

EFFICACY OF CLASS MEETINGS  
IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Ann Roeder Platt  
B.A., California State University, Sacramento

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Abstract of

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## Statement of Problem

Traditional autocratic methods for dealing with students in the classroom are becoming less effective. Teachers are becoming increasingly discouraged by their inability to control misbehaving children. Discussion of the problem centers around the efficacy of an Adlerian class-meeting model, the philosophy, and implementation at one elementary school to improve classroom and school atmosphere and to decrease vandalism and student suspensions. Research includes statistics on school vandalism and student suspensions. Teacher interviews cover topics regarding student attitudes and behavior, school climate, academic performance, and personal and professional growth.

## Sources of Data

Camellia Elementary School, Sacramento  
Pre- and post-data on student population  
Pre- and post-data on vandalism and suspensions  
Tape-recorded interviews with teachers

## Conclusions Reached

Results over a four-year period showed a significant decrease in vandalism from 24 to two reported cases and a decrease in number of suspensions from 61 to four. The recorded teacher interviews demonstrated great improvement in classroom atmosphere, behavior, and attitudes, school environment, teacher commitment and effectiveness, and academic performance due to implementation of class meetings on a school-wide basis.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Traditional autocratic methods for dealing with students are becoming less effective in a society that is becoming more democratic and equalitarian. Teachers that have been trained to use either autocratic or permissive methods are becoming tremendously discouraged by their inability to control misbehaving and discouraged children. In spite of the fact that our schools are better equipped, have increased numbers of professional support staff and improved materials and programs, optimal learning is not taking place in the majority of today's classrooms. The reason for this is that discipline continues to be the biggest problem. Since autocratic methods are no longer as effective as they once were, alternative ways of developing a more positive classroom environment are being sought.

In many cases, well-meaning teachers searching for alternatives end up at the opposite end of the spectrum with anarchy. Open classrooms have frequently been an example of this. In the majority of the situations where this approach is used, the classrooms become chaotic. Most of the walls that were eliminated in the process of establishing an open classroom climate are now being reconstructed or replaced with partitions in order to regain some of the sanity and structure lost in transition.

In contrast to autocracy, where there is order with no freedom, no choices, and all responsibility belonging to the adults; and anarchy, where there is freedom with no order, unlimited choices, and a lack of responsibility; the democratic model of order with freedom, limited choices, and individual or shared responsibility has been shown to be extremely effective in creating and maintaining a positive classroom atmosphere. In a democratic classroom it is possible for the teacher to be responsible for teaching, the students to be responsible for learning, and everyone responsible for their own behavior. Some brief comparisons of techniques or approaches that teachers utilize in the autocratic and democratic models are as follows:

Autocratic	Democratic
Boss	Leader
Command	Invitation
Sharp voice	Friendly voice
Power	Influence
Pressure	Stimulation
Demanding cooperation	Winning cooperation
Criticism	Encouragement
Punishment	Consequences
Imposing ideas	Selling ideas
Competition	Cooperation
I decide, you obey	I suggest and help you to decide
I tell you what you should do	I tell you what I will do
Sole responsibility of boss	Shared responsibility of team

The left column indicates pressure from without, the right, simulation from within. As stated by Dreikurs, Grunwald, and Pepper (1971):

The competitive spirit has to be replaced with one of cooperation serving the common interest. In such a setting each child is important, a prerequisite for harmonious function within the group. Instead of providing a sense of worth and equality for each student, competition makes one student feel superior and another inferior. In such a situation, no cooperation or team work is possible (p. 178).

In a famous experiment by Kurt Lewin (1948) involving the training of leaders of Boy's Clubs to be autocratic, democratic or anarchic, much can be learned regarding the observable behavior of the boys with each type of

leader. Significant results regarding the relationship between the students and teacher were obtained: the autocratic group could function only when the leader was present, otherwise they fought and quarreled; the democratic group could function without a leader, and they got along outside the class. Dreikurs, et al. (1971) summarized the significance of the previous study by stating:

First of all, the anarchic group is not democratic. Too many teachers assume that they become democratic by merely not being autocratic. By doing so, they become anarchic, not democratic. This misconception about the nature of democracy...seems to mean that everybody can do as he pleases. This is anarchy, not democracy. The democratic group requires a leader; without him, the group cannot function well. But the leader does not have to be an autocrat.... Wherever children move from an autocratic into a democratic setting, they become "free," but do not know what to do with their freedom. Freedom carries responsibilities.... Many of the events of our times,, the confusion, misused freedom, and lack of responsibility, validate the observations of Kurt Lewin (pp. 176-177).

Teachers will testify that they have no shortage of irresponsible children in their classrooms. According to Glasser (1965), teachers are still "trying to find better ways to cope with students whose wide varieties of misbehavior interfere with their own education and the education of others in the class" (p. 156). He further stated that once a child feels a sense of belonging within the class, "his behavior improves greatly, he learns much more easily, and he becomes generally a more responsible person" (p. 156).

