</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: Parent Survey</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D: Written Observation</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E: Inquiry Brief</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F: Annotated Bibliography</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Vocabulary

Morning Meeting – Daily morning class-wide gatherings that focus on building community through greeting, sharing, group activities, and announcements. These meetings often take place during the first 20 minutes of school.

Class Meeting – Whole class discussions facilitated by the teacher where students are able to express their thoughts, feelings, and emotions about a variety of topics in an open forum; not held every day

Circle of Power and Respect (CPR) – A form of morning meetings designed specifically for middle school students. CPR emphasizes activities and greetings that are developmentally appropriate to the unique needs of middle school students.

Professional Development Associate (PDA) – Advisor and supervisor who provides suggestions and feedback to individual interns as they instruct and work with children.

Mentor Teacher – The experienced instructor in whose classroom an intern completes his or her student teaching experience.

Cliques – A narrow, exclusive group of individuals usually held together by common interests or opinions.

Teaching Context

Miss Rinehimer:

Overall, there is a large mix of student abilities and personalities in my classroom. In this classroom, there are twenty-five students: thirteen females and twelve males. For the most part, the entire class gets along with one another. All of the girls in the class, except for the one girl receiving Learning Support, have formed friendships. A group of girls, which seems to be growing by the week, are insistent on making sure this girl is out-cast from their group. All boys
seem to have friends in the class; however, unlike the girls, they are not all friends with each other. There are definite formed groups of males. There are a mix of boys and girls (approximately 6) that are constant “helpers” in the classroom who want to please the teacher.

The students have all shown growth so far this semester; the first day of school, they only talked to peers they knew from elementary school. Friendships have grown in our classroom by making new friends. Through behavior modification plans with certain students, students getting appropriate learning support or enrichment, and adapting lessons for the class, all students have shown academic, behavioral, and social growth.

Mr. Bouchillon:

Like most any classroom, the social interactions of students in this class are primarily defined by each students’ individual personality. It is safe to say that about 70% of the students in this class are extremely outgoing and enjoy being the center of attention. Somewhat surprising is the fact that of the remaining students in the class, only 3 are extremely quiet, reserved, and introverted. This unique classroom make-up causes very active, generally positive interactions between most every student in the class. While it is apparent that some students have a smaller group of “best” friends, there seem to be very few, if any, “cliques,” within the class. With the introverted students, two of them seem to have made a very positive and supportive friendship with each other.

Unfortunately this still leaves out one student who, most likely as a result, will act out at times, often towards a specific group of outgoing individuals. From time to time the high percentage of extroverted students can lead to disruptions such as calling out or small confrontation between students vying for the spotlight. Overall; however, I believe this social structure of the class generates wide varieties of discussion within lessons. These discussions in
turn create a positive and active learning environment which helps the students learn, often times without them even realizing that they are learning.

**Main Question**

How do classroom-meeting activities affect the communities of two sixth grade classrooms?

Through discussing possible inquiry topics as individual researchers during the initial stage of the inquiry experience, we, as the researchers of this inquiry project, found that a common theme existed between both of our topic ideas. Ultimately we decided to join together in carrying out the research in order to gain more consistent and greater amounts of data. This main question addresses the common understanding amongst educators that the classroom community plays an integral role in developing a positive atmosphere and an engaging learning environment. The overall goal of this inquiry, represented through this question, focuses on how that sense of community is impacted by classroom and morning meetings.

**Sub-Questions**

What are the differences in community building between a sixth grade classroom in an elementary school setting and a middle school setting?

This sub-question was originally formed to account for the variable created by the differences in elementary sixth grade classes and middle school sixth grade classes. Unfortunately, as our research began to develop, there were very few opportunities to gain useful data in order to substantiate any form of claim in this area. Additionally, the unique hybrid structure of the sixth grade classes at Mt. Nittany Middle School implements important aspects of both settings into daily activities. This uncommon structure made collecting specific data to
answer this question difficult. Due to this overall lack of data, this question is still left unanswered.

**How do cliques influence a sixth grade classroom community?**

When analyzing any community of students, the term “clique” is frequently mentioned. As it is commonly associated with disruption of community, we wanted to investigate the full impact of cliques in a sixth grade setting. In attempting to answer this question, more questions than answers began to arise. While this is in no way a bad thing, we believe this question to be an excellent source of future inquiry as an action-research question in itself. In our future endeavors as classroom teachers, we both wish to revisit this question in deeper detail, having it be the primary focus of an inquiry.

