

# Class meetings: A place for social-emotional growth

**Editor's note:** While this article reflects the impacts of class meetings in a specific kindergarten class, the research, practices, and values described are applicable to most pre-K and primary grade classrooms.



As I watched my kindergarten students interact during my first year of teaching, I started to realize that they were in a critical period in which they will develop and learn to use particular social and emotional skills. Unfortunately, most of my days during that first semester sounded a lot like this: “Ms. Tucker, Ms. Tucker, Dre touched my backpack,” “Ms. Tucker, Alli took my play-dough,” “Eve is being mean to me.” Even more discouraging, some of these incidents led to students hitting and kicking.

A lot of what I heard during that first semester indicated that my students needed a lot of direct instruction related to learning how to interact with

one another. I knew from my undergraduate classes that kindergarten is an essential time for children’s social-emotional growth, sometimes called *soft skills*. Soft skills are personal attributes that enable someone to interact effectively and harmoniously with other people.

In graduate school, I’d learned about a technique called *class meetings* designed to help children learn to respectfully communicate and empathize with one another. Class meetings, also called *morning meeting*, *circle time*, or *social circle*, are reserved for children to learn and practice social skills. I wondered if teaching soft skills during class meetings would lead to more automatic conflict resolution (and a more peaceful classroom). I designed a research study to investigate and evaluate, asking the following questions:

- In what ways are peer relationships affected by class meetings?
- In what ways is peer-to-peer communication affected by class meetings?
- In what ways are students’ abilities to solve problems impacted by class meetings?

## Social-emotional learning

In recent years educational focus has shifted from being mainly concerned with academic competencies to embrace a more well-rounded approach to educating youth. Social-emotional learning is imperative for quality education and holistic human development (Bird & Sultmann, 2010).

The organization Collaboration for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2018) defines *social-emotional learning* as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy

PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ



---

for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. The research suggested that class meetings could foster this social-emotional learning in young children.

## What are class meetings?

Class meetings are organized sessions in which the entire class sits together to talk about critical issues in the class or in the world outside the classroom. Research suggests that these opportunities can serve many purposes, including assisting students with personal growth, conflict resolution, and academic performance (Styles, 2001). During meetings, children learn to collaborate and find solutions to their problems under the guidance of a teacher or adult (Nelsen, Lott, & Glenn, 2013). Class meetings that truly develop children's social-emotional learning are most effective when they are held regularly, and students are taught how to lead the meetings.

The structure of a class meeting is flexible and may serve different purposes depending on how it is organized. However, some class meetings are structured to guide age-appropriate social-emotional growth. Styles (2001) suggests that

Class meetings are viewed as being the cornerstone of democratic classrooms, fostering both affective and cognitive growth in students, and impacting the class as a whole. They can play a critical role in the development of students' emotional growth, social development, moral development, and intellectual development.

## Positive outcomes of regularly scheduled class meetings

In meetings, students encourage each other through compliments and learn skills to peacefully discuss problems that arise in the classroom.

**Fostering relationships.** Regular class meetings help students learn to empathize with one another (Styles, 2001). As children learn to listen attentively, they have opportunities to connect with their classmates on personal levels and consider the perspectives of others (Vance, 2014). Thus, children start to realize that there are possible feelings outside their egocentric views, which helps them to learn how to empathize.

Roffey & McCarthy (2013) found that after students had participated in class meetings, the

children were more willing to work together, stepping out of friendship and gender groups to talk and play with others, and generally were more attentive to the feelings of others. Another study found that teaching values explicitly, supported by targeted social and reflective practices, facilitates whole-class scaffolding of peer collaboration to develop mutual respect and positive relationships (Morcom, 2016).

In addition, repeated practice with communication during class meetings helps to extend children's receptive language skills, which is beneficial in early childhood and to English language learners (Vance, 2014).

