“Can I play with you today?”

Fostering and Building Student Relationships Within a Kindergarten Classroom Community

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Description of the Teaching Context

As an intern in the collaborative internship between the State College Area School District and The Pennsylvania State University, I have been teaching in a self-contained kindergarten classroom in Ferguson Township Elementary School during the 2009-2010 school year. My class consists of twenty-three students, eleven boys and twelve girls aged five to six years old. This group of students is homogenous in terms of race, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds; however, there is one Asian American student.

Although there is little diversity among the students culturally, there is much diversity among them academically, behaviorally, and socially. Three students attend Response to Intervention every morning; therefore, they miss our morning meeting and community building activities. One student receives speech therapy, while another student receives additional one on one language arts instruction. Conversely, one student attends reading enrichment every day during our regularly scheduled language arts time and is reading at a first grade level. All of the students are grouped by ability during language arts and math instruction. Eight students make up the high-achieving group who grasp concepts relatively quickly, eleven students make up the middle achieving group who are working at grade level, and four students make up the low achieving group who are working toward being on grade level.

The majority of the students’ behavior is developmentally appropriate; however, there are a group of three students who I feel are not being socially accepted by the rest of the class. These students range in being impulsive, confrontational, and withdrawn. One student has an individualized behavior plan that targets his behavior during specific time periods in the school day. There are a group of three students who are mature for their age and show their thoughtfulness and compassion for other students on a daily basis. They also serve as good role models for the rest of the class during conflict resolution by communicating with a positive attitude.

Socially, I have noticed that the students were playing with the same students or groups of students every day during a designated playtime such as recess or choice time. I would often hear groups of students say that they did not want to play with certain students. I also observed one student in particular who would not join any playgroups
without the assistance of a teacher. This student would wander around the play area by himself talking to no one. Even with coaxing from a teacher, this student had a hard time initiating conversation with others, joining in play, and keeping up with the pace of the group. Furthermore, the student with the individualized behavior plan does not have any observable meaningful, positive relationships in the classroom. He has a hard time cooperating and does not compromise easily with others.

(See Appendix A for full Inquiry Brief and Annotated Bibliography)

Wonderings and Sub-Wonderings

Main Wondering

My main inquiry question focuses on integrating community-building activities in my classroom to facilitate the growth and development of student relationships between and among each other.

_How can I foster and build student relationships among my whole class through community building activities given some individual challenging behaviors?

Sub-Wonderings

- To what degree will individual interventions, as well as full class community building activities help integrate a group of socially at risk students into the larger classroom community?
- Will a buddy system help encourage the building and development of positive student relationships through cooperation, compromise, and fun?
- How will a class project aimed at learning each other’s backgrounds influence students’ relationships, in addition to enhancing the overall classroom community?
- Do students know or understand the reason we have a greeting meeting every day?

Data Collection

Throughout my research, I collected a variety of data that would allow me to analyze the change in my students’ relationships over time. I collected data before, during, and after the implementation of community building activities and individual interventions.
BEFORE

Socio-gram #1

Prior to beginning my inquiry, I had some assumptions about what the students thought about each other based on whom they chose to play with and how they interacted with each other. I was interested in finding out how much truth my assumptions held, so I created a socio-gram that would inform me of how the students view other students in the class. The socio-gram included five positive questions and two negative questions to which each of the students had to choose one person from the class that they thought best answered the question. I calculated the results of the socio-gram to find that some of my assumptions were verified, in addition to new issues of which I had not been aware. (See Appendix B for Socio-Gram #1 and Socio-Gram #1 results)

Picture Ranking #1

In addition to understanding the views the students held for each other, I also wanted to know who the students viewed themselves as playing with all the time, sometimes, and never in order to delve deeper into their relationships with one another. I had the students complete a picture-ranking task in which they ranked everyone’s school picture into three categories: “I play with them all the time,” “I play with them sometimes,” and “I never play with them.” The students would lay the pictures on three different colors of construction paper corresponding to each of the categories: green=all the time, orange=sometimes, and purple=never. This data was also very telling because it was mostly congruent with the socio-gram results. (See Appendix C for the Picture-Ranking Task and the Picture Ranking Results #1)