**What (if any) behavioral and social interaction changes in sixth grade students are generated when participating in the Circle of Power and Respect?**

In researching techniques for building classroom communities in upper intermediate settings, we discovered a popular and well-documented form of morning meeting known as the Circle of Power and Respect (CPR). The reported success of CPR peaked our curiosity as to how the social interaction in our classrooms would change, if at all, if CPR were implemented. Overall, this question focuses on one specific point in the larger research of our sixth grade classroom communities.

**How does the way a teacher talks and listens to his/her students affect the way they view their sense of belonging in the classroom community?**

Several sources of research obtained while conducting background research on our main question consistently claim that the way students and teachers interact through speaking and listening has a direct relation to the success of classroom communities. Through this question,
we are attempting to understand whether or not our students feel that their teacher’s ability to speak and listen to his or her students has an impact on the community of the classroom. Ultimately, this question provides an area for us to analyze how a teacher’s treatment of a student affects the feeling of importance and comfort level that a student has in the classroom.

**Will the implementation of classroom meeting activities halfway through the year impact a pre-established community?**

Though it was not an initial sub-question, this question was designed to account for the variable of attempting to build a community after an initial community had already been created. Due to an overwhelming amount of research that showed morning meetings to be effective in building the community within the classroom, we chose to add this question to inspire inquiry in future school years of whether or not morning meetings will be successful if implemented on the first day of school.

**Data Collection and Analysis Process**

**Student Survey # 1: Appendix A**

Prior to the start of any class or morning meetings, both interns gave this survey to all of our students. We asked them to only identify their gender. The purpose of the survey was to garner baseline data; essentially how our students felt about the sense of community in our classroom. Other aspects of our main and sub-questions were also addressed, like students’ feelings towards how teachers speak and listen to them and whether cliques are prevalent.

We analyzed the students’ answers separately, by tallying their responses by gender. Once forming our own opinions of our classrooms, we brought our data together to compare. In Miss Rinehimer’s classroom, 71% of students felt that community building activities encourage
Exploring the Sixth Grade Community 8

respect among classmates; as compared to 50% in Mr. Bouchillon’s classroom. 75% of Miss Rinehimer’s class felt the current school-wide anti-bullying initiative impacted them, as opposed to 14% who felt the same way in Mr. Bouchillon’s class.

**Student Survey #2: Appendix B**

At the end of our morning and classroom meetings, for data collection purposes, we administered this final survey. We wanted to see if anything had changed due to the meetings, in our students’ opinions. The questions related to our wonderings about cliques, teacher’s speaking and listening, and community building in the middle school. The students provided some interesting suggestions for what can be done differently to increase the effectiveness of classroom meetings. Most were the typical sixth grade responses: more fun activities, more group work, etc. The most valuable information was rating, from one to five (“not at all” to “definitely”), if they felt the new classroom meetings had made a positive impact on the student’s feeling a part of the classroom.

**Parent Survey: Appendix C**

We asked the parents to complete this survey halfway through our data collection for inquiry. For us, the most important questions on the survey were about cliques and how teachers talk and listen to students. As stated previously, our main question about cliques could have become an inquiry on its own; nonetheless, the parents’ responses were valuable for all questions.

We asked them if their children had indicated to them that the way teachers talk and listen impacts their sense of belonging in the classroom. Our data was undeniably one way: yes, it does. Even so, some of the parents who did answer “no,” had previously stated in an answer
that their children do not speak to them about daily activities in school. This allowed us to have substantial evidence for a claim that related directly to a sub-question.

**Interviews: Mr. Mike Fitzgerald and Mrs. Becci Burns**

As two experienced veteran teachers, we interviewed Mrs. Burns and Mr. Fitzgerald since we had prior knowledge of their success with morning meetings. Mr. Fitzgerald is a sixth grade teacher at Mount Nittany Middle School. Mrs. Burns is a current PDA who spent numerous years in sixth grade, in both elementary and middle school settings. Our questions focused around their success with CPR and/or morning and classroom meetings.

From these interviews, we found that both teachers implemented such community building practices at the beginning of the school and felt they served a purpose. This helped us see that morning meetings can be successful, if started and carried throughout the entire school year. We trusted their opinions that were also backed by research.

