Building Social Skills in a First and Second Grade Classroom

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Context:

In my classroom there are a wide range of abilities and interests. I have twenty-two students, twelve of which are in second grade and ten of which are in first grade. Seven of them are boys and fifteen are girls. This makes for a variety of intellectual levels, as well as, different levels of social development. Of the twenty-two students in my class, nineteen are white, two are Asian, and one is African American. Two of my students have Individualized Education Plans for autistic support, four receive speech and language therapy, two also receive occupational therapy, and one student receives Title One support. There are four adults in the classroom: one intern, one regular education teacher, one K-2 Fail-Safe Paraprofessional, and one special education paraprofessional. We all work closely with the special teachers, who help to meet the special needs of our students.

There are only a few students in my class who pose behavior problems regularly. Most of these problems seem to be related to their lack of self-control, which is normal at this age. They are all very excited about school, so it is not a major problem, but a developmentally appropriate goal. There is also a child in my class with Asperger’s Syndrome, another with Austism, and one with emotional difficulties. These children add to the character of our classroom and have greatly enhanced our community building, as the other students learn how to interact with and be helpful to these students.
Questions:

Main Wondering:

What strategies can I use to teach my students social skills?

Sub-Questions:

A. How can I help students to become more aware of their feelings, so that they are better prepared to accept the differences of others?

B. How does inclusion impact the social atmosphere of the classroom?

C. What times (academic vs. social) are easiest for students to exhibit empathy?

D. How can I make my students feel more confident and capable of working cooperatively with others during group work settings?

Data Collection and Analysis:

Journal

Throughout the inquiry process, I have continued to write daily entries in my inquiry journal. Originally, my plan for my inquiry journal was to analyze and reflect about each of my lessons pertaining to inquiry, as well as, to interpret student surveys and reactions to lessons. After a few weeks, the purpose of my journal began to change because I found it necessary to have a place to interpret my anecdotal notes each day. I began to discuss anything that occurred in my classroom that day that could even remotely pertain to inquiry. For example, if an unplanned social situation came up during morning meeting that I felt related to my inquiry in any way, I would write about this situation in my journal. Sometimes I discussed how this situation made me feel, how it made the students feel and react, and how the situation was
addressed. Many of my entries are a paragraph or two, unless I had taught a lesson that day or given a survey.

When it came time to analyze my journal entries, I first found it difficult to decide what my claims would be, as I was still developing my exact focus. I found it beneficial to analyze my surveys, interviews, and recorded lessons first, and to keep referring back to my wondering and sub-questions. Once I had done this, it was much easier to read through my journal and highlight anything that I thought could be used as evidence for my claims.

Anecdotal Notes

Throughout the data collection process, I continued to take anecdotal notes of my student’s behaviors during morning free time, recess, group work, and while they were taking surveys. For my inquiry, my anecdotal notes did not include my interpretation of what was happening. I wrote only my observations without making inferences. In some cases, I made inferences in my journal.

I felt that it was important to keep anecdotal notes during times where there is less structure and students are able to interact freely because I was looking for any social trends in my classroom during these less structured times. These times included morning free time, recess, and the end of the day. Many of these notes were dated and written quickly, without interpretation. For example: April 3, 2008: 8:50 a.m. TN is playing with the legos. HM is playing close by, but they are not interacting. When the two-minute warning is given, HM offers to help TN clean up quickly.

I also chose to keep anecdotal notes while the students in my classroom were working in cooperative groups or on teams. Group work is a definite area of struggle for my students and I
felt that any observations that I could make pertaining to group work would benefit my students. During group work, I made sure to note things such as: how the group made their decisions, whether or not everyone agreed, what conflicts occurred, how the conflicts were settled, which students were participating and which students were letting others do the work and also, I made sure to note whether or not the group was able to complete the task or was held up by their conflicts.

The last aspect of my inquiry that relied on anecdotal notes was student reactions while they were working on a survey, or while they were thinking of compliments. While students were taking surveys, I observed them at my station to see which questions they struggled to answer or asked for assistance with the most often. Also, when students were asked to give a compliment for each classmate to be compiled into a Valentine’s Day gift, I took notes on how long it took them to come up with compliments, which students were difficult to compliment and which students were the easiest for them to compliment.

