FACILITATING STUDENT LEARNING THROUGH COLLABORATION:
A FIFTH GRADE JOURNEY TO CLASSROOM COMMUNITY
AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this action research project was to create a cohesive classroom community in a class of thirty unique and energetic fifth grade students divided by language and gender. Data was compiled over four months into eight data sets consisting of artifacts from team-building experiences, journal entries, observations of group interaction, and researcher journal reflections. The data sets were collected from community-building or team-building experiences facilitated by myself, which focused on working together and achieving success as a group while utilizing the strengths of individual classmates.

The result of these community-building activities is a class of fifth graders who have gelled into a cohesive unit and have a better appreciation of their own talents and the talents their classmates bring to the classroom community. While the class has in no way become a utopia, the major walls that had stood between boys and girls and between English monolingual students and native Spanish-speaking students have faded. All groups can be seen interacting socially and collaborating academically throughout the school day.
It was an exhilarating experience opening our classroom door on that warm August morning, just before the students flooded into the class for the first time this year. What wonderful group of students would I be working with for my first student-teaching experience. The students began to stream through the door—five, ten, then twenty. And they kept streaming in. I stopped counting at twenty-five and just tried to smile and take it all in, watching them find their desks and get their school supplies situated. The classroom was full of energy and continues that way even to the writing of this research paper. There were thirty bright and energetic bodies rummaging through their backpacks and sharpening pencils, eager to get the show on the road.

Our classroom is large and open, but with thirty desks in the room, it’s like winding through a maze to get from one side of the room to the other. Thirty fifth graders embarking on a journey together, set in a sun-filled classroom in a rural community between Portland and Salem, Oregon. Our class is just a fraction of the student body of 630 in a school built in 1993, beautifully constructed to meet the needs of a rapidly growing community. Within a year of its being built, the school was already bursting at the seams. The demographics of the school are well-represented in my classroom, a socio-economically diverse group of kids with a large Hispanic population ranging from 30–40%, depending on the time of year. As in any classroom, my thirty students have various levels of academic interest and ability. But without exception they love to have a-fun. I was looking forward to working with these students and discovering their talents and joys in life.

As I watched the students over the first few weeks of school, I noticed how little they interacted with one another in a helpful or collaborative way. The
students seemed to have a difficult time working together in groups. Even though their desks were clustered in groups of four and five to facilitate group interaction, the students did not naturally help each other. We had our Spanish/English bilingual students sitting close by our students who speak little/no English to facilitate vocabulary and instructional assistance. But our bilingual students did not give much help to our Spanish-only students; and the help they did give was usually a brief and difficult-to-understand summary of the teacher’s instructions.

My cooperating teacher and I had hoped for the students to help each other and collaborate with each other when they needed clarification on assignments. But they seemed to be highly dependent on the teachers for support. We saw the least amount of collaboration between the Spanish and English-speaking students as well as between the male and female students. They did not seem to see each other as valuable resources. We were especially interested in collaboration between the English Language Learners (ELL) and the rest of the class because Spanish-speaking students need to be exposed to as much English as possible, both inside and outside the classroom, in order to acquire the language most effectively. But the English-speakers in our class did not talk, or even try to communicate using non-verbal cues, with the Spanish-speakers. If only they would interact as a team, helping each other to understand and realizing they are all participants and important contributors in the classroom and to the learning process of the entire class.

The question I began throwing around at this point had to do with creating a classroom community where the students felt valued and encouraged to work together and build relationships in addition to getting their work done. In the face of such diversity, I could see how imperative it was for the students to first see how
much they had in common and begin to bring them together based on their similarities and help them feel a sense of belonging in our classroom community.

I saw this topic playing a major role in how effective the classroom would be throughout the year. Whether the students realized it or not, the classroom is a significant community where they would be spending a great deal of time during the following eight months. It would be so good for the classroom to be a positive collaborative environment where the students were learning and growing as a part of a supportive community. But this was limited because the students did not yet understand they all played an important role in the success of the classroom community. This topic of classroom community became even more important to me as I realized how difficult it was to teach a classroom full of students who did not work well with their classmates.

