

# **Partnering with 7th Grade Students to Foster *Their* Safe and Supportive Classroom Environment**

## **I. MY QUESTION & RATIONALE**

In the first few weeks of the new school year, I had a familiar experience with which many teachers can undoubtedly relate. I became aware that I was experiencing the classroom climates of my two groups of seventh grade students very differently, without obvious reasons to account for the differences. A breakdown of the demographics of these two groups would show them to be almost identical in terms of age, number of students, cultural and language diversity, gender, socio-economic status, and academic achievement. With Group A, I looked forward to the class period every day and experienced an easy confidence leading the group in learning experiences that felt like an enjoyable collaboration between us. When Group B entered the room, I felt my pulse quicken slightly and reminded myself to stay calm and maintain a warm and welcoming stance, plodding through the lessons each day with a sense that I did not have my students' cooperation. As the students from Group B exited the room at the end of the class period, I noticed myself breathing a sigh of relief and relaxing my guard, knowing that the most difficult part of my day was over.

Reflecting on my own feelings about the two different classroom climates, I wondered whether or not my students had similar reactions to the classroom environment and how those feelings might be impacting their learning. I found myself pondering a question that has returned to me countless times throughout my career as a middle school Social Studies teacher: How do I create and maintain the kind of classroom climate where all of my students can thrive? Drawing on my own lifetime as a learner, including 16 years as a professional teacher, I know that learning requires risk-taking, and risk-taking requires safety and support. Over the years, I have adopted a number of routines and procedures to lay a foundation for a supportive and safe classroom environment.

In the first few critical weeks of each school year, I build in strategic opportunities for my students to connect with one another and with me. I learn about students' interests and goals. I lead students in

norm-setting to promote shared ownership of the classroom culture. I set a goal for myself to have at least one positive interaction with each individual during the first few weeks of school. I scrutinize my instructional practices, the physical space of my classroom, even my own body language and communication style, to create and maintain the optimal learning environment.

As a middle school teacher, I see five different groups of students each day, and I implement these interventions with all five classes to foster a supportive and safe environment with each group. However, despite my best efforts to be consistent, I inevitably find that the emotional climate varies significantly from one group to another. It's simply not enough to be intentional about my own habits, routines, and behaviors. In my classroom, although I am the teacher, I am still only one member of the learning community. A "one-size-fits-all" approach of teacher-directed beginning-of-year interventions fails to address all of the complexities of the multi-faceted, unique "personality" that is created by a group of individuals who meet together everyday. I began to realize that if I wanted to foster an environment where students experience positive connections and safety, I needed to invite my students to be active partners in creating that space.

I began this action research journey with a conviction that a supportive and safe environment is essential for my students' learning. Knowing that many aspects of that environment are outside of my direct control, I arrived at the question at the center of my action research: What happens when I invite my students to partner with me to foster a safe and supportive learning environment?

## **II. CONTEXT**

In September 2015, I began my first year teaching at West Ridge Elementary School, a neighborhood school in Chicago Public Schools, located in the middle-class West Ridge community on the far north side of Chicago. The school, built in 2010, is a 105,000 square-foot, three-story construction that includes art and music classrooms, science and computer labs, and a library, gymnasium and cafeteria. West Ridge Elementary was designed as a "green school," meeting the sustainable design criteria to achieve LEED "Silver" Certification.

The 730 students at West Ridge range from pre-Kindergarten through 8th grade, and the multicultural student population reflects the diversity of the surrounding community. Unlike the majority of Chicago's 77 neighborhoods which remain largely racially segregated, West Ridge is home to many different ethnic groups, including the Midwest's largest Hasidic community, as well as other Jewish, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Assyrian, Russian, Korean, and many more immigrant communities. Just blocks from our school is the busy Devon Avenue, boasting many varieties of South Asian cuisine, grocery stores, and shops selling imported goods.

In addition to the long-standing presence of immigrant communities in West Ridge, the area is also one of the primary neighborhoods that welcomes many international refugees resettling in the United States. To support refugees in their transitions, the City of Chicago partners with six agencies (RefugeeONE, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago, World Relief, Heartland Human Care Services, Ethiopian Community Association of Chicago, and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society of Chicago), all of which are based in or near the West Ridge neighborhood. Due to the nature of refugee resettlement transitions, our school's student mobility rate (the percentage of students who transfer in or out of school) is 31%, significantly higher in comparison to the district or state.

32% of students at West Ridge identify as Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander. 30% are white, 28% Hispanic, 7% Black, and 3% identify as biracial, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander. 91% of students are eligible for the free or reduced lunch program. 42% of West Ridge students are classified as English Learners; the most common languages spoken at home include Assyrian, Arabic, Spanish, and Urdu.

With such a diverse bilingual population, all teachers at West Ridge are trained in the Sheltered Instruction approach to teaching English Learners, integrating language and content instruction, and differentiating learning objectives to the proficiency levels of all learners in the classroom. Despite the significant challenges inherent in this unique setting, West Ridge has maintained the highest possible CPS rating, Level 1+, and ranked the highest in achievement last year in comparison to other schools in the

same network. In both Student Growth and Student Attainment, West Ridge is Above Average. In 2014, West Ridge was at the 87th percentile in Reading and the 82nd percentile in Math as compared to other schools nationwide. The percentage of students who attained grade level standards was at the 78th percentile in Reading, and the 95th percentile in Math.

According to the 5Essentials report used in Chicago Public Schools, West Ridge was given the highest possible designation, Well-Organized. Although I am new to the community, it has been immediately evident to me that teachers feel supported by administration and many express that they feel fortunate to spend their days in this unique school.

I am the 7th and 8th grade Social Studies teacher at West Ridge Elementary School. I see five classes (two 7th grade, and three 8th grade) each day, spending 60 minutes with each class. In a survey I gave on the first day of school, my students reported a collective total of 31 different home languages. The English Language Proficiency levels of my students range from Level 1 Entering to Level 6 Reaching (using the WIDA Performance Definitions). Additionally, my students have vastly different literacy levels in their native languages. Some read and write fluently in their first language, while others arrive in the United States with only spoken language, and very little literacy experience. To meet the needs of the diverse learners in my classroom, I plan each lesson with specific language objectives for individuals at their own language proficiency level. While some students may be analyzing complex texts to evaluate the historical claims made by the author, other students may be reading simple sentences and answering basic questions or completing fill-in-the-blank responses.

My students spend time everyday in a classroom community where they have regular exposure to different ways of viewing the world. As young people who have been nurtured in different religious and cultural traditions, communication challenges in the classroom are often much more nuanced than mere language translation, and may stem from differing views on gender roles, cultural values, authority structures, and even different expectations on what should happen in school and how teachers, students, and classmates should interact. Although these differences can result in conflict, I see this exposure as a

tremendous opportunity for all of my students to learn early in life that they can value others' perspectives and learn from them.

### **III. LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **A. Why is Classroom Climate Important?**

In our current educational landscape, two incompatible realities coexist: With the advent of the Common Core State Standards (2010) and the accompanying high-stakes testing, today's students are required to engage with complex texts and tasks demonstrating ingenuity, dexterity, and nuanced high-level thinking. These efforts require students to take tremendous risks to think differently, make new connections, and to talk and act in ways that are often new and strange. Simultaneously, today's students are navigating a school environment in which fear and stress hold tremendous sway in their daily lives. According to the National Education Association, 83 percent of girls and 79 percent of boys have experienced incidents of bullying and harassment in school (2012). Garbarino & deLara note that schools and teachers, through curriculum, methods, and school policies, often inadvertently contribute to unsafe learning conditions. Guidance counselors report that many students turn to homeschooling or chronic truancy due to fears for their physical or emotional safety at school (in Hart & Kindle Hodson, 2004).

#### **B. Safety is a Prerequisite for Engaged Learning and High Academic Achievement.**

If we want students to meet ambitious academic standards, we must create an environment that is nurturing, supportive, considerate, protective and accepting, in which students experience encouragement and are given an opportunity to contribute (Kohn, 1992). Multiple studies link a positive student perception of classroom climate to measurable cognitive outcomes, gains in standardized achievement tests, and improved ability to acquire academic skills (Hart & Kindle Hodson, 2004; Freiburg, 1999; Purkey & Stanley, 1996).

#### **C. Emotional Safety Influences Cognitive Functioning.**

Research in neurological science indicates that there is a significant correlation between emotional safety and the ability to learn. Negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, and fear,

automatically trigger the neo-cortex, the reasoning center of the brain, to shut down. Goleman calls this phenomenon “emotional hijacking” (1995, pg. 13). When humans experience powerful negative emotions, we secrete stress hormones in preparation for a primitive “fight or flight” response.

Hart & Kindler describe the impact this neurological response has on learning.

“Since many students don’t experience emotional safety at home, they come to school already stressed . . . . If they have hostile, discouraging, or otherwise negative interactions with teachers, some students remain in an almost constant state of fight or flight. The brain is so thoroughly preoccupied with survival needs that these students are literally unavailable for the complex activities of the mind that learning requires. Tragically, their curiosity, wonder, and awe have been usurped by a state of heightened vigilance and an immediate need for protection and security” (2004, pgs. 18-19).