Interview #1

Lastly, I wanted to personally talk to the students to find out their thoughts on our greeting meeting and if they viewed it as a social time to build friendships. Based on the socio-gram results, I divided the students into three groups of those students who received a high number of positive results, a middle number of positive results, and a low number of positive results. I chose three students from each group and interviewed them using six questions. These results informed me of their feelings about the greeting meeting in general and the greetings and games that were aimed at enhancing our
classroom community. (See Appendix D for Interview Questions #1 and Interview Questions #1 Results)

**DURING**

Although I collected most of my data before and after the employment of the interventions, I did collect some data during the implementation period. My data consists of observational and anecdotal notes during greeting meeting, designated buddy time, and mystery friend presentations.

**Greeting Meeting**

Greeting meeting is a time each day when the students have the opportunity to formally greet each other and partake in a class game. When school started, greeting meeting was at the beginning of the day, and the children who attended Response to Intervention were unable to participate. As my first intervention, I moved greeting meeting to after lunch so that those specific students could take part in our community building. This was very important for them because they all scored very low in the baseline data I collected. I felt that it was essential for them to be included in our greeting meeting to integrate them more smoothly into our community. I also chose greetings and games that were fun and positive. They were designed so that through play, the students could get to know each other better and work cooperatively together.

I was constantly observing the students during greeting meeting. When the students were greeting each other, I looked at how each of the students would interact with different students every day. I was looking for eye contact, smiles, cooperation, confident voices, and mood of the entire class. When we were playing games, I was looking to see if the students were excited to play, followed the rules of the game, and cooperated with their peers. (See Appendix E for Observation Notes)

**Buddy Time**

Prior to my inquiry, I was observing my students only talking to and playing with the same students or groups of students. I would also see some students playing alone or wandering around alone during playtime. This had an effect on me as their teacher, and I wanted to do something to help everyone. I wanted to create opportunities for my students to play with everyone in the class, not just a select group. I created a buddy system in which I paired up students to be partners during a specific time during the day
such as lining up, cleaning up, recess, or choice time. The students would have the same buddies for Monday and Tuesday and do one of the aforementioned activities together, as well as buddies for Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday that would do a different activity. This buddy system was intended to encourage relationships between students and enhance our overall classroom community. I realized that playing with different people would be hard for some students and it might take them out of their comfort zones, but I wanted the students to learn how to adapt to various situations, compromise, and communicate effectively in a positive way.

Although each of the designated buddy times were very important for the students to interact with their buddies, I observed the children during play times because I could get a better understanding of their cooperating and compromising skills for a longer period of time. I was looking to see how the students were making plans, compromising, exerting effort to play cooperatively, and interacting with one another in terms of their tone of voice and actions. (See Appendix E for Observation Notes and the Observation Form for the Buddy System)

**Mystery Friend**

In order for the students to develop new relationships in the class, I thought that they should get to know each other better and find interests they have in common. I began a mystery friend project that allowed students to create poster collages that incorporated special things in their lives, their interests, and backgrounds. After receiving their completed posters, I assigned each student to a date, and we presented two posters each week on Wednesdays and Fridays. The mystery friend presentations took place every day right after our greeting meeting. I would give the students one to two clues each day about one person, and the students would then have the opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions as to whom they thought the mystery friend was. When revealing the mystery friend, I would say, “Will the real mystery friend please stand up?” and that student would reveal himself or herself to the class. He or she would then come up and present his or her poster to the rest of the class and answer any questions. I would facilitate their presentation by asking the class if anyone else liked the same things or knew a particular fact about that student.
During the mystery friend presentations, I was always observing the students. I would look at how they reacted to the clues I gave and who they guessed each day. I would also note their excitement level, attentiveness, eagerness, and willingness to participate and take interest in another classmate. I also observed students after the presentations to see if any of them took the time to personally look at the poster that was just presented. (See Appendix E for Observation Notes)

