

Love Your Neighbor!

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First/Second Grade Split Classroom

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Introduction:

Through a partnership between the Penn State University's Professional Development School and the State College Area School District, I have had the unique opportunity to student teach in a first/second grade classroom over the course of one year. The classroom contains twenty-one students, consisting of seven first graders and fourteen second graders. Although much of the curriculum requires the students to be split by grade level, there have been multiple opportunities for interaction between first and second graders, as well as same grade relations; typically these interactions are during cooperative work in social studies/science or unstructured time. My experiences in this setting with these particular children led me to find that many of the students in my classroom have not yet learned to enjoy, or in several cases tolerate, the company of their peers.

As teachers, we search for ways to make classroom experiences comfortable and pleasant for all children. I have made it a personal goal to implement opportunities to build and understand community in the classroom. Cultivating an inviting, friendly atmosphere that is welcoming for all students is critical. I believe that when a strong classroom community is built, it has the potential to branch out and influence the sense of community that the entire school shares; however it is important to start at the roots.

The Importance of My Inquiry:

The purpose of my research is to try and foster a sense of community within my classroom walls, amongst the different students in my classroom who do not typically get along. As a result of this project, I hope to gain insight and an understanding of the various behaviors of young students, resulting in the strengthening of my own teaching and leadership skills. My inquiry is an effort to create a peaceful atmosphere for the students in my classroom, to accomplish this task I must continue to further develop my professionalism in this area of teaching.

Throughout the year, a significant number of students in my classroom have struggled to have positive interactions with one another. The lack of community that I saw between the children truly bothered me because I believe that community building is an important part of the learning process for children in every classroom, regardless of age. Developing a strong classroom community fosters cooperation and understanding, as well as leadership skills. The ability to trust and rely on one another is critical throughout all stages of development; the implantation of these characteristics in the classroom helps to build a successful community where each child in the classroom feels apart of the group as a whole. Community is the backbone of the classroom; when there is a sturdy backbone, stronger individual learners can emerge.

Wonderings:

Due to the lack of community that I view on a daily basis as well as my own personal beliefs and research done on the topic, I asked myself one specific question; how can I help or encourage the students in my classroom to interact respectfully with one another?

Although the previous question served as the frontrunner in my research, several other questions emerged as I pondered how this inquiry could potentially be completed.

1. At what times during the day do the student's disrespectful interactions most often occur?
2. Are certain students more prone to showing the undesirable behavior?
3. What conflict resolution strategies exist to develop a friendly classroom atmosphere?

Resources:

One resource that I utilized was The Morning Meeting Book by Roxann Kriete. This book emphasized building community through morning and classroom meetings. The appendix of the book identified multiple games and

greetings that promote student connections. Examples of these activities are “Clapping Names, Hot and Cold, Zoom, etc.” More activities can be found in The Morning Meeting Book, Appendix D, E, and F. Portions of the book emphasize the importance of building a classroom identity utilizing group activity.

“The Purpose of Group Activity:

- Contributes to the sense of community culture by building a class repertoire of common material - songs, games, chants, and poems
- Fosters active and engaged participation
- Heightens the class’s sense of group identity
- **Encourages cooperation and inclusion**

(Kriete, pg, 86)”

A list of community building activities that were used throughout my research can be found in Appendix A.

Another book that I used as a source for implementing intervention ideas was Teaching Conflict Resolution Through Children’s Literature. This book clearly focused on conflict resolution in the classroom through literature and activities based on that literature. The book initially defines conflict, later dividing conflict and conflict resolution into specific areas of emphasis. Trade books used as read-alouds were teaching tools. (A list of specific books that I used during throughout the intervention can be located in Appendix B.)

The aforementioned resources were useful for community building ideas. The following sources provided insight as to the beliefs about the community building process. According to Heather Craven, who wrote Classroom Community: Building a Solid Foundation, there are several components that are required for classroom community building. I found two of the components to be particularly interesting.

“3.) Make Goals-I believe that classroom communities function best with common goals. Just as individual goals can motivate students, planning group goals can also give students the ability to contribute their own ideas and perspectives, which will benefit the class as a whole.

4.) Learn Teamwork-Learning the skills of working cooperatively as a group will equip students with a life long ability to function appropriately and productively with others (Classroom Community: Building a Solid Foundation, Located at http://www.inspiring_teachers.com/articles/beginning/community.htm. April 2005).”