#### **D. Social and Emotional Learning is Essential for School and Life Success.**

*Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all. – Aristotle*

In 1996, researchers Purkey & Stanley lamented that educational reforms, mandates, and legislation focused exclusively on school outcomes measured by standardized tests left teachers and administrators with little space for the “more human concern: the emotional, affective, mentally and morally healthy side of the teaching/learning process” (1996, pg. 9). Twenty years later, this sentiment still rings very true. Recent reform movements are beginning to circle back to the notion that social and emotional learning is an essential component of education in its own right, not only as it relates to academic achievement. To be successful in school, work, and life, all students need learning experiences designed to develop key social and emotional competencies, such as self-awareness, self-management, social and interpersonal awareness, relationship skills, and decision-making (Civic Enterprises, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan 2013).

A significant role of social and emotional learning is that of imparting tools for noticing and naming feelings, identifying the underlying needs, and analyzing appropriate responses to a variety of situations. For example, in uncomfortable situations that might evoke “fight or flight” responses, students can learn to identify “fight” behaviors, such as name-calling or talking back, as inappropriate responses resulting from the underlying need to be heard and understood. Students can then brainstorm

more appropriate responses, such as asking the teacher for a meeting after class to express feelings and reach understanding (Ridnouer, 2011).

### **E. Factors that Influence Classroom Climate**

Freiburg identifies three groups of factors that influence classroom climate: 1) the physical environment of the classroom, including the size, arrangement, functionality, and order of the environment, 2) the social system, in other words the relationships and interactions between all persons in the classroom, and 3) the teacher expectations about student outcomes, including teacher self-efficacy and professionalism (1999). Freiburg also notes that climate factors are “alterable by students, teachers, and schools (1999, pg. 40).

Hart & Kindle Hodson uphold relationships and “relational intelligence” as primary factors that influence classroom climate (2004, pg. 20), combining Freiburg’s categories of social system and teacher expectations by identifying four vital relationships that must maintain symbiosis in a classroom for safety, trust, and engaged learning to flourish: 1) the teacher’s relationship to self, 2) the teacher’s relationships with students, 3) the students’ relationships with one another, and 4) the students’ relationships with their learning processes and curriculum (2004).

Similarly, Purkey & Stanley emphasize relationships as the most significant factor to influence classroom climate, and advocate for an invitational approach to teaching in which a teacher invites students to be partners in making classrooms “the most inviting place in town . . . where teachers want to teach and students want to learn” (1996, pg. 9). Invitational education rests on four basic elements: 1) Trust, 2) Respect, 3) Optimism, and 4) Intentionality (1996). These four elements encompass many of the same principles inherent in Hart & Kindle Hodson’s four vital relationships (2004).

### **F. Placing Relationships at the Center of Classroom Concerns**

Relationship-based classrooms focus on meeting the needs of students and teachers and advocate that all members of the community learn and practice a language of giving and receiving. Hart & Kindle Hodson assert that “how we communicate our needs and listen to the needs of others determines

whether needs are likely to get met.” In order for all voices to be heard, “teachers and students take the time to learn and practice a non-confrontive way of using language” to navigate all four types of relationships in the classroom (2004, pg. 20).

### 1. Teacher-Self Relationship

Research indicates that more than one in four teachers are suffering from burnout and emotional exhaustion akin to a form of post-traumatic stress, due to lack of administrative support, stringent compliance measures, and negative interactions and emotional conditions in stakeholder relationships (Marshall, 2013). Teachers who wish to foster compassionate relationships in their classrooms must begin by practicing intentional self-compassion and self-care to maintain emotional equilibrium despite the significant challenges that are inherent in our profession (Hart & Kindle Hodson, 2004).

### 2. Teacher-Student Relationships

Teachers who place relationships at the center of the classroom understand that the capacity to connect with students, despite obstacles, is the hallmark of successful teaching. Teachers need to be reflective, honest, and authentic to communicate to students that we see them as whole persons, each instilled with unique abilities. Teachers who value relationships learn to use all aspects of communication in the classroom, verbal and nonverbal, to foster positive and supportive connections with students (Hart & Kindle Hodson, 2004).

### 3. Student-Student Relationships

Relationship-based classrooms engage students in mutually supportive interactions that seek to meet the needs of individuals and of the group (Hart & Kindle Hodson, 2004). This is an essential part of preparing adolescents to become active in democratic society (Kohn, 1992).

### 4. Student-Learning Relationship

In addition to the complex relationships that exist between each of the members of the classroom community, each member also navigates his or her own relationship to the learning process. Students benefit from opportunities to develop and deepen their own interests, talents, and learning styles.

Learners need experience evaluating their own achievement and navigating their feelings related to making mistakes and failing in academic endeavors (Hart & Kindle Hodson, 2004).

### **G. Invitational Teaching**

Purkey & Stanley propose that all people are “able, valuable, and responsible, and should be treated accordingly.” Education is, therefore, a cooperative activity between the teacher and the students. The goal of this cooperative activity is to “cordially summon individuals to see themselves as able, valuable, and responsible and to behave accordingly” (1996, pg. 16).

Similarly, Purkey & Stanley recognize the utmost importance of teacher’s relationship to self, saying, “What teachers accomplish in their profession is a function of the person they are. The highly successful teacher has learned to use one’s self in healthy and creative ways” (1996, pg. 51). Purkey & Stanley describe this teacher relationship to self as “The Four Corner Press,” which includes the following elements: 1) Being personally inviting with oneself, 2) Being personally inviting with others, 3) Being professionally inviting with oneself, and 4) Being professional inviting with others (1996, pg. 52).

Also, Purkey & Stanley emphasize that effective teachers teach and model communication, empathy, and conflict resolution. They identify four categories of teacher behaviors along a spectrum and invite teachers to analyze their actions and choices within this framework: Level 1 – Intentionally Disinviting, Level 2 – Unintentionally Disinviting, Level 3 – Unintentionally Inviting, and Level 4 – Intentionally Inviting. The best invitational teaching is intentionally inviting and seeks to resolve conflict in the classroom “with respect for the dignity and worth of everyone involved” (1996).

### **IV. INTENDED IMPLEMENTATION**

What happens when I invite my students to partner with me to foster a safe and supportive learning environment? To answer my question, I crafted an action plan that addressed the complex dynamics of classroom relationships on two fronts: the teacher (myself) and the students.

As the teacher, I decided to take steps toward further developing an *Intentionally Inviting* stance in my relationships in the classroom. At a personal level, this involved journaling, talking, and thinking

about how I interact with my middle school students and also how I react and adapt when I face relational challenges with them.

For my students, I made a plan to provide my students with the tools necessary to move toward an *Intentionally Inviting* stance in their own relationships with classmates and teachers. This involved initially inviting students to partner with me, engaging students in ongoing conversations and analysis of our classroom climate, offering weekly “Friday Notes” as a channel of communication, and allowing time in our lessons to explicitly teach, model, and practice new non-confrontive ways of speaking and listening.

I planned to look for changes in social-emotional awareness, student learning, student engagement, and student self-concept as a result of my interventions and collaborations with students, and I was particularly interested in analyzing how the outcomes might compare between the two groups of seventh grade students, who were starting from very different places, in terms of classroom climate. Rather than adding to the existing routines, I knew that I could leverage structures that were already in place in my classroom, such as weekly Friday Notes, an opportunity for students to give me anonymous feedback or notes about anything affecting the learning experience.

I planned to collect data in four different categories, listed below.

#### **Data Collection Plan**

1. Student Writing Artifacts - I invited students to use weekly Friday Notes as a way to communicate about our research and provided weekly prompts to unpack student thinking.
2. Student Surveys – I implemented a survey at the beginning and end of the project to measure changes in social-emotional awareness and self-concept.
3. Focus Groups – Periodically, I invited both classes to circle the desks for class meetings to monitor our progress, track changes, and make decisions about our classroom environment.
4. Student Interviews – I asked several students from both classes to reflect on the effectiveness of our interventions.

## V. IMPLEMENTATION AND DATA COLLECTION METHODS

I collected research data from my two different groups of my 7th grade Social Studies students, to whom I will refer as Group A and Group B. As illustrated by my anecdotal accounts in the introduction of this paper, Group A naturally began the year with a more supportive classroom environment, while Group B began the year with a less supportive classroom environment. Although the strategies and interventions that I used with the two groups changed through the course of the school year, as I made unique considerations for each group, my data collection methods were consistent with both groups.

### A. Social-Emotional Learning Survey

I administered a ten-question survey near the beginning of the school year, and gave the same survey near the end of the year. In this survey, students read a statement and choose a number between 1 and 6 (1 = No, not at all. 6 = Yes, very much) to reflect the degree to which they agree with the statement. The statements from the surveys are included below.

<b>Social-Emotional Learning Survey</b>
I trust people in this class.
I respect people in this class.
I can be myself around people in this class.
This class is a safe place to learn.
This class is a safe place to share my thinking.
This class is a safe place to give a wrong answer.
When I have an idea to share, I feel comfortable speaking during class discussions.
I believe that I have valuable ideas to add to class discussions.
I believe that it's better to hear multiple people's perspectives during class discussions.
I enjoy talking in class discussions.

### B. Teacher Journal

I made extensive use of my teacher journal to document my observations and reflections about anything that happened in either 7th grade class related to the classroom environment. In my journal I focused on describing any incidents of teacher-student collaboration, teacher and student feelings that emerged, interventions and strategies that I attempted, issues and problems that arose, and any changes that occurred.

### **C. Weekly “Friday Notes”**

Each Friday, I invited students to spend a few minutes writing a note to me. Initially, I introduced Friday Notes as anonymous and open-ended communications of anything students wanted to express to me. My only limitation was to ask students to be respectful and school-appropriate, but I encouraged them, within those constraints, to use Friday Notes as a way to communicate their feelings about the classroom environment and to suggest ways to improve their experience in the class.