**Video Recording:**

For the morning and classroom meetings, Miss Rinehimer visually recorded all of these encounters. Unable to remember all details from each meeting, this means of data collection served an excellent purpose. After re-watching the hours of tapes, we were both able to see the similarities and differences between the two classrooms, as well as see some insightful information for analysis. While only our recap and student quotes serve purpose in our writing, the visual interactions themselves are very telling of the social context.

**Audio Recording:**

Each classroom meeting conducted in Mr. Bouchillon’s room was recorded on Garage Band for data collection and reference purposes. These audio recordings allowed for further
review and student quotation analysis without making some students shy or embarrassed to share with the group.

In revisiting the conversations that took place during classroom meetings, we found that students genuinely believed that the classroom community was not helped at all by the morning meetings or CPR. Additionally, students shared that they found the relaxed, forum-like atmosphere of classroom meetings more comfortable and realistic to share meaningfully with each other. Finally, because classroom meetings addressed topics that were important to students, the audio recordings were found to show great student interest in speaking with little needed teacher facilitation.

**Conversation with Parent:**

Though not initially set-up to be a form of data collection, an IEP meeting between counselors, parents, and teachers for a student in Mr. Bouchillon’s room resulted in providing an important piece of data about the lack of community transferring from the classroom to the busses. In a conversation at the meeting, these parents stated that their child came home from school each day consistently talking to them about the emotional abuse he takes on the bus each day. Though this student is a well-accepted member of the classroom community, as shown by observations of interactions with peers in the classroom and student comments, the parents claimed that this student consistently suffers emotional abuse, primarily through speech, on his bus ride home.

**Research: See Appendix F**

**Claims and Evidence**

**Claim #1:** The manner in which a teacher speaks and listens to his/her students has a direct impact on students’ sense of belonging in the classroom community.
The majority of students surveyed agree that the way a teacher speaks and listens to his/her students impacts their sense of belonging in a classroom. On the first student survey (see Appendix A), of the forty-five students that answered, thirty-nine students responded with a three, four, or five, when asked if “the way my teacher(s) talk and listen to me affect my sense of belonging in the class.” Students were given the option in rating a one through five, with one being absolutely disagree and five being absolutely agree. For the parent survey (see Appendix C), thirty-nine out of fifty parents responded. Of those thirty-nine, thirty-one parents responded “yes” to the following question: your child has indicated to you that the way teachers speak and listen to them affects his/her sense of belonging in the classroom. One parent said, “there is no question that a teacher’s style and personality affect… morale and interest in the classroom.”

Faber and Mazlish state in *How to Talk so Kids Will Listen and Listen so Kids will Talk*, “…more than any words we use is our attitude. If our attitude is not one of compassion, then whatever we say will be experienced by the child as phony or manipulative. It is when our words are infused with our real feelings… that they speak directly to a student’s heart.” If a teacher speaks ill towards his/her class, students will not feel as though they belong in the classroom, as shown in the aforementioned research and in student and parent surveys administered to our classes.

**Claim #2:** When morning meetings are implemented from the beginning of the school year, they are as equally effective as classroom meetings.

Mr. Mike Fitzgerald, an experienced veteran-teacher, has implemented the Circle of Power and Respect (CPR) in his sixth grade middle school classroom for the past six years. He believes CPR is “critical for achievement” in middle school. Another interviewee was Becci Burns. As a former sixth grade teacher in both a middle school and an elementary school, Mrs.
Burns is familiar with the inner-workings of sixth grade and students at this age of transitions. In her classroom, the first three days would be dedicated primarily to community building and once a week thereafter, she would hold a class meeting. She said, “now, looking back, I would take the first twenty minutes of every day and hold a morning meeting.” Mrs. Burns remembers her students loving the class meeting and how effective it was for maintaining the sense of community throughout the year.

*The Morning Meeting Book* (including middle school) by Roxann Kriete, refers to CPR as “the middle school version of morning meeting” since it still included the traditional four components of its elementary counterpart. “Middle schoolers, perhaps even more than younger students, thrive in the atmosphere of trust and belonging created by this ritual… it should be part of the school day at least three times a week” (124).

As the aforementioned research and interview data shows, morning meetings or CPR, when started at the beginning of the school year can be extremely beneficial to a classroom’s community. However, when started halfway through, as it was in our case, students found the class meeting format to better suit their liking and needs. As evidence will show in other claims, our students had little to no reaction to the implementation of CPR.

**Claim #3:** Students participation in the Circle of Power and Respect, a form of Morning Meeting, does not affect student interactions during the school day and beyond.

