

# **Improving Social Skills and Making Friends in the Intermediate Grades**



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**Abstract:** Friendships are one of the most important aspects of the educational experience. What do you do as a teacher when students in your classroom lack those necessary skills to create long lasting and meaningful friendships? How can we as teachers help these students to improve their educational and personal career? This inquiry explores what strategies can be used to understand friendless students and to help their peers understand them as well.

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## **Background Information**

### **Teaching Context:**

In my classroom at Park Forest Elementary School, I have twenty-three third and fourth grade students. Eleven of the students are in third grade and twelve are in fourth grade. This makes for a variety of intellectual and social levels. Twenty of the students are White, one is Asian, and two are bi-racial (White and African American). About twenty-one of my students are from a well-to-do middle class socioeconomic background. Two of my students are from homes of a lower socioeconomic status.

Six of the fourth graders are incredibly intelligent and are placed in the advanced reading group. They occasionally receive enrichment in mathematics as well. Eleven of the students are at an average level in all subjects. The other six students are struggling in the educational setting. They are placed in a lower level reading group and receive extra attention from the teachers in the classroom. Two of these students have an individualized education program (I.E.P.) and go to learning support every day for about forty minutes. One of these students has been diagnosed with pervasive development disorder (P.D.D.).

Two of the students I focus on in my inquiry project are in fourth grade and in the advanced reading group. One of these students has recently been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome and the other student shows signs of this condition. The third student is in third grade and is one of two who has been placed in learning support and has an IEP. He is one of the two bi-racial students and from what I have heard from his mother and prior teachers, has had trouble fitting in since he entered school in kindergarten. The fourth student is an average third grader but seems to enjoy aggravating his peers. He budes in line, yells, and dismisses his peers and me. From talks with his parents, my mentor and I have come to the conclusion that the parents

view things differently. They believe that it is not his fault that he has anger and social issues; it is the fault of the students who provoke and anger him.

### **Inquiry Rationale:**

In elementary school and specifically throughout the intermediate grades, friendships are important. Students develop their social skills through interactions with their peers. In primary grades, students are taught how to use “I-messages” to express how they feel. In the intermediate and upper intermediate grades, students are encouraged to express their opinions about what classroom rules should be instituted, including how to treat and respect their teachers and peers. I notice in my classroom that nineteen out of the twenty-three students have a variety of friends in and out of our homeroom classroom. Four of my students however, are struggling with making and keeping friends and/or do not seem to mind that they do not have friends at all. I worry for these students, especially those that are having trouble maintaining friendships that they will suffer in the upcoming middle and high school years. They appear to yearn to be accepted by their peers although they are struggling. Having already gone through the middle and high school years, I know or can assume what kind of people these students will encounter in the upper grades. Through this inquiry project, I hope to understand these students and why they are not as socially accepted as their peers. I also hope to help these students and the class in general to develop social skills that may prove important in their upcoming school years.

By engaging in this inquiry project, I will understand the process of inquiry and will be able to use this knowledge in the future. Educators do not have a handbook for how to solve each and every problem in the elementary school setting and each and every class is different. As a result of this, we must understand how to solve problems on our own. In my future classroom, I

can assume that I will encounter problems based on friendships and will be able to refer to this project and how my students have reacted to my interventions. Friendships and social skills are important for youth and should be included in the curriculum throughout the intermediate grades. “As a rule, we do not systematically teach children how to understand and get along with other people. However, since social skills are fundamental to success in life, and are learned behaviors, children should be consistently and developmentally taught these important skills” (Palomares and Schilling, 1997). As this quote suggests, children must develop appropriate social skills not just for social reasons in the elementary school but also throughout life. I hope to understand my students and their relationships to others through this project as well as improve upon my role as a teacher.

### **Wonderings and Questions:**

Through observing my class and recording notes and wonderings, I have concluded that friendships, particularly the friendships of these four particular students, pose interesting questions for inquiry. My main question is: “Why are some children having difficulty developing and maintaining friendships, and what do I observe that seems problematic about their behavior? How can I assist them in developing and maintaining friendships? The following are my sub-questions for my inquiry:

~ Do these students have any real relationships with peers outside of school and if so, how did those friendships develop?

~ Did these students have friends in school during previous years and if so why have things changed?