Mid-year, I began to realize that this form of Friday Notes wasn’t giving me enough information. Although some students were taking advantage of the opportunity to use Friday Notes to address valid concerns and share their own reflections on our classroom climate, many were merely writing short notes that gave me little insight into my questions, such as, “I like your shirt,” or, “Waffles vs. Pancakes #TeamWaffle”.

Starting in February, I informed students that Friday Notes would no longer be anonymous, and that I would be asking them, from now on, to be a little bit more specific about their experience in the class. The new prompts for Friday Notes are included below.

#### **Friday Notes**

1. On a scale of 1-5 (1 = never, 5 = always), how often did you feel safe and supported in Social Studies class this week?
2. Explain why you chose your rating. Give specific examples of what happened.
3. (Optional) Write any other notes you’d like to share with me.

### **D. Student Interviews**

I chose four students from both of the 7th grade classrooms to interview with the questions below. I wanted to elicit different perspectives, so I chose two boys and two girls from each class, two of which I had perceived as being neutral or supportive of our interventions, and two of which had at some time during the school year been resistant to our interventions.

### Interview Questions

1. What happened to our classroom environment this year when we tried to partner to foster a more safe and supportive environment?
2. What do you think went well?
3. What do you think were some of our problems? What do you think we should have done differently?
4. Could you share some of the feelings you remember feeling about our classroom environment this year?

## VI. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

In my analysis of all of the data I collected from both groups of 7th grade students, I began to see five themes emerging from the data to address the question: What happens when I invite my students to partner with me to foster a safe and supportive learning environment?

### Five Themes in Data Analysis and Interpretation

- A. Incidents of Teacher-Student Collaboration
- B. Teacher Interventions and Strategies
- C. Issues and Problems
- D. Feelings
- E. Changes

#### A. Incidents of Teacher –Student Collaborations

In the early stages of research, I initiated and led several collaborative conversations related to improving the safety and support in the classroom environment. The table below summarizes those early teacher-initiated collaborations, which were identical with both groups of students.

DATE	Group A & Group B Teacher Initiated Collaborations
11.05.15	Introduced students to my research question. Invited students to write about this prompt: What is keeping us from having a safe and supportive classroom environment? What suggestions do you have?
11.06.15	Presented data from written responses. Led students in generating definitions of the words “safe” and “supportive.” Invited students to generate questions and brainstorm ideas for next steps to improve our classroom climate.
11.12.15	Invited students to analyze and discuss brainstormed ideas and to vote on 1-2 initial action steps.
11.17.15	Led students in discussion related to classroom whole group share-outs: How should I behave when it’s my turn to share? How should I behave when it’s someone else’s turn to share?
11.20.15	Introduced Friday Notes as a weekly opportunity for students to collaborate with me by asking questions, providing feedback, and sharing ideas, concerns, or problems that arise in our collaborative efforts to improve the safety and support in the classroom.
11.23.15	Presented selections of data from Social Emotional Learning Survey and led students in discussion about its implications for our classroom climate. Invited students to reflect on our

chosen action steps and suggest changes in light of the survey data.
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After this initial phase of introducing the research, analyzing data with students, and establishing a plan of action, subsequent collaborations were largely student-initiated, and these collaborations took very different forms with the two groups of students. Friday Notes were the primary method students used to initiate collaborative efforts, but collaborations also emerged in both classes as a result of one-on-one conversations with me or from whole group discussions during class.

Students in Group A were much more likely to take an active role in attempting to improve classroom safety and support, with 53 total incidents of student-initiated collaborative efforts. With Group B, there were 20 incidents of student-initiated collaboration. The tables below provide some snapshots of student-initiated collaborations from both groups of students.

<b>Group A Student-Initiated Collaborations</b>	<b>Group B Student Initiated Collaborations</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>12.10.15</b> - Students approached me in the hallway because classmates were teasing Aamer, a new student, and spreading embarrassing rumors about him during recess. I spoke to Aamer before class, and he was near tears. I asked him if I had his permission to read his recent Friday Note to the class, in which he had written, “When I came to this school and met my new class, I felt like I found my home.” When I read Aamer’s words to the class, some students began to cry, others got out of their seats to hug him, and some spontaneously offered apologies.</li> <li>• <b>12.11.15</b> - In his Friday Note, Faazil suggested an activity that might help students in Group A to bond together and develop trust: “I would like this to be a question that the whole class would answer: Do your best British accent.” I shared the idea with the group and they were enthusiastic. Students had a great time laughing together at our hilarious attempts at British accents.</li> <li>• <b>3.4.16</b> - Aaliyah wrote in her Friday Note, “I feel like we need to do better with the class questions because when I want to hear someone else’s answer, people start to</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>12.01.15</b> - Karina wrote in her Friday Notes, “I think if we do something all together as a class it will improve our classroom environment. I brought this suggestion to the class, and students responded enthusiastically. We brainstormed various ideas and decided to plan a charity project to support a community homeless outreach. After this initial conversation, though, students had difficulty settling on a plan before Winter Break, and after break, students decided to participate in the school-wide Student Council clothing drive rather than start a new project.</li> <li>• <b>01.22.16</b> - In her Friday Note, Raha reminded me that we had been neglecting to do our Question Time at the end of class, and asked if we could start to do a question everyday again. I shared this concern to the group, and they agreed. I led the class in a discussion about obstacles that keep us from doing the questions (such as wasted time with off-task behavior) and how we can partner to ensure that we have enough time for this activity each day. Although students were able to identify obstacles, the group was only partially consistent in efforts to avoid them in future class periods,</li> </ul>

<p>interrupt and I can't hear." I asked for her permission to share this concern with the group, and many others expressed the same concern. We revisited norms for respectful listening during the Question Time, and practiced with a new question. Although students listened more respectfully in the follow-up practice, this was an issue that we revisited multiple times throughout the following months as interruptions continued and several students expressed their frustration in Friday Notes.</p>	<p>so we only did Question Time when we had time at the end of a class period.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>02.29.16-</b> I asked the group if they had heard from a classmate who had been absent for a few days. One student said, "He got shot," and several students laughed. Belen, respectfully, but firmly said, "It's not okay to make jokes like that." The students who had been laughing immediately stopped, and the student who has spoken apologized, and agreed that we shouldn't joke about that.</li> </ul>
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With both groups, student-initiated collaborations fell into three categories, summarized below, all of which are illustrated in the snapshots above.

### **Three Types of Student-Initiated Collaborations**

1. Student(s) addressed a specific incident that reduced the safety and support in the classroom environment for an individual or a small group of students, and the group collaborated to identify solutions.
2. Student(s) addressed general behaviors and attitudes that reduce the safety and support in the classroom environment for all students, and the group collaborated to identify solutions.
3. Student(s) offer ideas for new interventions and collaborations to further improve the classroom environment, and these ideas are offered to the group for consideration.

### **B. Teacher Interventions and Strategies**

In my efforts to partner with two seventh grade classes to foster a safe and supportive learning environment, I attempted a variety of strategies and interventions. I chose some strategies, such as the mini-lessons about social emotional learning topics and non-violent communication skills, because of the research findings I encountered in my literature review. Other strategies I developed or adapted through the course of the research cycle as new problems emerged, and as my partnership with students surfaced allowed me to respond to their ongoing feedback.

Coding and analysis of Friday Notes and my Teacher Journal revealed that the many types of interventions I attempted mainly fall into four categories, summarized below.

## Four Types of Teacher Interventions and Strategies

1. Inviting Partnerships
2. Connecting with Intention
3. Addressing Problems and Concerns
4. Teaching, Modeling, and Practicing Communication

### 1. Inviting Partnerships

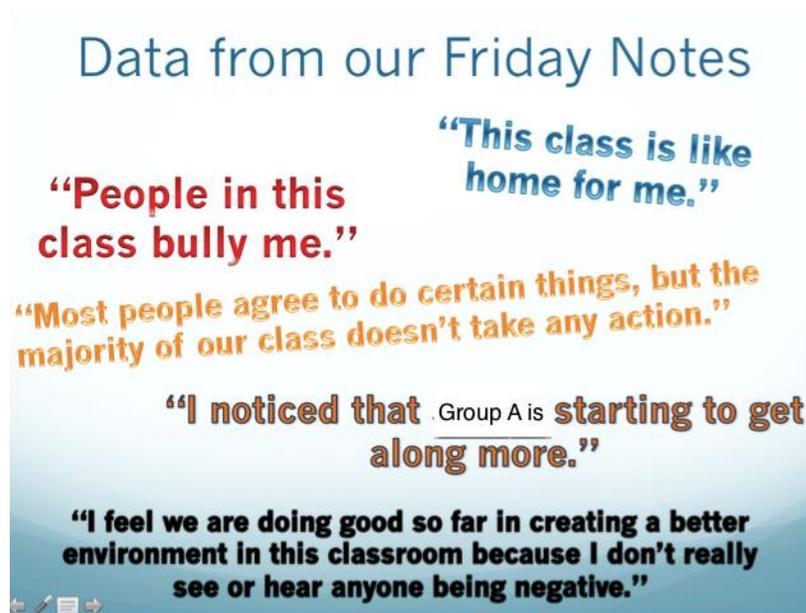
When I set out to answer the question, “What happens when I invite middle school students to partner with me in fostering a safe and supportive classroom environment?” I realized immediately that *invitation* and *partnership* were two ideas that were at the core of my question. It was, therefore, important for me to plan and use strategies that invite partnerships with students.

