

# “It Mattered that I Came”

## A N I N T R O D U C T I O N

I n 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 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 which 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 my 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



## Introduction

*All classroom members—grown-ups and students—gather in a circle at the start of every day for Morning Meeting.*

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 children in kindergartens, elementary, and middle schools around the country launch their school days in Morning Meetings.

All classroom members—grown-ups and students—gather in a circle, greet each other, and listen and respond to each others' 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 briefly grapple with problems

that challenge our minds and look forward to the events in the day ahead. Morning Meeting allows us to begin each day as a community of caring and respectful learners.

### Morning Meeting Format

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

1. **Greeting:** Children greet each other by name, often including handshaking, clapping, singing, and other activities.
2. **Sharing:** Students share some news of interest to the class and respond to each other, articulating their thoughts, feelings, and ideas in a positive manner.
3. **Group Activity:** The whole class does a short activity together, building class cohesion through active participation.
4. **News and Announcements:** Students develop language skills and learn about the events in the day ahead by reading and discussing a daily message posted for them.

Teachers must commit more than just time to implement Morning Meeting. They must also commit themselves to a belief in children's capacity to take care of themselves and each other as they learn social skills like respect and responsibility along with academic skills like vocabulary and algorithms. Morning Meeting creates opportunities for children to practice these social skills. It also creates opportunities for teachers to model these skills and give children valuable feedback. It provides practice in respectful behavior and helps children stretch the boundaries of their social world.

The time one commits to Morning Meeting is an investment which 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 upset and 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.

Introduction

### The *Responsive Classroom*<sup>®</sup> Approach

The Morning Meeting format described in this book was developed by Northeast Foundation for Children staff as part of the *Responsive Classroom* approach to teaching and learning. It is an approach informed by belief in seven basic tenets.

#### The Responsive Classroom

1. **The social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum.**
2. **How children learn is as important as what children learn.**
3. **The greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction.**
4. **There is a set of social skills that children need to learn and practice in order to be successful. They form the acronym CARES—cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, self-control.**
5. **We must know our children individually, culturally, and developmentally.**
6. **Knowing the families of the children we teach is as important as knowing the children.**
7. **Teachers and administrators must model the social and academic skills that they wish to teach their students.**

#### The *Responsive Classroom* Approach

#### How to Use This Book

#### How to Use This Book

You may choose to read the entire book from beginning to end, select sections which immediately grab your attention, or use it as a reference as your Morning Meeting experience grows. The book begins with a fundamental chapter about Morning Meeting as a whole, followed by chapters about each of its four components, a chapter about Morning Meeting in middle schools, and a conclusion. The structure is designed to tell three things about Morning Meeting: what it is, why it is, and how to do it.

## **In the classroom**

Each component chapter begins with a section that shows Morning Meeting 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 children 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 articulate the purposes and goals of each component and locate connections to theory and the larger context of learning. They are like a guided tour, highlighting and interpreting some of the powerful moments created in our classrooms and conveying some of the specific details and flavor of well-run Morning Meetings.

Introduction

## **Getting started**

These sections offer directions for teachers as they begin to implement the components of Morning Meeting. Directions and examples of teacher language are offered as templates to be used for guidance, not as exact patterns for repetition. Your knowledge of your class's development, pace, needs, and of your own teaching style will lead to adaptations that work best for you and your class.

These directions 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 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.

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

## **Fine tunings**

These questions and answers address some concerns and issues teachers commonly encounter as their experience with Morning Meeting evolves. This section considers some of the questions teachers frequently ask as they move past the basic introduction of Morning Meeting in their classrooms. These particular questions have surfaced frequently in our own practice and in teaching other teachers over the years.