Over my career as a student, nearly 17 years, I have participated in some incredible classroom communities that greatly enhanced my educational experience. The cohesion felt in those classrooms was built upon a great deal of respect for the teacher and classmates, an environment of trust and a place where each student was valued for what they could bring to the community. In each of these experiences, the community dynamic was modeled by the teacher in respect for the students and a passion for teaching/learning. My negative classroom experiences were in classrooms where there was not mutual respect for students or the teacher, and where the atmosphere was one of mistrust and rivalry rather than cooperation and teamwork.

I believe the foundation of community and cooperation within a classroom begins with the teacher. A good teacher cares for every single individual in her/his classroom, regardless of the scholastic aptitude and social behaviors of each child. In addition, a good teacher looks for the good in every child, sees the potential of each,
builds trust and respect into every student interaction, and believes her/his job as a teacher is to take every child from where they are and move them forward—to help every child discover their gifts and abilities and to become all they can be. Good teachers realize the benefits of cooperative learning and give their classes ample opportunities for both individual and group work. This action research project focused on these teaching practices, with specific emphasis on providing cooperative learning opportunities, as well as team-building experiences, in order to build community in the classroom.

I applied a variety of community-building strategies within the classroom in order to increase collaboration between students across ethnic and gender lines, emphasizing the strengths and talents each student brings to the classroom community. As a class, we defined community and what it means to be a great community, and then we worked toward becoming that community. The weekly team-building experiences were 15–30 minutes in length, focusing on getting students used to their teams and learning how to work with all the team members. The experiences included creating a team mascot, a memory synergy activity, a word-creation game, a silent castle-building activity, and an imaginative team scientist activity. After the activities the students reflected on their experiences through journaling or group discussions. I also conducted several observations of student interaction during regular classroom activities and group work to analyze whether or not there was growth in collaborative behaviors between students and/or an increased sense of community in the classroom as a whole. I wanted to see if the students were more willing and able to work together and help each other when given opportunities to do so. Over the course of the eight weeks of community/team-building time, the class has undoubtedly grown closer together and
the sense of cohesion in the room has grown much stronger than what I saw and felt at the beginning of the year.
WHAT I'VE LEARNED FROM DISTANT COLLEAGUES

Over the years, I have heard many studies vocalizing the importance of classroom unity and creating a community within the classroom as a means of facilitating learning within the classroom. As I observed my fifth grade students interact those first few weeks of school, it was obvious that their ability to learn was greatly inhibited by their inability or unwillingness to work together or get along with one another. I knew my student-teaching classroom lacked the community feel, but I did not know what steps needed to be taken to create that community in the face of such diversity. Fortunately, there are numerous books and piles of articles which have been written on this very subject. I have reviewed some excellent resources, which have answered many of my questions and given me a basis for my research methods. The themes of my literature review center around four main areas: the teacher, the student, the English language learner, and the classroom community.

Author and college professor, Thomas Lickona (1991), wrote a book called, *Educating for Character: How our schools can teach respect and responsibility*. In this book, Lickona focuses on the role of the teacher in building character in students, which leads to the formation of a classroom community. He states that teachers have an opportunity to affect the values and character of their students in at least three ways: by being effective caregivers, models, and ethical mentors. As a caregiver, the teacher can love and respect students, build their self-esteem, and encourage them to succeed in school. As models, to students it is essential for teachers to treat students and fellow teachers with respect and behave responsibly inside and outside the classroom. As ethical mentors, teachers are in the position to guide classroom discussion and give personal
encouragement to students as well as corrective feedback when students hurt themselves or others. The level of influence a teacher has on students is directly related to the level of respect and trust built with the individual students.

Consistent within all the literature I reviewed in regard to the role of the teacher in building a classroom community are the following (Gibbs, 2000; Kagan, 1997; Lickona, 1991; Shaw, 1992): The teacher models respect, affirmation and care to all students; provides opportunities for cooperative learning; promotes feelings in all students of membership in, and responsibility to, the classroom community; does not tolerate an atmosphere of disrespect.