#### 11.10.15 Journal Entry

I said, “When someone invites you to a party, you have the option to accept the invitation or not. It’s the same with my question about the classroom environment. You have the option to accept my invitation and partner with me, or you can choose not to. I’m curious to check in with you and see how many of you would like to accept the invitation.”

I asked students to show me with a thumbs-up, thumbs-down, or a sideways thumb, to what extent they feel enthusiastic about partnering with me. Approximately 60% gave me a thumbs-up. I followed up with, “Well, it seems like most of you are at least willing to give it a try. For those of you who don’t feel like you want to partner with us yet, you’ll still be in the room observing us while we have these conversations, and you can feel free to join us anytime you feel like it.”

Initially, I introduced my questions to students and explicitly invited them to be my partners in the research. In the 11.10.15 Journal entry above, I recorded what I said to Group B on the day I issued this invitation.



After inviting and establishing a partnership, I was careful to always refer to this work as “our research.” I maintained a stance of invitational partnership with my students by regularly reporting trends from “our research” and asking students to weigh in on decisions related to the classroom environment. For example, after the 12.11.15 Friday Notes with Group A, I projected five anonymous quotes from Friday Notes on the screen (pictured above), and invited students to analyze and discuss the data to make decisions about how we can improve in our efforts to foster a safe and supportive classroom environment. When I invited students to read and discuss the quotes, they discovered together that students in the room have vastly different experiences, and that many do not yet feel safe and supported in the group. This led students to discussion of how we can continue to promote safety and support for everyone.

In order to maintain a partnership with my students, it was important throughout the year that I continue to show my willingness to listen to them as new problems and challenges arose. On 2.18.16, I stopped teaching in the middle of a lesson to reprimand Group B because several students were encouraging off-task and disruptive behavior by smiling, laughing and cheering on the offenders. I saw this as a consistent problem in the group and felt it was important to spend time in class addressing the problem, but several students were frustrated that I was taking time away from instruction. In the

journal entry below, I recorded the feedback I received from a student in Group B, and the resulting decision we made together.

### **2.18.16 Journal Entry**

He said to me, "I think that you need to acknowledge that 'you' are part of the 'we.' Just like you said that we are giving attention to negative behavior, you are giving too much attention to negative behavior when you stop class and try to make us talk about it. Maybe it would be better if you just deal with the few who are being disruptive as quickly as possible and then get back to teaching." I could see from the faces of students in the class that many of them felt relieved that he had said what they had been wanting to say, and it dawned on me that I had been approaching the problem the way I thought was best and had been blind to my students' concerns and preferences. In that moment, part of me had the urge to say, "I'm the teacher. I think I know what's best," but another part of me recognized that this was a critical moment when I could show my students that I truly mean it when I invite them to help make decisions and that I take their feedback seriously.

Humbled, I thanked my student for his words and said, "I'm really taking to heart what you said. It means a lot to me that you shared what you felt. I'm sure it wasn't easy to say." I asked the class if they agreed that I should spend less time and attention addressing negative behavior. They all agreed. One student said, "We just want you to teach us Social Studies." I asked some questions of the group to clarify, and found that the majority of the group preferred that I stop spending time in class teaching about non-confrontive language and other social-emotional topics. Someone said, "It was good for a while, but I think we don't need it now." Although I had my doubts, and secretly felt sure that my students could still benefit from more instruction, I also realized it was more important in this moment to share the power with them than it was to be right. I ended the conversation by saying, "Okay, based on what I learned from you today, I'm going to come to class tomorrow prepared to teach, and with a new commitment not to feed negative and disruptive behavior. Will you come to class tomorrow prepared to learn and with a new commitment not to feed the negative and disruptive behavior?" The class agreed.

In retrospect, this seems to have been a pivotal moment in our partnership. The fact that my students felt safe enough to take the risk to give me honest feedback about the role I played in the classroom environment speaks to the fact that we had already made some progress toward creating a safe space. However, my willingness to hear that feedback and make changes in my practice seemed to be the catalyst that moved us toward even greater safety in the learning environment. Although we continued to experience challenges throughout the year in Group B, this particular interaction seemed to serve as a foundation for the work we continued to do to maintain our classroom culture.

After establishing an invitational and partnering stance with both classes, I looked for opportunities to deepen my students' sense of partnership by inviting them to weigh in and vote on decisions about how we spend our time and how we intervene in the classroom environment. On 3.11.16, a student from Group A brought a conflict to the group at the beginning of the class period on a day when I had scheduled a quiz. I allowed students to help me make decisions about how much of our class time we spent on this issue, while also balancing the importance of the Social Studies work for that day. I wanted to honor the students who felt it was important to discuss the conflict, but I also wanted to honor the students who needed enough time to successfully complete the quiz. I recorded our interaction in my journal, included below.

### **3.11.16 Journal Entry**

I said, "I want to be respectful of your time, especially because we have a quiz at the end of class today, but I also want to be respectful of your desire to talk together about a problem that is bothering some of you." I asked students to vote on whether or not we should address the problem immediately, and the majority voted yes. I said, "The quiz won't take the whole class period, so perhaps we could set a time limit and when that time is up, we will start class immediately." I asked how long they thought they would need, and a student suggested ten minutes. I asked students to give a thumbs-up if they agreed, and all agreed. I set the timer and allowed students to take the lead in a discussion to address the conflict

during those ten minutes.

In this interaction, I invited students to partner with me in classroom decisions without sacrificing the academic content. I offered choices for my students' consideration, but set boundaries within those choices to protect what was most important for that class period. Although voting on how many minutes to set on the timer may seem insignificant, offering even the smallest choicest to my students signals that I am willing to share the power in decisions about our learning environment.

Maintaining a stance of invitational partnership was a key strategy that I used with both groups throughout the year, but this intervention looked very different within the two groups. With Group A, inviting their partnership often meant carving out more time for discussions and collaborations, because this is what students felt was important, and knowing that there was space in the classroom routines for explicit conversation about safety seemed to be an element that promoted safety for this group. With Group B, as illustrated in the anecdote above, a stance of invitational partnership meant that I honored the partnership by accepting students' feedback to spend less time on discussions and collaborations related to classroom environment, even when I felt that students could benefit from more, because I sensed that the net result of honoring their request would be a deeper sense of mutual respect that, in itself, fostered a safe and supportive classroom environment.

For many students, the experience of being asked to partner with the teacher was, in itself, a positive interaction that promoted safety and support. When I interviewed Edgar, a student from Group B, he expressed this sentiment.

#### **4.6.16 Interview with Edgar**

Jodi: Could you share some of the feelings you remember feeling about our classroom environment this year?

Edgar: Today. Right now.

Jodi: Oh, what kind of feelings?

Edgar: Well, I feel like a part of a group. Like what we're doing right now makes me feel like I'm part of a

group.

Jodi: Oh, you mean the fact that I'm interviewing you right now? You feel like you are partnering with me?

Edgar: Yeah.

For Edgar, the invitation to partner with the teacher, and to share his experiences in a one-on-one interview evoked a sense of belonging. Jacinta, a student from Group A, expressed a similar idea in a note she left on my desk.

#### **5.27.16 Note from Jacinta**

I felt excited to be a part of helping you with your study. It was fun!

- Jacinta

In these two exchanges, Edgar and Jacinta confirmed what seemed evident in many of my students' facial expressions, body language, and interactions with me throughout the year: Being invited to be true partners with the teacher was a source of pride and resulted in overall positive feelings in the learning environment.

## **2. Connecting with Intention**

My analysis of all of the data I collected indicated that a strategy I used frequently was the intentional use of my own relational tools to connect with individual students, especially when there was conflict between us. Often I took advantage of information students shared in their Friday Notes to build relationships. For example, when Malik wrote about his favorite basketball team in his Friday Notes several weeks in a row, I made a point of commenting to him whenever I learned something new about the Chicago Bulls. Similarly, I noticed that Karina frequently wrote about her baby brother. I started to ask about her brother from time to time to show that I took an interest in the personal things she shared with me.

In my journal, I recorded several instances when I used intentional warmth to promote connections with individual students and with the group. Below I've selected one snapshot from each group to illustrate how I used this strategy.

Connecting with Intention in Group A	Connecting with Intention in Group B
<p><b>2.6.16</b></p> <p>On a day that I was absent from school, a box of candy was stolen from the Student Council supply cabinet in my classroom. When I returned and found that the candy was missing, I addressed the problem to the class and asked students who were involved to come to me privately and apologize. Several days later, Mia and Sabrina approached me, evidently both very nervous, to apologize. Mia said, "We've been feeling so guilty, we just had to tell you!" Rather than lecture them again, I gave them both hugs and said, "I'm so proud of you for making the choice to be honest, and it means a lot to me that you did."</p> <p>I've never experienced any other conflict with Sabrina, who is typically cooperative and respectful. Although Mia occasionally pushes boundaries and sometimes struggles to communicate with me appropriately and respectfully, she always softens her demeanor when I speak to her one-on-one and is quick to self-correct and acknowledge her mistake. We have many more positive interactions than negative ones, and have maintained connection despite challenges.</p>	<p><b>2.18.16</b></p> <p>After a heated whole group discussion, Lakshmi wanted to speak to me after class. She seemed angry and wanted to continue arguing about issues that had already been resolved by the group, so I tried to end the conversation while also maintaining a stance of warmth and connection with her. I said, "I don't think it's productive to keep arguing about this when the class has already resolved it."</p> <p>I lightly touched her forearm and said, "Lakshmi, everyday when you come to my classroom, I think, 'This is a fresh start and I'm going to do my best to connect with Lakshmi.' Have you noticed that?" She reluctantly admitted that she had. I said, "I'm going to do the same thing tomorrow and I would love it if you would think about it that way, too." Then I asked her to go on to her next class.</p> <p>Although Lakshmi did not show immediate signs of adopting this new attitude the following day, in the weeks that followed I continued to maintain my "fresh start policy," and she gradually began to challenge me less and began to participate much more often in class discussions in helpful and productive ways.</p>

### 3. Addressing Concerns and Problems

One strategy that I used throughout the school year in both classes was that of addressing individual problems and concerns that students communicated in face-to-face conversations or through weekly Friday Notes. These interventions were instrumental in promoting a supportive classroom environment, because they showed students that I was responsive to their individual needs and concerns.