**Individual Interventions**

There were three students who I felt would benefit more from individual help in combination with full class community building activities. For the most confrontational and impulsive student in our class, I used him as my helper more often during full group instruction. This let the other students know that he was a valuable part of our classroom. I also held his hand when we would travel the halls on our way to specials and lunch to provide more structure for him. I observed him as I was teaching the lessons that he helped with and was looking to see if he was making an effort to cooperate or not. For the shyest and most withdrawn student, I implemented the buddy system. While this intervention served the whole class, it was mainly intended for him without making him feel singled out. I observed him during playtimes, in addition to full group instruction because of his reserved personality. For another impulsive student who had a hard time sitting on the carpet without touching classroom materials, I put up a curtain to cover the materials so that he would be better able to concentrate and not disrupt other students. I would observe him during full group instruction to see if he was being distracted and if he was touching the materials around him.

**AFTER**

*Socio-gram #2*

After conducting the full class and individual community building interventions, I was curious to see if the students still viewed each other the same way as they did before the interventions were set in motion. I gave the students the same socio-gram that I did prior to the start of my inquiry, and I asked the same five positive questions and the same two negative questions. The students needed to tell me who they thought was the best answer for each question. Upon the calculation of this second round of data, I realized it was just as telling, if not more than the first socio-gram since the results had changed
both positively and negatively. (See Appendix F for Socio-Gram #2 and Socio-Gram #2 Results)

**Picture Ranking #2**

Since I wanted to see if the students’ relationships with one another had changed in terms of whom they chose to play with, I also conducted a second picture ranking. I asked the students to rank their classmates’ pictures again as to whom they play with all the time, sometimes, and never. The students would lay the pictures on three different colors of construction paper corresponding to each of the categories: green=all the time, orange=sometimes, and purple=never. This second round of data provided me with so much insight into the lives of my students. I was able to tell whom they felt most comfortable playing with through their choices. (See Appendix G for the Picture Ranking Task and the Picture Ranking Task Results #2)

**Interview #2**

I wanted to have the chance to speak with my students once again to hear their thoughts on the greeting meeting and the new addition of the mystery friend project. I asked a portion of the same questions from the first interview, but I had to add a few questions to include the mystery friend project. I also interviewed the same group of students who I interviewed the first time because they were representative of the highest number, middle number, and lowest number of positive responses in the socio-gram. Their answers allowed me to perceive their likes and dislikes. I was also able to observe how their thoughts had changed since the beginning of my inquiry. (See Appendix H for Interview #2 Questions and Interview #2 Results)

**Mentor Interview**

After I had implemented all of the full class and individual community building strategies, I wanted to receive a second opinion about how my inquiry was working with the students. I had some ideas about how the students were reacting to different things, but I also wanted to ask my mentor what she thought because she knows the students as well as I do and is around them as much as I am. I created a set of questions that targeted the specific community building strategies I have used and their effectiveness among the whole class and individual students. I found her input extremely helpful and valuable
because she is an expert of young children and can see deeper into students’ relationships than most observers. (See Appendix I for Mentor Interview)

**Steps Take to Analyze the Data**

When I finally had finished collecting all my data, I need to take the necessary steps to analyze it. I first compared the two socio-grams that I conducted to see if any of the scores had increased or decreased, and in what categories. I sorted the scores into three groups for both the positive and negative questions: zero to four, five to eight, and nine to twelve. I noticed that the scores did not change much when compared in this way.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Socio-Gram #1 Positives</th>
<th>Socio-Gram #2 Positives</th>
<th>Socio-Gram #1 Negatives</th>
<th>Socio-Gram #2 Negatives</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-4 Responses</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>5-8 Responses</td>
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<td>Outliers</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