~ Have previous teachers had success helping these students develop more positive interactions and if so what strategies did they use?

~ How often are these students engaging in activities/conversations with their peers and when they do how do the other students react? What valuable information might the other students provide about these students?

~ What are their interactions like during recess/free-time/specials activities?

~ Which of their peers do these students tend to sit by and why? Do they always sit by these students and how do the chosen students react?

By investigating these questions, I hope to understand my students and their relationships with others. Whether I am able to successfully help the students make and maintain friendships or not, I hope to understand why these students struggle and why their peers are not responsive to their efforts in creating and maintaining bonds.

### **Inquiry vs. Improvement Project:**

Since the beginning of the school year, I have been observing students in my classroom and how they interact with each other and with me. I had noticed a handful of students who were not engaged at all times, did not always want to work cooperatively, and were also teased by fellow classmates. They have many differences in their personalities although they all share one common bond: none of them have any good friends. I began wondering how this lack of friendship could be affecting other areas of their lives and more importantly how their life would be in the future if this continued. I wondered how I could understand these students who will not open up to me and consistently get shut down when they open up to others. I want to help these

students and their peers understand each other and possibly accept each other more as well. Most importantly, my observations have helped me understand what kinds of characteristics these students possess and why their peers have decided not to interact and befriend them. I hope to help these students and make them more accepted by their peers, although, more importantly I want to understand why they behave the way they do today. I want to encourage students to accept everyone. As an insider in the classroom and the teacher researcher of this project, I look forward to learning about these students and what makes them the people they are today.

## **Inquiry Process**

### **Inquiry Plan:**

In order to begin the inquiry project, I decided to observe all of my students, particularly my four focus students, in a variety of social situations. I needed to understand what social skills the students were struggling with and why they were having trouble fitting in with their peers and making friends. The observations I made reinforced my opinion that there were four students in the class who have trouble making and keeping friends. I also noticed that many of the other students were not making an effort in return to befriend these students. When I felt as if I understood these students and their present social skills, I went onto the next step.

Two of my four focus students had a second grade teacher I could contact within the elementary school. I decided to interview these teachers in order to learn more about my students and their social skills from last year. I planned to ask ten different questions of the teachers each question having to do with a different social skill, the amount of friends these students had last year, and any intervention they may have used last year. I planned to use this knowledge to help

me better understand the students and possibly come up with some new interventions or reinstate interventions that have previously worked.

In order to learn more about how the students feel about themselves socially, I gave each student a survey. The survey asked the students questions about what they enjoy doing in and out of school and exactly how many friends they have currently. I wanted to gain an understanding of not just what I saw as their teacher but also how they felt about themselves. I felt that if the students had negative feelings towards making friends, then this would result in these students not trying as hard socially because they assumed they would fail. Once I received these results, I moved onto my interventions and how I could help myself and the students learn more about each other socially.

In reading through a text called, *Social Skills Activities for the Elementary Grades* by Palomares and Schilling (1997), I learned about sharing circles. According to the text, a sharing circle can be an effective way to teach students social skills. “The sharing circle brings out and affirms the positive qualities inherent in everyone and allows children to practice effective modes of communication. Through regular practice and reinforcement, children internalize effective interpersonal skills and are then able to transfer those skills to other situations” (p. 2). Using this information, I chose to introduce the sharing circle to the students in my class. I hoped to have about two sharing circles per week focusing on some of the social skills I hoped to improve in the classroom as well as the social skills I felt my four focus students needed to strengthen.

Once I knew exactly what strategy I wanted to use with my students, I needed to come up with a variety of topics to introduce to them. In order to figure this out, I began analyzing the observations I took as well as making new observations. I eventually decided upon three

different circles: How do you make and keep new friends? How do you cope when working with a classmate that you do not necessarily like? How do you feel when you are wrongfully blamed? These three topics were chosen not only for the four focus students, but also for the entire class who also needed to work on improving their social skills. The first day I introduced the sharing circle, I had the students sit in a circle. I explained to them that for a school project, I was attempting to come up with some new ways to improve our classroom environment. Following are a few guidelines I set for the students when participating in the sharing circle: 1. Share only if you want to, 2. You must be holding the sharing object to share, 3. Do not discuss anything that has occurred in our classroom this year, 4. Do not name anybody. Once the guidelines were set, we began having regular sharing circles.