Concerns and problems that students brought to me ranged from trivial issues, such as requests for seating assignment changes, requests for snacks in class, and questions about how to improve Social

Studies grade, to more serious issues. For example, Nahuel reached out to me in his Friday Note to share that a student from another grade level was using racial epithets to address him outside of school. I talked with Nahuel privately and contacted the other student's homeroom teacher, who was able to identify the student and address the problem. I informed Nahuel that if the problem continues, he should let me know immediately, and that he did the right thing to get adults involved. This particular problem has not surfaced again, but Nahuel has felt comfortable to bring other concerns to me either in his Friday Notes or in face-to-face conversations.

In another instance, Samir wrote about a conflict that he was having with friends, and asked me to talk with him privately. He worried that in his anger he might "lose control and punch somebody." I set a time to talk with Samir while the rest of the group was in art class. He explained the situation and I helped him to brainstorm what he could say to his friends to let them know how he was feeling and what he needed. I also helped him to develop a plan for what to do when he is feeling angry and ready to resort to violence. Samir is a soccer player and a boxer, so he decided he should do something physical, like play soccer or spend time with a punching bag when he is feeling overwhelmed and angry. I encouraged him to also keep talking to me or to another adult he trusts.

Often, students who may not have felt comfortable explaining a concern in a face-to-face conversation felt comfortable explaining the problem in their Friday Note and then following up with me one-on-one. The routine of Friday Notes, as well as my explicit invitation to students to bring to me any concerns related to their safety in the classroom, made a regular channel for these concerns to be addressed.

#### **4. Teaching, Modeling, and Practicing Communication**

This final intervention of teaching, modeling, and practicing communication grew out of my initial research in the literature about classroom environment. In the early stages of my project, it became clear to me that my students did not have the tools to engage in classroom discussions about the learning environment without explicit instruction about the language we use.

From mid-November to mid-March, I began teaching five minute mini-lessons several days each week to introduce students to non-confrontive communication, which focuses on communicating feelings and needs, rather than using labeling, blaming, shaming, and name-calling.

As students gained familiarity with this type of language and had opportunities to practice using it in the mini-lessons, I began to look for opportunities to encourage students to use non-confrontive communication in their own discussions, and hoped that students would eventually frame statements in terms of needs and feelings automatically without prompting from me. Although I did not see evidence that students used non-confrontive language without prompting, I saw ample evidence that students had internalized the essentials and were able to rephrase statements using non-confrontive language when I prompted them to do so.

### **3.10.16 Journal Entry**

The students explained to me that many of them had been out of their seats and disruptive when they had a substitute teacher for writing class. Dulce was worried that the class would get in trouble, so she stood up and addressed her classmates directly. The students told me that she said, "You're all acting like animals!" Some students realized that Dulce was trying to help them, and settled down, but some turned on her and said, viciously, "Who made you the *class mom*?" Dulce began crying and asked to go to the office to speak to the Assistant Principal, which further angered students who felt she was "snitching."

After students had explained the situation, I asked, "Is there anyone who feels that they should say anything to Dulce when she returns to class?" Several students raised their hands, so I asked students to first turn to a partner and practice what they might say, reminding them to focus on feelings and needs, and to avoid name-calling and blaming. Students practiced and then I invited some to share out with the group what they could say. Some students shared how they could apologize to Dulce, saying things like, "I'm sorry that I called you 'class mom.'" Some shared what they might say to tell Dulce their own feelings, saying things like, "I felt hurt when you called us animals." I encouraged the students who shared to find an opportunity to talk with Dulce one-on-one.

Later, when I followed up with Dulce, I told her about the conversation we had had in class and gave her a heads-up that students might be coming to talk with her. I invited her to practice what she might say to them, and reminded her to focus on feelings and needs, and to avoid name-calling and blaming. Dulce practiced how she could apologize for saying, “You’re all acting like animals,” and how she could express her own need to feel safe to address her feelings about problems in the class, and to feel that her classmates are cooperating with her to find solutions.

Despite the fact that we had practiced so carefully in class, I found out the next morning that some students had failed to use non-confrontive language when they talked to Dulce. Bashir had sent a text message to her saying, “If you hate our class so much, why don’t you just transfer to another school?” Natali stirred the pot by sending Dulce a Facebook message that said, “I’m not mad at you, but everyone else is mad at you.” She proceeded to describe in detail every hurtful thing that everyone had said.

When I learned of these new problems, I followed up by sitting down first with Bashir and Dulce, then with Natali and Dulce, to redirect them once again to rephrase their feelings and concerns using non-confrontive language.

The above excerpt from my journal illustrates how my students and I practiced using non-confrontive language in a conflict that upset many students in Group A. This example highlights one of the challenges I encountered using this intervention, that even with frequent practice, students often failed to apply the new ways of talking in authentic situations.

### **C. Issues and Problems**

My efforts to collaborate with my students and my attempts to implement interventions and strategies to support our endeavor have resulted in many positive and enriching experiences for me and my students; however, it is insufficient to talk about our successes without acknowledging that my students and I have encountered many issues and problems throughout the process, which can be summarized in two broad categories.

## Two Types of Issues and Problems

1. Student Resistance or Lack of Agency
2. Conflicting Teacher and Student Expectations

### 1. Student Resistance or Lack of Agency

An inherent difficulty in the nature of this research is the virtual impossibility of gaining cooperation from 34 middle school students simultaneously. Although many of my students in both groups were enthusiastic about partnering with me to foster a safe and supportive classroom environment, in both groups, there were students who actively resisted or even attempted to sabotage our initiatives, and also those who remained on the sidelines and failed to adopt our goals as their own. In the journal entry below, I described one such instance of student resistance.

#### 3.1.16 Journal Entry

Today I could tell within the first minute of class that there was a negative mood with Group B. Several students entered the room, walked right up to me and asked, "When are you going to let us change seats?" (I assume they must have been talking about this before class, and perhaps agreed to all ask me on the same day.) I answered each one, "I don't have plans to change seats right now." Some of the students appeared to be very angry and wanted to challenge me on my reasons for my decision, but I said, "I have answered this question before. Right now is not a good time for me to repeat myself. We can schedule a time to talk some other time about it, if you're still concerned. That seemed to start things off on a negative tone, so that when the bell rang and students sat down, I noticed several icy glares directed at me from around the room.

As I started teaching, I noticed that one of the students had deliberately sat in the wrong seat, as if to challenge my authority to assign seats in the classroom. I paused, looked at him, and said, "Please sit in your assigned seat." He stared me down for a minute as if he was thinking about refusing to get up. I didn't repeat myself, but I returned his stare, trying not to seem angry or flustered, but trying to

communicate that I expected him to comply. I waited until he complied, which only took a few seconds, before moving on with the lesson. The rest of the class period, it seemed that a cloud had descended over the room. Several students seemed sullen and angry, participating as little as possible. Even those who had not challenged me about the seating arrangements were still subdued and hesitant to get involved in discussions, perhaps sensing that it wasn't "cool" to cooperate with the teacher today.

## **2. Conflicting Teacher and Student Expectations**

It became clear very early in the year that my students and I had very different expectations about what this partnership would look like. On both sides, partnering together was an unprecedented experience, as traditional classroom environments generally emphasize teacher authority and student compliance. My students sometimes struggled to understand that they had been invited to partner with me to foster a safe and supportive classroom environment, but that did not give them unlimited access to weigh in on all of the decisions affecting our daily classroom life. The journal entry below illustrates an example of that struggle in an early conversation with Group B.

### **11.5.15 Journal Entry**

Yesterday I ended the class period by having students write to answer these prompts: "What is keeping us from having a safe and supportive classroom environment? What could we do to make our classroom more safe and supportive?" Today I chose several student responses to share with the group. I wanted to show students that the majority of their comments were suggesting changes that I, as the teacher, should make, instead of focusing on ways that we as a community could work together to improve the environment. The comments I shared with them included: "You should just get really mad and kick the bad kids out, and then they won't do it anymore," "You should give us more projects," and, "We think the Puritans are boring, but we like talking about all of the wars." Several students also shared that they didn't think it was necessary for me to insist on hearing many different students' voices during discussions. Amaan explained, "If the same four or five boys talk in every discussion, it's okay, because we

usually say all the important stuff anyway. It just wastes time when you make us wait for other people to talk.”

I said to students, “Remember my question that I shared with you was, ‘What happens if I invite my students to partner with me to foster a safe and supportive learning environment?’ I’m inviting you to be my partners to think about how we can improve the learning environment. I’m not inviting you *right now* to partner with me to think about what I teach or how I teach.” I used an analogy to try to explain: “When I go to my mechanic to get my car fixed, I don’t go back into the garage and get under the car with him and start saying, ‘cut that wire,’ or ‘take out that part’ because I don’t know how to do his job, and it’s best to let him do it.” I continued, “I am the one who knows what content needs to be taught, and I am the one who has the job of thinking about what kinds of learning experiences will support all of the students in my classroom, not just individuals, but all of you, and I think it’s best if you leave that to me.”

