

Problem-Solving Curriculum

There is a notebook in the classroom that is more valued than any other notebook. It sits in a basket in the book corner and is labeled "Class Meeting Notebook". This notebook is the depository of students' daily hurt feelings, anger and frustrations. When students cannot resolve their conflicts on their own, they may write them up in the notebook to be discussed at a weekly meeting. There are only two conditions: the child must have tried to first solve it by himself/herself, and the entry needs to be signed.

The problem solving class gathers once per week in the counselor's room—a place that all students come to know as a safe space. The class begins with one minute of silence where students are given a chance to reflect on the week.

Before the counselor opens the notebook, the students are given a chance to share any problems that were resolved before class. This gives positive recognition from the group to the student who has resolved a problem independently.

The meetings have predictable elements that give students a sense of order and regularity. First the counselor reads an entry and asks the student author to elaborate on the entry. If it's an issue that involves another student, the other student is required to let the first student finish talking before joining the conversation. At first, it is difficult for some students to wait. They want to instantly refute the accusations. They are afraid that if they do not defend themselves immediately, it makes them appear more guilty.

However, over time, the students become less defensive. They know to trust the process, that there is a form of justice exercised at our meetings, and that we are not here to judge, but to listen to them and support them. After the first student has finished sharing his/her perspective, the second student has a chance to speak. Based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development, we know that at around age seven, children become less egocentric, and can begin to understand someone else's point of view. Students are asked, "What is your perception of the incident?" in an effort to help them realize that every incident can be viewed differently depending on one's vantage point.

The second student then shares their side of the story, after which the class is invited to participate. The other students offer support, wisdom, acknowledgement and concrete solutions. The counselor facilitates the discussion and only intervenes to help guide the students. Students learn to listen to one another and understand the function of social rules.

Class meetings give students a safe, predictable place to share their conflicts, and a supportive place to resolve them. When children feel safe and trust their environment, they will be ready to learn.



The Benefits of Class Meetings:

An exercise in the democratic system where the students are encouraged to voice their opinions, and make decisions together to improve our classroom life.

Help give students a sense of belonging, a place where they are seen and heard. And slowly, they begin to feel invested in a process that recognizes the life of the playground, and the difficulties students cope with every day at school.

Provide students with an opportunity to express themselves in an open and direct manner.

Teach students how to listen to one another in order to develop empathy, and understand someone else's viewpoint.

Promote character education, giving the teacher the opportunity to talk about what it means to be kind, to be a good friend, to be brave, to have integrity, to be an ally, to tell the truth, to stand up for one's beliefs, and more.

Teach students social and emotional vocabulary. Students begin to use more sophisticated words to express the full range of human emotions, not only with words like "mad," "sad," "bad," but also with words like "discouraged," "frustrated," "disappointed," "jealous." Expressing their feelings with these words will give the children more mastery over their emotions, and the ability to understand others.

Serve as a safe public forum, give students a chance to become accountable for their actions with dignity and respect, without losing face.

Model the 3 R's - responsibility, rights and respect - and help create a genuinely caring class community.