In order to efficiently analyze my anecdotal notes, I read through all of them several times, circling everything that I thought was connected to my wondering or sub-questions. Then I went back through and color-coded everything that was circled. Everything that I circled was highlighted according which wondering or sub-question that I felt it corresponded with. This helped me to form my claims, but it also made it easier to locate possible evidence for each of my claims.

Surveys

Throughout the course of my inquiry I had asked my students to complete four surveys. Two of these surveys were taken as a whole class, and two were taken in small groups during
Language Arts Stations. The first survey asked the students to identify the qualities of a good friend. It also asked them if they considered themselves to be good friends and to list examples of times when someone was a good or bad friend to them. This survey was given as a whole class while I lead them through each question. My intent for this survey was to assess what the students knew at the beginning of my investigation. After this survey I was able to plan my next course of action.

The second survey asked the students to identify and give examples of times when they are feeling: sad, frustrated, angry, happy, annoyed etc. This survey was also implemented as a whole class while I lead the students through each question. The students did not have to put their name on this survey, although some of them did. I wanted my class to feel comfortable answering the questions and giving good examples, therefore, I gave them the option of leaving out their names.

The last two surveys were given in a small group setting at the reading station. One survey was given in response to interviews about group work where I discovered that many students who had previously enjoyed group work, no longer found it to be enjoyable. This took me by surprise, so I needed to investigate further. To develop this survey I talked to my students about the qualities of a good group member. From their responses I developed a self-analysis survey. It was my hope that if the students felt their responses were anonymous, they would feel more comfortable and provide honest answers. Since the students chose numbers, I was able to identify which paper belonged to each student. Before the students filled out the survey we discussed the qualities of a good group member. Then I explained that I would be passing out a survey that would be asking them to answer questions about themselves. If they did not feel comfortable putting their name on this survey, they could choose a number to write on their
paper, instead of their name. This was different from the final survey because its purpose was to ask the students questions that would help me gauge the effect that my lessons were having on my students’ progress.

Upon the completion of a survey, I read through the student responses to each question. Then I began to tally the responses to each question. For my last survey, many of the questions required the students to circle yes, no, or sometimes. So I tallied the number of each answer. I used this process with each of my surveys because it helped me locate class trends. For example, fifteen students felt that they had become better group members, one student felt that he/she had not improved, and five students felt that sometimes they were a good group member.

**Student Interviews**

Throughout my inquiry, I conducted four interviews with my students. The first interview dealt with giving compliments. I worked with each student individually, to list a compliment for each of his or her classmates. Then we discussed whether or not this was difficult for them. I later compiled all of their compliments into a list for each child and gave it to them during our Valentine’s Day party. My hope was to make students feel more comfortable giving compliments, but to also build confidence and improve the classroom atmosphere.

The next three interviews all dealt with how my students felt about group work. For the first group work survey I asked the students general questions about their thoughts on cooperative work. A month later, I again asked the students how they felt about group work. Their responses had changed greatly since the last survey. Previously twenty out of twenty-two students stated that they enjoyed group work, but now only four students enjoyed group work, nine students enjoy group work some of the time, and eight students did not like group work.
anymore. This response spurred the need for my final interviews, in which the students were asked why they no longer enjoyed group work and what they would like to change.

When analyzing my interview notes, I simply highlighted anything that I felt would serve as evidence for the claims that I had in mind. After reading through all my notes I realized that many of my interviews were a way for me to receive feedback from the students so that I could later analyze where students were in terms of social skills, group work, friendship and acceptance. This allowed me to plan my instruction to better meet the needs of my students and was not necessarily helpful as when gathering evidence to support my claims.

**Recording of Lessons**

My final form of data collection involved the use of my Macbook in video recording my lessons and class meetings dealing with my students’ social skills. Two of the lessons I recorded dealt with a read aloud followed by a class discussion. I also recorded one class meeting and five small group lessons during Language Arts stations. I felt that recording my lessons would enable me to concentrate on the lesson and discussion, rather than attempting to write down student responses during the lesson. Also, I felt that it would be beneficial to watch my lessons and look for student reactions that I might have previously missed.