Malik raised his hand and challenged me, saying, “Your analogy doesn’t work because in this case, we have lots of different teachers and we have observed them all, so we can critique you based on our observations.” I replied, “Okay, let’s try changing the analogy from mechanics to doctors. Let’s say you have a bunch of different doctors and you see them regularly. You have an eye doctor, a foot doctor, an ear, nose, and throat doctor, and a heart surgeon. Just because you’ve observed them all and interacted with them all, do you have the necessary knowledge to tell any of them how they should do their job?”

Malik reluctantly agreed that he wouldn’t tell his doctors how to do their job, but the expression on his face showed that he wasn’t convinced.

Throughout the research period, I frequently found it necessary to examine my own expectations about partnering with my students to foster a safe and supportive classroom environment. Although the idea of partnership was essential to question, and I was intentional about talking to students about “our research” and “our question,” I found that I still implicitly believed that it was my responsibility to make sure our endeavor would be successful, and that if our endeavor failed, the blame would be on me. In the

journal entry below, I reflected on a conversation with my colleague, Janice, that helped me to adjust my expectations.

### **12.1.15 Journal Entry**

It's okay if the things we try don't work. My question is about "what happens," so it's okay if the answer to my question is, "It failed." Janice said, "Whether it works or not, it will be instructive and others will be able to learn from it, as you will." She encouraged me to get back into a spirit of giving myself permission to think of this aspect of my teaching as an experiment and just "try it and see what happens."

I need to stop thinking of this research like I'm going to discover the secret to always having positive, cheerful, respectful teenagers in my room. That's unrealistic, and it will help my state of mind to stop arguing with reality. Conflict will always be a part of any learning environment, and teenagers are in the process of learning how to deal with conflict appropriately. Often, the way they learn is by doing something inappropriate. And it may not even register that they are learning or changing, but they probably are.

### **D. Feelings**

In my analysis of the data in my teacher journal and my students' weekly Friday Notes, one of my most powerful realizations was the undeniable reality of the interplay between individual emotions (those of the teacher and those of each of the students) and the classroom environment that is co-created by all members of the community. As I taught my students the language to name their feelings and needs in our occasional mini-lessons on non-confrontive communication, I was also practicing that discipline by expressing my own feelings in my teacher journal, and also, occasionally, to trusted friends and colleagues. The snapshots below provide a sense of the range of emotions that I noticed and recorded over the course of the research project.

### **Feelings Expressed in my Teacher Journal**

- **9.16.15** I've found it harder and harder to maintain my emotional equilibrium with these two students. It frustrates me and makes me angry when my class is disrupted by their outbursts. Even

though I have tried to stay calm and attempted to control my responses, I am sure they can see the effect they have on me, and in some ways, it feeds the behavior.

- **11.12.15** With Group A I feel a warmth in our group and I feel that students are sincerely trying to take the endeavor seriously. With Group B, I feel like there is an undercurrent of resistance and distrust toward me. I feel myself trying to stay calm, trying to stay positive, but sensing my own hackles going up.
- **11.17.15** With Group B, it feels like I'm constantly being challenged by a mob that wants to see me have a reaction. I find myself feeling angry and impatient with them, all the while trying to stay calm.
- **11.30.15** It feels almost like a battle of wills between me and Group B. It feels like they are finding it entertaining to see me struggle to figure out how to get them engaged, and it feels like quite a few are actually seeing if they can get me to lose my cool.
- **12.1.15** I have been thinking about the importance of being mindful about noticing my feelings as they come, but not reacting in the moment. Although I haven't been screaming at students or doling out harsh punishments, I think they can tell that I'm frustrated and that is giving them a reaction. A strategy I'm going to try is to notice when I'm getting frustrated, and say something like, "I'm noticing that I'm feeling frustrated. I'm going to remember to come back to that later and think about why I felt that way. Right now I'm going to set that feeling aside and continue teaching."
- **12.10.15** I've noticed with Group B I don't feel so stressed when they come into the room. Today they had a really great energy in class. It was clear that they could tell they had done a much better job, and that felt good.
- **2.6.16** This week was rough in a lot of ways with both Group A and Group B.
- **2.18.16** It was hard to hear his feedback, but I also immediately realized that what he said was true. It made it worse to see a few students in the room smirking in delight to see me squirming, but I tried not to dwell on that.
- **2.18.16** I'm much more a part of the problem than I like to admit. I'm not doing as good a job as I'd like to think at being calm and neutral. It's true that I'm feeding the negative behavior with the attention I give to it in my responses.
- **3.2.16** Today was a better day with Group B, but it was a hard day with Group A, for some reason.
- **3.5.16** I notice I'm feeling more in control, and that makes me relax and enjoy the conversations without feeling like I have to be constantly on alert.

A theme that emerges in the journal entries is my uneasiness and frustration when I find that I am in danger of losing emotional equilibrium. Throughout my journal, I often express myself as "trying to stay calm." As I noted on 2.18.16, my attempts to stay calm through sheer will were largely unsuccessful and often, despite those attempts, the classroom climate was affected by my emotions. Although I attempted to adopt a strategy of practicing mindfulness around noticing feelings and tabling them for later, it's clear that I often reverted to established habits of reacting in the moment, which was often observable to my students.

	Negative Feelings Expressed		Positive Feelings Expressed	
	Group A	Group B	Group A	Group B
11.20.15	0	0	4	5
11.24.15	0	0	0	0
12.11.15	0	3	11	0
01.08.16	1	0	2	6
01.15.16	0	0	2	7
01.22.16	0	0	1	8
01.29.16	0	0	2	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>30</b>

My analysis of students' early Friday Notes (from 11.20.15 to 1.29.16) indicates that when students were invited to write anonymous notes to express their feelings about the classroom climate, very few took advantage of that routine to share negative feelings. As summarized in table above, there was only one negative feeling expressed from Group A, and only three negative feelings from Group B. Both groups were more likely to express positive emotions. Surprisingly, in comparison to my own impressions as recorded in my teacher journal, more positive feelings were expressed by Group B than by Group A.

The snapshots below provide examples of negative and positive feelings expressed by students in early Friday Notes. Because there are so few negative feelings expressed overall, I've included all below.

Negative Feelings from Group A	Negative Feelings from Group B
<b>1.8.16</b> (anonymous) "I don't like the way you treat me lately."	<p><b>12.11.15</b> (anonymous) "I really feel unfair. I am done with all this mess you have going on. I'm going to stay to myself and I won't talk to you or anyone."</p> <p><b>12.11.15</b> (anonymous) "I don't feel safe enough to share with people my answers."</p> <p><b>12.11.15</b> (anonymous) "I don't like the people I'm sitting with."</p>

Positive Feelings from Group A	Positive Feelings from Group B
<b>11.20.15</b> (anonymous) "Social Studies is fun this year. I used to hate it, but now I don't."	<b>12.11.15</b> (anonymous) "Just wanted to tell you that you are very nice. I sort of feel safe in this class."

**2.4.16** (anonymous) “I do feel safe and supported by my friends. I’m also glad about the level of forgiveness in this classroom. I feel accepted.”

**1.15.15** (anonymous) “I really do enjoy your class. It has gotten better. Before I was really shy to participate. Now I am not shy (a little).”

### Prompts for Friday Notes

1. On a scale of 1-5 (1 = never, 5 = always), how often did you feel safe and supported in Social Studies class this week?
2. Explain why you chose your rating. Give specific examples of what happened.
3. (Optional) Write any other notes you’d like to share with me.

Starting in February, I informed students that Friday Notes would no longer be anonymous, and that I would be asking them to be a little bit more specific about their experience in the class by responding to the prompts above.

This new format for Friday Notes provided me with more information about how students in each group were feeling about the classroom climate, and also how students’ feelings might be fluctuating from week to week. For comparison, I made a habit of also recording a rating for my own feelings about the classroom environment for that week with each group.

	<b>Group A Student Rating</b>	<b>Group A Teacher Rating</b>	<b>Group B Student Rating</b>	<b>Group B Teacher Rating</b>
02.04.16	4.2	4.0	3.8	2.0
02.11.16	4.3	4.0	4.0	3.0
02.19.16	4.4	4.0	3.6	3.0
03.04.16	4.1	4.0	4.4	4.0
03.11.16	3.8	4.0	4.4	4.5
03.18.16	4.3	4.0	4.5	4.5

As illustrated in the table above, student ratings on the classroom climate fluctuated from week to week, often directly related to issues that were happening in the classroom. For example, on 2.4.16, student feelings were influenced by an incident of stealing in my classroom that had affected several students’ sense of safety. Similarly, on 3.11.16, ratings were significantly lower for Group A after class

discussion raised concerns for several students that some members of the community were silencing the voices of others by interrupting and talking over others.

Comparing my teacher ratings to student ratings is informative with both groups. With Group A, my rating remained steady despite changes that happened in the classroom environment that affected the student ratings. This group started with such a strong and supportive culture from the first day of school that, even when we faced challenges, I rarely struggled to maintain my emotional equilibrium with them. I consistently felt that the group was essentially safe and supportive, with some room for improvement, and this is reflected in my ratings. With Group B, my ratings were at an all-time low on 2.4.16 because the incident of stealing from my classroom and my steps to address the problem had resulted in some backlash from students. After that, my ratings increase steadily from week to week as the classroom environment continued to improve. Sadly, I believe this is due in some part to the fact that one of the most disruptive and influential students suddenly transferred mid-year. When his influence diminished (after 2.19.16), both student and teacher ratings increased and remained steady for the remainder.