I next looked at the two picture ranking results. I put the results of the task in an excel document so that they would be easier to look at rather than many pictures. When looking at these, I focused mainly on the students who had very high scores in the never played with category in the first socio-gram. I then compared their first scores of this category to the second set of scores from the second socio-gram and found that some student’s scores did increase, decrease, or did not enter into the very high scoring range.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Names</th>
<th>Picture Ranking #1 Never Played With Scores</th>
<th>Picture Ranking # 2 Never Played With Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BR</td>
<td>13</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZA</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thirdly, I looked at all the interviews I had starting with my mentor. I read over her questions thoroughly to see if we were feeling the same way about how things were going or if she noticed something I had not and vice versa. I then moved on to the interviews that I had conducted with the nine students. I put all of their answers into a word document and compared their first answers with their second answers. I mostly focused on the questions about including everyone in our greeting meeting and the mystery friend project because I wanted to find out what importance greeting meeting held with them as well as if they enjoyed doing the mystery friend presentations every day. I compared the answers I received about the greeting meeting and found that five out of nine students thought that we had it because we had to greet everyone. In the second round of interviews, eight out of nine students answered with the aforementioned response.

Finally, I looked at the observation notes I had been taking. I saw a pattern that I was writing the same students’ names each day based on their behavior and/or participation. I created a word document in which I broke down each observation time: greeting meeting, mystery friend presentations, and buddy time. These individual sections allowed me to see the patterns in students’ behaviors during these times as well as overall. (See Appendix E for Observation Notes)

**Explanation of Findings**

After analyzing my data through the aforementioned methods, I found patterns and trends within it that enabled me to create three strong claims that support my main wondering of fostering and building student relationships through community building activities.

**Claim #1: The most impulsive and confrontational student in the class was least affected by the individual interventions and full class community building activities.**

One of my sub-goals throughout the duration of my inquiry was to help the most impulsive, confrontational student in the classroom. I was afraid and reassured after my data collections, that this student was not being socially accepted by the rest of the class. This student received zero positive responses and eight negative responses in the first socio-gram. In addition, zero students reported that they played with him all the time, six
reported some of the time, and sixteen reported never. This data point was an outlier compared to the other students’ numbers in the socio-gram and picture-ranking results.

After the implementation of the new greeting meeting time so that he could be included, the mystery friend project, the buddy system, and his individual interventions, I conducted a second round of data collection. In the second socio-gram, he received zero positive responses and sixteen negative responses, doubling his score from the first socio-gram. One student noted, “I don’t really play with HC because sometimes he says, ‘STOP IT’ and does mean stuff.” Another student also commented, “I don’t play with HC because he’s really mean.” Furthermore, in the second picture ranking, zero people reported playing with him all the time, three people reported some of the time, and nineteen people reported never. This data reinforces the fact that even though he has had more exposure to the class and has been included in more community building opportunities, the other students’ opinions of him have changed in a negative way. This also tells me that the other students are fully aware of his behavior and have their ideas about what it means to be a good friend in our community. When talking with HC, he informed me that he liked having greeting meeting better in the morning when he was not there. Research from Buhs and Ladd shows that “children who are not participating adaptively in the classroom are likely to be disengaged from peer activities and are also likely to spend more time off task,” which describes HC very well (Buhs & Ladd, 2001).

Although I know this specific student very well in terms of his personality and behaviors, I wanted to get a second opinion to reinforce the data I had collected. I decided to ask my mentor her thoughts on the effects of my interventions because she knows the student and his mannerisms as well as I do. I asked her the following question: “Do you think the individual interventions and the full class community building activities have made the students view the socially at risk students differently?” She expressed that “the aggressive behaviors of the strong personalities have had a more lasting and powerful negative memories than the recent interventions.” Estell also supports that statement by noting that “aggressive children hold negative social positions due to their antisocial behavior that contributes to continued problem behavior as they react to the provocation of peers with further aggression” (Estell, 2007).
Claim #2: The full class community building interventions were the most effective with those students who had difficulty entering into social situations.