In order to analyze the lessons that I had recorded, I utilized StudioCode. When I was analyzing my lessons I was looking for student reactions. StudioCode helped me pick out the student reactions that I felt stood out, or were examples of the students meeting the objectives of my lesson. I was also looking at the body language of the students to see if they were excited, uncomfortable, or bored. This was especially helpful when analyzing class meetings, or during my small group lessons on differences and feelings because I was able to separate certain student
responses from the overall discussion. For example, during a lesson focusing on differences, I had hoped that students would be able to identify internal differences, rather than external differences such as hair color. If a student was able to meet this objective I would separate their response from the original discussion.

Explanation of Findings:

Claim 1

*After using a variety of activities to help my students improve their basic social skills, I have determined that in my classroom, role-playing and class meetings are the most effective ways to build social skills with students of this age.*

For this claim I have drawn evidence from three sources: my anecdotal notes, surveys, and recorded clips of student responses during class meetings. My anecdotal notes show that students were much more engaged during class meetings and role-playing than they were during a read aloud or lesson. Over half of the class had their hands raised to contribute an idea and they all participated in the voting portion of the class meeting. An example from my anecdotal notes is, “ML raised hand to say that a good way to work in a group is to let everyone talk.”

From the video recorded portions of a class meeting I was able to look at the facial expressions of the students and check for the level of engagement of each student. I was surprised and happy to see that every student was paying attention and participating in the discussion. Recording these lessons enabled me to look at any student response or idea and then observe the reactions of the students to that particular idea. When looking at this aspect of my
recordings I was able to see that many of the students agreed with each other by nodding heads or smiling.

My last piece of evidence came from a survey that I gave the students toward the end of my inquiry. There were two questions that asked the students if they enjoyed class meetings and whether or not they think our classroom has improved since we began having class meetings. All of my students responded by circling yes they enjoy class meetings. Twenty out of twenty-two students felt that class meetings have helped to improve our classroom and one student felt that class meetings sometimes helped improve our classroom. While I found this survey helpful towards my claims, I was left wishing that I had interviewed my students to discuss why they felt that class meetings helped improve our classroom.

Claim 2

*Primary students can talk about their feelings and the differences of others, but most are not yet ready to independently look at the internal qualities of a peer.*

When my students were beginning to fill out their compliment sheets for Valentine’s Day, I worked with them one-on-one to come up with a compliment for each of their classmates. With each student I explained that I would prefer his or her compliments to be about the person, rather than what the person looks like or happens to be wearing. At the time, there were twenty-two students in my class, 15 students were unable to think of compliments that did not pertain to clothing or appearance, seven students were able to give compliments like: “You are really funny” or “I like that you are so helpful to me.” With the fifteen students who focused on appearance I discussed what I was looking for and gave examples, but these students were unable to come up with compliments independently.
My second piece of evidence comes from a lesson that I taught on differences. At my Language Arts station I read each group a book about friends that are the same, yet different. Then I asked the students to choose one peer to compare themselves to and then discuss their similarities and differences. About half of the class was able to explain differences and similarities that did not pertain to appearance during discussion. Then I asked the students to think of another peer with which to compare themselves and write down one similarity and one difference. The students worked independently to complete this task and did not share them with the group. When analyzing their papers, I noted that only two students were able to complete this task, which leads me to believe even further in my second claim.

Claim 3

Although students of this age are capable of reflecting on a conflict and discussing their thoughts, feelings, and actions with teacher guidance, they have difficulty generalizing this skill in new situations.

Several times throughout my inquiry the students were engaged in role-playing during morning meeting. The topics ranged from being bossy, and feeling left out, to ignoring I messages. Each time role-playing occurred, two students were chosen to read the story plot from index cards. Afterwards, I asked the class questions about how they think the characters were feeling, if they had ever experienced something like this, and how could they solve this problem. My anecdotal notes show that over half of the class participated. I also kept track of the number of times a student participated by placing a check next to their name on the class list.