It is noteworthy that, in the last two weeks, my ratings for Group B were higher than they had ever been for Group A. Perhaps seeing rapid improvement with Group B and enjoying the resulting momentum had a more positive impact than the steady consistency of Group A. Also, with Group A, although I appreciated the solid foundation that they had established almost instantly, I often noticed that the same small problems, such as interrupting others, that threatened the safety of the classroom at the beginning of the year continued until the end of the year. Perhaps my consistent ratings are indicative of the fact that Group A started strong, but then plateaued.

### **E. Changes**

On 4.25.16, I administered a survey to both Group A and Group B that was identical to the one I first administered on 11.16.15. Over those months, my students and I had collaborated to plan and implement several strategic interventions to foster a more safe and supportive classroom environment.

Throughout the course of the research, various issues and problems emerged, and many of my students and I experienced both positive and negative emotions. The question remains: Did we change?

In the following pages, I will examine each of the ten survey questions to analyze changes from the beginning of year administration and the end of year administration, and to compare results from Group A to those from Group B. In my analysis of the survey results, five categories emerged.

**Five Categories of Change from BOY to EOY Survey**

1. Significant Positive Change in Both Groups
2. Significant Positive Change in Group B, Some Positive Change in Group A
3. Significant Positive Change in Group A, Some Positive Change in Group B
4. Slight Positive Change in Both Groups
5. Safety Progression in Comparison of Statements

**1. Significant Positive Change in Both Groups**

**Statement 3: I can be myself around people in this class.  
(1=No, not at all. 6=yes, very much.)**

<b>11.16.15 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>	<b>4.25.16 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>
<b>1</b>	4	3	<b>1</b>	1	1
<b>2</b>	4	6	<b>2</b>	3	1
<b>3</b>	5	4	<b>3</b>	7	3
<b>4</b>	4	5	<b>4</b>	15	8
<b>5</b>	4	6	<b>5</b>	5	11
<b>6</b>	10	8	<b>6</b>	5	7
<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>13 (42%)</b>	<b>13 (41%)</b>	<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>11 (31%)</b>	<b>5 (16%)</b>
<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>18 (58%)</b>	<b>19 (59%)</b>	<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>25 (69%)</b>	<b>26 (84%)</b>

**Statement 4: This class is a safe place to learn.  
(1=No, not at all. 6=yes, very much.)**

<b>11.16.15 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>	<b>4.25.16 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>
<b>1</b>	2	3	<b>1</b>	0	0
<b>2</b>	3	4	<b>2</b>	0	1
<b>3</b>	1	4	<b>3</b>	1	0
<b>4</b>	7	5	<b>4</b>	5	11

5	5	7	5	14	8
6	13	9	6	16	11
<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>6 (19%)</b>	<b>11 (34%)</b>	<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>1 (3%)</b>	<b>1 (3%)</b>
<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>25 (81%)</b>	<b>21 (66%)</b>	<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>35 (97%)</b>	<b>30 (97%)</b>

<b>Statement 7: When I have an idea to share, I feel comfortable speaking during class discussions.</b> (1=No, not at all. 6=yes, very much.)					
<b>11.16.15 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>	<b>4.25.16 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>
1	5	6	1	1	3
2	4	6	2	2	6
3	4	8	3	6	1
4	7	4	4	9	8
5	6	4	5	5	10
6	5	4	6	12	3
<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>13 (42%)</b>	<b>20 (63%)</b>	<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>10 (28%)</b>	<b>10 (32%)</b>
<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>18 (58%)</b>	<b>12 (37%)</b>	<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>26 (72%)</b>	<b>21 (68%)</b>

<b>Statement 9: I believe it's better to hear multiple people's perspectives during class discussions.</b> (1=No, not at all. 6=yes, very much.)					
<b>11.16.15 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>	<b>4.25.16 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>
1	3	3	1	0	0
2	2	2	2	1	0
3	1	3	3	2	2
4	4	6	4	7	8
5	7	4	5	12	7
6	14	14	6	14	14
<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>6 (19%)</b>	<b>8 (25%)</b>	<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>3 (8%)</b>	<b>2 (6%)</b>
<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>25 (81%)</b>	<b>24 (75%)</b>	<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>33 (92%)</b>	<b>29 (94%)</b>

Several items from the survey indicate significant positive changes in the classroom environment for both groups. As illustrated in the table for Statement 3, both groups showed a gain of seven students (11% for Group A and 25% for Group B) who agreed with the statement, "I can be myself around people in this class." With Statement 7, "When I have an idea to share, I feel comfortable speaking in class discussions," both groups moved in a positive direction, with an increase of 8 (14%) who said yes in Group A and 9 (31%) who said yes in Group B.

In the November administration of the survey, six students from Group A (19%) and eleven students from Group B (34%) indicated that the class was not a safe place to learn; by April, the number of students who called the learning environment unsafe reduced to 1 (3%) in Group A and 1 (3%) in Group B. This result is perhaps the greatest cause for celebration, as it most closely correlates to our research question.

Finally, for the statement, “I believe it’s better to hear multiple people’s perspectives during class discussions,” 6 (19%) from Group A and 8 (25%) from Group B answered no in November, but only 3 (8%) from Group A and 2 (6%) from Group B answered no in April. This change is indicative of a supportive environment in the classroom, because if students value others’ perspectives, they should be more likely to support others to share their views with the community in discussions.

An analysis of these four survey items together indicates an overall increase in safety and support in both Group A and Group B from November to April. In both groups, students’ sense of safety increased, and this contributed to an overall increase in willingness to express oneself and ability to participate in class discussions. Furthermore, students grew to place more value on the perspective of others.

## 2. Significant Positive Change in Group B, Some Positive Change in Group A

<b>Statement 1: I trust people in this class.</b> (1=No, not at all. 6=yes, very much.)					
<b>11.16.15 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>	<b>4.25.16 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>
<b>1</b>	3	8	<b>1</b>	2	2
<b>2</b>	4	4	<b>2</b>	3	4
<b>3</b>	4	9	<b>3</b>	7	7
<b>4</b>	9	6	<b>4</b>	9	10
<b>5</b>	7	4	<b>5</b>	9	6
<b>6</b>	4	1	<b>6</b>	6	2
<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>11 (35%)</b>	<b>21 (66%)</b>	<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>12 (33%)</b>	<b>13 (42%)</b>
<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>20 (65%)</b>	<b>11 (34%)</b>	<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>24 (67%)</b>	<b>18 (58%)</b>

<b>Statement 2: I respect people in this class.</b> (1=No, not at all. 6=yes, very much.)					
<b>11.16.15 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>	<b>4.25.16 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>
<b>1</b>	3	8	<b>1</b>	2	2
<b>2</b>	4	4	<b>2</b>	3	4
<b>3</b>	4	9	<b>3</b>	7	7
<b>4</b>	9	6	<b>4</b>	9	10
<b>5</b>	7	4	<b>5</b>	9	6
<b>6</b>	4	1	<b>6</b>	6	2
<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>11 (35%)</b>	<b>21 (66%)</b>	<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>12 (33%)</b>	<b>13 (42%)</b>
<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>20 (65%)</b>	<b>11 (34%)</b>	<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>24 (67%)</b>	<b>18 (58%)</b>

1	2	2	1	0	0
2	0	2	2	0	1
3	2	6	3	4	2
4	4	5	4	5	5
5	15	8	5	17	15
6	8	9	6	9	8
<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>4 (13%)</b>	<b>10 (31%)</b>	<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>4 (11%)</b>	<b>3 (10%)</b>
<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>27 (87%)</b>	<b>22 (69%)</b>	<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>32 (89%)</b>	<b>28 (90%)</b>

With two items related to trust and respect in the classroom environment, both groups showed change in a direction that indicates increased safety and support, but the changes were more pronounced with Group B. For example, 7 students (24%) in Group B changed their answer from no to yes for the statement, “I trust people in this class.” Similarly, “I respect people in this class,” changed from 22 (69%) students saying yes to 28 (90%). These results seem to indicate that the interventions and collaborations we attempted were more successful with the group that most needed them because they started the year with less safety and support.

Group A started the year with a strong and supportive environment and the survey results above indicate that this remained relatively steady, with only small changes toward more safety and support. Four more students (2%) changed to say that they trust people in this class. Five more students (2%) changed to say that they respect people in this class.

### 3. Significant Positive Change in Group A, Some Positive Change in Group B

<b>Statement 10: I enjoy talking in class discussions.</b>					
<b>(1=No, not at all. 6=yes, very much.)</b>					
<b>11.16.15 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>	<b>4.25.16 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>
1	5	7	1	4	4
2	4	4	2	3	7
3	4	7	3	2	5
4	1	3	4	7	7
5	4	4	5	7	6
6	13	7	6	13	2
<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>13 (42%)</b>	<b>18 (56%)</b>	<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>9 (25%)</b>	<b>16 (53%)</b>

<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>18 (58%)</b>	<b>14 (44%)</b>	<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>27 (75%)</b>	<b>15 (47%)</b>
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With only one statement, “I enjoy talking in class discussions,” did Group A show significantly more positive change than Group B. From November to April, an additional 9 students (17%) in Group A agreed with the statement. In Group B, the positive change only consisted of one more student (3%). I included this statement with the assumption that students who feel safe and supported will be more likely to enjoy talking in class discussions; however, this item seems to indicate that that is not necessarily the case in Group B.