The Kappa Delta Pi Record: Creating Community in the Classroom, recognizes the importance of positive social relationships in the classroom. The research of this particular organization highlighted the need for and positive use of discussion through morning and classroom meetings.

“Sigrun Adalbjarnardottir has done extensive research in Iceland, specifically with elementary school children, on the benefits of teaching students how to deal with one another socially. Adalbjarnardottir (1993, 482) explained, ‘By creating a supportive classroom environment and using a relatively simple discussion method when dealing with socio-moral issues, teachers are capable of fostering children's social growth and generating positive interpersonal relationships among them’ (Kappa Delta Pi Record: Creating community in the classroom. Located at

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4009/is_200104/ai_n8948869
, April 2005).”

Building community in the classroom is a critical part of the educational experience for all students and the focus of my research. Introducing students to multiple activities promoting community is one benefit of my research; familiarizing students with conflict resolution strategies is the other. The Educators for Social Responsibility believe that helping adults create peaceful atmospheres at school and in the home allow children to learn strategies in order to “prevent aggressive and anti-social behavior, form caring relationships, and build healthy lives”.

Conflict resolution is critical, not only in the educational experience, but in the home is well. The following are beliefs of the ESR group, which I too feel are vital for teachers to administer in their own classroom.

- “Helping students develop and strengthen social skills, emotional competencies, and qualities of character that increase interpersonal effectiveness, reduce aggressive and anti-social behavior and intolerance, and enhance academic achievement;
- Creating peaceable (safe, caring, and respectful) classroom environments;
- Establishing **a safer school and more positive peer culture** (ESR: Elementary School Programs. Located at <http://www.esrnational.org/es/elem.htm> April 2005)”

Data Collection:

The first step that I took to carry out the inquiry in my classroom was to collect as much data about the reoccurring conflicts as possible. On a daily basis, I monitored the students' behavior during structured and unstructured time. When the students did not act in an amicable way toward their peers, I wrote down the interaction and briefly described the circumstances. My mentor teacher, who used sticky notes to record the undesirable behavior, assisted me in this process. Then I recorded her observations for the day on the same data sheet as mine. I collected data for approximately one and a half months using the data sheet method before implementing intervention.

The second form of data collection that I used included the use of individual student interviews. Examples of the interview questions are: How well do you think the boys and girls in our classroom get along? Do you think that you get along with everyone? Do you think the first graders or the second graders get along the best? The students had the opportunity to answer these questions honestly and privately. (See appendix D)

The third form of data collection included a post-intervention survey. This survey asked the students whether or not they thought two of the interventions helped to boys and girls in our specific classroom to remember how to treat each other. (See appendix E)

The fourth and final form of data collection was the use of a video camera. The video camera was used during 3 specific lessons. The students were under the impression that I used the video to watch myself teach science lessons. Although this was true, I was also using it as an extra pair of eyes. I watched for student interaction that I might have overlooked while focusing on something else.

After all of the data was collected, I took several days and scoured through my notes. I used highlighters to indicate patterns in the notes. When I was completely finished analyzing what I had written for the past month and a half, my results indicated two specific things. The first is that every single conflict that occurred in the classroom during structured or unstructured time was initiated by a second grader. The first grade students *never* initiated conflict with their peers. If a first grade student happened to be involved in a confrontation with a peer, a second grader initiated it. (See appendix C)

The second thing that my notes indicated was that conflict was initiated by four specific children in my classroom 86% of the time. One of the four children initiated conflict 51% percent of the time alone. It can be noted that the remaining ten-second graders in the classroom initiated conflict a mere 14% of the time. (See appendix C)

Although I had previously realized that these specific students in my classroom were typically at the root of the conflict, I would have never predicted that the numbers were so incredibly high.

After analyzing the data and collecting research, a decision was made about the intervention to be implemented. My mentor teacher and I both believed that targeting the specific children in the classroom who caused the conflict would most likely not solve the problem. As previously mentioned, Heather Craven suggests that making classroom goals will strengthen individuals in the classroom.

