

# A First-Year Teacher Implements Class Meetings

by **Shannon Potter and Barbara H. Davis**

**A**s I walked slowly down the hall to the music room and hesitantly poked my head through the door, I hoped to be greeted by a brilliant smile on the lips of the music teacher. Instead, my heart sank as I heard the familiar refrain: “Miss Potter, could I speak to you about your class?”

That was my first year of teaching. My class was full of bright children who could not get along and had trouble restraining their impulses. After several attempts to improve student behavior, my class continued to have quite a reputation among the other teachers. As Christmas rolled around, I was still asking myself, “What can I do to help my students stay on task, work cooperatively, and decrease their impulsive behavior?” This question became the focus of an experiment I conducted as part of a graduate induction program for beginning teachers (Davis, Resta, Higdon, and Latiolais 2001).

In my search to find ways to help my students improve their behavior, I discovered an approach using class meetings. Educators have advocated class meetings as a way to help stu-

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dents build positive relationships, resolve conflicts, and develop group problem-solving skills (Browning, Davis, and Resta 2000; McClurg 1998; McEwan, Gathercoal, Donahue, Greenfield, and Strangio 1998). These studies reinforced my belief that it is important to teach students positive interaction skills in order for their behavior to improve in the classroom. As Nelsen, Lott, and Glenn (2000, 2) noted, “Teachers can create a climate for mutual respect by having students become involved in ways that allow them to listen to one another, take each other seriously, and work together to solve problems for the benefit of all.” I wanted this environment in my fifth-grade classroom.

### My Class

At the time of this inquiry project, I was teaching in central Texas at an intermediate school with about 500 fifth- and sixth-grade students. My class contained 23 students, the majority of whom were considered economically disadvantaged and received free or reduced lunch.

I introduced my students to class meetings during the spring semester. As part of my inquiry project, I conducted class meetings at least three times a week for eight weeks. For the first two weeks, we focused on Nelsen et al.'s (2000) eight building blocks for effective class meetings (see Figure 1 on page 89). For example, the students practiced forming a circle “quickly, quietly, and orderly.” We learned how to

give and receive compliments and express appreciation. I introduced the agenda box in which students could place items to discuss during meetings. In subsequent weeks, we focused on developing effective communication skills (such as using “I” statements) and learning how to value different perspectives. Finally, we practiced problem-solving skills through role-playing, brainstorming, and selecting nonpunitive solutions.

We used three methods of data collection: a teacher journal, student journals, and parent surveys. After each class meeting, my students and I wrote in our journals. In the teacher journal, I wrote observations about the success of the class meeting, interesting occurrences that happened throughout the day, and changes in student attitudes or behavior. I also documented positive comments that elective teachers and administrators made about my class. In their journals, students wrote about classroom events or information pertaining to the class meeting. I used the students' journals to assess their attitudes about classroom meetings. I also gained insight into positive interactions among students by reading their journal entries.

To determine students' interaction skills at home, I administered a parent survey in the first and last week of my project (see Figure 2 on page 90). The survey asked parents to rate their child on specific behaviors demonstrated at home. Targeted

Figure 1  
Eight Building Blocks for Effective Class Meetings

-  **Form a circle.**
-  **Practice expressing compliments and appreciation.**
-  **Create an agenda.**
-  **Develop communication skills.**
-  **Learn about separate realities.**
-  **Recognize the four reasons people do what they do.**
-  **Practice role-playing and brainstorming.**
-  **Focus on nonpunitive solutions.**  
(Adapted from Nelsen, Lott, and Glenn's *Positive Discipline in the Classroom*, 3d ed., Prima Publishing, 2000, 60.)

behaviors included giving compliments, listening attentively, taking turns, and tolerating the views of others.

### What I Found

An analysis of the data collected suggests that class meetings did influence my students' behavior, both at school and at home. By the end of the project, I noticed an increase in positive interactions among my students as well as a decrease in inappropriate behavior and complaints from other teachers. In the second week of the experiment, I wrote, "Overall, the class was not attentive during class

meeting today, and a few of the boys were downright disrespectful." During week eight, however, I noted my pride in a child who exhibited positive interaction skills: "Today, I was very proud of Jesse.\* When Nick came to go to recess with us, Jesse made a big deal out of being glad to see him and wanting to play with him." I found that participating in the class-meeting process increased my students' ability to communicate and interact positively with others.

Journals revealed that students felt positive about class meetings. Several entries referred to skills they had acquired during class meetings. For instance, Linda wrote, "I think we're getting

better at respecting each other." She also commented, "I felt happy when I knew who shared the same view as I did." Keith shared Linda's enthusiasm for class meetings: "I like class meetings† because I like to give complements and apreations and I like reseving complements and apreastians and it is also fun talking about my other classmates problems and fun tring to solve them."

Tim noted another skill learned in class meetings: "Today at the class meeting I learned that you need to pay atienchion when someone is talking to you so they will feel good." These observations indicate that students were learning important interpersonal skills. Their

positive comments, in addition to the examples of lessons learned, suggest they were learning to interact positively with one another.

Comparisons of the responses on the pre- and post-experiment parent surveys suggest that my students' participation in class meetings carried over to their interactions at home. Results of the comparison showed that students' behavior at home improved.

An unexpected, but positive, result of implementing class meetings occurred at the end of my project. During Field Day, another teacher commented that she was impressed by my class's behavior. She noticed that

\* All names are pseudonyms.

† Student quotations contain actual spellings.

Figure 2  
Parent Survey

Dear Parents,

In our classroom we are working on positive behavior and interaction skills. I am using class meetings to help students relate positively with one another and to resolve conflicts. The goal is to help students improve their social skills at school and at home. I would appreciate your completing the following survey.

**Please circle the number that describes your child most accurately.**

Never = 1      2      3      4      5      = Always

1. My child listens attentively to others.	1	2	3	4	5
2. My child shows concern for others.	1	2	3	4	5
3. My child takes turns.	1	2	3	4	5
4. My child tolerates the view of others.	1	2	3	4	5
5. My child respects others' property.	1	2	3	4	5
6. My child obeys the rules of the house.	1	2	3	4	5
7. My child shows accountability for his/her actions.	1	2	3	4	5
8. My child compliments others.	1	2	3	4	5
9. My child uses "I" statements. "I feel _____ when you _____, and I wish _____."	1	2	3	4	5

Parent signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

students stayed together when they were not participating in an event and that several students cheered for one another as they competed in the races. Perhaps class meetings helped my students develop a sense of community as well as problem-solving skills.

### What I Learned

As I reflected on the results of my experiment, I realized that my students had made important gains in their ability to interact positively both at school and at home. I learned that students

who have the opportunity to participate in class meetings might increase their skills in listening attentively, complimenting and appreciating others, showing respect for others, and building a sense of community.

Class meetings had a positive impact on my students' behavior, and conducting this experiment helped me develop as a teacher. In the process of holding class meetings, I realized that I have the ability to recognize problems in my classroom and implement a

plan to bring about positive outcomes for my students.

### References

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