Now that I am analyzing my data I have realized that many of these situations are still occurring on a daily basis. Students are still being told by other students that they cannot play
with them and I messages are often ignored. I feel that part of the reason for this is due to the maturity level of the students in my class. Being first and second graders it is difficult for them to respond to situations in a manner that is different from their previous habits.

Claim 4

Students of this age find it much easier to exhibit empathy during academic situations, rather than social situations.

My evidence for this claim comes from my observations, as well as, from a survey in which the students were asked when it is easiest for them to be helpful or sympathetic toward others. Under the question, “When is it easiest for you to help others?” several different times were listed and the students were asked to circle the times that were easiest for them. These included: Math, Reading, Social Studies, morning free time, lunch, and recess. Eighteen of my students felt that it was easiest for them to exhibit empathy during academic situations, rather than free times that allow for more socializing. I have also gathered from my observations and anecdotal notes that many times when students are in need of assistance, other students ignore their situation and continue on their way. An example of this often occurs when students are cleaning up after their morning free time. “One student is carrying a large box of Legos and drops them. One student helps him clean up. Four other students in close proximity, but continue talking.”

Implications for Future Teaching:

I feel that this inquiry project has been the most beneficial of any school project because it has helped me realize the importance of reflection. It has also shown me that it is possible to
do research in your own classroom that does not take up a large amount of time. Each survey that I gave took no more than five minutes. Class meetings are also something that should be done in any classroom.

Before I began my inquiry I was fully aware of each of my students’ development academically, but only partially aware of their development socially. I now have a full view of my students, academically and socially and am able to work with them individually to meet their needs. Classroom community is important in every classroom no matter the grade, so I will definitely benefit from the processes that I went through this year.

**Future Wonderings:**

How could I further investigate the impact of inclusion on the social atmosphere of the classroom?

What is the influence of children’s literature in helping students think about how others are feeling?

What is the influence of children’s literature in helping students improve social skills?

What are the characteristics of a person that cause them to be like or disliked by their classmates?

How does parent involvement impact a student’s social skills?

How would the results of my inquiry have been affected if I had tried these same lessons and activities in a different grade level?
1. If you had one wish for our classroom, what would it be?
   - no homework – Akari’s return – wish others would be nice – more recess – no homework

2. Do you feel important and accepted in our classroom?
   Yes 18           No 2           Sometimes 1

3. Do you like to help others?
   Yes 17           No              Sometimes 4

4. When is it easiest for you to help others?
   Morning/lunch/recess 1           math/LA/science/unit 18

5. Do you think that you have become a better group member?
   Yes 12           No 4           Sometimes 5

6. Do you feel more comfortable giving compliments now, than you did in January?
   Yes 19           No 0           Sometimes 2

7. Do you like to receive compliments?
   Yes 21           No 0           Sometimes 0

8. Do you think our classroom has improved since we started having class meetings?
   Yes 20           No 0           Sometimes 1

9. Do you like class meetings?
   Yes 21           No 0           Sometimes 0

10. Now that we have talked a lot about our feelings, do you feel like you are better able to accept the differences of others?
    Yes 17           No 0           Sometimes 4
Date: ______________________________

1.) I feel sad when
- people are mean – cutting in line – people won’t play with me – people won’t share- people tease me

2.) I feel frustrated when
- I have ideas and people won’t listen – when I can’t do my math

3.) I feel embarrassed when
- people laugh at me – when I say something that’s not funny – when my shoes are untied

4.) I feel confused when
- When the teachers don’t say things the same - no one will play with me - lunch tickets are moved -

5.) I feel angry when
- people don’t listen – people won’t play with me – when people are bossy – when people say I’m wrong

6.) I feel happy when
- I win – I help hurt people – at recess – people are nice to me

7.) I feel annoyed when
- people are fighting – when I can’t hear – people talk to me and I can’t work
Appendices C

Name:_____________            Date:_____________

Friendship

1) What are qualities of a good friend?
   - nice - play with you- funny

2.) Do you believe that you are a good friend?     Yes 21     No

3.) Give an example of a time when a classmate was a good friend to you?
   - they helped me with _____