“3.) Make Goals-I believe that classroom communities function best with common goals. Just as individual goals can motivate students, planning group goals can also give students the ability to contribute their own ideas and perspectives which will benefit the class as a whole (Classroom Community: Building a Solid Foundation, Located at <http://www.inspiringteachers.com/articles/beginning/community.htm>. April 2005).”

So it was decided that the intervention would be a collaborative effort involving each of the students in the classroom.

Intervention:

Student Star and Kindness Can are the two group projects that I initiated and implemented to build community amongst all students in the classroom.

The Student Star is the *secret* classroom friend; qualities of the student star include: kindness, friendship, caring, politeness etc. At the beginning of each day a foam star is pulled from the student star bin. That foam star simply has a number on it; the students are unaware of who the secret person is, it could be anyone! Ideally, all students will demonstrate exemplarily behavior, especially in the areas of kindness and friendship in attempt to be recognized as secret student star at the conclusion of the day.

Upon the closing of the day, the students in the classroom gather together in a circle. I discuss with the children the wonderful qualities that I saw the student star demonstrate on that specific day, and then I announce who the student star was. The child who was the secret student star has his or her name placed on a large star and then displayed on a corkboard for the entirety of the following day.

When a child is deemed student star, they are bestowed specific privileges. The following day, that child chooses and participates in special activities. Examples of these activities are:

1. The child may add a tally to the daily number chart.

2. The child chooses the language in which the morning greeting will be said.
3. The child chooses a community building game to play as a group.
4. He or she is presented with extra sharing time.
5. The student star is also the line leader when the children must walk to and from a location.

Thus far, the activities and privileges of the student star appear to be individually oriented. However, group goals are also emphasized. Upon the completion of the day as student star, the child's name (written on a large star) is moved from the corkboard and hung from a chain on the ceiling. The children are all eager to have the names added to the ceiling chain because when the chain of stars touches the floor, the entire class receives a special prize. This is a direct correlation between individual and collaborative efforts.

Sometimes the child who was being watched did not demonstrate the desired "student star" qualities for the day. In that for instance, the children in the classroom are informed that the student star did not demonstrate the qualities that a good school friend should; but the name of that student is not revealed to the rest of the class. However, I do make it a point to tell the particular child in private that they were the secret star and discuss why they thought they might not have earned the special privilege that day. After

discussing this with the individual child, it was important to emphasize that he or she will receive another chance. He or she is given motivation to try harder and again!

As a whole, the students are generally excited about the student star and student star chain. They are working hard *together* to earn special prizes as the classroom community is strengthened.

Not only is a good school friend somebody who is nice to others, he/she is somebody that makes others feel good about themselves too. I believe that compliments are hard to come by these days! I have introduced my students to compliments at morning meeting. The students are encouraged to turn toward their neighbor and tell them something that they like about them. Ideally, this serves for a warm up for a day of kindness towards each other. After morning meeting, kindnesses can be acknowledged by use of the Kindness Can. When a student is “caught” doing something kind, the can serves as a means of acknowledgment. The student, who “caught” someone else performing a kind act, simply writes down that child’s name and the action and places it in the Kindness Can. At the end of the day the kindness can is emptied and read aloud.

The students who were kind are recognized and rewarded a small star to place their initials on. The small stars can then be added to the ceiling chain of secret stars to make the chain grow longer. As previously mentioned, the chain

is a collaborative effort between all of the students in the class to reach one common goal.

Most of the students are very proud of their accomplishments and remind one another on a daily basis to be good friends and grow the chain!

Several of the students in the classroom have remained somewhat unaffected by the individual and group goals. These particular students have yet to receive the privilege of Secret Student Star and rarely are recognized for acts of kindness that they may have demonstrated. These students appear to be somewhat cynical of the interventions; however students thoroughly enjoy partaking of the classroom reward when the collaborative goal is reached.

It can be noted that the four students who were directly involved with 86% of the conflict in the classroom have not been rewarded the privilege of the student star. When specific incidents that demonstrate negative classroom friend behavior are pointed out, the student typically is defensive and claims, "not to care".

The parents of the four students who continue to have negative interactions with the remaining children in the classroom have all been notified of the negative behavior. Suggestions for improvement of behavior were requested, however changes in attitude typically last for several hours, if at all. The children of whom the conflict typically revolves around have extremely

strong personalities. Many classrooms contain one student who may have difficulties interacting with other children; my classroom in particular has four!