Vanston Shaw (1992) discussed the role of teacher in his book, *Communitybuilding in the Classroom*. He stressed the necessity for teachers to provide opportunities for students to get to know each other. Students need these opportunities to find out about each other in a safe way, like “show-and-tell” in the early elementary years, because it gives them a chance to connect and relate to one another in authentic ways. But as students move through school, these opportunities to share decrease and teachers don’t take time for individual experiences to be shared. Students have a strong need for belonging and connectedness to something larger than themselves. They also often exert a great deal of energy to belong/feel connected to a group. Teachers who provide community-building or cooperative experiences are recognizing the need for connectedness and enabling students to focus their energy toward learning rather than gaining acceptance.

Shaw also emphasizes the need for teachers to teach relationship skills as a part of building a sense of community. Communication, listening, and conflict resolution skills are important skills to have in order to maintain a positive group dynamic.
The second area I focused on is the student. According to the literature, students must feel safe and valued in the community; must see their place or role in the community to feel ownership and value in the community; must listen attentively to others and be willing to help in their strong areas. Jeanne Gibbs (2000), who writes and implements educational programs to support child development and prevent youth problems, created a process called “Tribes – TLC” (Tribes Learning Community) with the specific purpose of facilitating learning by establishing a positive classroom/school community.

The traditional competitive system awards the few, but loses many. Students, even those considered to be slow learners, become motivated when able to work with peers. Cooperative learning is heralded as one of the most promising instructional strategies to dramatically improve academic achievement. (Gibbs, 2000, p. 20)

Gibbs’ work clearly shows that students benefit greatly from cooperative learning experiences. She also emphasizes the idea of a democratic classroom, which is more student-centered than teacher-centered. The shift to a classroom format of cooperative learning has brought with it the need for students to be active participants in what and how they learn. When students have choice, their voices are heard and they are able to take ownership in the projects they take on. Ownership in their work facilitates ownership in the community as a whole because students begin to take responsibility for both individual and group outcomes. Students are much more likely to strive for success when they are working on something where they have been involved in the decision-making process.

In addition to focusing on the students in general, I also wanted to research the impact of building community through cooperative-learning experiences for the English
Language learners. The literature overwhelmingly indicates that English language learners benefit greatly in language acquisition from cooperative learning activities because information is relevant, repetitive, and developmentally appropriate. According to Spencer Kagan (1995), cooperative learning groups are excellent for English language learners because the language used by their peers is relevant and developmentally appropriate, versus the direct lecturing method where the teacher may be using vocabulary above the English language learner’s level. The students are able to interact with their peers at their appropriate level of development, in relevant language they will use from day to day.

Also, when students are working together in groups, brainstorming or creating a corporate finished product, their conversation is often repetitive. English language learners hear similar vocabulary over and over as their English-speaking peers explain ideas in similar but different ways. This is excellent for English language acquisition. In cooperative learning experiences, where students are grouped together heterogeneously, English language learners also have the opportunity to hear more grammatically correct English spoken by their English-speaking peers, rather than if they were just seeking help from their bilingual classmates (Kagan, 1995). The bilingual students in the class have a crucial role in the classroom; however their English is not usually the best model for their peers who have not yet acquired English because English is still not their primary language. Native English-speakers are generally the best model for English language learners.

Language acquisition is greatly increased when students have the opportunity to participate in discussions. “Students benefit from using the target language and practicing expression of their ideas, opinions, and answers in English” (Echevarria, *Becoming a Teacher Through Action Research, Second Edition* © 2010 Routledge / Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.
In whole-class instruction or class work, there is not sufficient time for each student to express his/her ideas. But in the cooperative group, there is time and place for that interaction and the environment is less threatening within a group of four or five than in front of an entire class.