After CPR was conducted multiple times, a formal class meeting was held in both classrooms. In Miss Rinehimer’s classroom, the students were told that their teachers had observed students being excluded from daily happenings, like group work and at lunch. What ensued was an hour and forty-five minute meeting, where students vocalized their exclusion from lunch tables and harassment on the bus. Just as teachers had observed, students admitted to
not only seeing their classmates eating alone, but also isolated them further. The students who occasionally eat alone also spoke up. Students also confessed to being sexually, emotionally, verbally, and physically bullied, while their classmates admittedly watched on.

In Mr. Bouchillón’s classroom, students were informed that the way they were speaking towards each other during group work times was not only disruptive to the groups’ academic success, but also consistently derogatory towards individuals’ emotions and personalities. During the meeting, students shared that they believed forced activities, such as morning meetings and assigned groups, detracted from the community because they did not get to have any say in what was required of them. One student stated, “getting more choice in the projects and assignments would … add to the community.” From this and similar comments, the conclusion can be drawn that one of the reasons CPR does not work is because students feel it is something they shouldn’t have to (or don’t want) to do.

**Claim #4:** When started mid-school year, classroom meetings produce a stronger community-based atmosphere than traditional morning meetings.

In both classrooms, we observed that students were more behaved and more likely to participate during class meetings. During morning meetings, students were often acting goofy, immature, and calling out. In Miss Rinehimer’s class, every student participated in at least one of the class meetings. While every student did not participate during class meetings in Mr. Bouchillón’s class, at least fourteen students chose to verbally participate in one meeting. During CPR meetings, however, no more than eight students chose to participate verbally or actively (depending on the activity) during any one activity. Additionally, parent surveys returned to both classroom frequently shared comments about the amount of classroom community the mentor teachers already helped establish from the beginning of the school year.
Reflection and Future Practice

There are a few things we now wish we could have done differently, and a few things that we will definitely do in the future. Some of the things we had no control over, i.e. having little to no time for morning meetings first thing in the morning. Students leave our rooms four days out of the six-day cycle within ten minutes of the start of school, and on the remaining two days, science (or social studies) starts right away. Ideally, a schedule where we could have our homerooms for 15-20 minutes before formal instruction begins would be optimal for morning meetings. Ideally, in an elementary school setting where the schedules are more flexible, we will be able to work in both morning and classroom meetings.

We also wonder if implementing formal morning meetings at the beginning of the school year would have made a difference in the students’ reactions to them. In the future, we both plan to implement morning meetings from the start of the school year, regardless of the grade levels we teach. Since classroom meetings went so well, we will definitely be using that tool throughout the remainder of this school year into next year.

In addition to the aforementioned time differences between elementary and middle school, we were also able to compare how classroom meetings are different in the different settings based off of Mr. Bouchillon’s student teaching time in the fifth grade. In the fifth grade classroom, classroom meeting times, subjects, and rules for sharing were much more structured than the sixth grade. Fifth graders tended to speak directly to the teacher during meetings instead of addressing each other as they do in sixth grade. Through discussion about possible causes for this difference, we believe the classroom meeting differences are different due to the present community in each classroom and the developmental level of the students at those ages. Ultimately, we both wish to create a relaxed, supportive, and honest atmosphere in our classroom
community so that students can feel safe and free to share with each other. Though how the meetings are managed will vary by grade/student developmental level, our research and subsequent reflection leads us to believe that students, regardless of age, have a need to be listened to and spoken to respectively.
Appendix A: Student Survey #1

(note: Actual survey was provided a different, user friendly format using a landscape page setting)

Rate your answer from 1 to 5

1 2 3 4 5
1 absolutely disagree
  absolutely agree
2 somewhat agree

1. Feeling as though you are part of your classroom community is important to me.

2. When teachers to do community building activities, it encourages me to treat my peers with respect each day.

3. To me, a strong community includes students who treat each other with respect, are friendly, and support my ideas.

4. On most days, I enjoy spending time in homeroom because of the welcoming atmosphere my peers and teachers create.

5. The sense of community on 5th grade was more positive than in 6th grade (I feel more comfortable sharing ideas, taking risks, and/or making mistakes).

6. The sense of community on 6th grade is more positive than in 5th grade (I feel more comfortable sharing ideas, taking risks, and/or making mistakes).