In attempt to dissolve some of the conflict that the four students have with the majority of children in the classroom, I chose to create a unique seating chart. The seating chart does not necessarily solve the problem per say, however it confines it to a smaller portion of the classroom. Instead of spreading the conflicting students throughout the class, I chose to place them all at the same set of four desks. Although that particular set has its share of arguments, the remaining sets appear to be much more peaceful. (See appendix F)

The Kindness Can and Secret Student Star are group activities to promote community; however the students must also learn to deal with their emotions as well. Conflict resolution activities such as books and "I messages" were two of the tools that were implemented or further elaborated on.

The children had the opportunity to hear a multitude of read-aloud books that dealt with conflict resolution. After the books were read, often the children had a chance to share their ideas or apply their knew found knowledge during worksheets or simulation activities, such as "I messages".

"I messages" allow the children in the classroom to address their feelings in a universal way. The children are prompted to face the peer and tell them how the situation is making them feel. Example:

"I feel angry when you call me Pinky. I want you to call me by my real name."

Claims and Evidence:

Claim A: Setting group goals encourage the students in the classroom to interact *more* respectfully with one another.

Evidence 1: Secret Student Star – The majority of the boys and girls in the classroom have worked collaboratively to be better classroom friends; thus resulting in the growth of the classroom student star chain.

Evidence 2: Kindness Can – The majority of the boys and girls in the classroom have received acknowledgement or recognized another student who has done something kind for a peer in the classroom. Small stars have been passed out and added to the chain, resulting in the growth of the classroom student star chain.

Evidence 3: The student star chain has touched the ground twice since the intervention has been implemented, resulting in two, well deserved classroom rewards.

Evidence 4: Student Survey – Do you think the Kindness Can and Student Star help the boys and girls in our classroom remember how to treat each other?

- 72% of the student in the classroom agreed that the boys and girls in classroom get along better post intervention. (See Appendix E)

Claim B: The students demonstrate disrespectful interactions with their peers typically during unstructured time.

Evidence 1: When anecdotal notes were taken prior to the intervention, over 60% of the instances occurred during transition or free time. (See Appendix C)

Claim C: The second grade students are more prone to showing the undesired behavior more than first grade students.

Evidence 1: When anecdotal notes were taken prior to the intervention, it can be noted that conflict was initiated by four specific second grade children in the classroom 86% of the time. One of these four students initiated conflict 51% of the time. The remaining seventeen children in the class (ten of which were second graders) had a mere 14% of the conflict split between them.

Evidence 2: Initial Student Survey Question Number One: How well do you think the boys and girls in our classroom get along?

- 42% of the students in the classroom initially thought that the boys and girls in the classroom usually get along.
- 58% of the students in the classroom initially thought that the boys and girls in the classroom do not usually get along.

Evidence 3: Initial Student Survey Question Number Two: Do you think that you get along with everyone?

- 72% percent of the boys and girls in the classroom initially felt that they got along with everyone in the classroom.
- 28% of the boys and girls in the classroom initially felt that they did not get along with everyone.

***** Evidence 4:** Initial Student Survey Question Number Three: Do you think the first graders or the second graders get along the best?

- 90% of the boys and girls in the classroom initially felt that the first graders got along the best.
- 10% of the boys and girls in the classroom initially felt that the second graders got along the best.

Claim D: Tools such as books and “I messages” can be used as strategies to aid conflict resolution.

Evidence 1: As noted in post intervention anecdotal notes, “I-messages” were used to aid in conflict resolution approximately 30% more often.

Evidence 2: Student activities used as a follow up to conflict resolution read-alouds have demonstrated student comprehension of techniques useful for future situations.

I believe that the students in my classroom have benefited from the increase in activities promoting community in the classroom. I do not think that the intervention was necessarily “cure-all”, but there has been a significant and positive increase in the behavior of the *majority*, but not all of the students in the classroom.

Future Practice:

“Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success.” (Henry Ford) This quote undoubtedly articulates the reason for, and the effect of, community building in the classroom. A strong classroom is one that works together for the success of each of its students; working together begins by coming together, not as individuals, but as one whole. For it is only at the beginning that we can come together, point in the same direction, and focus on one common goal.