The fourth area my literature review focused around is the classroom as a community. As previously stated, I entered my student-teaching classroom immediately observing the lack of community feel within the classroom, and I noticed that this inhibited the students’ learning. Disagreements broke out between students throughout the day, distracting their peers and pulling the lead teacher away from instructing the class or helping individual students with their work.

The root of the problem was students’ unwillingness or inability to work well with others, but the resulting “discommunity” left our classroom in chaos and wasted valuable time we couldn’t afford to lose. Asking myself why that sense of community seemed so important to the flow of the class, I started reading through Shaw’s (1992) *Communitybuilding in the Classroom*, and Kagan’s (1997) *Cooperative Learning Structures for Team-Building*. Both books served as excellent resources for team-building activities while giving in-depth insight into the importance of building a community within the classroom. “This sense of community is important because we know intuitively, and research has consistently shown, that where there is a strong sense of community, trust, high self-esteem, and good instruction, students have higher achievement” (Shaw, 1992, p. 1:2). A strong sense of classroom community and ability to work collaboratively increases learning in all students, prepares them for life outside of the classroom, and strengthens their character and sense of self-worth. “Cooperative learning empowers

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our students with new skills both in how to learn and how to relate” (Shaw, 1992, p. 1:1).

Lickona’s (1991) *Educating for Character* focuses on creating a “moral community” in the classroom, a community that emphasizes mutual respect and shared responsibility for all members of the community. In order for this community to exist, students must get to know each other, respect, affirm, and care about one another, and feel part of—and responsible to—the group. “Only when students are willing and able to work together will we maximize the learning potential of our students” (Kagan, 1997, p. viii).

Research has established that the cooperative learning classroom structure is more successful academically and socially than the competitive or individualistic structures, regardless of content or grade level. It’s the proverbial “Two heads are better than one” scenario. Students need to have the skills to work together in groups because they will need it today and for the rest of their lives. If they can’t work with their peers now, they must learn to do so because they are growing up in a world marked with increasing diversity. Their ability to make/keep friends, a job, a livelihood, is dependent on their ability to work well with others (Kagan, 1997). Using long-term teams (where students work together for six or more weeks) models the real world and requires students to work through their problems with each other, hopefully developing positive relationship skills along the way. Students have the opportunity to work closely with the same peers over an extended period of time, getting to know a few peers more intimately, which also allows time for more conflicts to arise. Teachers can structure class activities to teach conflict resolution skills so students can work through difficulties in their teams (Shaw, 1992).
Working in teams breaks down some of the barriers in the class because it places students together who would not necessarily have naturally chosen to work together (Kagan, 1997). In general, my students choose to spend time with people like them (the Spanish-speakers with the other Spanish-speakers, the athletic boys with the athletic boys, etc.). But when I put them on teams for cooperative learning experiences, each student’s success is dependent on the rest of the team’s success, regardless of what circle of friends they belong to. According to Kagan, those friendship circles should fade away (at least during the activity) and teammates become interdependent, valuing each team member’s unique abilities as they work toward their common goal (Kagan, 1997).

The final piece of my literature review, while still very much connected to the classroom as a community, focuses on the stages of group development. Both Tribes (2000) and Communitybuilding (1992) emphasize the importance of these stages for teachers to understand how to meet the needs of their students as they are team-building and implementing cooperative learning groups.

The stages are not linear, and groups can go to and from stages seemingly randomly, but groups usually begin at the inclusion stage, then move to influence, openness, and may finally reach the community stage. Inclusion is where group members present themselves to the group, building trust and a feeling of safety within the group. It’s the getting-acquainted piece where members try to see how they might fit into the group.

The influence stage is where group members are comfortable enough and feel safe enough to present their own viewpoint and try to convince other group members to see things their way. Group members strive to gain power and influence within the group.
The openness stage is where a sense of trust has been built enough for group members to openly communicate their feelings with one another. Once group members move past being open with each other, there comes a point when you can just sense a feeling of community, indicating the group has moved to the final stage of group development (Shaw, 1992).