7. There are cliques (groups of friends not open to other people) in my classroom and/or my school.

8. Cliques influence whether or not I have a good day in school.

9. The way my teacher(s) talk and listen to me affect my sense of belonging in the class.

10. Planet Peace has impacted my sense of belonging in a positive way.

11. Planet Peace has diminished bullying in my school.

12. What do you think your teachers could do to make this classroom community stronger?
Appendix B: Student Survey #2

Please complete this survey honestly, seriously, and completely; sharing as much information as you feel comfortable.

1. How do you feel you adjusted to experiencing sixth grade in the middle school?

2. How have your teachers helped or hindered the adjustment from fifth grade?

3. Do you feel cliques (groups of friends that are usually not accepting of other students into their group) are prevalent in your classroom? What impact, if any, do they have on your day in and out of school?

4. How often and to what extent do you talk about your non-academic experiences from school at home? (For example: who you sit with at lunch, who your partner was, etc)

5. The new classroom meetings have made a positive impact on me feeling a part of the classroom community

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<td></td>
<td>(not at all)</td>
<td>(somewhat)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(definitely, yes)</td>
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6. Do you have any suggestions on what can be done differently to increase the effectiveness of the classroom meetings?

7. If you have any other comments, questions, or things you would like to share, please feel free to do so here.
Appendix C: Parent Survey

March 24, 2008

Dear Parents,

First and foremost, I would like to thank you for allowing me to play an active role in your child’s education. Throughout my student teaching experience, I have the opportunity to explore many aspect of education, including an action research/inquiry project. I am choosing to focus my inquiry on the way a community is built within the sixth grade classroom. While building a community during the school day is important, what goes on at home plays an integral role in your child’s daily experience. It would be a tremendous benefit to my inquiry to gain some perspective of how you view the impact of the classroom community on your child. Please complete the survey below and return it by Friday, March 28. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me through the school’s telephone number or via email (____)

Thank you again for your continued support!

Sincerely,
Teacher’s Name

Please answer each question with as much detail as you feel comfortable.

1. How do you feel your child has adjusted to experiencing sixth grade in the middle school?

2. Do you feel cliques are prevalent in your child’s classroom? What impact, if any, do they have on your child’s day in and out of school?
   a. Yes, they appear to be evident, but cliques do not seem to impact my child
   b. Yes, cliques are evident and seem to impact my child’s day
   c. No, my child never talks about cliques
   d. None of the above, please explain:

3. How often and to what extent does your child share his/her non-academic experiences from school with you? (For example: who your child eats lunch with, who their partner was that day, etc)

4. Yes or No: Your child has indicated to you that the way teachers speak and listen to them affects his/her sense of belonging in the classroom

5. If you have any other comments, questions, or things you would like to share, pertaining to the aforementioned topics, please feel free to do so here.
Kids comments about Community Building:

~ your comment about kids cutting other kids down… and the words they choose to do that. You want them to refocus on being relaxed but also be kind and have a good time.

G (girl)- bothered by not letting people in when the door gets locked (some people let others in and others do not)

G- “I don’t think the community building has done anything at all.” Why… not a clear answer.

B (boy)- doesn’t think c. building is working either. Started talking about science and the fact that work was getting done, but in SS the same thing wasn’t happening. (you paraphrased that group work that is fun makes it easier to build community)

G- group activities have not been helping her at all. It is easier to work on projects that are fun rather than the boring ones.

G-? having to work with people you aren’t used to makes the project harder. Could we work with just one person at a time rather than a small group of people?

G- put with people you don’t know or hang out with… it is harder to pay attention and get work done and you end up just feeling uncomfortable.

G- (second comment) people tend to annoy her by times and working on projects would be less stressful in partners rather than groups. One on one with someone who annoy you is better than lots of people who annoy you.

B- getting more choice in the projects and assignments would help. Also added that the comm. Building wasn’t working.
Exploring the Sixth Grade Community

working with people you know might help if you don’t goof off.

choosing to be with people might make things harder too.. leaving people out or not being able to have the people that you really want.

your comments about friends and people having friends and not having friends.

kids should be able to know if they shouldn’t work with the wrong person (if they are your friend)… because you’ll get a bad grade and not do a good job.

your comment about friends working together being sometimes problematic and asking the question about what you could do to make the community stronger and how do they feel about the community…

being able to vote on subjects and working with friends… but feels as though the community is “good”.

community is “good”

community is “very strong”.. I don’t hear people being mean and we’re all pretty much friends (not best friends), but we’re not mean to anybody (this person is someone who said the cb was not working..)