Once my students were comfortable being a part of a sharing circle, I decided to institute a sharing box. Students could use this box to request new topics for the sharing circle anonymously. I wanted the students to feel comfortable sharing topics that were a concern for them and know that they were in a safe environment where no one was going to judge them or make fun of them.

While the sharing circles were being instituted in the classroom, I began taking observations based on how the students were responding to the circles. I wanted to see if any of the strategies we discussed while in the circle were being used in various situations. When I did see them used, I would commend the students at the next circle and state that I was thrilled to see the students using our strategies and would comment on strategies I saw in action.

Finally, I was interested in learning how the students' social skills had progressed through the implementation of social circles and the encouragement of my mentor and me. I

handed out a final survey asking questions about the effectiveness of the circles, any new concerns they had, and a variety of other questions to help me analyze my intervention.

With the support of my mentor, I was able to implement nearly everything I had planned. I engaged the students in six different sharing circles, made a variety of observations, spoke directly with the students about their social skills on a daily basis, and administered two surveys. In doing so, I hoped to be able to help my students learn more about themselves and each other in terms of their social skills.

#### **Data Collection:**

In coming to a final conclusion about what my inquiry wondering would be, I began collecting baseline data about the four particular students I was interested in learning more about. In observing these four students, I was also observing the other students in their relations with these particular children on a daily basis. Nearly every day, I wrote down on my computer different situations in which these four students were involved. I would write quick notes about how the students had interacted with their peers. These notes supported my perspective that these four students need assistance in developing social skills, as they did not often have positive interactions with their peers or, in some cases, adults in the classroom. These students' peers have already developed the social skills necessary to make, keep, and relate to friends while these students are still struggling. Erwin (1993) states that, "relating to another requires an ability to transmit and receive information. As there are considerable developmental and individual differences in children's communication knowledge and ability, it is not surprising that this has

been given substantial attention as a factor in establishing and maintaining peer relationships” (p. 99).

To begin my inquiry, I passed out a student survey to 22 of my 23 students. (Appendix A) One student was absent this day. I explained to the students that I was beginning a project that would provide me with information on how I could help to make their time in our classroom better. The survey consisted of 3 multiple-choice questions and 4 short answer questions. I hoped to gain insight on how my students feel about coming to school and the friendships they have formed while at school. In particular, I wanted to learn about my four students. I asked the students not to write their names on the survey although I am familiar with their handwriting and was able to pick out which survey belonged to each student. This provided me with some perspective on how the students feel about their relationships with their peers and what activities interest them, which would help me learn what common interests certain students’ share. I particularly wanted to look into my four focus students’ surveys. (Appendix B)

Soon after the students took my survey and after collecting many observations, I began to get a good idea of what students could potentially be friends with my four students or at least make them feel more comfortable coming to school. My mentor gave me the opportunity to create the seating chart for the next couple of weeks. I created the seating chart using the data I collected and my observations and placed the students according to who would provide some type of friendship for the four students I was targeting. I took note of how the four were now interacting with this new set of neighbors and began making new observations.

In order to learn more about two of my students, I met with the teachers they had in second grade. These two students attended Park Forest Elementary School while the other two came new to us from other schools. I wanted to find out more information about these students

and what kinds of social skills they had last year. I made a list of about ten questions to ask their teachers. I gained great insight from these interviews about these two students.

This same week, I implemented a sharing circle with the students. In the sharing circle, the students come together and answer a question I present to them that focuses on social skills. Everyone gets a chance to answer the question and express his or her opinions. When the students are not answering the question, they are to be listening to their peers and learning about what common ideas they share about certain topics and how they react to different situations. While the students were sharing, I took notes on some of the common ideas I heard. To conclude the sharing circle, we would discuss some different strategies we could use to solve social problems in our classroom. Some of the questions and ideas discussed were about making and keeping friends and what to do when working with people who are not your friends. In total, we had six sharing circles and intend to continue for as long as the students find it beneficial.

Along with the sharing circles, I began a sharing box. Whenever students were upset about something in the classroom and wanted to discuss the topic with me or with their peers in the sharing circle, they would put the topic in the box and I would present the topic to the students during the next circle. The various suggestions in the box were important to me in learning the different social concerns my students expressed. In sharing their concerns with their peers, the students were able to understand all the different perspectives on this particular topic. Student suggestions included name-calling and bossing others around.