I believe that community building starts at the beginning of the year and continues throughout its entirety. Instilling each individual student with a sense of purpose and belonging is critical. Demonstrating conflict resolution through literature in the classroom and peer conferencing is something that will be

continued for years to come in my future classrooms. Setting group goals and encouraging kindness and friendship will carry on as well.

I do believe that is important to remember, that just as each child is unique, so is each class. Some years, the sense of community amongst the students will be stronger than others, but is imperative to never abandon the concept; instilling the concept of community in children is something they will carry with them through life.

New Wonderings:

As this paper ends, my personal community-building investigation will continue. New methods and research are continually emerging each day with new opportunities for growth in the areas of community building and conflict resolution. If I were to delve further into this inquiry, one particular question would be on my mind: How does the relationship that the students have with their family members affect their conflict resolution techniques, resulting in their ability to befriend peers at school?

Appendix A

Community Building Activities (Some were taken from The Morning Meeting Book by Roxann Kriete):

1. **Student Star** – one child is chosen as the special school friend daily; child assumes special responsibilities and privileges.
2. **Kindness Can** – kind words and actions are written down and placed in a can to be read at the closure of a day.
3. **Morning Greetings** – students greet one another using language and a handshake each morning.
4. **Good Morning Song** – children greet their neighbors with a morning song.
5. **Back to Back** – game that permits children to reveal details about themselves; other children in the classroom use prior knowledge of classmates to make guesses about the child revealing the clues.
6. **Change Three Things** – one child stands in the middle of a circle and allows the remaining children to study them; child leaves the classroom and returns with three things changed. Classmates must be observant to notice the changes.
7. **Morning Compliments** – compliments are passed around the circle; compliments may be physical or characteristic.
8. **Zoom** – game in which the children in the classroom work together to pass a sound around the circle.
9. **Hot/Cold** – twenty questions game; children must ask questions to determine who the secret child in the classroom is. Children must know information about their peers.
10. **Clapping Names** – students practice syllables by greeting one another and clapping names.

Appendix B

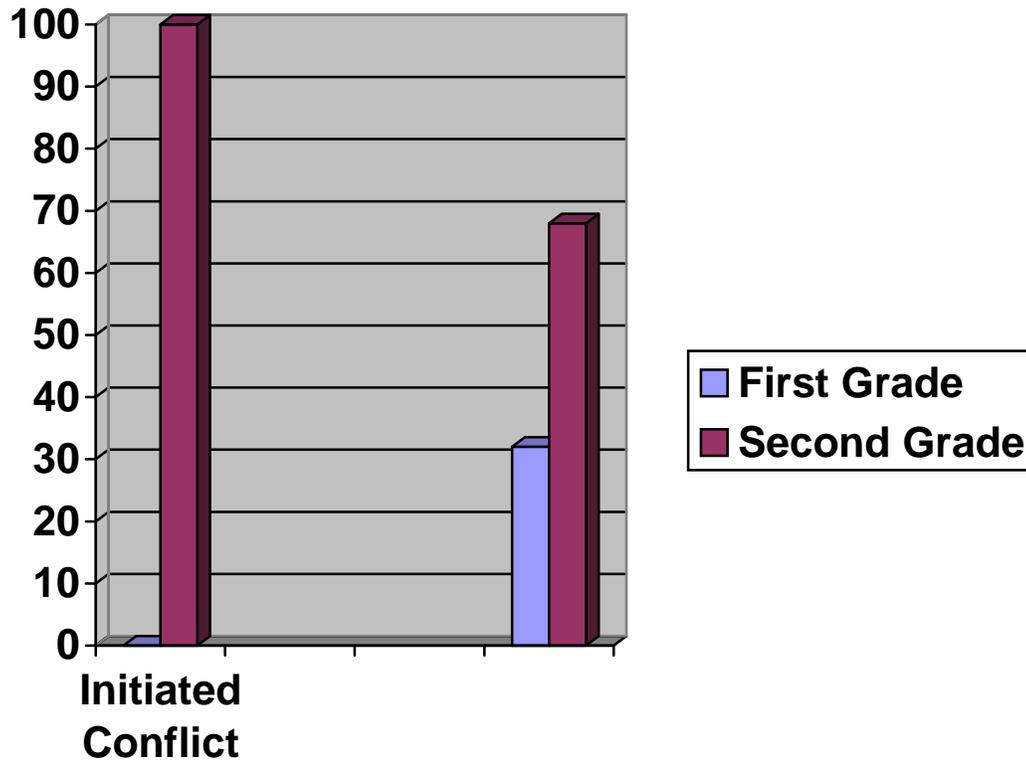
Trade Books Used As Read Alouds (Recommended in Teaching Conflict Resolution Through Children's Literature):

