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# RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM NEWSLETTER

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## The Power of Morning Meeting

### "Like Being at the Breakfast Table"

**Adapted, with permission, from an article in *Childhood Education*, Spring 2001**

by Elizabeth Bondy and Sharon Ketts

With twelve years of elementary teaching experience, four years of teaching music, two grown children of her own, and a master's degree, Sharon Ketts is confident about her teaching skills. Nevertheless, she was astounded when the news broke that her students had scored higher on all sub-tests of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) than students in three other third grade classrooms in her school. The class seemed no different from other classes she has taught. They were a racially and ethnically heterogeneous group; eighty-four percent of the children were eligible for free or reduced price lunches; and a majority read at or below grade level. Sharon can identify just one difference—she was the only third grade teacher to implement Morning Meeting. (See side bar for a description of Morning Meeting.) Could Morning Meeting have been the impetus behind the students' academic success? Sharon is convinced that it was.

#### **Morning Meeting created a welcoming and stable environment that helped students learn.**

As one of Sharon's students said, Morning Meeting was like "...eating breakfast with your family. It's a comfortable, good feeling." One result of this was that new students more quickly became part of the class. This was especially important in Sharon's school, where many of the students' families are transient. "Because the new students quickly felt accepted, they didn't lose as much ground as students often do when they move to a new school mid-year," Sharon says.

In addition, the family climate promoted more peer helping than Sharon had witnessed among students in the past. She says, "Everybody helped everybody else. I saw this in every subject. Students were glad to give help [and were] not guarded about it. They were like a family where everybody asks for help and gives it."

Sharon also notes that Morning Meeting had an immediate and daily impact on students' ability to absorb new material. As an example, she points to her students' reading scores. Although Sharon didn't teach reading to most of her homeroom students—they were equally divided among other third grade teachers—her homeroom students still scored higher in reading. She believes this was due, in part, to the fact that Morning Meeting occurred right before reading instruction. "Many students entered the classroom upset, frazzled, and rushed," Sharon says, "...then they moved into the very accepting environment of Morning Meeting, where they had fun and laughed together. This got them ready to be on task and ready to work."

Research supports Sharon's observations about the value of fostering a caring community of learners. In *Teaching With the Brain in Mind* (1998), brain researcher Eric Jensen explains that stress and feeling threatened may be the greatest contributors to impaired academic learning. And in "Using the Learning Environment Inventory," which appeared in *Educational Leadership* in 1997, educators Herbert Walberg and Rebecca Greenberg report that the classroom social environment has a significant effect on student attitudes, productivity, engagement in learning, and academic achievement. In other words, for learning to take place, learners must feel safe. Morning Meeting helps to create a safety zone and maintain a climate of trust, respect, and belonging.

### **Morning Meeting also provided students with opportunities to practice responsibility and assertiveness.**

According to Daniel Goleman (*Emotional Intelligence*, 1995), these skills are among the capacities that are sometimes referred to as indicators of emotional intelligence and are often viewed as being critical characteristics of people who excel in life.

Before using Morning Meeting in her classroom, Sharon often felt that she was the one who needed to be in control of everything, doubting the students' abilities to do things correctly. However, as Sharon's students demonstrated increased responsibility and social skills during Morning Meeting, she found herself turning over more power to them in the classroom. "Morning Meeting changed the way I looked at things," she says. "I found that [the students] could do it. They became more responsible for their schoolwork, their homework, and for each other."

Sharon describes one child in particular who was known for crying and fits of temper. She credits Morning Meeting for his gains in confidence and responsibility. "Over the course of the year I watched him become willing to try new things...He became more accepting of his own mistakes and was willing to start over rather than throw his paper and cry."

She also saw an increase in assertive behavior in many students as a direct result of their participation in Morning Meeting. "A lot of kids who were shy and withdrawn at the beginning of the year really came to life. They began to initiate activities and get help when they needed it. Kids who weren't leaders were able to take charge when it was their turn to lead the greeting or sharing. They became assertive enough to lead their classmates."