The last week of inquiry observations, I gave my students a worksheet asking them to react to the six sharing circles that we had. I asked them a variety of open-ended questions in hopes of learning what, if anything, they learned about themselves and their peers in being a part of this activity.

Throughout the month and a half, I took observations of the students and any improvements they may have had socially. I also began to research students with Asperger's Syndrome in an effort to learn more about how this problem can affect students socially. According to Brenda Smith Myles (2005), "children and youth with AS manifest severe social challenges that affect them daily in home, school, and community. Due to wide-ranging and often lifelong effects of these challenges, it is essential that these individuals receive multifaceted interventions that include social skills instruction" (p. 106). With this in mind, I began a new intervention. I began to converse with my two students with Asperger's Syndrome in an effort to teach them how to speak conversationally and apply the social skills we had discussed during our sharing circles. I learned through research that coaching students could be a great way to help Asperger's children develop their social skills specifically helping the students learn how to use daily conversation. Myles (2005) says, "Beginning and maintaining a conversation requires a high degree of social skill and flexibility – two areas in which children and youth with AS have challenges. Although they want to interact with peers, some students with AS do not know what to talk about" (p. 105). I began to make conversations with the students in hopes that these two students would pick up on some great ideas and topics for when they were interacting with their peers. I was hoping this would help them talk with their peers but also I hoped to learn more about them in general. I began this the last week of inquiry and recorded observations about our conversations as well. I hoped that these minor, not so obvious interventions would help these students blend into the classroom a little bit more.

**Data Analysis:**

The first analysis I performed was looking through my observations to understand the different social skills my students, four in particular, use in their daily interactions with their peers. I needed to understand what they do, and why, in order to help these students blend in with their peers and form long-lasting friendships. I wrote observations whenever I saw something that stood out to me about these four students. I understood prior to making these observations that one of these students has Asperger's syndrome, one has Asperger's syndrome tendencies, one has pervasive development disorder, and the final one has had a variety of social problems since kindergarten. From looking through my observations, I noticed that one of these students who we will call Student A tended to stay away from her peers. She did not interact; rather she sat alone and read a book during any kind of free time including recess. Both Student B and C talked to their peers. They would often talk over other students and follow around certain students at times. They would talk at inappropriate times during instruction. Often, during any kind of circle time, they would try to fit in places at the carpet where they most definitely could not fit. Student D argued often with most of the students. Many students came to me and would complain about the constant budging saying, "Miss Delevie, please don't let \*\*\*\* budge in line!" According to the observations I took, this student interacted positively with only one student throughout a given day. This student attempted to get away from Student D when Student D began walking towards him. He would ask me to not be partnered with Student D. From my beginning observations, it appeared that this student wanted nothing to do with Student D. This information showed me that all four of my students needed a focused lesson on how to interact with peers. After much thinking, I thought that it might be beneficial to have their peers

teach them how to interact in different social settings. A sharing circle would be a great way to share these social skills.

After making my base-line observations, I gave all of the students a survey in order to learn more about what they found enjoyable about school and what they like to do on their free time. I also included a question about how many friends the students believe they have. In order to analyze this data, I first separated the surveys into two piles. One pile included the students who consider themselves to have four or more “good friends.” The other pile included the students who said that they have less than four friends. I scanned the pile of “4 or more” friends for the four students I am focusing my inquiry on. Three of them circled that they have more than four good friends. (The fourth student was the one that was absent.) The next part of the survey I focused on was question 3: “Do you enjoy coming to school?” Every single one of the students answered yes to this question. Some of the students included why they enjoy coming to school. I received answers such as “I get to have fun and learn” and “[You get to] play with your friends. Do cool stuff.” Three of the answers had to do with enjoying when I teach. This led me to believe that, because they knew this was a school assignment, they wanted me to do well and therefore included that I am an “awesome intern.” They may have not been entirely truthful because of my explanation that this is a school assignment for me. I kept this in mind when designing my final survey. The next step I took in analyzing the survey was separating the papers into piles based on what the students “favorite part of the day” is and why. All of the students but six wrote down that either recess or after school or lunch is their favorite part of the day. I kept these three times together because they are all non-instructional parts of the day. Within this group, I looked for the four students in particular that I was targeting. Student C was the only one who wrote that recess is his favorite time of the day. He wrote, “Recess because you get to play