If a teacher, or better yet an entire school, desires to establish a democratic atmosphere, which would include shared responsibility and learning, one essential ingredient and method would be the implementation of class meetings. Winning the cooperation of the students and sharing the responsibilities of behavior through this problem-solving model have been shown to be extremely effective at Camellia Elementary School, located in the south area of Sacramento. Camellia is a neighborhood school, with no need for busing, and currently is the only school in the Sacramento area that continues to be predominately non-white. The total population of the school is approximately 190 students and is made up of 91.6% minority students. A further breakdown of the population during the 1978-79 school year is described as follows: Black 67.6%; Asian/Pacific Islander 10.6%; Hispanic 12.8%; American Indian .6%; and White 8.4%. The records also show that 48% of the students are from families that receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) monies, which ranks the school seventh highest in the Sacramento City Unified School District and the highest in minority population. There have been some new housing developments constructed in the past year, and more underway, with the prediction that these homes will result in a decrease in low-income, minority families.

Until very recent years, the atmosphere of Camellia School was described as the most troubled elementary school in the Sacramento school district. There had been a great deal of fighting, truancy, and vandalism, with education taking place almost incidentally. The administration and staff were continually involved with confrontations with and between the students. Violence was a way of life for many students and demanded a great deal of attention and time from the school personnel. There were many days when the adults were most discouraged by having to deal with so much student misbehavior. Several of the staff stated that they used to dread going to their cars at the end of the day for fear of what they might find, and their fears were realized frequently. Vandalism was not unusual on the school campus, nor were the incidents of suspensions for fighting and other unacceptable behaviors.

Historically, Camellia was a school that teachers avoided; it was the last resort if no other jobs were available. The local state university would not send its student teachers to Camellia because of its reputation. At best, this was a school of great challenge for a teacher, and at worst, a school of conflict and violence. The causes have been defined as multiple, but the effects were discouraging, to say the least.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this project is to define a specific teaching method, the class-meeting model, and to describe how it is being utilized at one elementary school to improve classroom and school atmosphere and to decrease vandalism and student suspensions. By exploring the specific guidelines, philosophy, and application of class meetings as an integral part of the daily instructional program, it is hoped that teachers and administrators might consider this model as a valuable tool in developing a cooperative learning climate through demonstrating and teaching social problem-solving processes and skills to the students. A description will be given of one elementary school prior to the initiation of the class-meeting model four years ago, and a comparison to the current school year will be drawn in order to show the efficacy of this model for elementary schools.

## **Need for the Study**

Most people in education have a growing concern regarding the increase of violence on school campuses and the amount of time teachers are being forced to devote to misbehavior in their classrooms. Teachers seem to be increasingly frustrated and resentful of frequent disruptions that interrupt and interfere with learning. Much time and energy is being expended on classroom discipline, with the expectation that the teacher should solve all the problems. Needs assessments of teachers and administrators at many elementary schools indicate that classroom management is a number-one priority. It seems only logical that the people involved in creating the disturbances, the students, should be included in the resolution of the problems.

Therefore, the class-meeting model needs to be considered as a possible method of involving students in the problem-solving process. Professionals in education have been trying to solve the problems of fighting, vandalism, and the entire scope of misbehaviors with little success, as evidenced by the yearly increase in violence and money spent on vandalism in the schools. If this model can be shown to be effective in one of the most difficult schools in the Sacramento area, it is the author's opinion that it should be a viable, useful method to be implemented in any elementary school.

## **Method**

Camellia Elementary School will be described and compared over a four-year period, focusing on the make-up of the school population, the atmosphere, and the records kept on vandalism and suspensions. Statements from teachers and other school personnel will be included to identify their thoughts and feelings regarding the use of class meetings and their effectiveness. The class-meeting model used at this one school will be described in detail in order for the reader to have a clear understanding of the method and its application to other settings. The objective is to demonstrate how the implementation of class meetings can be instrumental in improving classroom atmosphere, school climate, teacher effectiveness, and in the reduction of suspensions and vandalism.

## Chapter II: Review of the Literature

In this chapter the author will review the literature relating to the general area of class meetings or discussions with students, describing different approaches, theories and purposes when appropriate. There was found to be a consistency among many authors recommending and/or describing the use of class meetings for social problem-solving purposes. However, this writer could find little research showing the efficacy of class meetings in resolving problems or improving the classroom climate on school campuses. In a recent newspaper article there appeared an account of a boycott by 100 students, out of a possible 240, on a high school campus in a rural Midwest community. The students were charging that the restroom restrictions left them with no privileges and no rights. They picketed the school and eventually boycotted all classes over the issue, at which time the principal summoned the parents to pick up their children. The teachers and principal had set up the rules and supervision policy regarding restroom restrictions without including input from the students. Incidents such as this will continue to occur as long as students are excluded from the decision-making, problem-solving process.