1. Tyrone the Dirty Rotten Cheater
2. Spinky Sulks
3. Elbert's Bad Word
4. Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day (See Attached Worksheet)
5. The Grouchy Lady Bug (See Attached Worksheet)
6. If I Had a Hundred Dollars
7. Clive Eats Alligators
8. All the Animals Were Angry
9. Oliver Button Is A Sissy
10. Frederick
11. Chicken Sunday (See Attached Worksheet)

- See attached worksheets for examples of follow up work, emphasizing conflict resolution.

Appendix C

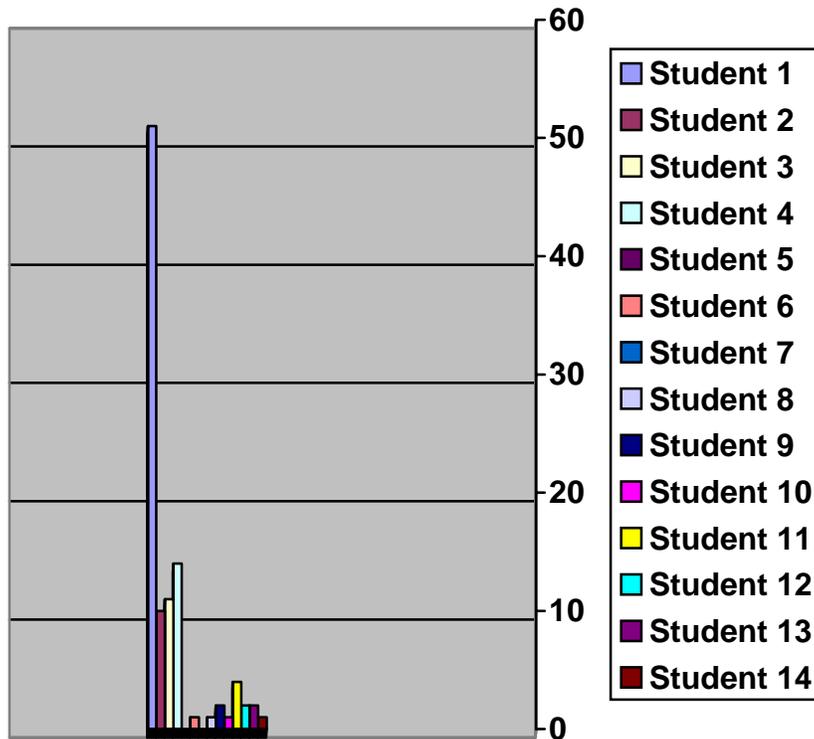
Student Conflict Involvement



- As indicated in the chart above, the second graders in the classroom initiated 100% of the conflict.
- As indicated in the chart above, the second graders in the classroom were involved in 68% of the classroom conflict and the first graders were involved in 32% of the classroom conflict.

