The Many Wonders of Community-Building:
How having morning meetings and giving compliments can affect a struggling classroom environment, while simultaneously welcoming new students to the classroom and community at large.

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April 25th, 2009
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Description of the Teaching Context

As a Professional Development Intern through Penn State University, I have worked in a sixth grade self-contained classroom at Mount Nittany Middle School in the State College Area School District during the 2008-2009 school year. My classroom has twenty-four uniquely behaving and performing students, consisting of fourteen males and ten females. Out of the twenty-four students, one identifies as Hispanic or Latino, while the other twenty-three identify as White or Caucasian. The majority of these students come from upper-middle class families; however, there are also some students in the classroom whose families are classified within a lower socio-economic status. This is evidenced through the fact that they receive free or reduced lunch, as well as conversations I have observed and participated in during parent-teacher conferences and IEP meetings.

As far as academic levels are concerned, we have three students who receive Learning Support, and eight students who attend Learning Enrichment. There is a wide range of ability and understanding in our classroom. The majority of our students function at a middle level of achievement, and they understand and perform tasks with moderate success. The three students who receive Learning Support for reading and writing have learning difficulties, which have allowed them to qualify for these services. They often require more personal attention and repetition in order to successfully complete their assignments, both class work and homework. The students who attend Learning Enrichment are high achieving and produce work that is beyond the expectations set forth for them. Two more students qualify as Title I for reading, which means that they receive reading assistance.
Because this inquiry deals directly with community building, it is also important to note the social dynamics in my classroom. The boys and girls in the class tend to socialize within their gender groupings, with few exceptions. There is one male and one female student who socialize almost exclusively, as well as one female student who is new in our classroom and has not established strong or consistent relationships with either gender. During this second semester, there has been a significant decline in the unity of our classroom community. This has been evidenced through several exclusive friendships and bullying behaviors from certain students. (See Appendix A for full Inquiry Brief)

Wonderings and Questions

Main Wondering

My inquiry question focuses on using community-building techniques, which may help contribute to creating a positive classroom environment for all students. I am seeking to discover whether these community-building techniques are capable of both helping familiarize new students to the classroom and community, while also building a stronger and more cohesive classroom environment. My wondering is:

How can community-building techniques help build a stronger classroom social dynamic while simultaneously helping acclimate new students to the classroom and school at large?

Sub-Wonderings

• How can new students and their families be properly welcomed to a new school, and acclimated into the classroom environment without being singled out?

• In what ways are other teachers currently acclimating new students to their classrooms?
How does effective community building impact a class of students who might be struggling to maintain a positive environment?

**Data Collection**

**Clear Description of Data Collection**

I collected many different types of data in order to find the most effective method for combining the two aspects of my inquiry: welcoming new students without singling them out, and repairing a struggling classroom community. The data was collected before, during, and after my community-building strategies were implemented.

**BEFORE**

Prior to beginning my inquiry research, I created an “open-ended question” survey and issued it to the students in my classroom. They were asked if they felt respected, if they felt comfortable asking and answering questions in front of their peers, and to describe our classroom community in their own words. My final question was to ask how, if they desired, they would change the classroom environment. My intention with these questions was to get a “baseline” feeling for what I would be dealing with once I started my inquiry. This survey helped me understand how students felt about the climate in our classroom, and gave me an idea of how willing they would be to participate in the interventions I was planning.

I feel it should be noted that I did not include anything specific about new students in my initial survey. I chose not to single our new student out, because I wanted to get an idea for how comfortable she felt in our classroom community. I felt that armed with that knowledge, I would be able to move forward in discovering the best way to
welcome her into our community without singling her out. *(See Appendix B for Student Survey.)*

During this ‘before’ portion of my baseline data collection, I also issued a teacher survey to all of the sixth grade teachers at Mount Nittany Middle School. I was most interested in what sixth grade teachers do in their classrooms, because they deal closely with the transition from elementary to middle school in the beginning of the year, and thus are more likely to have a larger number of community-building activities in their repertoire. My questions for the teachers focused mainly on what types of community-building activities they incorporate in their classroom, and what their standard procedure is for welcoming a student who comes during the school year. These questions and answers helped me see what types of strategies would be most effective to implement during my inquiry. *(See Appendix C for Teacher Survey)*

**DURING**

The majority of my data was collected during my inquiry research, as I implemented community-building strategies that I thought would best benefit our classroom situation. Additionally, I assigned for homework a written response from the students in regards to community-related incidents in our classroom (name-calling, bullying), asking them to reflect on the status of our classroom community.