The mostly independent and/or withdrawn students who had complications in social situations were positively affected the most by the community building interventions. Bridges, McLemore, Phillipsen, and Saponaro suggest that teachers should “foster positive and appropriate child-child interactions that could promote close relationships among children, while also discouraging the withdrawal of one or two children from the peer group,” which is what I accomplished through my interventions (Bridges, McLemore, Phillipsen, & Saponaro, 1999). After I conducted the first socio-gram, I identified those students who I felt were the most socially at-risk based on their very low scores in the positive response category. These scores ranged between zero and two. I looked at that group of seven students further to examine who had a more shy or impulsive personality. Of the four students who had difficulty initiating social situations, KL had two positive responses, SK had one, SG had one, and ZA had two. After the second socio-gram was conducted, I noticed that KL’s number of positive responses increased to four, SK’s increased to three, SG’s remained unchanged, and ZA’s tripled and increased to six. ZA’s results impress me the most because he was the student I was greatly concerned about because of his lack of social interactions with the class. This increase in results informs me that these students are being acknowledged more and considered more as a part of our class.

I also identified that some of the same students who had very high scores reported that they were never played with in the picture rankings. I repeated the process in that I identified the at-risk students first, and then went on to look at those students who had social difficulties. Of the eight at risk students, four of them were identified with social challenges based on their personalities. Of these four students, JM received ten never played with responses, JD received ten, SF received twelve, and ZA received eleven. After the second round of picture rankings, JM received eight never played with responses, JD received fifteen, SF received six, and ZA received eight. With the exception of JD all of these students’ never played with scores dropped by two to six points.
Again, I wanted the opinion of my mentor because she is a keen observer of these students and their actions and interactions with other students in the class. She has been able to see a difference in them, and when I asked her if she thought “the individual interventions and the full class community building activities have made the students view the socially at risk students differently,” she informed me that she thought “it has had a strong impact on the quiet, happy-to-stay-by-themselves, type of student. They seem to be included more and join more easily.” She not only encompassed the outcome of my interventions, but she also confirmed and reassured me that I met my goal of integrating these students smoothly into the larger classroom community.

Claim #3: The greeting meetings, buddy system, and mystery friend project has positively enhanced the overall classroom community.

The main goal of my inquiry was to enhance the overall classroom community between and amongst all the students in the classroom, and with the combination of the greeting meetings, buddy system, and mystery friend project, this goal was achieved. Charney’s research states that teachers should show children to care for others by “listening with attention and responding with relevance, by showing concern for the feelings and viewpoints of others, and by developing a capacity for empathy,” and each of the aforementioned interventions have helped me do those things (Charney, 2002). The students have developed, and I have seen their “need to be useful and helpful to others,” which supports our classroom environment (Charney, 2002).

After I conducted the first socio-gram, I identified three subgroups of students who I felt represented the rest of the class and chose three students from each group to interview: the highest number of positive responses: MK, KM, GD, the middle number of positive responses: GM, CF, MH, and the lowest number of positive responses: HC, SG, BS. When I asked the students why they thought we had greeting meeting, five out of nine students said, “to greet each other.” Other responses included, “I don’t know,” and “because we have to.” I wanted the rest of the students to understand the importance of greeting meeting and the purpose for it every day. After the interventions, I interviewed the same group of students, and eight out of nine students reported that we have greeting meeting so that we can greet each other. This was exciting because I knew the students had finally seen and understood the significance of spending time saying hello and
playing a game with each other. I also asked them if they thought everyone in our class should be included in our greeting meeting. They saw past the fact that the activities were just fun and connected with the idea of showing respect and compassion to our friends. MH answered that she thought everyone should be included because “they are a part of our class.”