sometimes people don’t act the way they really are… we have a strong community and we talk a lot and these discussions help build a community.

back to the group thing…. Try to make sure you have someone you know in each 4some with someone in each pair knowing each other… good grief! :-(

shouldn’t work with best friend, but should work with friends in general

should be a choice of whom you get to work with OR have the choice to be with people whom you don’t know…

your final question… announcing another survey for people who don’t like to respond in a large group setting… took you a while to get to the question… (friends keep coming up)… “what if you’re a person who doesn’t know anyone… how do we come together as a class and reach out to that person?”

passed

meeting one person allows you to meet their old friends which helps all of us. Chain of friendship.

nobody came in here with no friends (that she knew of).
9 people out of 21 spoke. 6 girls and 3 boys

g- shared about x helping her on the first day of school with missing FCS class and being afraid of the teacher.

g- people being shy… we should be open minded and accepting

g- can we please just write?

g- people who don’t have friends can just sign up on the “thing” to work with anyone.
Appendix E: Inquiry Brief

Main Wondering and Sub-Questions:
How do classroom-meeting activities affect the communities of two sixth grade classrooms?

- What are the differences in community building between a sixth grade classroom in an elementary school setting and a middle school setting?
- How do cliques influence a sixth grade classroom community?
- What (if any) behavioral and social interaction changes do sixth grade students are generated when participating in the Circle of Power and Respect?
- How does the way a teacher talks and listens to his/her students affect the way he/she views their sense of belonging in the classroom community?

Date Collection Ideas:
- Observations (intern, PDA, mentor teacher)
- Teacher plans (community building activities)
- Interviews (with Mike Fitzgerald, face to face with students that seem extremely affected or unaffected by CPR)
- Student Surveys (whole-class, written, confidential in which students will be able to write about and rate CPR before, during, after implementation of CPR)
- Video (of community building activities and CPR)
- Pictures (of community building activities)

Context:
Room 117 (Rinehimer)
Total: 24 Students

Gender
Male: 12
Female: 13

Academic Level
Learning Enrichment (Gifted): 5
Title I: 4
Learning Support: 1
Emotional Support: 2

Reading Level
Below Basic: 1
Basic: 7
Proficient: 6
Advanced: 10

Writing Level:
Below Basic: 3
Basic: 5
Proficient: 6
Advanced: 10

Behavior
Off-task: 5
Disruptive: 3
Poor social skills: 1

Social Relationships
For the most part, the entire class gets along with one another. All of the girls in the class, except for the one Learning Support girl, have formed friendships. A group of girls, which seems to be growing by the week, are insistent on making sure this girl is out-casted from their group. All boys seem to have friends in the class; however, unlike the girls, they are not all friends with each other. There are definite formed groups of males. There are a mix of boys and girls (approximately 6) that are constant “helpers” in the classroom who want to please the teacher.
Overall, there is a large mix of student abilities and personalities in my classroom. The students have all shown growth so far this semester; the first day of school, they only talked to peers they knew from elementary school. Friendships have grown in our classroom by making new friends. Through behavior modification plans with certain students, students getting appropriate learning support or enrichment, and adapting lessons for the class, all students have shown academic, behavioral, and social growth.

Room 118 (Marcus):
Total: 25 Students

Gender
Male: 11
Female: 14

Academic Level
Learning Enrichment / Gifted: 5
Title I: 1
Learning Support: 1
Emotional Support: 0

Reading Level
Advanced: 5
Proficient: 16
Basic: 3
Below Basic: 1

Writing Level
Advanced: 3
Exploring the Sixth Grade Community

Proficient: 18
Basic: 2
Below Basic: 1

Behavior
Off Task: 5
Disruptive: 1
Poor social skills: 3

Social Relationships
Like most any classroom, the social interactions of students in this class are primarily defined by each student's individual personality. It is safe to say that about 70% of the students in this class are extremely outgoing and enjoy being the center of attention. Somewhat surprising is also the fact that of the remaining students in the class, only 3 are extremely quiet, reserved, and introverted. This unique classroom make-up causes very active, generally positive interactions between most every student in the class. While it is apparent that some students have a smaller group of “best” friends, there seem to be very few, if any, “cliques,” within the class. With the introverted students, two of them seem to have made a very positive and supportive friendship with each other.