### Impacting collaboration and problem solving.

Unfortunately, we aren't born with the ability to see, consider, or understand different points of view; we must learn to solve problems rationally and fairly. Children have to be directly taught and deliberately guided in problem-solving techniques (Vance, 2014). As students participate in regular class meetings, they have plentiful opportunities to practice problem-solving skills under the guidance of a skilled teacher. The more children practice these skills, the more likely they are to internalize and apply them in other areas of life (Styles, 2001).

Teachers facilitate class meetings by giving students the tools to communicate respectfully, opportunities to reflect on situations, and time to share their feelings and experiences. This, in turn, creates a democratic classroom where student voices are heard, respected, and even challenged for the greater good of the classroom community.

This kind of communication offers children the tools and opportunities to deal with "issues of difference and disagreement, inclusion, and exclusion, thus connecting to the very substance of democratic politics" (Tammi & Rajala, 2018). Researchers Gray & Drewery (2011) concluded, "It is clear from the meeting process that students became much more able to discuss and manage some of the problems that presented themselves in their classroom community." Class meetings can aid students with the tools to communicate and work through problems respectfully.

**Building academic success.** Positive peer and teacher relationships create a sense of well-being that encourages students to interact and learn from each other. Positive relationships allow students to exchange ideas, beliefs, skills, and values that impact

them and the community positively (Bird & Sultmann, 2010). Class meetings offer security inside the classroom—a space free from ridicule by peers or by the teacher. This allows children to take intellectual risks and seek answers without fear of failure. Class meetings also help children learn to reason, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate (Styles, 2001)—all essential to overall academic success.

## Implementing class meetings

During the year I explored the efficacy of class meetings, I was teaching in a kindergarten classroom in a public school district in Central Texas. The school served more than 800 students, pre-K through 5th grade. My class had 16 students—8 boys and 8 girls—all self-identified as Hispanic, 71% qualified for free or reduced lunch, and 51% labeled at risk for academic failure.

During the project year, children gathered every morning for about 10 minutes—the longest most children could focus and participate. As a foundation, I borrowed from the eight building blocks for effective class meetings (Nelsen, et al., 2013). These mini-lessons covered

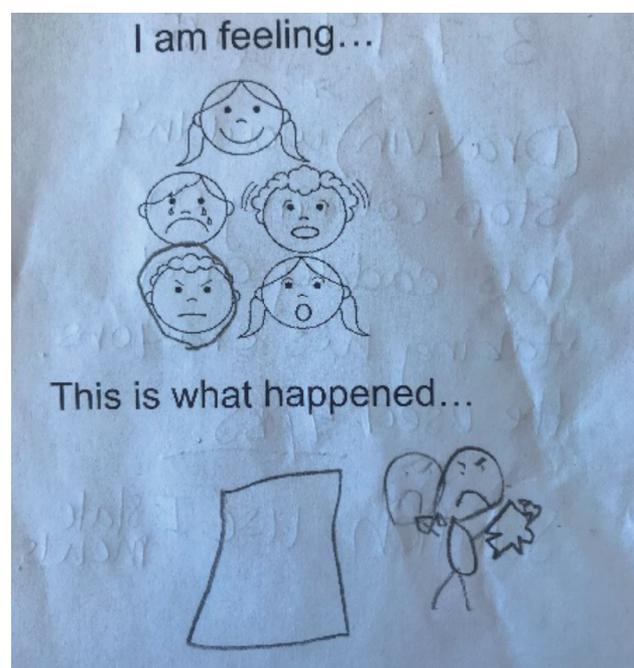
- giving and receiving compliments,
- respecting differences,
- respectful communication skills,
- finding solutions,
- brainstorming, and
- role playing.

The primary focus was on problem-solving skills and generally reinforced children’s potential responses to a problem.

1. Ignore the problem. For example, José stares. Because there’s no injury or intent to injure, children can be taught to recognize and ignore José’s harmless stares.
2. Use respectful communication. For example, Jensa brushes against Claudine’s block structure and knocks it over. Both children can be taught to acknowledge behaviors and to learn that apologies come with a resolution to avoid the same behavior in the future.
3. Agree on a solution. For example, Sammy and Hannah both want to work in the art center. The children can be taught to collaborate on a solution to a problem, in this case, to paint a mural together instead of painting individually.
4. Put unresolved issues on a follow-up agenda.