games and play on the play ground.” I used this information to observe him while playing during recess. He did often play with one student in particular. He would play basketball or run around the schoolyard. The final part of the survey I analyzed was question four. This question asked students what their favorite subject is and why. I included academic subjects such as writing and reading but also included specials where the students have a different instructor. In order to analyze this data, I separated student responses into academic subjects and specials. About half of the students selected academic subjects as their favorite and about half selected specials. Four students selected multiple subjects that fit into both categories. Three of these students were my focus students. Student A expressed that she liked all of the subjects because, “I just like them, I can’t say why.” Student B wrote, “I like all of them because school is the most funnest thing in the world.” Finally, Student C wrote that he chose nearly all of the subjects “because they are all cool.” I analyzed this data, as it was important in understanding where and what subjects the students’ feel most comfortable with. I also wanted to see if friendships and interactions with peers made any difference in a student’s favorite subject. I wondered if in the subjects where the students do not have a seating assignment, they enjoy the subject more because they may sit by their friends. All of the information collected through this survey helped me understand what is important to the students in regards to school life.

Once I completed the student surveys, I approached two of my students’ prior teachers to learn more about how they acted socially last year in the second grade. Student C and Student D were the students whose teachers I was able to interview. I asked the same questions to both of the teachers and a variety of new questions depending upon their answers. I learned a great deal about Student C and Student D in regards to their interactions with their peers and their teachers last year. In order to analyze this data, I looked at the notes I took during both of the interviews. I

had a list of questions I asked both of the teachers and my notes centered around these questions. I answered these questions for each student based upon my experiences with them so far this year. By having the teachers' answers from last year and my answers from this year, I was able to compare the students' behaviors easily. I analyzed the data this way with the intention of seeing if there was any change in my students' behaviors from last year to this year. Anything that stuck out as a major change was circled while anything that appeared to have remained the same from last year to this year was underlined. In analyzing this data, I gained great insight into what strategies have already been used with these students and whether or not they were successful. Through these interviews, I learned that Student D had very similar interactions with his peers last year. They often complained about his behaviors. His teacher ended up instituting a behavior plan in an effort to improve his behavior and relationships with his peers. It was interesting to see that his interactions with peers last year almost mirror his reactions this year. In regards to Student C, I found that he was in a multi-age class last year. He was a second grader surrounded by first graders. He enjoyed helping out and being a big-brother figure to the younger students. Unfortunately, this year he is on the younger side of the multi-age class and therefore does not have students to mentor and help out. I could not use this strategy to help Student C out in my classroom.

After collecting all of my base-line data, I began to think of ways to help my students, particularly the four who have been struggling, in making and keeping friends in the classroom. After much thought and research, I came to the conclusion that it would be best for students to learn about social skills and how to fit in with the rest of the students by being taught directly by their peers. In hearing their peers' perspectives on social issues, they would understand how to deal in certain situations appropriately. It would hopefully be more powerful and effective

coming from their peers rather than coming from just me as their teacher. I decided to implement a sharing circle. In my research, I learned the various benefits of implementing a sharing circle. Palomares and Schilling (1997) state, “One of the great benefits of the Sharing Circle is that it does not merely teach young people about social interaction, it lets them interact. As they interact, they learn about each other and they realize what it takes to relate effectively to others” (p. 2). In the fifteen or twenty minute circle, the students would respond to a prompt I would give them. I provided them with guidelines about the sharing circle including the following: share only if you like; when telling about an experience, do not name people; only share when you are holding the sharing object; respect everyone; and listen. During the sharing circle, I took notes about what the students were saying. At the end of the circle, we would come up with a series of strategies about how to improve the social skill we have focused on throughout that day’s circle. Later that day, I would look through the notes I wrote and analyze what the students said. I would take note of problems or experiences the students shared that directly relate to our classroom. I would circle these ideas and see how they related to the strategies we came up with at the end of the circle. The strategies I thought would be most effective and possible would then be starred. I would next create a list of strategies for this topic and record them on a white sheet of paper mounted on a piece of construction paper. This was then attached to the “Sharing Guidelines” poster and placed on the whiteboard for the students to see. I did this with the hopes that, if students were put in a position such as what to do when you are working with a partner you do not want to work with, they can look up at the strategies we listed and solve the problem in a calm and appropriate manner. In observing the students after the sharing circles, I would particularly look at how the students dealt with problems addressed during the circle. I noticed many students acting more appropriately when placed with a partner they did not like. They