4.) Give an example of a time when a classmate was not being a good friend to you?
   - they wouldn’t’ play with me - ran away from me – didn’t help me clean up

5.) Give an example of a time when you showed a classmate that you were a good friend?
   - helping them when they are hurt – being nice

6.) Do you think that our classroom is a friendly place to be?
   Yes 15    No 6
1. Do you think that you are a good group member?
   - Yes 12
   - No 4
   - Sometimes 5

2. Do you like to be the leader?
   - Yes 15
   - No 0
   - Sometimes 6

3. Do you think that you are bossy?
   - Yes 6
   - No 7
   - Sometimes 8

4. Do you listen to the ideas of others when you are working in a group?
   - Yes 16
   - No 0
   - Sometimes 5

5. Do you think that you give other people their own personal space?
   - Yes 10
   - No 8
   - Sometimes 3

6. Do you tattle on other people?
   - Yes 9
   - No 3
   - Sometimes 9

7. Do you use I messages before you tell a teacher?
   - Yes 9
   - No 8
   - Sometimes 4

8. Do you think about the feelings of others when they are upset or angry?
   - Yes 13
   - No 4
   - Sometimes 4
Appendices E

Inquiry Brief
Jennah Feathers

Context:

In my classroom there are a wide range of abilities and interests. I have twenty-two students. Twelve of my students are in second grade and ten of my students are in first grade. Seven of them are boys and fifteen are girls. I found the multi-age classroom to be very beneficial to myself, as well as, my students. I believe that it allows all children to stretch their abilities and challenge themselves socially, physically and mentally.

There are only a few students in my class who pose behavior problems regularly. Most of the problems seem to be their lack of self-control, which is normal at this age. They are all very excited about school, so I am not sure that their lack of self-control is a major problem. It is simply something that we are working on. There is also a child in my class with Asperger’s Syndrome, another with Autism, and one with some emotional problems. These children add to the character of our classroom and have greatly enhanced our community building as the other students learn how to interact with and be helpful to these students. None of these students are in need of wheelchairs or special arrangements in the classroom, except that I prefer to have the student with Asperger’s syndrome seated where I am able to pull a chair over to work with him at his desk. The student with emotional problems needs to be talked to in an understanding tone and he needs the other students to understand his need to feel included, which the class has done a very good job of doing.

Rationale:

As a teacher in a first/second grade classroom, I work with and observe children of varying levels of maturity and social skills. Since the midway point of the year, it has become evident that the students in my classroom are exhibiting signs of frustration when interacting with their classmates. This could occur on the carpet, during recess, during lunch, and also during partner and group activities. After conducting a morning meeting greeting where students were asked to give and receive compliments, I realized how uncomfortable my students were with this basic social skill. It is my hope that after the activities I have been planning, my students will learn to accept the differences of others; after all, we are all very different. I realize that this is a skill that must be practiced, and that giving and receiving compliments will be very difficult for first and second grade students to master, but I feel that because of my inquiry I can make an amount of progress that will help my students and myself in the future.

Inclusion is also a concept that I have become increasingly curious about throughout the year. I have a lot of experience working with students with special needs and I feel very strongly about inclusion. But I wonder, when is it easiest for students to be helpful to other students in need and how does this contribute to the atmosphere of the classroom? This does not include only special needs students that are fully included in the classroom, but simply the differences of others as well.

This also led me to wonder what times (academic vs. social) is it easiest for students to exhibit empathy and be helpful and accepting towards other students. I have often witnessed
students’ willingness to help others during academic situations, but during recess, lunch, and free time they seem much less willing to help or be caring towards one another. Simple tasks like explaining how to complete an assignment seem to be a much easier way for students to exhibit empathy than letting a student join their game at recess, or helping clean up their materials after recess or science.

In order for students to be successful at improving any of these given tasks, they must be aware of their own feelings. They need to understand what makes them feel upset, angry, embarrassed or left out so that they are able to identify how other students are feeling in any given situation. Being able to accept the differences of others is one of the most important social skills that a student can learn. Understanding their own feelings is crucial to a student’s social progress.