Glasser, in his book *Schools Without Failure* (1969), stated that "the many social problems of school itself, some of which lead to discipline of the students, are best attacked through the use of each class as a problem-solving group with each teacher as the group leader" (p. 122). He continued by proposing that when "children learn to participate in a problem-solving group when they enter school and continue to do so with a variety of teachers throughout the six years of elementary school," they learned that they could "individually and as a group, solve the problems of living in their school world" (p. 123).

Gordon (1967), in his review of the Coleman Report, found that over and above the value of learning to solve problems through class meetings, students also gained in scholastic achievement. He summarized:

In addition to the school characteristics which were shown to be related to pupil achievement, Coleman found a pupil characteristic which appears to have a stronger relationship to achievement than all the school factors combined. The extent to which a pupil feels he has control over his own destiny is strongly related to achievement. This feeling of [potency is less prevalent among Negro students, but where it is present their achievement is higher than that of white pupils who lack that conviction (p. 17).

Kohl (1969) suggested that "punishment is a dangerous way to deal with behavior.... If students are punished for fighting, not only will the cause of the fight go unresolved, but also hostility toward the adult and his/her authority will develop" (p. 74). He also recommended the use of the group in problem-solving discussions, to involve the students in the resolution in order to share the power and to develop cooperation and openness in the classroom. In a recent study (D. Johnson, F. Johnson, and R. Johnson, 1976) research showed that:

(1) Members in groups that successfully resolve controversies and produce creative solutions are more satisfied with group decisions; and (2) groups that engage in controversy are different from other groups because they dig into a problem, raise issues, and settle them in ways that show benefits of a wide range of ideas used in problem solving and a high degree of emotional involvement in and commitment to decisions (p. 47).

Consequently, these authors suggested that one of the basic aspects of the teacher's role was to "provide students with the attitudes, skills and strategies for constructively managing interpersonal conflict" (p. 48). They felt the following was important:

To define controversies as problem-solving situations in which differences need to be clarified through rational analysis, not as win-lose situations; being critical of ideas, not of persons, and separating criticism of one's ideas from one's personality or being.... By handling conflicts through classroom discussions, teachers can promote high motivation to learn, high levels of achievement and creativity, and the advancement of student cognitive and moral reasoning (p. 48).

The use of role playing in classroom discussions was presented by Hawley (1975) in settling elementary school playground disturbances. By having students act out a particular incident, the situation could then be discussed and clarified through discussion, leading to resolution.

A well-known and frequently used model of class discussions is the Magic Circle, developed by Palomares (1974). This particular program is meant to be a preventive one "designed to help children understand and respect themselves and each other as human beings. They are given an opportunity to use useful social skills in order to prevent problems.... The program capitalizes on the basic drives of children to achieve mastery and gain approval" (p. ix). The purpose of including this source in the review of the literature is because of its emphasis on class or small group discussion; however, this model does not encompass problem-solving or decision-making processes, but stresses dealing with feelings and interpersonal relationships. Adams and Biddle (1967) researched the time allotted to dealing with feelings in the classroom setting and found that it amounted to less than one-half of one percent. Flanders and Amidon (1967) also found that on the average, teachers accepted student feelings less than one percent of the time.

In another comprehensive publication, Collins and Collins (1975) prefaced their ideas by suggesting that "discipline-classroom behavior-classroom management is a major and universal concern of teachers, administrators, parents and students in the schools of nations around the globe" (p. ix), based on their contacts with school personnel in more than a dozen countries. Out of 134 specific misbehaviors described and treated, the authors recommended the use of class meetings as a constructive means for dealing with these concerns with approximately forty different behaviors. However, they also suggested that "the total range of daily behaviors...can be dealt with through effective class discussions" (p. 198). These authors also referred to Glasser (1969) and Dreikurs et al. (1971) as the major contributors in the development of class meetings.

Group discussions and class meetings were discussed in detail by Dreikurs et al. (1971) and will be referred to in the following chapter regarding the practical application and techniques used in developing effective problem-solving and decision-making skills. The aforementioned authors stated:

Group discussions...examine problem areas and also face unpleasant facts which normally are ignored or sidetracked.... They are the basis for democratic interchange of ideas guided by the needs of the group.... Using group discussions not only helps children to develop better interpersonal relationships but enhances learning through accumulated information. Effective communication of ideas leads to problem solving.... Group discussions are probably the most effective means by which a teacher can integrate all children into one class for a common purpose (p. 101).

### Chapter III: The Model

In this chapter there will be a discussion of the rationale of class meetings, followed by specific guidelines, ground rules, and procedures. This specific model has been developed and implemented at Camellia Elementary School in Sacramento as a regular part of the daily curriculum. One of the assumptions upon which the rationale of the class-meeting model is based is that students can learn to be responsible for their own behavior and are capable of developing effective decision-making and problem-solving skills. By using the class meetings as a forum for developing a democratic classroom atmosphere, teachers are able to win the cooperation of students by sharing the responsibility of behavior and learning. When students have an opportunity to express their ideas and offer solutions to matters that are important to themselves and others, they experience the positive results of their contributions and develop a sense of belonging.