The objective of the buddy system was to help students interact with a range of students and to learn to work cooperatively and positively together. I feel that this objective has been achieved, and through my observations, I have seen evidence to support the results. I have heard students shout in excitement, “Yay, you’re my buddy today!” Most of the students appear excited and willing to play with their buddies during designated buddy play times, in addition to making an effort to make a plan of action. At times, the students volunteered to play with their buddies when I did not require it. They remarked that they would play with them anyway. Seeing these kinds of interactions warmed my heart because I did not have to watch students playing alone or wandering alone during a time when they should be having fun and building relationships. I specifically observed the students I was most worried about due to their socio-gram and picture-ranking scores. I feel that these students were successful with their buddies for the most part with the exception of the most impulsive and confrontational student in the class. These students often needed teacher encouragement and involvement in order to make plans with their buddies and successfully play together. I asked my mentor if she thought “the buddy system has had any effect on the students in terms of forming new relationships with different people?” She said, “It has been a good beginning. There have only been a few instances that needed adult guidance to insure the buddies are working and playing together. Compromise is difficult for some personalities. This will definitely be a strategy I will use each school year in the future. I will start it in September and the logistics for the ‘buddy activities’ will be ingrained earlier when new friendships are just developing.”

Finally, the mystery friend project added an additional component of fun to our community building activities. I frequently get asked, “Am I the mystery friend this week?” The students also help me to remember to give a clue every day, so we never miss it. I have seen the students erupt into cheers and elation whenever I reveal the
mystery friend. They get so excited, and it is really fantastic to watch. When I was interviewing students for a second time, I asked them if they liked doing the mystery friend project and why. All nine students responded with a “yes” and noted that they liked making their posters, seeing everyone’s pictures, and guessing who the mystery friend was each day. I also interviewed my mentor and asked her if she thought “the mystery friend project has had any influence on the students forming new relationships or being more accepting of one another?” She let me know that “It has helped students discover what they have in common with others. They have all enjoyed the mystery of the program and trying to figure out whom it could be from the clues given. The class is genuinely interested when the poster is shared and I predict the class book of posters will be very popular in our classroom library.”

Reflection and Implications for Future Practice

Conducting this inquiry project was a wonderful learning experience in that I have learned so much about myself as a person and a teacher. I now understand that in my own life, my values of working together, compromising, and forming meaningful, long lasting bonds with others are of the utmost importance. I feel that this project has made me a more sensitive and empathetic person who is willing to take the time to learn about others and extend a helping hand to those around me. Prior to my internship experience, I had an idea of what was important to me as a teacher, but it was not refined, thoroughly developed, or supported by classroom experience. Through my inquiry, I have learned that building a classroom community and helping students develop socially is a strong passion of mine. It gives me great joy to see students working cooperatively and positively together. I have witnessed my young students grow and develop before my eyes since the beginning of the school year into a wonderful community that would welcome anyone with open arms. These special students are caring, compassionate, and friendly, willing to help anyone who needs it.

The process of inquiry does not stop here, but rather I will continue it in my future practice as a teacher. Since I have seen and understood the impact of creating a warm, positive learning environment through community building activities and strategies, I will be spending the time at the beginning of the school year in my future classroom to set up this type of environment. This will enable my students to feel safe, needed, welcomed,
and able to take risks in their learning. I learned how to further meet the needs of my students and adapt my classroom to them. I realize that every year, I will encounter different students with a range of needs, and I will always need to adapt. I would like to use some of the same interventions I used during my inquiry because they helped enhance our overall classroom environment, while helping individuals achieve success at the same time. They were fun, engaging, and most importantly, allowed the students to build and develop relationships with many different students in the class. I will take the time to get to know my future students because this will allow me to make meaningful connections with them and choose activities in which I know they will thrive and flourish. Being the teacher, I need to create a community, which will give my students the power to care (Charney, 2002).

Furthermore, I know that when I have my own classroom, I will take the stance of teacher as researcher because it is an important factor in always growing and developing in the teaching profession. This will support me in being a life long learner and always wondering and questioning the happenings in my classroom. This project provided me with some strategies that I will continue to use and perhaps refine throughout my years as a teacher. I will be able to create more community building activities based on my prior experience and knowledge of what is most effective and useful with students.

References
for Children, Inc.