Understanding these stages and the ability of groups to move freely between the stages will be important as I observe my students’ interactions in their groups during our team-building and cooperative learning experiences.
CLARIFYING MY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

As I watched the students over the first few weeks of school, I was disturbed by their state of disconnectedness. I could not understand how a group of 30 fifth graders, many of whom had gone to school together since kindergarten, could seem so distant from each other emotionally and so unwilling to jump at opportunities to work together and help one another. The cultural and socio-economic diversity was nothing new for these students, as the demographic make-up of the largely rural/suburban school has been the same since the school was first built in 1993.

Upon watching the students work, I questioned their lack of collaboration and had to pursue the possibility of creating a more cohesive classroom environment where the students were ready and willing to work together and help each other both in classroom work and during the more social times of lunch, recess and break times. The critical question I decided to pursue during my time with these students was how to create a cohesive community that would encourage meaningful interaction and collaboration among students in a classroom divided by gender and ethnicity.

After reading a great deal of the literature on building community in the classroom, I began to see the building of a cohesive classroom community as a top priority for these students so they would have a successful year in preparation for middle school. They needed to learn how to work together and depend on one another as teammates, and I needed to find a way to facilitate such a shift in their interaction. I began to think back to my own experiences growing up to discover patterns of situations in which I experienced a deep sense of community.
Most of those communities were so strong and close because I had worked/struggled intensely to reach some sort of goal with that group of individuals. The groups were varied in focus, from athletic teams to church groups to marching band, yet they were also groups where all members had common ties that bound us together, even though we came from different walks of life. With my own experiences as a springboard for what a cohesive community looks like, I wanted to bring my class of 30 fifth graders to a point of really facing one another, getting to know each other, and seeing the threads of commonality woven throughout the class.

Therefore the approach I took to community building in my classroom was group activities that were collaborative in nature, but designed to draw out the similarities of students, while highlighting the strengths of different students and the benefits of working together as a group.

Prior to beginning my research, I sent home an informed consent letter and received permission from the parents of every student in my classroom to conduct this research project (Appendix A). I facilitated these community-building activities weekly over the course of eight weeks. I gave the students opportunities to reflect on their experiences through journaling and/or whole group discussion.

I believed that the groups that were best able to collaborate would be most likely to be successful in the activities. I also believed that these groups would be the most successful in our everyday classroom work because they would be willing to work together and help one another, rather than always trying to work in isolation without sharing ideas or creative means of problem-solving.
ROADMAP TO MY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

I collected data over a period of four months (mid-November, 2003, through mid-March, 2004), while student-teaching a class of 30 fifth grade students in the newest elementary school in a rapidly growing rural/suburban community of 13,000, located about halfway between two metropolitan areas. During those months I collected a total of eight data sets, the majority of which consisted of an artifact from the team-building experience, journal entries, observation of group interaction, and a reflection in my researcher’s journal. (See Appendix B for timeline and details of data collected.) Each of the data sets resulted from a community-building or team-building experience facilitated by myself, an activity that focused on working together and achieving success as a group. My cooperating teacher and I also gave many opportunities for collaborative work in content areas throughout the four months and conducted observations during these times to identify possible areas of growth in collaborative behaviors since the beginning of the year.

The sociogram in data set #1 (Appendix C) served as my baseline data for classroom interaction. I conducted the sociogram using the question: “If you could work with anyone in the class on an important project, who would you choose? Write the names of your top 3 choices.” (A class list of names was provided in alphabetical order by first name to facilitate recall for the students.)

The purpose of this sociogram was to discover the key students in the class who were the most and least chosen by their peers. I chose the students most frequently picked by their peers to lead the social studies colonial region groups in data set #1 because they were respected by their peers and I had observed their participation in class and their propensity to lead out. The sociogram indicated I had four “stars”

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(students who were chosen by six to twelve of their classmates), and five “isolates” (students who were not chosen by any of their classmates). I also used this data to help form the teams that the students remained in from January through mid-March.