Regarding the specific class-meeting model in operation at Camellia School, the majority of the classrooms follows the same basic guidelines. It is recommended that a specific time be set aside on a regular basis, at least three times a week or more, for class meetings. Suggested times are prior to lunch, recess, or PE. It is also recommended that spontaneous meetings not be held, in order to provide a "cooling off" period for conflict situations. The length of the meetings varies according to the age of the children. The recommended length is twenty minutes for primary and thirty minutes for intermediate and secondary classrooms.

The physical setting for class meetings includes sitting in a circle, if at all possible. Also suggested for effectiveness is to have assigned seats in order to minimize disruptions. In a circle all students can see each other, and there is a sense of equality with no one in the front or back of the room. It is helpful to go through a training period for the students to learn how to move chairs and/or desks to the circle in an orderly fashion. Some teachers have the students sit on the floor in a circle; however, chairs add more structure to the meeting and provide limits for potentially disruptive students.

The use of an agenda is recommended for the meetings and needs to be in a prominent place in the classroom so all members of the class may list concerns. It is understood by the class that all agenda items are discussed in sequential order. In primary classes, the agenda includes just the name of the student, since spelling may be a problem. In intermediate and older classes, students are required to list their name with the area of concern and the names of other people involved. The agenda is very helpful in taking the teacher or other adults out of the middle of every dispute of the students. Students learn very quickly that tattling or telling on someone is not an effective way to involve the teacher. This also provides the opportunity to students for solving many problems themselves. When all the teacher says is, "Put it on the agenda, and we will discuss it at the meeting," fighting and arguing are no longer useful ways to seek adult involvement.

There are two ground rules that are essential to follow in helping to create a cooperative atmosphere in the classroom. The first one is that the teacher and students practice mutual respect, which includes listening to others, taking turns, and making recommendations. The second ground rule is that the meetings are held for the purpose of everyone working together to solve problems and, as a result, to help each other. This is a very important ground rule, because the teacher has the control to stop hurtful discussions or consequences with one question, "Do you think this will be helpful to Mary?"

Mutual respect and helping each other are ultimately reflected in the recommendations that come from the discussion. It is important that the teacher has a working understanding of logical consequences and helps students distinguish between consequences and punishment. Until the students have learned the concept of logical consequences, the teacher reserves the right to eliminate punitive suggestions. Minutes of the class meetings are kept and consist of suggested consequences and the action taken by the class. They are kept on file for further reference by students or the teacher.

The following step-by-step procedures for leading class meetings are recommended:

### **Compliments**

The meeting is started by the teacher who gives a compliment in order to start the meeting on a positive note. Compliments by students (with raised hands) are given one at a time in a clockwise manner. It is recommended that the teacher not recognize a student whose turn has passed. Compliments are statements of appreciation for someone's help, willingness to share, contribution to others, etc. When first starting class meetings, it is very important that teachers train the students in how to give compliments and how to be encouraging by demonstrating what compliments are. Compliments do not include any derogatory comments, such as, "I would like to compliment Sam for getting 90% on his spelling test, because he usually flunks." Since some students are not used to giving compliments or have difficulty in being encouraging to others, it is helpful to discuss (in the training stage) whether the compliments are helpful or hurtful.

### **Agenda Items**

After the compliments, the first item on the agenda is read, and the person who wrote it is asked if the problem is still of concern. If the problem has been solved, the leader proceeds to the next item on the agenda. Oftentimes, when students are mad and have a place to write down their concerns, by meeting time the problem is resolved and doesn't need to be discussed.

### **Agenda Items for Discussion**

The person who writes the item on the agenda and wants to discuss it tells the class exactly what the problem is as he/she believes it to be. The person or persons involved in the problem are asked if the accusation is accurate. If the person or persons involved in the problem agree that the description of the situation is accurate, he/she/they are then asked what should be the logical consequence of the misbehavior. If the majority of the students agree with the suggested consequence, it is accepted and the next item is brought up. If the majority disagree, then suggestions are taken from other members of the class in a clockwise manner. After going around the circle twice, the discussion is ended, and the students vote on which consequence they believe to be appropriate. If the student/s involved in the problem do not remember his/her/their actions, the leader goes around the circle one time to help clarify the situation. If the person/s still don't remember being involved, the leader asks, "How many people witnessed this problem and think the person/s named were, in fact, involved?" Once the class decides the people are involved, suggestions for consequences are discussed and voted upon. After a consequence has been selected, the leader asks the group for reactions to the consequences. (This takes place again by going around the class once in a clockwise direction.) After these reactions, the next agenda item is brought up and discussed in the above manner. The emphasis for the discussion of an agenda item might include the Four Goals of Misbehavior (Dreikurs et al., 1971) especially during the training period. Questions regarding the four goals might include the following:

**Attention.** "How many of you think that people might do this to get attention?"

**Power.** "How many of you think that people might do this to show others they are the boss or that no one can stop them?"