After receiving baseline data from the students and sixth grade teachers in our school, I decided to implement a particular form of morning meeting in our classroom, called CPR (Circle of Power and Respect). CPR is a type of morning meeting that works well for older students, and numerous other teachers in the sixth grade spoke about CPR as their main community-building technique in their classroom. The format of CPR is as
follows: a greeting, group sharing, an activity, and a morning message. The reason I chose CPR as an intervention for my inquiry was because of the opportunity it gives students to share their thoughts and feelings in a safe environment, which could potentially improve the social dynamic in the classroom. Additionally, I felt that CPR would require all students to participate equally – which would mean that everyone was benefiting from its community-building aspects, without singling out newer students, who might need it more.

The second community-building strategy that I implemented in our room was the compliment box. In a process that would evolve throughout my inquiry research, my mentor and I used a decorated box with a slit on the top for the students to submit written compliments about their peers. We would then read them aloud at the end of the week. This process changed over time, from random compliments, to assigning each student a peer to praise. We also emphasized that the compliments were to reflect an aspect of someone’s character, not how they dress or appear. This emphasis on character was necessary to continue with the theme of building a closer-knit community, lest the students focus on aspects of appearances that would not help the students grow closer.

In response to name-calling and bullying incidents in our classroom, I assigned a written response from the students that I was able to use as data for my inquiry. It was simply a quick-write response to a specific name-calling incident that happened in class, and I gave students the opportunity to give me their opinion on the current status of the classroom community. (See Appendix D for a sample of a student’s written response).

The final data that I collected during my inquiry was my interview with Mrs. Molly Snavely, one of Mount Nittany Middle School’s guidance counselors. I asked her
specific questions about what resources are made available to students who come to our school and district during the school year, as opposed to the beginning of the year. She also gave me valuable information about community-building techniques that are good to use with new students, which will familiarize them with our school and community at large. (See Appendix E for the list of questions asked in the interview).

AFTER

At the end of my inquiry process, I was interested to see how effective my attempts at community building had been in my classroom. Although there are many variables beyond my control that could affect how comfortable students feel in the classroom, I wanted to find out whether or not my attempts had been helpful, harmful, or irrelevant. I also wanted to find out if giving compliments and having CPR a few times a week had been effective in easing our new student’s transition into our classroom community.

I designed a final survey to give to my students, which asked many of the same questions as the original survey I gave at the beginning of my inquiry process. My questions focused on whether or not they felt respected, whether or not they felt that our classroom environment was improving, and whether or not they thought that the community-building techniques I’d implemented (compliments and CPR) had been effective and helpful. By giving this survey to the students, I was able to find out how their feelings changed throughout the inquiry process, as well as how effective my efforts to improve our community had been. (See Appendix F for the second Student Survey)

The final type of data collection that I did in my inquiry was to assign a writing prompt. In light of our struggles to keep a positive classroom attitude, my mentor and I
assigned our students a writing prompt entitled: “*What would you do if you were the teacher?*” We explained to the students that we were interested in their suggestions for improving the social dynamic within the classroom. The data that I was able to collect from that writing prompt was very helpful as I analyzed whether or not my inquiry process had been a success. *(See Appendix G for a sample of a student response)*

**Data Analysis**

**Steps Taken to Analyze the Data**

The first step of data analysis I did was to go through the surveys that I handed out. In analyzing the teacher survey, I was looking for suggestions for possible community-building activities and interventions I could apply in my own classroom for my inquiry. Out of the seven teacher surveys I received responses from, four teachers suggested using the Circle of Power and Respect (or some form of a morning meeting) as an easy and effective community-building technique. Because of this recommendation, I chose CPR as one of my interventions.

In analyzing the two student surveys I designed, I read through each of the student responses and looked for trends between the two surveys. I found it easiest to represent my findings graphically. In response to the question: “Do you feel respected in our classroom?”, which I asked on both surveys, the numerical data I found is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do You Feel Respected?</th>
<th>Students who answered Yes</th>
<th>Students who answered No</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Survey</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second Survey</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

It is evident from Table 1 that more students felt respected in the classroom when filling out the second survey, than the first survey. However, for comparison purposes
(because a different number of students were present for each survey) I have made a chart comparing the percentages of the student responses, below.

**Chart 1**

![Chart showing the percentage of students who feel respected in the classroom]

Although the data is not entirely conclusive because of the undecided students, the percentages make it clear that the number of students who felt respected in our classroom jumped from 40% to 70% from the first survey to the second one.

In analyzing the results of the compliment box, I searched for compliments that reflected aspects of student character, as opposed to superficial aspects. This was an important distinction, because as a class we decided that the most genuine compliments are character-based, and would better strengthen our classroom community. I found the overwhelming majority of compliments to fit the “character” category: in a sample of 22 compliments, 20 of them followed the guidelines, and only two compliments were about personal appearance.

The final way that I analyzed my data was to read through the written responses that students submitted. Although it was difficult to make comparisons or find patterns because the essays were very unique to each student, there were a few commonalities.
Out of twenty-four students, seventeen wrote that morning meetings are effective tools for building a cohesive classroom community. These responses as a whole allowed me to see how much impact my attempts at building a stronger community had actually had on my classroom.