Unfortunately this still leaves out one student who, most likely as a result, will act out at times, often towards a specific group of outgoing individuals. From time to time the high percentage of extroverted students can lead to disruptions such as calling out or small confrontation between students vying for the spotlight. Overall; however, I believe this social structure of the class generates wide varieties of discussion within lessons. These discussions in turn create a positive and active learning environment which helps the students learn, often times without them even realizing that they are learning.

Rationale:
After experiencing morning meeting in CLE classes, we began to wonder how a “child-friendly” morning meeting would affect a sixth grade community. The success of an elementary morning meeting has inspired this interest in researching to see if a middle school classroom meeting would have the same affect. Our sub-wonderings reflect our desire to change things in our respective classrooms. Since morning meetings are traditionally focused on elementary schools, we were hoping to see similarities and differences of community building between a sixth grade based in an elementary and middle school settings. Cliques of girls are seemingly becoming a negative aspect of our classrooms; therefore, our hope, through community building, is that the cliques diminish.

A popular middle school classroom meeting is the Circle of Power and Respect. We wonder upon implementation of this meeting, if and how our students and/or the community in our classroom changes. Our last wondering is based upon a common theme throughout our research: how a teacher talks and listens to his/her classroom affects their behavior. This theme has sparked our interest and would like to adopt a change in us that could positively affect the classrooms’ community. Overall, we wish to positively make a change in enhancing our
classrooms’ community, whether that is through our speech and listening or if implementing the Circle of Power and Respect can have us achieve that goal.

**Timeline:**

**February:**
2/18
- Observe and Interview Mike Fitzegerald’s CPR
- Research information relating to our topic
- Hold discussions with our mentor teachers/ PDA informing them of our plan of action

2/25
- Survey our students (their feelings on classroom meetings, classroom community, their friendships, cliques, teacher language/listening skills)
- Interview/discuss with our mentors their community building activities that are currently in place (for the purpose of official data collection)

**March:**
3/3
- Possible interview teachers who have taught in an elementary and middle schools
- Possibly observe 6th grade classrooms located in an elementary school
- Begin and conduct classroom meetings (CPR, classroom lead meetings)
- Conduct various community building activities

3/17
- Conduct various community building activities
- Conduct classroom meetings (CPR, classroom lead meetings)

3/24
- Conduct various community building activities
- Upon data collection, implement a single-variable change to gather more measurable data

3/31
- Conduct various community building activities
- Conduct classroom meetings (CPR, classroom lead meetings)
- Hold discussions with our mentor teachers/ PDA informing them of “plan of action”
- **End of the Week:** Give surveys (their feelings on the community in the classroom, if any new friendships, diminished cliques? Difference in teacher language or listening to students?)

**April:**
4/7
- Generate claims based on all recorded data
- Formulate our inquiry paper
Appendix F: Annotated Bibliography


This book will provide information relating to children’s behavior and how teachers should talk and listen to students. Focusing on the outside world and the negative effects it has on children, while providing coping strategies. We will use little information; however, the tips and advice provided, intended for parents, will help aid in our question focusing on how to listen and talk to students. There is also parent-teacher communication tips that will be helpful in our communication.


One aspect of building a strong classroom community is how teachers can talk more effectively to their students so a mutual respect is gained. While this book is a bit outdated, they key points to how a message should be conveyed by adults to students is still the same. Chapters titled, Engaging Cooperation, Alternatives to Punishment, and Praise, all relate creating a positive learning environment, fostered by the sense of community created by the teacher and delivered by the students in the classroom. We plan to use this to gain valuable advice on how to effectively talk and listen to students during classroom meetings to build a stronger sense of community.


In conjunction with the aforementioned resource, this book will also help us gain insight on how to address our students during classroom meetings. Dr. Haim Ginnot said, “How parents and teachers talk tells a child how they felt about him. Their statements affect his self-esteem and self-worth. To a larger extent, their language determines his destiny.” This book is built upon his beliefs and we value the way a teacher talks and listens to be a major factor in the creation of a strong classroom community. There is also advice on the parent-teacher partnership, praise, and problem solving that will be beneficial to our wonderings.


This book primarily focuses on helping the reader learn how to relate to, speak with, and understand the constantly changing teenage mind. Faber and Mazlish write about eight major topics (from “feelings discussions” to punishment to drugs and sex) which guide the reader into a better understanding of how best to help the growing adolescent. The book gives a wide variety of suggestions, tips, and general advice for how to be a positive influence to children who are growing into young adults.