**Revenge.** "How many of you think people might do this to get even?"

**Inadequacy.** "How many of you think people do this to make others think they can't do anything right?"

Another important discussion topic involves the desire that all people have of wanting to belong, to be needed and/or liked. Some children are on the agenda more often than others. With this type of child (who may not have a sense of belonging), the following might be helpful: if the child's problem with others is on the playground, the teacher might ask, "How can we help John feel like he is a part of our group or class?" Some students have often suggested that they invite John to participate in an activity (four square, kick ball, etc.). Therefore, rather than feel excluded, the child begins to have a sense of belonging.

### **Additional Suggestions**

The following suggestions are included in order to be helpful to the leader in specific, and sometimes difficult, situations:

1. The teacher is a facilitator and needs to keep students on the topic. If someone tries to change the subject, the teacher might ask, "How many people think that the topic is being changed?" "How many think it is not?"
2. Using the ground rule of helping each other can turn a humiliating experience into a helping one. If a humiliating statement is made, the teacher can ask what the others think about it. "Do you really think he's just mean, stupid, etc., or do you think there might be another reason for what he's doing?" This questioning leads the students to an understanding of the goal of the misbehavior and encourages the group to find ways to help the child.
3. Once children learn the acceptability of discussing areas that are of concern to them and that the purpose of the discussion is to help them with personal problems, their ability to express themselves and the spirit of cooperativeness and helpfulness greatly increases.
4. Teacher input as facilitator needs to be the greatest at initial class meetings. Once the students realize their ability to solve problems and increase their skills in this area, teacher input diminishes.
5. It has been found that using nonverbal signs to agree and disagree eliminates such yelling-out behavior as, "Yea, I saw you do it," or "You don't know what you're talking about." To agree, students give the "power" to salute up and down quietly. To disagree, students signal by crossing hands back and forth above their lap, similar to being called "safe" in baseball.
6. It is important for teachers to recognize that the effectiveness of the class meetings is not realized immediately and shouldn't discourage themselves or the students by expecting perfection. Developing a helpful cooperative and democratic classroom atmosphere is not a quick or easy process, and much training is usually necessary.

## Chapter IV: Parallel Occurrences

This chapter will present the relevant data that was recorded over a four-year period (1975-79), the time during which the class-meeting model was initiated and implemented. Also to be included will be figures that will help to define the make-up of Camellia Elementary School, a description of the school population (students and staff), the number of student suspensions during the four-year period, the number of reported cases of vandalism, and an interview of several staff members regarding their thoughts about the impact of class meetings on the school atmosphere, student conduct and attitudes, and also their own personal/professional growth.

The total student population has not varied significantly over the past few years: in 1975-76 there were approximately 200 students, compared to 190 enrolled in the 1978-79 school year. The racial/ethnic breakdown of the students attending Camellia during the 1975-76 school year was as follows: Black--79.4%; Asian/Pacific Islander--0%; Hispanic--11.3%; American Indian--.05%; and White--8/8%. (For the current school year percentages refer to Chapter I.) The only significant change in the racial/ethnic breakdown over the past four years is an increase of approximately 10.6% of Asian/Pacific Islanders, mostly Vietnamese. The total non-white population is recorded at 91.2% in 1975-76, as compared to 91.6% in 1978-79, which indicates that there has not been a significant change in "minority" population over the past few years. During the 1977-78 school year, Camellia had the highest percentage of Black students attending any one school in Sacramento City Unified School District. Also, the percentage of families receiving AFDC monies has averaged about the same during each year, approximately 50%, and consistently ranks in the top seven highest in the school district. In summary, it appears that the make-up of the student population has remained basically the same over the past four years, which might lead one to assume that, therefore, the problems, concerns, and school atmosphere would also be the same.

More significant, however, are the records that have been kept regarding problems and concerns related to behavior, specifically dealing with vandalism and suspensions. The yearly breakdown of the number of students suspended from school is as follows: 1975-76, 61 students; 1976-77, 54; 1977-78, 5; and 1978-79 (February), 4. (During the last two school years, class meetings were being held by almost all of the teachers in the school, including total administrative and classified support.) The statistics on vandalism are similar: during the 1975-76 school year, 24 cases of vandalism were reported, and as of February of this school year, only two. Regardless of the reasons for the reductions in both categories, one cannot ignore the amount of money saved the district, first in Average Daily Attendance increases due to less suspensions, and secondly, the obvious savings due to repairs from vandalism.

Regarding staff turn-over during the past four years, the majority of the teachers has remained the same, with almost no changes during the last two years. There have been changes in administration.

According to the school secretary, who has been at Camellia throughout this period of time, the types of vandalism have changed from purposeful to accidental. The two reported incidents this school year were described as follows: one due to a skateboard hitting a window and the other involving a minor theft by an "outsider."

Coinciding with the economic gains, it seems that the attitudinal and behavioral changes have and still are taking place. The secretary reports that her involvement with the students has drastically changed. She used to see children in the office mostly on a negative basis for misbehavior and was apprehensive about going home at the end of the day for fear of trouble, vandalism to her car, etc. In contrast, she now loves her job, sees children totally on a positive basis, and has more time for her other tasks.