**Explanation of Findings**

After analyzing my data through the methods outlined above, I identified patterns and trends that allowed me to make two strong claims regarding the effectiveness of community building in helping all students thrive in their classroom environment.

**Claim #1: Effective community-building techniques have a positive impact on students who are struggling to maintain a positive classroom environment.**

Although I attempted to blend two different topics to formulate my main inquiry wondering (welcoming new students and improving a negative classroom environment), the issue of the classroom community immediately became the forefront of my inquiry research and experience. Throughout the period of my inquiry research, our classroom experienced a veritable roller coaster of emotions, with many instances of both negative and positive outbursts. However, by the end of the research process, it became very clear to me that the morning meetings and compliment box we had tried out were having a positive impact on the overall classroom dynamic and environment.

**Evidence #1**

There is one student in particular in our class, who struggled greatly in the beginning of my research. She was deeply unhappy, and felt as if everyone else in the class was picking on her, as is evidenced by this excerpt from the initial student survey:
“I don’t feel respected in the class because teachers blame me, kids pick on me, and get away with things – unlike me...This class is miserable, yelling, bullying, fighting, and blaming. Worst [sic] than any class I’ve been in.”

However, in my final survey after being asked the same question, she responded in a much more positive manner.

“I think personally everyone in this classroom is nice and caring. I was the problem and we worked it out and as you can see I’m much happier...I understand I’m some of the problem...We all need to stop being rude, mean mad, and angry. Why not happy?”

I was amazed at the improvement I saw in this student’s attitude from the beginning to the end of the inquiry process. Not only did she recognize that she was part of the problem, but by voting exclusively in an optimistic manner on the second survey, she proved that community-building can positively impact students who had been negative before.

Evidence #2

In the final student survey I issued to my classroom, I asked the students point-blank whether or not they believed that the community-building strategies we had implemented were helping the situation in our classroom. Out of twenty students surveyed, fifteen said that yes, the CPR meetings and Compliment Box were having a positive effect on the classroom environment. That is undeniable evidence that the majority of students in my classroom found the activities we implemented to be helpful for our classroom dynamic.
Claim #2: Using effective community-building techniques, it is possible to welcome and familiarize new students to the classroom without singling them out.

Because of the generally sensitive nature of middle school students, it was important to me to find a way to introduce new students to our classroom community without singling them out or embarrassing them. I found community-building activities such as CPR and the Compliment Box to be very effective at achieving that goal, because they allowed the new student in our class to get to know her peers better, while they were all simultaneously getting to know each other better as well.

Evidence #1

When analyzing the data from my student surveys, I was careful to note how the new student in my classroom responded to both the initial and the final survey. On the initial survey, as expected, she displayed a more negative attitude, stating that she did not feel comfortable asking or answering question in class. However, on the final survey, she answered much more positively, rating her feeling of respect in the classroom as a four, on a scale from one to five. On that same survey, she rated the community-building techniques we had been implementing in class as a five, when asked whether or not they had been effective in improving our environment. In the space available, she described the compliment box as one of the reasons she felt more comfortable in the classroom. This evidence shows me that the non-invasive methods of community-building that I chose to implement in the classroom were helpful in easing the new student into our classroom.
Evidence #2

In addition to the concrete evidence that the new student in my classroom provided me, I also found many community-related suggestions for easing a new student into the classroom climate (that avoided singling the student out) in the teacher surveys that I issued at the beginning of my inquiry research. One teacher suggested having the entire class introduce themselves by stating their name and something that makes them unique, because that will allow the new student to participate without being the only one introducing his or herself. Another teacher suggested setting up a “Lunch Bunch” group with multiple students, the teacher (and intern), and the new student. That would give the new student an opportunity to meet and familiarize his or herself with a small group of people, before facing the entire class of students. Both of these suggestions are very helpful ideas that prove it is possible to use community building to inconspicuously welcome new students to the classroom community.

Evidence #3

My final piece of evidence for this claim is the information I received from Mrs. Snavely, the guidance counselor whom I interviewed. I asked her numerous questions about how students are welcomed to our schools across the district, and in turn I was given very valuable information about our district procedures, as well as helpful community-building resources for new students. I was given an entire folder of lesson plans for a now-defunct group at Mount Nittany Middle School, called “The New Student Group”. While some of the lessons would be relevant only to new students, there were many games and activities in the folder that could be used as community-building
activities for the entire class. Although the group was intended to be helpful, and to familiarize new students with their community, Mrs. Snavely informed me that it was disbanded because most new students disliked the idea of being classified as “new” and separated from their peers. This shows me that instead of singling new children out, using those community-building activities with an entire class could be beneficial for everyone involved.