Fitzgerald, M, personal communication, future date.

We plan on interviewing Mr. Mike Fitzerald, a sixth grade teacher at Mount Nittany Middle School. He has successfully implemented the Circle of Power and Respect (CPR), a form of classroom meeting we wish to research and adapt into our own classroom. We will ask
him what affect CPR had on his class, ways to implement CPR, and how to implement CPR-among other things. We will interview him after observing CPR in his classroom.


This book is perhaps one of the most useful books when analyzing how to develop classroom community. George and Lounsbury suggest that one of the main reasons community is not felt in schools is the lack of the establishment of long-term relationships between all parties involved (i.e. students, teachers, administrators, etc.). Describing community as the feeling of “smallness” of a given school or class, this book gives both reasons and solutions for the lack of community building in schools. With research completed (and compared) in both elementary and middle schools, this book is a prime resource for community building research and solutions within different environments.


Since cliques are apparent and a major influence on our classrooms, we wanted to gain insight on how they affect our classroom environment. While this book focuses on techniques a parent can use to dissuade the effects bullying and cliques on a child, the same concepts can be applied to our students on both ends of the spectrum: those who are bullying and those who are being bullied. One chapter in particular, titled Teach Your Child Tolerance, can help us conveying the meaning of tolerance and how all students can practice tolerance to make a more positive classroom community.


This excellent resource provides numerous classroom meeting ideas, for all age levels. The meeting that interests us the most, right now, is the Circle of Power and Respect (CPR). However, there are many other ideas for middle school students that we hope to implement, as well. The short and quick morning greetings would also be a nice, new way to start the day, especially since sometimes we do not have a lot of time in the mornings. The accompanying information provided will also help us with our research into community building.


This article analyzes positive affects and costs of having student centered and led class meetings. Leachman and Victor suggest that when students lead their own class meetings (aka morning meetings), discussion topics tend to be more relevant and meaningful to students within the classroom. Also, because students are able to select their own topics, other students are then engaged to ask deeper, more “clarifying” questions. Overall the article demonstrates how student focused meetings within the classroom help to build a more stable, unique classroom community.

Our students are not quite teens, but they certainly act like teenagers! While we are not counselors starting a specific group, the “getting started” tips are extremely helpful and related to what we hope to create in our respective classrooms. There are also blacklines that students can fill out, which we can use to garner ideas for our baseline survey and subsequent interviews and surveys. There are essentially full lesson plans throughout the book that we can use for specific CPR topics for a certain day. The lessons deal with specific topics we want to address in our classroom and the background, objectives, suggestions, and written activities provided can positively influence our inquiry.


As its title states, this book centers on the power of conversations in everyday activities within the school day. In particular, chapter 14 of Routman’s book focuses on “collaborative communities” are created and maintained within the classroom through conversations between students (also between teachers and students). Routman suggests that by creating an inviting classroom and “establishing the social and emotional climate” teachers can take an extremely active approach in building a very positive classroom community. Overall, this book contains research, suggestions, and resources for establishing a strong community within a classroom.


Though a bit dated, this book provides a wide variety of games and activities which are specifically intended to build personal confidence, self esteem, and a strong community. Containing outdoor and indoor games, ice-breakers, trust building exercises, and group challenges, Rohnke demonstrates through instructions, testimonials, and pictures how “classic” activities can combine with more “non-traditional” community builders to create a bonding atmosphere between participants. If for nothing else, this book is a great reminder (filled with resources) that community building can also be a fun time for each member.


The primary focus of Ruder’s article is on the need for a “customized” plan for fighting bullying in the Middle School environment. The suggested “customization” within this article centers around a student led and created dramatic play or array of skits. While this inquiry is not focusing on bullying specifically, throughout the article Ruder shows how using activities that are commonly “extra-curricular” can be used to build a stronger student community. Overall, Ruder gives a wonderful guideline that can be followed for students, teachers, and administrators to come together to form a stronger community between the students of individual classes and entire schools.


The in-depth research and reporting skills of the CQ Researcher staff are demonstrated in this report that suggests that there is a link between childhood depression and the “competitive atmosphere” of the modern elementary school. While this report goes into various details about other causes of depression, such as the chemical imbalance induced bi-polar disorder, evidence is presented which shows that some students struggle to keep up with the increasing social and academic demand of schooling. The piece even goes as far as to devote an entire section of the
report to bullying within schools and the positive effect for the school community of “cracking down” on bullies.