These are problems children can’t solve independently and require adult intervention and help with additional skill development.

These steps helped students stay on track while finding solutions to problems. Formalizing a follow-up agenda—essential to remembering and tracking important points of disagreement—was tricky because the children were only at the beginning stages of reading and writing. I developed a template that invited children to draw (and use emerging literacy skills) to communicate how a specific action or behavior made them feel. Group members were encouraged to bring their drawings to the class meeting as a recap tool. For example,



Lott and Nelson’s (2013) Wheel of Choice was another helpful tool. Their pie chart illustrates various potential behavioral choices such as apologize, ask for help, and count to 10.

Additionally, we practiced making I-Statements—a respectful way to communicate requests and express how one is feeling without accusing or making someone else responsible. Examples include “I feel annoyed when ...,” “I get nervous when...,” or “I’m frustrated when ....” These contrast with You-Statements like, “You must...,” “You are...,” “You shouldn’t...,” “You make me feel...,” “You upset me when....” The children learn that using an I-Statement allows them to say how they feel, give a

reason for that feeling, and reinforce their own need for friendship and connection.

Last, I incorporated literature that taught specific social skills. After reading books aloud, we would discuss the theme of the book and how it related to our class.

## Tracking class meeting success

I needed data, rather than my subjective impressions, to validate my decision to use class meetings. For this I used the ClassMap Survey developed by Doll, Zucker, & Brehm (2004) that queried children (both before and after daily class meetings) on friendships, fear of physical aggression, emotional comfort, self-reliance, and behavioral self-control. I also collected and analyzed items that children put on the follow-up agenda to document the most challenging conflicts.

My anecdotal records were helpful in analyzing how well and how frequently children were able to resolve problems independently. Tally sheets noted incidents of tattling, aggression, and name calling as well as interactions that reflected effective problem-solving strategies. Last, I recorded our class meetings and transcribed the conversations. I used these videos to analyze students' abilities to communicate, express ideas, and collaborate during the meetings.

Analysis of the data reflected four major changes in our class dynamics.

- **Independent problem solving in the class improved.** As my students internalized techniques and applied strategies in class meetings, they built

the skills to more independently solve problems through their day-to-day activities (See Figure 1).

- **Students learned to communicate and collaborate during class meetings.** Behavioral data revealed that the children gained an understanding of what solutions are and were able to employ problem-solving techniques. The following transcript shows what happened in a class meeting after a child's request for follow-up support.

Kate: Someone wasn't sharing at my table. He wouldn't put it in the middle of the table.

Tucker: Did you ask him to share and put it in the middle of the table?

Kate: Yes, but he wouldn't listen.

Tucker: Did you try a problem-solving step?

Kate: I tried to tell him how I feel, but it didn't work.

Tucker: OK friends, how can we help that table find a solution if they have this problem again?

Jake: Tell them to put it in the middle, for them to get it, and then they can put it back in the middle.