### **And how did the children feel about Morning Meeting?**

Were they able to recognize a positive impact on their life at school? In conversations last year with twelve of Sharon's former students, the children spoke enthusiastically about Morning Meeting. Generally, they viewed it as one of their favorite parts of the day. Words they used to describe Morning Meeting included "fun," "funny," "happy," "smiling," and "laughing." Students not only described their own pleasure during Morning Meeting, but also noted Sharon's enjoyment. Carla said, "when we do a funny greeting, like walking backward to the person, Mrs. Ketts tries not to fall, but she gets scared that she'll fall. She's the first one to laugh, and then everybody laughs." Marika talked about the importance of having fun in school. She explained, "We feel so, so happy in the classroom. So no one has to fuss at each other or be mean to each other."

The students also liked getting to know their classmates. Jasmine said, "You get to know each other in Morning Meeting. You learn to get along with each other, and you get to know each other's lives. So if someone feels bad, you know that person and you could help them." Brandon focused on the importance of being known. He said, "When people greet me, it makes me feel good."

Sean recognized that Morning Meeting was a kind of warm-up for academic challenges that lay ahead. He commented, "Morning Meeting ...[is] really a lot like schoolwork. Like when you're playing the koosh game, you have to watch and pay attention." He added, "Morning Meeting helps kids get awake so they can do their work."

In addition, students described opportunities for exercising responsibility during Morning Meeting. Jasmine explained, "[Mrs. Ketts] used to do everything; but now we just do it....There's a list that tells who starts the greeting, the sharing, and the game. Those people decide what to do, and they run things."

Perhaps the students' commitment to Morning Meeting was most apparent in their response to the hypothetical question, "What if the principal proposed outlawing Morning Meeting?" The students unanimously argued against this idea, stating that Morning Meeting helped them do better in school. Petra suggested, "Invite him to come and see what Morning Meeting feels like. That will change his mind." These third graders and their teacher are convinced—Morning Meeting is a strategy whose time has come.

## About the Authors

**Elizabeth Bondy** is professor of education in the College of Education at the University of Florida. She teaches in the unified elementary and special education teacher education program. She is also professor in residence at Duval Elementary School. She enjoys sharing what she has learned about the Responsive Classroom approach with preservice and inservice teachers.

**Sharon Ketts** has been an educator for fifteen years in Gainesville (Alachua County), Florida. She currently teaches fourth grade at Duval Elementary School. She has also taught first, third, and fifth grades and has been a curriculum resource teacher and a music teacher. One of four trainers for the Alachua County School District in *The Responsive Classroom* approach, Sharon has used *The Responsive Classroom* strategies for seven years. In addition, she has done consulting work for the University of Florida Portfolio Project and has taught as an adjunct faculty member for St. Leo University, Gainesville campus.

## Morning Meeting

Morning Meeting is an important part of *The Responsive Classroom*® approach to teaching. Teachers in K–8 classrooms begin the day with a fifteen to thirty minute class meeting that builds community, creates a positive climate for learning, reinforces academic and social skills, and gives children daily practice in respectful communication. Morning Meeting consists of the following four components:

**Greeting:** Students greet each other by name. There are many different greeting activities that can be used throughout the year, including handshaking, singing, clapping, and greeting in different languages.

**Sharing:** Each day, two or three students share information about an event in their lives. Listeners take turns offering empathic comments or asking clarifying questions.

**Group activity:** All participate in a brief, lively activity such as singing, chanting, playing a game, reciting a poem, dancing, etc.

**News and announcements:** Children read the news and announcements chart that their teacher has written. Sometimes they read silently as a group; sometimes they read aloud; sometimes they follow as the teacher or a fellow student reads. The news and announcements chart usually includes an activity that reinforces academic skills.