Observations were conducted by myself, my cooperating teacher, my university supervisor, and my cohort leader (Appendix D). Observers used a seating chart to identify students and record observations, focusing on positive teamwork and inclusion, supportive peer-helping behaviors, and interaction across language and gender lines. Observers attempted to overhear and record specific interactions between students. The field notes included both verbal and non-verbal communication, on/off task behaviors, inclusion and collaborative behaviors. As I gathered data through these field note observations, I looked for patterns of interaction and behavior that indicated a change in collaborative behavior and/or community interaction between students over the course of the research project.

Much like the observations above, I looked for common themes in the student reflections and tracked student journal entries according to their themes (Appendix E). I read and re-read the entries, looking for patterns which might indicate changes in collaborative behavior and community interaction between students over the course of the research project. The journal entries gave me weekly insight into the current feelings of the students concerning their group members and helped to guide my future observations because they pointed to difficulties in group interactions that I did not always notice on my outside observations of their groups.

The researcher’s journal is a key piece to my research (Appendix F). In this journal I reflected on the whole research process, the group interactions and progress as a classroom community. I compiled my journal entries and all other documents I
collected during my research and organized them chronologically into a research notebook. My weekly journals are interspersed with other observations, interview documentation and artifacts. This organizational structure has facilitated the data analysis portion of my research.

At the conclusion of the data collection period, I conducted a second sociogram to compare with the preliminary sociogram. I asked the same question in the same format as the first sociogram so I could equitably compare the results. The original sociogram therefore serves as a point of comparison for increased interaction between students, especially the students who were labeled “isolates” on the preliminary sociogram.

The interviews served a different purpose in my research than the basic data collection. For the most part, I used the interviews to affirm or negate patterns I saw emerging from the data. As I sifted through all the observations and the journal reflections, trying to find patterns in the group interactions, I wanted to check in with individual students to hear their responses to the patterns I saw emerging.

In the focus group interview in data set #5, I was about halfway through my research and had identified some patterns in the group interaction. I chose a student from each group who was not the informal group leader, but who was a strong participant in the group and would be fully aware of the group dynamics and what was/was not working for their group. The group chosen also proportionally represented the language and gender diversity in our classroom. I audio-recorded the focus group interview, which met during lunch recess on January 30. The students shared who they saw as their group leader and discussed the benefits and difficulties of working in their groups.

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The student interviews in data set #8 also served as “member checks.” By the end of my research, I had formed some preliminary ideas for research results. As I listed those ideas into synthesized statements, I chose some key members of the classroom community to share my result with and find out whether their experiences and feelings aligned with what I had observed. I interviewed each of the six informal group leaders (identified by observation and confirmed in the focus group interviews) regarding their roles in the groups and their feelings about the benefits of collaborative work to themselves and the group as a whole. I also interviewed two of the bilingual students regarding their role in the class and their feelings about translating for their peers who do not speak English.

The final interview I conducted was with my cooperating teacher. In this interview I shared each of my synthesized statements with her and sought her opinions about each, specifically asking for her perspective and ideas on different ways I could interpret the same data. This interview was also audio-recorded and was incredibly fruitful as my cooperating teacher has a much different perspective on this class than I do. She has seen amazing growth in individuals and the class as a whole and the cohesion we currently have in our classroom is much higher than any she has achieved in previous years with her fifth grade classes. Gaining my cooperating teacher’s perspective on the data we have collected was a crucial piece to this data collection puzzle. It also left me with some new questions that I will explore later on, in the final section of this paper.

As a whole, I analyzed the data for patterns of change in willingness to work with different classmates, as well as increased interaction and helpfulness among students of differing language and gender.
THE STORY OF MY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Each time I looked at my data I was able to make connections and find holes that required more data to be collected. However, I was highly frustrated by the subjectivity of the data. I wanted solid, indisputable facts that could be backed up by several different data sets. But each data set collected meant one more data set to be interpreted using my own mind with its biases and presupposition. Therefore I have come to realize that action research, especially in this form, is innately subjective because I, the researcher, am very much involved in the research process. My interpretations have everything to do with the results I share, and I know there are different perspectives on how this data could be interpreted. In my observations I could have missed some very key behaviors that could have significantly altered the results of my research. However by collecting multiple sets of data, as well as enlisting the support of my cooperating teacher, cohort leader, and university supervisor to assist in the observations, I have attempted to round out my data beyond my particular interpretations of student behavior.