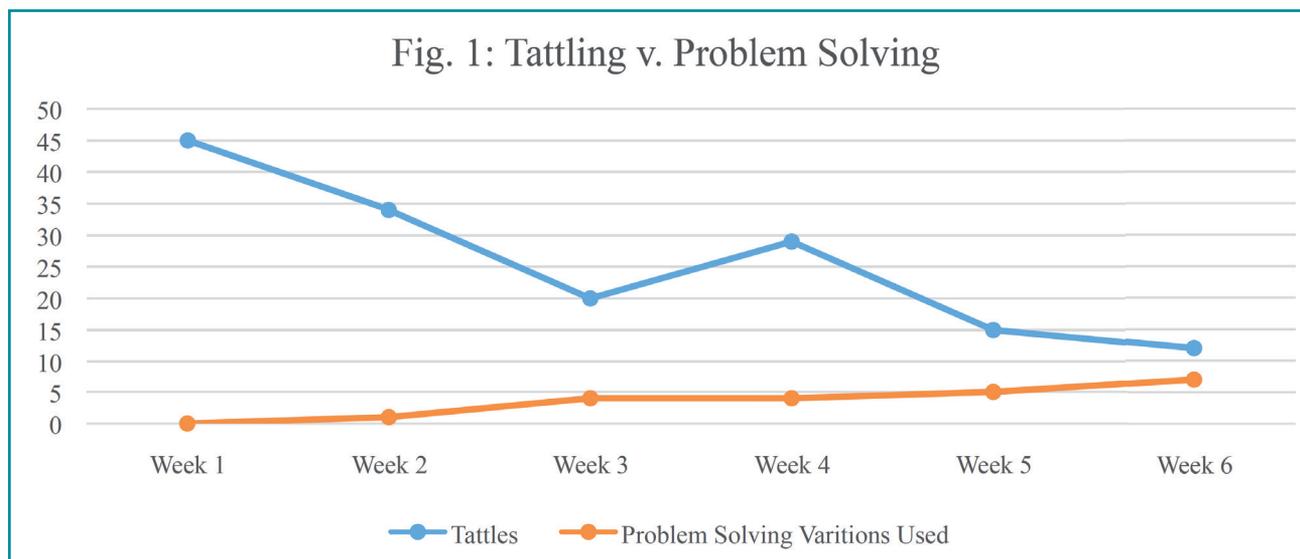
Tucker: So what you're saying is that they can take turns with it and after they finish using the item, they can put it back in the middle of the table so others can reach? (Jacob nods)

(Eve raises her hand)

Eve: They can share it.

Tucker: So taking turns and sharing is a solution to that problem. Any other ideas?

- **Peer relationships were positively impacted.** Survey results obtained before the implementation



of class meetings show that while my students had fun with their friends in our class, they believed that they were not safe from teasing or physical aggression. *Figure 2* shows that half my students believed that other kids might tease or hit them.

As a result, I worked to help children focus on communicating their feelings when problems occurred instead of showing aggression. As students learned to listen to each other and understand the perspective of their peers, they learned how name

calling and teasing makes a child feel. Class meetings helped my students learn soft skills and, in turn, improve peer relationships.

The post-research survey shows a slight shift in positive feelings toward classmates (*See Figure 3*). Most significant was a greater sense of emotional and physical safety.

- Negative classroom behaviors decreased. During my study, I recorded negative peer-to-peer name calling as well as incidents of pushing, hitting, and

