

Democratic Class Meeting

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Our school has been exploring ways to become a peaceful school community. We have been looking at books, programs, and initiatives that are currently available and are being implemented in other schools. Last summer, we invited Stan Shapiro (author of *Classrooms That Work, A Teacher's Guide To Discipline Without Stress*) to our area to present an all day workshop. Two of our staff members had previously been to one of his workshops and learned about the democratic class meeting. Both of these teachers (P/1 class & gr 4 class) had some students with very challenging behaviors and found that the class meeting was very successful in helping their classes deal with their problems and become learning communities.

When our staff met in the fall, we decided to practice conducting the 'Shapiro class meeting' as an agenda for our staff to follow. This allowed many of us to feel more comfortable trying it in our own classrooms. Then as a follow up, we invited Stan Shapiro to our school in early December to spend a couple of days with us. He demonstrated running class meetings with our students while we observed and discussed issues with us after school.

The class meeting has a set format and Mr. Shapiro recommends that you allot 5-10 minutes for each agenda item with 20 minutes for problem solving. This should help train students to focus on the important features of the dialogue and ensures that all agenda items are covered.

1. Things that are going well (encouragement)
2. Planning (rules, homework, curriculum, projects)
3. Responsibilities (jobs)
4. Things to be improved (problems)
5. Personal concerns (personal issues)
6. Feedback (How did you feel about the meeting today? What did you learn?)

It is important that all participants feel valued and have equal opportunity to voice an opinion and contribute to problem solving and decision making. Often under 'planning' and 'responsibilities', there may be many ideas brought forth from the group. Then it is necessary to work toward a consensus. Here is a format that works with all ages:

Developing a Consensus

1. Introduce issue.
2. Have children contribute their ideas, solutions, etc.
3. List all of them on the board.
4. Go through the list, one by one and ask, 'Is there anyone who disagrees with this one and cannot live with it?'
5. Cross out the disputed items (no discussion necessary)
6. Narrow it down to the agreed-upon items.
7. Make a note of those and revisit next meeting.

Mr. Shapiro also talks about the 4 goals of misbehavior :

Attention
Power
Revenge
Inadequacy

and effective communication (reflective listening, "I" messages, understanding , etc) - not 'new' information, but critical to the success of democratic class meetings.

Some of the problems that arise between students can be solved by teaching them effective communication skills. Some problems require conflict resolution:

1. Define the problem
2. Cooperate in finding possible solutions (brainstorm)
3. Evaluate the creative solutions
4. Consensus decision making
5. Agree on how to carry out the decision
6. Evaluate the success of the solution(s)

For more challenging behaviors, the class can work together to help the classmate solve the problem(s), and then check on it the following week to "see how it is going".

When dealing with "Things to be improved", make sure you ask the students if they want to mention names or just the behaviors (they usually want to use names). After the complaint has been brought up, ask the student :

1. *Do you know why you? (They usually say, 'I don't know'.)*
2. *Can we ask the class what they think? (They usually agree)*

Then ask the class:

How many people feel that Stuart does.....because.....?

Ask Stuart,

Do you know how people feel when you? Check it out with the class.

(Hopefully classmates will share using "I"- messages)

Ask Stuart,

Do you have any suggestions on how we can help you?

(They usually respond, 'no'.)

Do others have ideas on how to help Stuart?

*Do any of you like being the center of attention? How do you get the attention you want?
(share ideas)*

How are we going to help Stuart stop.....? Let's agree on what we are going to try.

Finally, encourage Stuart to work on it for the week (with the class help) and check on it the next week to see how he is doing.

This procedure teaches the children about respect and responsibility. It gives them the tools to become effective problem solvers and contributes to a class 'team building'. In my class this year, I have a student that has earned a reputation of being a bully. She uses abusive language, hitting and kicking to get her own way. Naturally, her name was brought up during our first class meeting - in fact, her problems monopolized our whole class meeting, and some strong emotions emerged from the class.

Roxie (fictitious name) reacted defensively and stomped out. I felt discouraged and assumed that I had not handled the meeting very well. When I discussed this with another staff member, she encouraged me to continue - that it takes time to make a difference. The next week, Roxie again was the sole agenda of our meeting, but this time, she was less defensive and we agreed on a couple of things to work on. Each week, the problems about Roxie diminished and we were able to work on other issues.

Finally, during our 5th weekly meeting, Roxie's name was not even brought up and she remarked, "Isn't anyone going to complain about me this week?" Indeed, Roxie was (and still is) really trying hard to be more cooperative and polite to peers and staff. Several staff members have mentioned to me about the positive change in Roxie's behavior this year. It certainly has been a strong demonstration to me of how important it is for people to feel like they 'belong'.

Near the end of the meeting, there is time allotted to 'Personal Concerns'. This is a time when students can share things that they are worried about or perhaps problems they are having outside of our class. Students need a time to share when they are worried about a sick parent or a pet that has died or a neighborhood bully.

After the student brings up the problem, ask,
Did you want help with this or did you just want us to know about it?

If they want help, ask,
How many people have the same problem? Can anyone share how they handled it?

Next,
Would you like some ideas of how you might be able to deal with this?

If yes, have a few students share their ideas. Ask,
Did you hear anything that you're willing to try? We'll check with you next week to see how it's going.

Luckily, our school has an empty classroom so that classes can hold regular class meetings in a space unhampered with furniture. I think that having everyone sit in a circle on the floor (even myself) contributes to the communal feeling and equal status. It is also wonderful that most of our staff have been working with this democratic class meeting so that we can be a support to each

other and the children gain essential learning that contribute to a more peaceful educational environment.

When students question school rules or playground rules, our principal or playground supervisors may be invited to a class meeting. Sometimes a school bully in another class is requested to attend a class meeting as part of their responsibility for their actions. The 'victim(s)' feel safer with the support of their classmates and the bully understands that it is no longer easy to single out a 'weakling'. Like everything else, the class meeting is not a 'quick fix' to our struggle for peace, but it certainly is a worthy investment of time and work that should impact on the lives of our students and our school culture.