**Reflections and Implications for Future Practice**

In conducting this inquiry, I have learned a series of valuable lessons. The most important lesson that I will take away from my inquiry experience is that maintaining a cohesive classroom community requires a commitment to performing community-building activities year-round. This is something that my mentor and I did not do in our classroom, and I strongly believe that is the reason we have struggled with such a negative classroom environment.

When students are exposed to community-building activities throughout the entire school year, then they are constantly aware of the feelings and emotions of their peers. There is no disconnect; no opportunity for the students to grow apart. In our case, we focused heavily on community-building in the beginning of the year, in order to familiarize and welcome our students to the middle school and our classroom. That was very beneficial during that period, but without the constant prevalence of a sense of community in the classroom, our positive environment eventually disintegrated.

The other benefit to putting effort into community building year-round is that when a new student comes into the classroom during the school year, it is just standard
practice to welcome them by using community-related activities. The activities are familiar to the students who have been there all year, and that familiarity will allow those students to be cohesive and supportive of each other enough to properly welcome the new student into their environment.

This inquiry project has also heightened my awareness of how many factors can affect the moods and mentalities of sixth grade students. While I tried to control the environment to the best of my ability by implementing these community-building techniques and surveying students multiple times about their effectiveness, I had to recognize that many other factors are at play when asking students how they feel about such a subjective issue as community-building. This could account for the uncertainty in some of the survey answers that I received. Anything from their home life to “who said what” on the bus ride to school that morning could affect how a particular student feels about their peers and classroom community when asked. This is something especially important to note because in the spring of sixth grade, the students are experiencing many different hormonal changes in their bodies that could easily impact their mindset.

Not only has this inquiry process allowed me to reflect on the effectiveness of community building, but it also has implications for my future practice. After collecting and analyzing my data, I am most certain that I will have permanent community-building activities built into my schedule. I found the CPR morning meetings to be very effective and out of all of the techniques I tried, it was definitely the one about which the students were most enthusiastic. Regardless of what grade I am teaching, I intend to use some form of a morning meeting to start off the school day. I also intend to learn more about different types of community-building techniques, so that I will be able to have a wide
repertoire of activities to draw from on a consistent basis in my future classroom. Armed
with that knowledge, I feel that I will best be able to teach all students, all year round.

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<td>All parts are included, but one or two of the components of the brief are not clear.</td>
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<td>Description of teaching context (5)</td>
<td>1 to 2 paragraphs describing the classroom context as it relates to the inquiry. (e.g., grade level, classroom diversity, school culture and/or other environmental factors) (4-5)</td>
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<td>Main question is clear but sub-questions are unclear or not related. (5-7)</td>
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<td>The description of data collection and/or analysis is extremely limited or unclear. (0-6)</td>
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<td>Explanation of Findings (Including Claims and Evidence) (15)</td>
<td>List of claims is clear and indicates growth related to the question (i.e., claims would not have been possible prior to conducting inquiry). The paper and appendix provides a clear explanation of</td>
<td>List of claims is not clearly related to the question. OR claims are limited in depth. The supporting evidence for some (but not all) of the claims is clear.</td>
<td>Claims are unrelated to question or lack depth. The explanation for the evidence that supports the claims is</td>
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<td>Implications for your future practice as a teacher are clear and detailed.</td>
<td>Implications for your future practice as a teacher are somewhat clear and details are lacking.</td>
<td>Reflections on the process and results of the inquiry are somewhat related to the process and findings (7-11)</td>
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<td>Reflections on the process and results of the inquiry are directly related to the process and findings (12-15)</td>
<td>Reflections on the process and results of the inquiry are somewhat related to the process and findings (7-11)</td>
<td>Reflections on the process and/or implications for your future practice as a teacher are minimal or missing. (0-6)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization (10)</td>
<td>The paper’s organization is clear and logical, using headings, etc.</td>
<td>The paper lacks organization in some aspects. The paper is not concisely written. (5-7)</td>
<td>The paper is neither well organized nor concise. (0-4)</td>
<td>(8-10)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The body of the paper is concisely written approximately 10 pages in length (double-spaced, 12 point font).</td>
<td>[This does NOT include the annotated bibliography, the inquiry brief, or the appendix] (8-10)</td>
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<td>Mechanics (5)</td>
<td>Paper is professionally done in terms of mechanics (spelling, punctuation, grammar, citing sources, etc). There are no mechanical errors. (4-5)</td>
<td>There are fewer than 5 noticeable mechanical errors in the paper. (2-3)</td>
<td>There are many noticeable mechanical errors in the paper. (0-1)</td>
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</table>

96/100 Very interesting study and paper. You examined a very important and sensitive subject area. I wonder what would have been the impact if you had broadened and repeated some of your interventions. I think this study definitely has had an impact on your beliefs in your teaching, learning and naturally the overall set up and values underlying classroom community.