Not only has the behavioral atmosphere changed at Camellia, but there seems to be evidence that the academic and attitudinal climate is improving. One parent, so encouraged by the observable improvement in the school, decided to transfer her son from a suburban, middle-class school to Camellia. Prior to the move, his attitude and academic performance had been poor; he did not like school, even dreaded going. After enrolling him in September at Camellia, his scores on the CTBS tests showed an average growth of 2.4 years in six months, plus he now looks forward to going to school.

The school psychologist, so impressed by the changes at this school, decided to interview several teachers regarding the effects of class meetings on the school, the staff and the students. Excerpts of the recorded conversation are as follows: (names deleted)

Interviewer. "Where did we start? What was it like at Camellia five years ago?"

Teacher A. "When we first started, it was out of necessity for survival. Our first attempts were physical. They didn't really work, except for the time being. For example, children were paddled. The head teacher would take them in and work them over (1973-74). It was a power struggle--them against us. Which doesn't say much for where we were at, but that's the way it was. The physical punishment quieted them down for a couple of hours, because 'I might be next'."

Teacher B. "Assaults on teachers. Kids throwing desks and chairs. A fight in my room, one girl fighting another, and the girl's elbow bent through the window. It was nothing to have a girl stand up in the class and hit a boy. This one boy got up and knocked her cold. Seriously. That's the way it was."

Teacher A. "When I first started at this school, the first day, the first hour, first ten minutes, I had two kids in the back of the room beating the hell out of each other. I turned my back to put my name up to introduce myself, and these two were working each other over, and I had to pick them up bodily and haul them to the office. And that helped for about ten minutes."

Teacher B. "There were three fights simultaneously in one room. There was so much blood! They were so mad. The janitor had to come and clean it up. When anything happened, we had so little control that the students would run out of the classrooms and gather if there was something happening. If something happened the kids in my classroom and ----'s room would run out to see what was going on. We couldn't stop them. There was no control. My job, while ---- hauled the injured out to the office was to hold the rest of his class in. Physically block the door! It was horrible; it was really horrible."

Teacher C. "About the cooperation from the parents--if you expect parents to do your discipline, you were really in trouble. I always walked around feeling like I was on a tight rope all the time with the students, because they were testing me and we were losing. I was constantly losing. But after a while, you accept it. I didn't accept it, but that's the way it was. You'd always question yourself, whether you're doing it right or wrong--and then you're really in trouble. And that's the way it was. You felt insecure completely. And from a teaching posture, that's impossible."

Teacher B. "You felt like you were in the foreign service. You were just here for the time being, trying to do the best you can. But don't do too much or try doing anything too much different, because this is the way it is and the way it's going to be. This was the way things were. What was really ridiculous is that I really felt like back-handing a kid, and that's ridiculous if you're thinking things like that."

Teacher A. "I saw teachers running out of here. The teacher that ---- replaced didn't last until Halloween."

Teacher B. "Oh, yeah. Then there was the time the boys kicked the wall out of the boys bathroom and started to drag the girls in there."

Teacher A. "Once on PSA field trip--I thought they (kids) were doing fairly well, at least 100% better than in my classroom. Stewardess sat down--conversation--she said 'Is that your class? I said, 'Yeah, that s my class (fairly proud). Then she said, 'I just wanted to tell you that this is the worst bunch of kids I ve ever seen in my life !"

Interviewer. "What kind of vandalism was there? What was it like?"

Teacher A. "Every week-end there would be quite a few windows out. The secretary told me it got so that she just expected every Monday she would be typing up the vandalism reports. One time the police got a whole truckload back from our kids."

Interviewer. "When did things start turning around?"

Teacher A. "1974-75. The first step was, look, if we re not going to get any help, and it s not working the way it s going, then we'd better do something for ourselves. We just can t live with it the way it is. So one of the first things we did was decide that OK, we can as teachers, suspend kids. And we exercised that right. And I remember being told by a parent that her child didn t mean what he said when he called me a 'white honky -- -- ---- and that he didn t mean to hurt my feelings when he said that; and I shouldn't take it like that, and he shouldn't be suspended. And I said that he should be and he would be and I suspended him. And that was a change, a definite change."

Teacher B. "In 1974-75 was the year we set up the rules, and the thing the rules did, especially the fighting rule, was that we could do something about it, and we did. The fact was, 'We are not going to have any more fights ."

Teacher C. "Then carry-over at home. We started noticing more parental support. Suspension rule for fighting was hard at first. Some parents said that was what they told their kids to do. But the teachers felt that the improvement at school was observable almost immediately. It really started to get better fast. Another example was when a fourth grade student and first grade sister had a problem at home over a treat that had come home from school. It was put on the agenda in the fourth grade class, and the first grader came to the class meeting. Later the mother talked to the teacher about what these class meetings were all about and said that it had changed things at home between the girls. The younger one doesn't go into to the older one's bedroom at all anymore. And the mother said she d been fighting with her all the time. And now that the class has told her that she can't go into the other child's room, she just doesn't go."