Fig. 2: Student Feelings Toward Classmates Pre-Survey

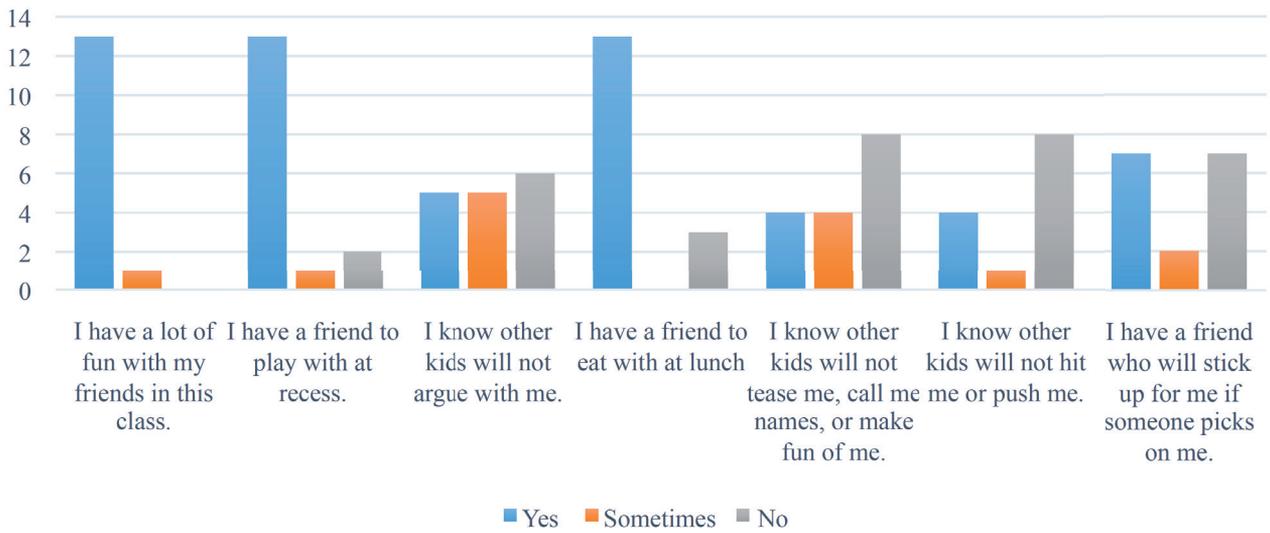


Fig. 3: Student Feelings Toward Classmates Post-Survey

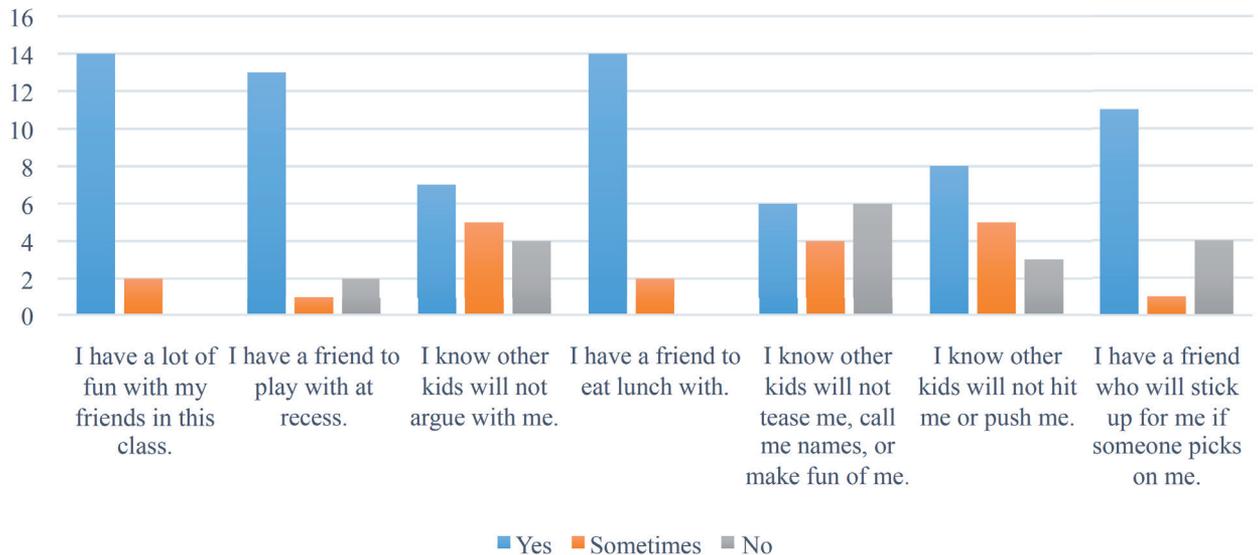
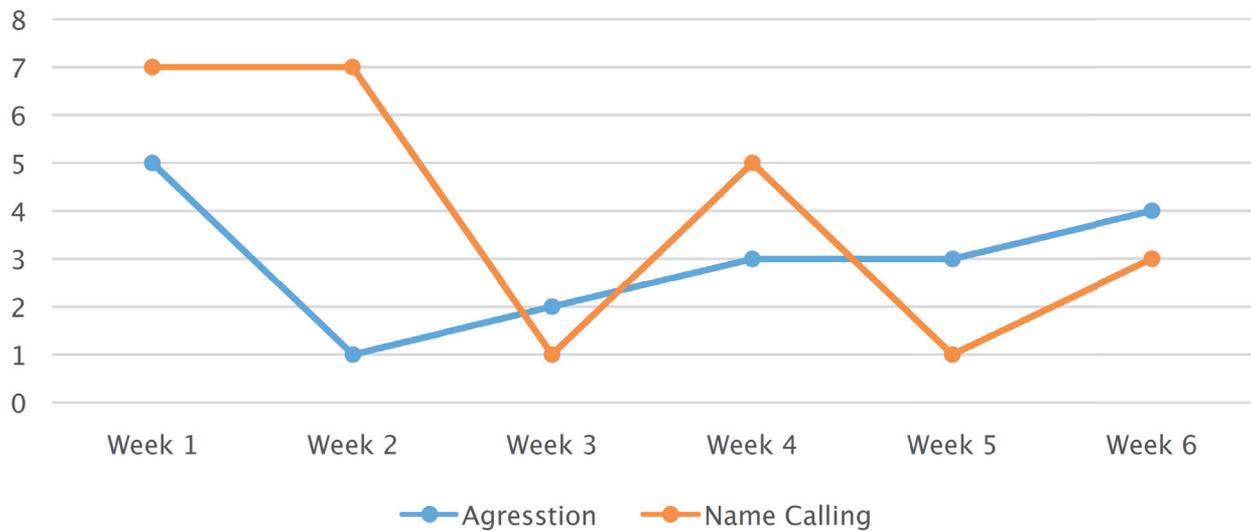