Lastly, as I began to plan more and more lessons on my own, I always tried to incorporate some sort of group activity or partner work. I soon noticed that my students were becoming very frustrated and did not look forward to working with one another. There was a lot of tattling and unwillingness to compromise. I decided that I was not going to discontinue group work in my classroom just because my class is not very good at it. Working with others is a skill that children need to be taught and practice over and over. I hope that I am able to equip them with the skills and confidence necessary to be able to successfully work with others.

Main Wondering:

What strategies can I use to teach my students social skills?

Sub-Questions:

How can I help students to become more aware of their feelings, so that they are better prepared to accept the differences of others?

How does inclusion impact the social atmosphere of the classroom?

What times (academic vs. social) is it easiest for students to exhibit empathy?

How can I help make my students feel more confident and capable when working with others in cooperative group work settings?

Timeline:

**February:**

Week Two
- collect compliments for Valentines Day (pre-assessment)
- conduct morning meeting lesson on pride
- take anecdotal notes about compliments and keep journal
- use read aloud times for conflict resolution lessons

Week Three:
- conduct morning meeting lesson on character trait for the week
- distribute student survey on classroom atmosphere
- distribute student survey on friendship
- continue anecdotal notes and journal
- use read aloud times for lessons on friendship

Week Four:
- conduct morning meeting lesson on character trait for the week
- distribute classroom scenario survey
- conduct student interviews on classroom atmosphere
- observe student interactions during recess, lunch and morning free time
- continue anecdotal notes and journal
- use read aloud times for lessons on feelings

March:

Week One:
- conduct morning meeting lesson on character trait for the week
- video record students’ acting out classroom scenarios
- continue anecdotal notes and journal
- use read aloud times for lessons on differences

Week Two:
- Spring Break

Week Three:
- conduct morning meeting lesson on character trait for the week
- begin data analysis
- continue anecdotal notes and journal

Week Four:
- conduct morning meeting lesson on character trait for the week
- conduct student interviews on classroom atmosphere
- distribute student surveys on classroom atmosphere
- begin inquiry paper
- continue anecdotal notes and journal

April:

Week One:
- conduct morning meeting lesson on character trait for the week
- continue data analysis
- being inquiry paper

Week Two:
- begin revising peer inquiry paper
- begin preparing for presentation

Week Three:
- finish inquiry paper
- prepare for presentation

Week Four:
- inquiry presentation

Data Collection Ideas:
- Daily journal reflecting on activities: A daily journal will help me keep track of the progress that I feel I am making throughout my inquiry. It will also give me a place to reflect on
my lessons dealing with inquiry and discuss the results of my surveys and interviews, and anecdotal notes.

- Video recording of lessons dealing with inquiry: Recording lessons dealing with my inquiry will enable me to better analyze the impact my lessons are having on my students. I will be able to look for student involvement in discussion and role playing, and zone in on student’s reactions to the different topics, for example: conflict resolution, feelings, character traits, and friendship.

- Student interviews: Student interviews will focus on the classroom atmosphere and identifying feelings. I will ask students questions like: “What is your wish for our classroom? If we could change our classroom atmosphere what would you change? Do you feel accepted in our classroom? Do you feel important in our classroom? Do you like to help others? When? How does it make you feel when you help someone? What about when you don’t? etc. From these interviews, I will be able to receive more information because the students will not have to write down what they are thinking. They can simply state their thoughts. I can also ask questions that I would not be able to ask if they were writing something down and giving it to me.

- Anecdotal notes: Anecdotal notes are a great way for me to record exactly what is happening at any given time throughout the day. These notes will not include my interpretation of the events, but only exactly what occurred. Ex. “Student A helped Student B clean up after recess. Student B said ‘Thank you.’” Most of my data for my third sub-wondering will come from anecdotal notes.

- Student surveys: Student surveys will focus on friendship, feelings, classroom atmosphere, and reactions to classroom scenarios. The surveys will also be a great way for me to gauge progress throughout my inquiry because I could give the same surveys at different times throughout the inquiry process.