would not groan or make upsetting comments but accept their position. I also noticed that students would approach me more often to discuss times when they thought they may have been wrongfully blamed (a sharing circle topic) throughout the day. They knew I would listen and care. I recognized that I was not necessarily having my students engage in the sharing circles in an effort to make best friendships but rather to form bonds with the peers who might have a common interest and to improve upon situations that may upset them during the school day. This opinion was reinforced by Erwin (1993) who suggested, "Skills training may be better at improving levels of acceptance rather than friendship, at making children more acceptable acquaintances or 'other friends' rather than best friends" (p. 227).

The sharing box was created in the hopes that the students would share any concerns they had about the classroom with me. They were to write on a slip of paper any concerns they had or any suggestions they had for a sharing circle. I implemented the box during the second sharing circle. I received a handful of suggestions from the students on circle topics. These students wrote anonymously although I was aware of who wrote which slip because I know my students' handwriting. My four focus students did not request any topics. I was somewhat surprised by this although I suppose they do not see themselves as socially inept. I used these suggestions in subsequent sharing circles in the hopes that these students would develop strategies for how to deal in these situations.

Throughout the entire length of the inquiry project, I made observations about the students and how they interact socially. At first I was only focusing on the four students in particular although as I continued my project, I realized that social issues are a concern for many of the students in the class, not just those four. Before I began a sharing circle I would reflect upon these observations. I would pull them up on my computer and focus on the different

concerns I had about the students interacting with each other. In doing so, I decided to bring the topic of “a time someone ruined it for everyone” to the circle. I had noticed through my observations that some of the students were upset when the class would owe five minutes for recess because they had not done anything wrong. I wanted the students to come up with some ideas for how to solve this problem. I also introduced the topic of name-calling based on a request in the sharing box and observations that at least one of my students was using an inappropriate nickname for his peer. My observations and the sharing circles often went hand-in-hand.

Finally, at the end of my project, I handed out another student worksheet. This worksheet asked the students to respond to the sharing circles and if they were beneficial (Appendix C). It also asked the students to answer if they consider themselves to be a good friend. One question asked students how they feel when they are left out. The other question asked for any additional concerns the students have about their social relationships. Many of the students chose not to answer the open-ended questions. I allowed them to skip questions as they were allowed to “pass” during the sharing circle and I told them to follow the sharing circle guidelines when completing this survey. Everyone responded to the question asking, “Did you enjoy the sharing circles and would you like them to continue?” Twenty-one of the twenty-three students said they enjoyed the sharing circles. One of the two students who answered no to this question was one of my four focus students. This survey as well as the student reactions when I told the students we were going to have another sharing circle displayed to me that the students truly did enjoy voicing and sharing their opinions.

## What I Have Learned

### Claims:

**Claim #1: By instituting and consistently engaging in a sharing circle, the students become more comfortable and were able to share their perspectives on social issues. In doing so, all students were able to learn from each other.**

In observing my students and taking a variety of notes regarding their opinions during our sharing circles, I have noticed that students are more willing to share and respond to each other's comments. When I first introduced the circle, many students were apprehensive in sharing. I encouraged students to share although did not make them. About fifteen students chose to pass the first time we had a circle. Our circle still lasted the twenty minutes with the eight other students sharing and responding to each other's thoughts.

As we continued engaging in sharing circles, students began to open up and share opinions once or twice and eventually much more often. In creating a safe environment for the students, they were more comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions on certain topics. They understood through my instructions that their peers would not laugh or make fun of their thoughts. Also, in being a part of the circle, the students understood each other in a whole new way. New children who wanted to share may have known prior to sharing who would have the same perspective on an issue that they did.

After the second circle, I realized that new students were sharing. As a result of this, I began to tally how many students were sharing per circle. I noticed more and more people sharing during each subsequent circle.