Fig. 4: Negative Behaviors



kicking. I used class meetings as a place to talk about how to solve problems and repeated the phrase, “We use our words to handle problems, not our hands.” Figure 4 displays a brief downward slope in both behaviors. While it was clear that the standard 4-step problem-solving technique was not enough to eradicate all aggression, these negative behaviors did decrease over the course of the study.

## Class meetings enhance soft skills

Using daily class meetings in a kindergarten class is effective in bringing about a harmonious classroom. Class meetings helps students empathize and listen to one another, give them practice in communication skills and collaboration, and build a foundation for respectful interactions that help everyone feel welcome and safe.

My students formed positive peer relationships and did not require as much guidance from me to solve their problems. Through class meetings, the children learned and implemented problem-solving tools that helped them become independent problem-solvers and better prepared for the academic challenges ahead.

## References

Bird, K. A., & Sultmann, W. F. (2010). Social and emotional learning: Reporting a system approach

to developing relationships, nurturing well-being and invigorating learning. *Educational & Child Psychology*, 27(1), 143–155.

CASEL. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://casel.org/>  
Doll, B., Zucker, S., and Brehm, K. (2004). *Resilient classrooms: Creating healthy environments for learning*. New York: Guilford.

Gray, S., & Drewery, W. (2011). Restorative practices meet key competencies: Class meetings as pedagogy. *International Journal on School Disaffection*, 8(1), 13–21.

Morcom, V. E. (2016). Scaffolding peer collaboration through values education: Social and reflective practices from a primary classroom. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 41(1).

Nelsen, J., Lott, L., & Glenn, H. S. (2013). *Positive discipline in the classroom: Developing mutual respect, cooperation, and responsibility in your classroom*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Roffey, S., & McCarthy, F. (2013). Circle solutions, a philosophy and pedagogy for learning positive relationships: What promotes and inhibits sustainable outcomes? *International Journal of Emotional Education*, 5(1), 36–55.

Styles, D. (2001). *Class meetings: Building leadership, problem-solving and decision-making skills in the respectful classroom*. Markham, Ontario, Canada: Pembroke.

Tammi, T., & Rajala, A. (20118). Deliberative commu-

---

nication in elementary classroom meetings: Ground rules, pupils' concerns, and democratic participation. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 62(4), 617–630.

Vance, E. (2014). *Class meetings: Young children solving problems together*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

### **About the author**

Victoria Tucker is a kindergarten teacher in Central Texas. She received a master's degree in elementary education from Texas State University in San Marcos and studied with the Teacher Fellows Program. She believes in educating the whole child and strives to maintain a welcoming classroom environment where students of all backgrounds feel safe to learn and grow. ■