Second Grade Students Conflict Involvement Initiation and/or Participation

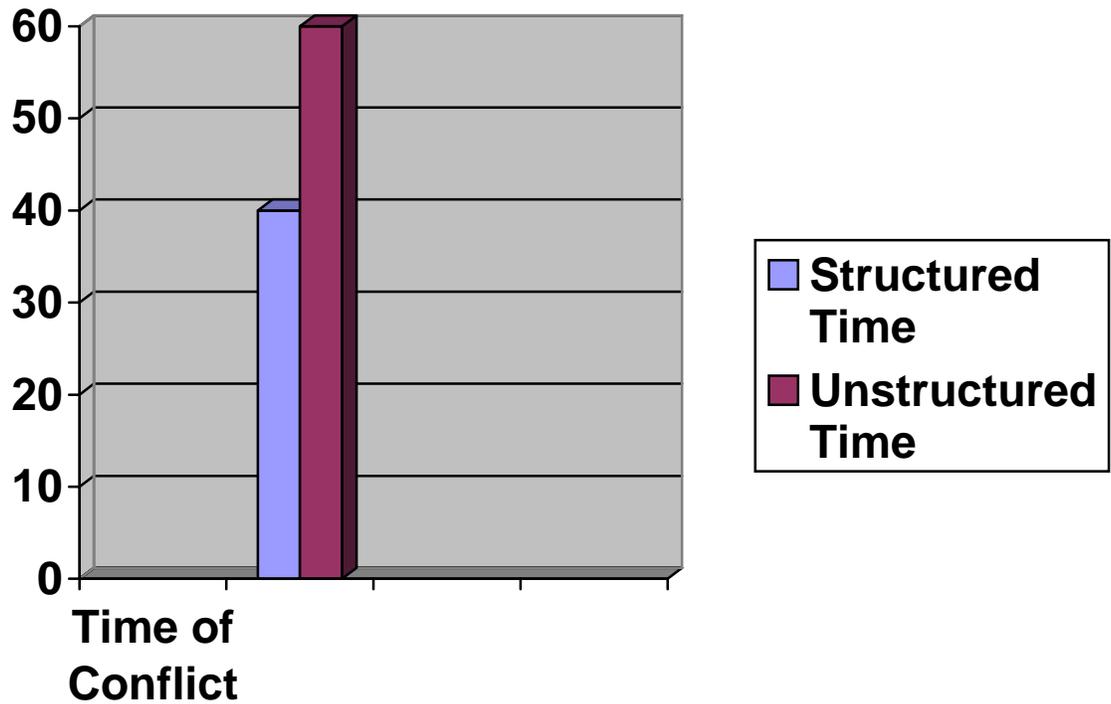
(Number located on graph represents the percent of time.)



Conflict Involvement

- As indicated on the chart above, the percent of second grade children's involvement in conflict ranges from 51% to 0% among the students.

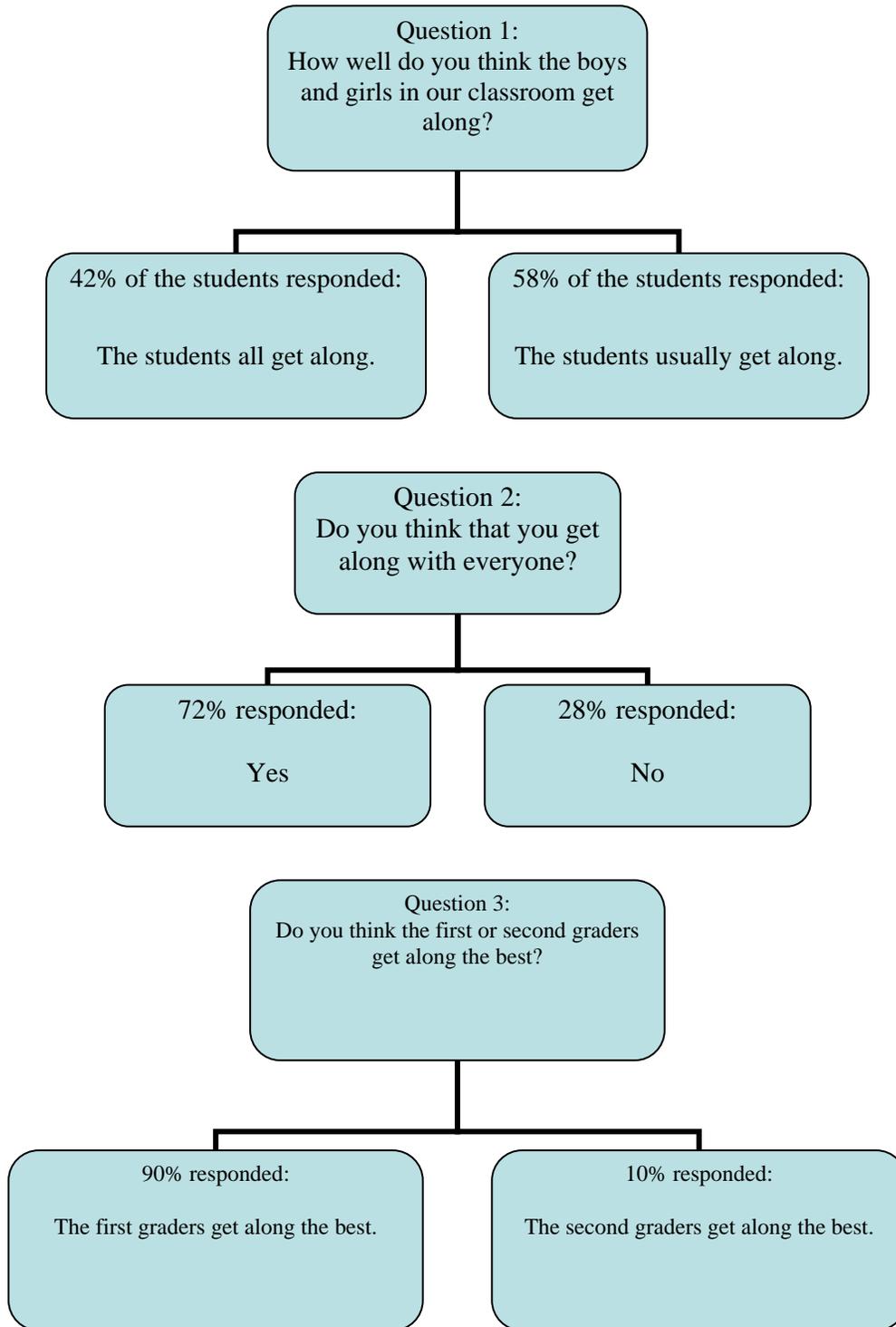
Conflict During Structured vs. Unstructured Time



