

“It Mattered That I Came”

AN INTRODUCTION

In the spring of my first year as a secondary school teacher, I got a letter from a student for whom I had a particular fondness, letting me know that she was dropping out of school. School wasn't making much sense to her, and little that she was being asked to learn held much interest for her. She wrote, almost apologetically, that school just wasn't a place where she felt she belonged. More than twenty years later, her words still seem profoundly sad to me:

I will always remember how you said “Hi, Sue” as I walked into eighth period. It made me feel like it really mattered that I came.

It touched and pained me that something that seemed so small to me, an act I hadn't even been aware of, had meant so much to her. I vowed to learn something from it and became more intentional about greeting students. I stationed myself by the door and tried to say a little something to each one as they entered,

or at least to make eye contact and smile at every student, not just the ones like Sue for whom I had an instinctive affinity.

Gradually I realized how much I was learning at my post by the door. I observed who bounced in with head up and smile wide, whose eyes were red-rimmed from tears shed in the girls' room at lunch, who mumbled a response into his collar and averted his eyes every day for an entire semester. I didn't know what to do about much of it, but at least I was learning how to notice.

I have learned a lot since then. It is good for students to be noticed, to be seen by their teacher. But it is only a start, not enough by itself. They must notice and be noticed by each other as well.

Years after I taught Sue, I joined the staff of Greenfield Center School, the independent K–8 school founded by Northeast Foundation for Children. There, I saw teachers teaching students to greet each other, to speak to each other, to listen to each other. I saw students start each day together in Morning Meeting where noticing and being noticed were explicit goals.

This book is about Morning Meeting—a particular and deliberate way to begin the school day. Today, many students in K–8 schools around the country launch their school days in Morning Meetings.

In a Morning Meeting, all classroom members—grown-ups and students—gather in a circle, greet each other, and listen and respond to each other's news. We take note of who is present and who is absent; whether it is still raining or not; who is smiling and buoyant; who is having a hard time smiling. We practice academic skills, briefly grapple with problems that challenge our minds, and look forward to the learning we'll do together in the day ahead. Morning Meeting allows us to begin each day as a community of caring and respectful learners.

—Roxann Kriete

MORNING MEETING FORMAT

Morning Meeting lasts up to a half hour each day and is made up of four sequential components: greeting, sharing, group activity, and morning message. The components intentionally provide opportunities for students to practice the skills of greeting, listening and responding, group problem-solving, and noticing and anticipating. Daily practice of the four components gradually weaves a web that binds a class together. Although there is much overlap, each component has its own purposes and structure.

- 1 Greeting** ■ Students greet each other by name, often including handshaking, singing, movement, and other activities.
- 2 Sharing** ■ Students share some news or information about themselves and respond to each other, articulating their thoughts, feelings, and ideas in a positive way.
- 3 Group Activity** ■ The whole class does a short, inclusive activity together, reinforcing learning and building class cohesion through active participation.
- 4 Morning Message** ■ Students practice academic skills and warm up for the day ahead by reading and discussing a daily note to the class posted by their teacher.

Teachers must commit more than just time to implement Morning Meeting successfully. They must also commit themselves to a belief in children's capacity to take care of themselves and each other as they learn academic skills (like vocabulary and algorithms) and social-emotional skills (like respect, responsibility, and stretching the boundaries of their social world). Besides creating opportunities for students to practice such skills, Morning Meeting also creates opportunities for teachers to model these skills and give children valuable feedback.

The time teachers commit to Morning Meeting is an investment that is repaid many times over. The sense of belonging and the skills of attention, listening, expression, and cooperative interaction developed in Morning Meeting are a foundation for every lesson, every transition time, every lining-up, every handling of

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an upset or conflict, all day and all year long. Morning Meeting is a microcosm of the way we wish our schools to be—communities full of learning, safe and respectful and challenging for all.

THE RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM® APPROACH

The Morning Meeting format described in this book was developed by Northeast Foundation for Children as part of the *Responsive Classroom* approach to teaching and learning. Morning Meeting, together with other *Responsive Classroom* practices, gives teachers concrete ways to make academics engaging, manage classrooms effectively, and create a positive climate in which children feel safe to take the risks necessary for learning.

Following are the seven guiding principles of the *Responsive Classroom* approach.

- 1** The social and emotional curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum.
- 2** How children learn is as important as what they learn.
- 3** Great cognitive growth occurs through social interaction.
- 4** To be successful academically and socially, children need to learn a set of social and emotional skills that include cooperation, assertiveness, responsibility, empathy, and self-control.
- 5** Knowing the children we teach—individually, culturally, and developmentally—is as important as knowing the content we teach.
- 6** Knowing the families of the children we teach is as important as knowing the children we teach.
- 7** How we, the adults at school, work together is as important as our individual competence: Lasting change begins with the adult community.

To learn about other *Responsive Classroom* practices in addition to Morning Meeting, see the resources listed on pages 216–219.



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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

You may choose to read the entire book from beginning to end, select sections that immediately grab your attention, or use the book as a reference as your Morning Meeting experience grows. The book begins with an overview chapter about Morning Meeting as a whole. Next come chapters about each of the four Morning Meeting components, followed by a conclusion.

In the classroom

Each component chapter begins with a section that shows that component in action. Some of these vignettes are from large urban schools; some are from small rural schools. Though the demographics vary widely, the spirit and elements of the Morning Meetings are consistent, the students and their teachers familiar to those of us who spend time in schools. These glimpses take you into the middle of classrooms where Morning Meetings are flourishing.

Purposes and reflections

These sections articulate the purposes and goals of each component and how it fits into the larger context of learning. They highlight and interpret some of the powerful moments created in classrooms and convey some of the specific details and flavor of well-run Morning Meetings.

Getting started

In these sections, you'll find recommendations to help you as you begin to implement the components of Morning Meeting. The suggestions and examples are offered as templates to be used for guidance, not as exact patterns for repetition. Your knowledge of each class's development, pace, and needs—and of your own teaching style—will lead to adaptations that work best for you and the students you teach.

These recommendations are offered with respect for individual teachers and a wish to empower them. They are offered, also, with the awareness, affirmed by thousands of teachers with whom we have worked, that templates drawn by experienced hands are invaluable tools when starting to do something new. Feel free to use these templates—trace them, adapt them, refine them—so that they truly serve you. Just keep the purposes and goals of Morning Meeting in mind as you go.

Each Getting Started section ends with a concise listing of teacher and student responsibilities to help you implement Morning Meeting and assess your practice.

About the Term “Parent”

Students come from a variety of homes with a variety of family structures. Students might be raised by grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles, foster families, and other caregivers. All of these individuals are to be honored for devoting their time, attention, and love to raising children.

It's difficult to find one word that encompasses all these caregivers. In this book, for ease of reading, we use the term “parent” to represent all the caregivers involved in a child's life.

Fine tunings

The questions and answers in these sections address some concerns and issues teachers commonly encounter as their experience with Morning Meeting evolves. If questions come up for you as you read a chapter or as you use Morning Meeting, look in the chapter's Fine Tunings section for help. Also check out the other Morning Meeting resources listed on pages 216–219 and at www.responsiveclassroom.org.

Ideas for greeting, sharing, group activity, morning message

We've included ideas for each component. You can use these ideas as written, adapt them to meet the needs of the students you teach, or use them as a springboard for creating your own ideas. These ideas cover grades K–8 and address a range of academic and social-emotional learning goals.

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