This journey toward building a cohesive classroom community began with discovering how this class of fifth graders understood community. The students made a class list of characteristics of an ideal community. A few days later, they drew pictures and wrote descriptions of their ideal community (Appendix G). These artifacts were excellent identifiers of what the students value about the communities in which they have lived. The student work had varying degrees of quality and depth, but the students clearly had a good idea of what they believe makes a good community. They especially valued kindness, sharing with and helping others, friendship, love and fun. These were...
the characteristics that came up time and time again as I read through their
descriptions. I found it interesting that even though the majority of the class saw these
as the important parts in a good community, they themselves were not intentional about
putting them into practice in their own interactions within our classroom community.
As I planned the forthcoming community-building experiences, I focused on activities
that would bring out these characteristics in the students' interactions.

Prior to moving the students into their long-term small groups, I wanted to
involve the students in a whole-class experience that both challenged them and caused
them to relate to each other in an all-new way. The very first day they returned to
school after winter break, I conducted a Spanish immersion experience which consisted
of 30 solid minutes of instruction in Spanish, followed by a class meeting in English.
The results of this experience were fascinating and long-lasting, as students
remembered and reacted to the connections they made during the experience in their
interactions even in March.

The students had no forewarning that I would be teaching in Spanish. They
simply walked in the door after P.E. and I began talking about winter break and giving
a writing assignment all in Spanish. The only instruction I gave the bilingual students
was that they could not translate into English for their English-only peers while I was
giving instructions; they had to wait until I finished talking. I also wrote the entire
assignment on the board in Spanish and answered all of their bewildered questions in
Spanish. I wanted to give the bilingual students a chance to step out and let their
English-only peers understand what a crucial role the bilingual students play in the
classroom. In addition, I wanted the English-only students to experience what it is like
to be thrown into a classroom where they understand little or nothing of what the

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teacher says, and are forced to rely on nonverbal cues and peer translators to get anything done.

    At first the bilingual students kept to themselves, while the Spanish monolingual students were delighted to finally be able to understand what was being assigned and get right to work without need of translation. For the most part, the English-only students tried to be independent and figure out what was going on without the assistance of their peers. Many of them thought it was a joke, asking, “Are you going to talk in Spanish all day?” and “How are we supposed to understand you?” But they did not turn to their bilingual peers to seek a translation.

    After several minutes of the English-only students trying to be independent, I encouraged the bilingual students to help their peers. They began to explain the assignment quietly, but only to the students sitting next to them. It took a great deal of encouraging for the English-only students to share their understanding with their peers. I was discouraged by this observation, fearing they were going to completely miss the point of the experience. But what followed in the class meeting and what I later read in their journals about what they learned of themselves and their classmates during this experience took away every bit of discouragement.

    What surfaced again and again from the sharing time in the class meeting was: “It was difficult to get through,” “It was hard and annoying, but we got help from classmate,” “The Spanish-speakers were helpful,” and “We can understand/feel what it’s like for [our Spanish-only students] everyday.” In their journals, students reflected on the importance of helping each other to understand, and they related to those who did not always understand what the teacher said. “Maria,” one of the Spanish monolingual students wrote, “I wish it were always like this, but then the rest of the class couldn’t
understand and it’s better that all but two understand.” She was so relieved to have instruction in her own language, but she clearly understood she was part of a community of which she was not the center. Yet for her, being a part of our community meant giving up knowledge and comprehension for the sake of her English-only peers who are in the majority. Although there was a great deal of our class that Maria could not understand, her classmates later discovered she was an important contributor to the classroom in her areas of talent, which are math and problem-solving.