- As indicated on the chart above, 60% of the conflict occurs during unstructured time.
- Unstructured time is defined as: morning arrival, recess, lunch etc.

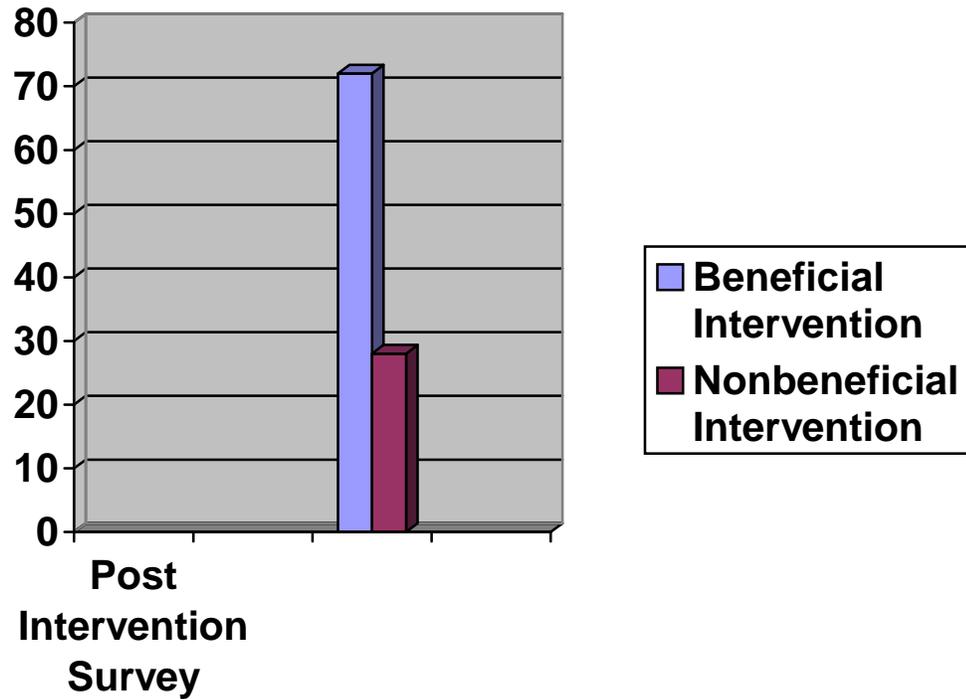
- See attachment for examples of data collection sheet.
- Sheets were created to collect evidence and later used to create aforementioned graphs.

Appendix D



Appendix E:

Post Intervention Survey



- As noted above, 72% of the students felt as though the intervention was successful. 28% of the students did not see the benefit of the intervention.
- See attached survey for examples.

Appendix F

Seating Chart:

Red = First Grade

Blue = Second Grade

Green = Second Grade "Repeat Offenders"