Teacher A. "You'll hear it all the time. Some parent said, 'Boy, Mr. ---- really did a job with my child. He used to come home and cause trouble. But things have really changed. Mr. ----, you can t believe the change in ----. He's more pleasant at home, he respects his sisters and brothers and his father. These kinds of things--direct--they just come to us and say them."

Teacher B. "One mother was telling me that her son, now in the ninth grade, always still thinks logically. He tells me, 'No, that s not logical. He's more apt to give compliments to his sisters and brothers. He s more apt to listen to them, to cooperate. He thinks and does everything more fairly. In fact, the mother will tell you that the two years at Camellia were the best two years of his life, two most important years."

Teacher A. "The class meetings, what they do is that they change the situation to the teacher and the kids together versus any kind of trouble-maker. Like Suzie and Billy had trouble today--what can we do to help them? Because of this, students started changing. Instead of not wanting to work, they want to work now."

Teacher B. "In my class when we were working on a play, we weren't spending as much time on academics, and the kids were concerned. They were worried that they might start falling behind. They wanted to get back into it. Before, they could care less; they were fighting it. Now they really do care. Another thing that the class meeting does is that it takes us, or anyone else, out of the power struggle. And they can't say you decided. And I think you could say you are in control. And that's the main point--teaching is fun. You can't wait to get into your math lessons, your spelling, and language. It's really fun to teach. And that's one of the biggest changes. Also, there's a lot of esprit de corps, a lot of good feelings among the staff. They all work together. There's no feeling that I'm better than you are. Everybody cooperates."

Teacher A. "The higher the grade level, the more important it is for the climate of the school. One really important thing is that you have to keep this up, and you can never say that we've gotten it to the point where we want it and that's it. Because the day you stop meetings or the day that you stop hanging together, things will start going down hill."

Teacher B. "Another thing. If I was putting as much pressure on academics six years ago that I am now, my classroom would be really bad. Back then I just had to give them busy work, just to keep their heads looking at the paper long enough so they wouldn't be fighting or calling someone a name. Now, a lot of time, they don't have enough time to be causing trouble. Besides they want to succeed."

Teacher C. "The first year I came here it wasn't cool to show anyone your report card or cool to be smart. I sure saw a difference in the class I had last year: they liked to be intelligent, they liked doing their work."

Interviewer. "What would you recommend for another school?"

Teacher A. "The teachers have got to be more responsible. You can't slam it down their throats. You have to like teaching, and I know a lot of teachers who don't like teaching. Class meetings take a lot of energy. It's as hard for me to do a class meeting as it is the most difficult math lesson. Each year it seems like you get a better class than you had before, a higher class, too. Each year it seems like you are getting better and better academically, and that's really exciting, because you have the freedom to teach more. The students then turn out more and more. Plus if a student works hard for one teacher, then the next year it's going to be the same--now. You have to modify it for your own self. But each year they're used to working. If you don't work in --'s room, you're in trouble. So then when I tell them the same thing, it's no big thing. If you can't fight in one room, you know it's going to be the same in the next one. Or if you have one teacher all day, but go to another one for PE, you know it's going to be the same. So it makes my job increasingly easier. It seems like if you can teach at higher levels, it just seems that you have more freedom; because if they're at a higher level, they just seem to catch on quicker. So you have more time in the day. For example, I'm putting on this play which I think is an academic achievement for every student in there. They learn a tremendous amount of lines. They speak clearly, loudly. Five years ago this would be so out of our realm to even consider putting on a play like we're doing. Just no way in the world; we wouldn't even attempt it. They've memorized parts. And one thing that they're gaining is that they're learning how to speak slowly, and not the ghetto lingo, so you can really understand them. This play is 24 pages long, and they're not going to read one word. It's just amazing. So that's the kind of freedom that you have."

Teacher B. "Another part of this, five years ago if you had tried this, the kids wouldn't be able to read their lines, plus half of them wouldn't even have shown up. We know the kids will be there, and the parents will be, too."

Interviewer. "What's one thing you would tell another staff in order to turn things around?"

Teacher A. "One thing is that they need to set up some expectations, which includes what we want and what we don't want, what we expect to have and what we're not going to have. Secondly, you've got to get a total commitment from everyone on the staff. It isn't just three teachers handling six classes. It's got to be everybody. You can't have anyone turning heads when there's trouble. If there's someone out there causing trouble and the rules say that you don't fight, it doesn't matter who sees them, the same results take place. You've got to get the teachers out of the forefront, out of the power struggles. And the best way I've found so far is class meetings. There are other people trying peer counseling and conflict management, but the best thing I've seen is class meetings. Even ---- says that you wouldn't need conflict management if every teacher had class meetings. And that was his livelihood! You've got to put yourself on the line; if `after school us what happens, then you stay. If no field trip is what happens, no field trip. You've got to stand by what has been decided. Probably the worst thing you can do is play favorites. We've had some trouble with that around here over the years, and different things happen to those kids (the favorites): immediate disaster."