#### 4. Slight Positive Change in Both Groups

<b>Statement 8: I believe I have valuable ideas to add to class discussions. (1=No, not at all. 6=yes, very much.)</b>					
<b>11.16.15 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>	<b>4.25.16 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>
<b>1</b>	3	7	<b>1</b>	1	1
<b>2</b>	1	3	<b>2</b>	4	4
<b>3</b>	5	6	<b>3</b>	7	9
<b>4</b>	5	3	<b>4</b>	7	8
<b>5</b>	9	4	<b>5</b>	10	3
<b>6</b>	8	9	<b>6</b>	7	6
<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>9 (29%)</b>	<b>16 (50%)</b>	<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>12 (33%)</b>	<b>14 (45%)</b>
<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>22 (71%)</b>	<b>16 (50%)</b>	<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>24 (67%)</b>	<b>17 (55%)</b>

For Statement 8, “I believe I have valuable ideas to add to class discussions,” the positive change in both groups was not significant. In the November administration, 22 students from Group A (71%) agreed with the statement, and in the April administration, an additional two students agreed. Given the slight change in class size, this was actually a decrease of 4% from the November survey. Similarly, the students who agree with this statement in Group B changed from 16 to 17, a slight increase of 5%. I included this item in the survey to analyze whether or not interventions to improve safety and support would have an effect on student self-efficacy, and these results seem to indicate that they did not have significant impact.

## 5. Safety Progression in Comparison of Statements

<b>Statement 4: This class is a safe place to learn.</b> (1=No, not at all. 6=yes, very much.)					
<b>11.16.15 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>	<b>4.25.16 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>
1	2	3	1	0	0
2	3	4	2	0	1
3	1	4	3	1	0
4	7	5	4	5	11
5	5	7	5	14	8
6	13	9	6	16	11
<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>6 (19%)</b>	<b>11 (34%)</b>	<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>1 (3%)</b>	<b>1 (3%)</b>
<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>25 (81%)</b>	<b>21 (66%)</b>	<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>35 (97%)</b>	<b>30 (97%)</b>

<b>Statement 5: This class is a safe place to share my thinking.</b> (1=No, not at all. 6=yes, very much.)					
<b>11.16.15 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>	<b>4.25.16 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>
1	4	6	1	0	1
2	4	4	2	1	2
3	6	3	3	8	4
4	6	9	4	8	9
5	6	4	5	10	8
6	5	6	6	9	7
<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>14 (45%)</b>	<b>13 (41%)</b>	<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>9 (25%)</b>	<b>7 (23%)</b>
<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>17 (55%)</b>	<b>19 (59%)</b>	<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>27 (75%)</b>	<b>24 (77%)</b>

<b>Statement 6: This class is a safe place to give a wrong answer.</b> (1=No, not at all. 6=yes, very much.)					
<b>11.16.15 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>	<b>4.25.16 Response</b>	<b>Group A (# people)</b>	<b>Group B (# people)</b>
1	4	10	1	0	4
2	6	6	2	2	1
3	6	6	3	9	8
4	6	2	4	8	4
5	3	5	5	9	10
6	6	3	6	8	4
<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>16 (52%)</b>	<b>22 (69%)</b>	<b>NO (1-3)</b>	<b>11 (31%)</b>	<b>13 (42%)</b>
<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>15 (48%)</b>	<b>10 (31%)</b>	<b>YES (4-6)</b>	<b>25 (69%)</b>	<b>18 (58%)</b>

Three items from the survey, when analyzed together, indicate an interesting progression in terms of student's perception of safety in the classroom environment. With Statement 4, "This class is a safe place to learn," there were six students from Group A (19%) and eleven from Group B (34%) who disagreed with this statement in November. In contrast, by April, there was only one student in each group (3%) who disagreed with the statement, indicating that almost everyone in the room feels safe to learn there.

With Statement 5, "This class is a safe place to share my thinking," the number who disagreed in Group A changed from 14 to 9, a 20% decrease. The number who disagreed in Group B changed from 13 to 7, a 22% decrease. While these changes are positive, they indicate that there is still a subset of each group in which students do not feel safe enough to share their thinking.

Finally, with Statement 6, "This class is a safe place to give a wrong answer," students who disagreed with this statement changed from 16 to 11 in Group A, a 21% decrease. Students who disagreed with the statement in Group B changed from 22 to 13, a 25% decrease. Again, while these changes are positive, they indicate that roughly 1/3 of each class does not feel safe to give a wrong answer.

These three items from the survey, when analyzed together, may indicate an interesting progression in terms of student's perception of safety in the classroom environment. Most students feel safe enough "to learn." When students read these words, perhaps they thought of a passive and receptive learning that involved listening and understanding. Fewer students felt safe to share their thinking, perhaps because this is a more active participation in the learning process. Finally, even fewer students in both groups felt safe enough to give a wrong answer, indicating that the classroom environment was not yet supportive enough for this type of very necessary active participation in the learning experience.

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

I began the school year with a question and a conviction. My question was: What happens when I invite my students to partner with me to foster a safe and supportive learning environment? My

conviction was a belief that a supportive and safe environment is essential for my students' learning. I brought my question and my conviction to the two very different groups of 7th graders who spend time in my classroom each day, and I asked them to become my partners.

The day-to-day enactment of that partnership looked very different within the two groups, but in broad strokes, the experience was very similar. Both groups initiated collaborations with me to improve the learning environment. Within both groups, there were issues and problems, and both positive and negative feelings emerged as we struggled through challenges and attempted to identify solutions. Most significantly, despite the very different places from which they started, both groups developed measurably safer and more supportive classroom environments through our partnership.

Based on my experience in this partnership, I intend to continue improving my professional practice with four specific next steps, described below.

#### **Summary of Next Steps**

- A. Invitational Teacher and Student Partnerships
- B. Proactive Channels for Communication
- C. Learning and Practicing New Ways of Talking
- D. Teacher Emotional Health

#### **A. Invitational Teacher and Student Partnerships**

Teachers promote safety and support in the classroom environment when they show a willingness to listen to students' perspectives and invite students to partner in bringing about positive changes. Although teachers must navigate how much control to share, and what areas of classroom life are open for negotiation, even small gestures of invitation and partnership yield positive results in the classroom climate.

Moving forward, I will continue to approach challenges that emerge in the classroom by inviting students to partner with me in attempting to identify solutions. Through my experiences in this action research project, I've gained some clarity on the boundaries of these partnerships; in the future, I will look for more opportunities to partner with students to solve different kinds of problems.

## **B. Proactive Channels for Communication**

Despite the many demands on classroom time, there is value, especially at the beginning of the year, in setting aside even a few minutes per week to allow students a regular channel for communicating needs and concerns. Many students are hesitant to approach the teacher for a face-to-face conversation, but these same students often share real concerns when a low-risk channel for communication exists. When students are invited to share their perspectives and given a consistent outlet for doing that, teachers can learn a great deal about the obstacles that interfere with safety and support in the classroom space. Moreover, these channels often offer a powerful opportunity for the teacher to strengthen individual relationships with students, which positively impacts the overall classroom climate.

Based on this recommendation, I will implement a regular routine like Friday Notes at the beginning of a new year, and will continue as long as it seems necessary or students find it valuable.

## **C. Learning and Practicing New Ways of Talking**

Students benefit from explicit instruction and modeling of non-confrontive communication, as well as multiple opportunities for safe practice in the classroom context. This new way of talking is often counter to the models that students encounter daily at home, at school, and in the media they consume; therefore, students need many opportunities to practice before they begin to internalize and own the language.

In the upcoming school year, I plan to teach, model, and practice the basics of non-confrontive communication during the first few class periods while I'm introducing routines and procedures. Rather than teaching mini-lessons throughout the year, I hope to build on that foundation and continue embracing "teachable moments" to allow students to practice new ways of talking in authentic situations.

## **D. Teacher Emotional Health**

One of my most powerful realizations, from what I uncovered in my literature review and my own action research, is a new understanding of the way that my own emotional health contributes to the climate in my classroom. We are living in a time when teachers navigate unprecedented amounts of

pressure and stress from every direction, and conflict is a natural and, in fact, valuable, part of classroom life. We teachers can benefit from continued reflection on how to practice self-care and self-compassion to sustain ourselves in this important work while maintaining emotional health.

Although the importance of teacher emotional health may seem self-evident in a time when the media frequently reports on teacher shortages and burnout, in my experience, the topic is rarely discussed among teachers themselves. Moving forward, I would like to invite my colleagues at school to join me in a book study group focused on emotional health topics to explore the role our emotional health plays in our professional practice.

## **VIII. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **A. Invitational Teacher and Student Partnerships**

Teacher education programs should emphasize the philosophy of invitational teaching in preservice training, particularly for teachers of middle school students. School districts should offer ongoing professional development to allow teachers to form invitational partnerships with students around problems of practice in the classroom.

### **B. Proactive Channels for Communication**

Administrators should encourage teachers, particularly those in the middle school setting, to dedicate a small amount of time each week for a routine that allows students to communicate concerns and needs to the teacher in writing.

### **C. Learning and Practicing New Ways of Talking**

School districts should value social and emotional learning as a core subject and provide teachers at all grade levels with the resources and support needed to implement enriching, grade level appropriate instruction aligned with state standards for social and emotional learning. That instruction should include explicit teaching and modeling of respectful communication. Students need to practice new ways of talking and listening many times throughout years of instruction to adopt non-confrontive communication as their own language.

#### **D. Teacher Emotional Health**

Teacher education programs should inform preservice teachers of practices that support emotional health. School districts should offer ongoing professional development to allow teachers to develop and practice individual strategies for self-care and self-compassion.

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