**Claim #2: In providing the students with a safe environment to share and voice their opinions, the students are more likely to share problems that affect them and/or their peers and come up with strategies to solve these problems.**

My students very much enjoyed engaging in the sharing circles. After lunch when I asked them to get in a circle, they knew it was time to share and some appeared to grow very excited. Many of the students began to look forward to hearing opinions from their peers and, more importantly, voicing their own opinions.

In order to set up the circle, the students and I began in a circle with me explaining to them exactly what the procedures are for being a part of the sharing circle. I attempted to set up a safe environment for each student where they would feel comfortable sharing and know that their opinions and perspectives stayed within the classroom walls. In doing so, I felt more comfortable bringing topics to the circle that would not generally be discussed during a typical school day.

During the first and second circles, the students did a great job responding to my prompts with their own experiences and opinions on how to deal with these various situations. My mentor and I discussed that it would be a good idea to have a concluding part of the circle where the students come up with their own strategies for how to deal with each of the prompts presented. The students responded very well to this and I was impressed by how many students would raise their hands and respond with great strategies. Students would also present new ideas and problems that they may have been faced that corresponded to the prompt. For example, during a discussion on how to deal when being wrongfully blamed, one student mentioned that when they are asking a friend not to talk to them during instructional time, they would get in trouble for talking when they were only quieting down their friend. This idea brought about an entirely new situation for the students to discuss.

**Claim #3: By engaging in sharing circles, I am able to understand my students socially and how they react to certain situations. When teaching, this helps me understand certain misbehaviors and other social tendencies.**

When I began teaching much more in January, I realized how difficult it is to teach and manage so many different students and personalities. I struggled in the many different aspects of teaching a lesson and would often gain great insight and advice from my mentor and PDA after they would observe one of my lessons. As great as their advice was about how children act and respond to certain situations, nothing can compare to what I learned from the students through engaging in sharing circles.

I never thought much of pointing out and possibly disciplining students who are talking at inappropriate times. I never really thought about the fact that I may have wrongfully blamed a student for talking when they were actually not. Through the “getting wrongfully blamed” sharing circle, I learned how upsetting this situation can be for students. It upsets many of my students when they are telling a friend to quiet down and I scold them for talking. I also learned about how often students are placed in groups to complete work and are often left doing all of the work on their own. Most importantly, I learned more about the culture of students in the intermediate grades and how name calling and bullying are prevalent.

I have been using the knowledge I have learned from the sharing circles to understand and connect to my students to an increased degree. If a student tells me they were not talking when I have blamed them for talking, I apologize. When students are put into groups, I will walk around and monitor to make sure everyone is working. When I hear students being called names or being bossed around, I immediately stop the situation and help the students work it out. I want

the students to know that their opinions matter to me and I take what they say to heart. I have noticed that the students are more likely to discuss situations with me than they were before. I wonder if this has to do with my new understanding of the third and fourth grade life.

### **Conclusions:**

Through engaging in this inquiry, I better understand third and fourth grade students not only educationally but also socially. I understand more clearly what makes them happy, sad, and aggravated. I understand how these students make and keep friends as well as what they do in certain social situations. I also feel that I have learned through this inquiry how to provide a safe environment for my students and how I can earn their trust. All of this information will prove incredibly important in my future when I am teaching and learning about a whole new set of students. What is important for third and fourth grade students is not necessarily important to me. By knowing what is important and upsetting to these students, I will be able to provide not only a good education but also a great support system for the students when they need someone to lean on or to talk to. According to Chip Wood (1994), “Nothing is fair to the nine year old, who is also struggling with the cognitive task of understanding ethical behavior...Many nines feel they are singled out for unfair treatment by a teacher” (p. 97). With this feeling toward teachers and life in general at this age, it is important to make an effort to interact, understand, and laugh with the students. Wood (1994) reinforces this statement by saying, “Teachers of nine year olds in third and fourth grade need a sense of humor and a determined lightness to challenge the sometimes deadly seriousness of the age (p. 97).

I cannot readily prove that my students learned from each other, particularly the four students I targeted for my inquiry on. I am not so sure that the sharing circle was effective in

anyway for these four students. I hope in the future to continue inquiring into how I can understand these social strugglers and how I can help them open up to their peers.