Teacher B. "Consistency, togetherness as a staff, teacher responsibility--which is enough to turn off teachers usually--are all vital. You really need a commitment, because you may get parental pressure at first. It's going to work if everyone has that commitment. And also you'll have strength, you won't feel like you're stepping out on a limb when you keep them away from a field trip..."

In summary, not only were the statistics on suspensions and vandalism significant, but also the recorded interview of teachers demonstrates the improvement in student attitude and behavior, school atmosphere, academic performance, and beyond that, personal and professional growth.

## Chapter V: Discussion

This chapter will include a discussion and summary of the effects of class meetings at Camellia Elementary School in Sacramento. The implications of the statistical results, as well as the attitudinal, behavioral, and academic changes, for consideration and application in other schools will be discussed.

To say that Camellia School has undergone some changes and has shown improvement in many areas over the past four years is a definite understatement. Yet the changes in the make-up of the student population and school personnel have been minimal. The reasons for such drastic improvements are the results of the gradual development and implementation of the class-meeting model in conjunction with school rules regarding suspensions. Even without the impressive statistics regarding suspensions and vandalism, one only needs to visit the campus and observe the interaction of students and staff to see the effects of class meetings on the entire school environment. Many people have done so, and many have been impressed.

During the past school year, there were approximately one thousand visitors on campus, and Camellia was selected as having an exemplary program in classroom and behavior management, the only school in Sacramento City Unified School District so identified. One classroom in particular was involved in giving sixteen demonstrations and/or workshops off campus for other schools, staffs, administrators, education classes and organizations interested in learning or implementing class meetings.

The benefits of visiting the school campus and classrooms are numerous: one can observe cooperation and mutual respect in action, see class meetings in operation at the various grade levels, learn specific techniques and guidelines of leading the meetings, and experience the positive attitudes and atmosphere of the students and staff. There has developed a great deal of pride and commitment in the efforts being made to improve the academic and social environment at Camellia. Between the years of 1975 and 1979, Camellia has changed from one of the most troubled schools in the Sacramento area into a model educational institution.

On several occasions, the author witnessed some specific class meetings with agenda items that included not only social problem-solving situations, but also items that involved helping fellow students to improve in specific subject areas, demonstrating a sincere desire to learn, to do the best each person could within his/her own range of capabilities. Learning has become more enjoyable, challenging, and seen as a privilege for most students.

Regarding the statistics on the number of suspensions per year throughout this four-year period, the decrease from 61 student suspensions to four seems remarkable. The basis on which suspensions are made is defined simply as "fights that include the intent to cause harm and that involve anger." When a fight situation occurs, it is treated as an automatic suspension, with no exceptions to the rule. Since school-wide class meetings along with the suspension rule began, fighting has become practically nonexistent. The records on vandalism are also impressive, decreasing from 24 to two reported cases. It is doubtful that many other elementary schools could make this statement, and more likely, the opposite would be true.

It would seem that the implications for implementing this model in other schools are numerous. If classroom management, behavior management, and/or attitude toward school and learning are of concern to educators at any level, this alternative model of shared decision-making (class meetings) seem appropriate. More so now than any time in the past, students are demonstrating most effectively that they do have power (both negative and positive) to influence almost any situation of which they are a part. Many students are successfully showing teachers through their behavior that "you can't make me do anything I don't want to do" by refusing to do schoolwork, by being disruptive in class, by defying the school or class rules, etc., and many other creative ways of defeating their teachers and other adults. It seems only logical that if students are a part of the problem they should also be a part of the solution by involving them in the problem-solving process.

Another spin-off of class meetings and the subsequent positive change in the school climate is that the morale of the staff has improved dramatically. As was indicated in the taped interviews, teachers felt a much stronger commitment to their jobs and to cooperatively working with their colleagues. The obvious implication of these positive results can only lead to more efficient, effective teaching.

Academic learning has always been the main goal of American education. In schools where class meetings are utilized, this objective is being realized in a more positive and productive environment and manner. Not only is cognitive learning taking place, but also students are learning social problem-solving skills, responsibility for their own behavior, and the rewards for getting along with others.

Teachers commented during the interviews that some parents had noticed positive behavior changed in their children at home. These parents observed that peer and sibling relationships have improved, along with increased acceptance of responsibility. Some families even initiated family meetings based on the children's experience with the class-meeting model. Other specific comments by parents indicated an improvement in parent-child communication, cooperation, and an increased ability to think more logically in problem-solving situations.

Administrators and teachers at other schools are finding the class-meeting model to be helpful in conducting faculty and other organizational and educational meetings. They are experiencing that their time is being used more productively, and the process seems to have an encouraging effect on those participating.

It is obvious that the author is biased toward the value and impact that class meetings can have on a total school environment. During a time when educational funding is being cut drastically, this no-cost (in fact, money-saving) program should be taken into account by other educational institutions. Since the efficacy of the class-meeting model has been demonstrated in one of the most difficult schools in the Sacramento area, one can only assume its viability and applicability to other school settings.

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