### **New Wonderings**

My inquiry provided a few answers to some of my original wonderings although most have remained unanswered. Through engaging in my inquiry and learning more about my students and their social skills, I have a new list of wonderings I am eager to explore. My new wonderings include the following:

- What age do the students begin separating into different social groups?
- How do students with Asperger's Syndrome or Pervasive Development Disorder grow socially when they reach middle and high school?
- How often do students feel uncomfortable or out of place in school throughout a given day/month/year?
- What specifically is it about certain students that might make them become outsiders within a classroom?

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Appendix A:

Circle any answer that applies to you.

1. Which activities do you do on the weekend?

- a. Play with friends
- b. Go to the movies
- c. Watch television
- d. Play video games
- e. Spend time with family

2. How many good friends do you have?

- a. 0-1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. More than 4

3. Do you enjoy coming to school?

- a. Yes
  - b. No, why? \_\_\_\_\_
- 

4. What is your favorite subject?

- a. Science
- b. Social Studies
- c. Writing
- d. Reading
- e. P.E.
- f. Music
- g. Library
- h. Art

Why is this your favorite subject?

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5. What is your favorite part of the day and why?

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6. What is your least favorite part of the day and why?

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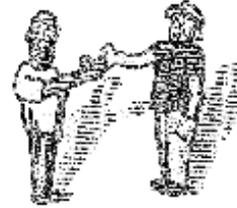
Appendix B



Circle any answer that applies to you.

1. Which activities do you do on the weekend?

- a. Play with friends
- b. Go to the movies
- c. Watch television
- d. Play video games
- e. Spend time with family



2. How many good friends do you have?

- a. 0-1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. More than 4

3. Do you enjoy coming to school?

- a. Yes
- b. No, why? \_\_\_\_\_

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4. What is your favorite subject?

- a. Science
- b. Social Studies
- c. Writing
- d. Reading
- e. P.E.
- f. Music
- g. Library
- h. Art

Why is this your favorite subject?

I like all of them because  
school is the most funnest thing in the  
world.

5. What is your favorite part of the day and why?

helping because I  
making

6. What is your least favorite part of the day and why?

I don't have one.

Circle any answer that applies to you.

1. Which activities do you do on the weekend?

- a. Play with friends
- b. Go to the movies
- c. Watch television
- d. Play video games
- e. Spend time with family



2. How many good friends do you have?

- a. 0-1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. More than 4

3. Do you enjoy coming to school?

- a. Yes
- b. No, why? \_\_\_\_\_

4. What is your favorite subject?

- a. Science
- b. Social Studies
- c. Writing
- d. Reading
- e. P.E.
- f. Music
- g. Library
- h. Art

Why is this your favorite subject?

I just like them. I can't say why.

5. What is your favorite part of the day and why?

My favorite part of the day is, well all of it but especially  
with I like it all

6. What is your least favorite part of the day and why?

My least favorite part of the day is, actually math. Math  
can be kinda mean.



Circle any answer that applies to you.

1. Which activities do you do on the weekend?

- a. Play with friends
- b. Go to the movies
- c. Watch television
- d. Play video games
- e. Spend time with family



2. How many good friends do you have?

- a. 0-1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. More than 4

3. Do you enjoy coming to school?

- a. Yes
- b. No, why? \_\_\_\_\_

4. What is your favorite subject?

- a. Science
- b. Social Studies
- c. Writing
- d. Reading
- e. P.E.
- f. Music
- g. Library
- h. Art

Why is this your favorite subject?

because the fare  
is cool.

5. What is your favorite part of the day and why?

RECESS BECAUSE YOU  
GET TO PLAY GAMES AND  
ON

THE PLAY GROUND.  
6. What is your least favorite part of the day and why?

WRITING BECAUSE YOU JUST  
WRITE.

Appendix C:

Answer the following questions by circling yes, no, or sometimes.

1. I ask my classmates to play if I see they have no one else to play with.

Yes                      No                      Sometimes

2. I consider myself a good friend.

Yes                      No

Why?

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3. I learned about my classmates from the sharing circles we did.

Yes                      No

4. Write about a time you felt left out or made someone else feel left out. How did you feel?

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5. Write about any concerns you have about your relationships with your classmates.

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6. I enjoyed the sharing circles and hope to continue having them.

Yes

No

7. The most important part of the sharing circle and our discussions was:

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8. Any other thoughts?

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