With this Spanish immersion experience as a foundation, we moved the students into their teams (six groups of five) and began the team-building process. Based on the findings of Shaw (1992) and Kagan (1997) discussed earlier, I decided the best way to build a strong community was to provide the students with long-term groups in which they were able to really get to know each other and learn how to work together over a long period of time (eight weeks). Kagan emphasized the need for the students to know (beyond acquaintance) and respect one another, which is most successfully accomplished in a small group setting rather than in a group of thirty.

Shaw emphasized the need to keep them in the same groups beyond six weeks because anyone can get along for a short period of time, but when people must work together for an extended period of time and they realize their success as a group (on group projects) depends on their ability to work together and learn one another’s strengths, they are much more willing to work out their differences and resolve conflicts rather than stuffing them or simply refusing to interact. They get to know that small group of peers more intimately and take the time to work through the inevitable conflicts.
The process of choosing the teams proved to be highly difficult because there were more boys than girls in the class and I knew I needed to separate certain individuals from others to ensure they did not socialize the year away. I used the sociogram to identify the “stars” and “isolates” in order to carefully distribute them among the groups. I expected the stars to become the informal group leaders because their peers chose them most frequently on the sociogram, probably because they are friendly and high academic achievers.

I wanted to put each of the isolates in a group where I also had someone who was good at including everyone in group work. I also had to carefully place my two students who, regardless of with whom they are working, really struggle to cooperate with others and get their work finished. I spent a great deal of time dividing the groups because I believed it was imperative to be intentional in this process as group dynamics could make or break this experience. I wanted to ensure I had at least two girls in each group to explore the boy/girl barriers we had in the class; and I wanted to pair up my bilingual students so I did not have any of them isolated and unable to help each other with vocabulary and translation.

Due to the emphasis the experts place on students getting to know each other and feeling a part of a group, I chose the first couple of team-building activities to get the students interacting socially and establishing a group identity. All six groups had to create a team mascot and team name and then share them with the class. Through this process within their small groups, they were also able to share some of their similarities as they chose the pastimes and favorite foods of their mascots. The resulting team names were: Clunk-Slunk the Two-Headed Zebra, Chowie Chocabo, Rizo the Rat, Rainbow Candy, Camron the Camel, and Wiskers de Gato (Appendix H).
The students had a great time with this activity and the journal entries from this experience were overwhelmingly positive. I was amazed by what I observed of their interactions, how well the students worked together and how energetic they were. In several journal entries students shared how great it was that their teammates actually listened to their ideas, even though they were a little far-fetched or silly. One student said, “I felt good with my team because they were listening to my ideas and were being nice and creative. I told them some ideas and it is fun working with my group.”

They felt their voices were being heard, which is a critical piece of the small-group experience. This cannot often occur as a whole group when thirty children want to share their ideas.

The students participated in a total of six team-building activities over the course of two months (Appendix B). As discussed earlier, these activities started off showing a great deal of cooperation between team members, and the journal entries gathered from these activities overwhelmingly showed the students were enjoying working in their groups. Both the creation of a team mascot activity and the science invention activity were creative activities that required the students to use their imaginations, with no right or wrong answers to seek.

A look at the journal entries shows a direct correlation between enjoyment of the activity and the affirmation that each student’s ideas were heard by their peers. Writing about the team mascot activity one student responded, “I did like working with my group because for the first time in my life they listened to my ideas,” while another more frustrated student wrote he did not like the team mascot activity “because they did not let me explain my ideas or let me give my ideas.” This pattern constantly arose in all six team-building activities.
The student journals indicated that even if their ideas were not chosen by their group, as long as the students felt listened to and their ideas were acknowledged by their peers (usually in the form of adding the idea to the group brainstorming list), they felt they were a significant part of their group and were content working in that group.

In our observations of the group interactions, we frequently saw the opposite to be true as well. Like the student who did not like working in his group because his teammates didn’t listen to his ideas, the handful of students who shared his experience showed their displeasure non-verbally through frustrated facial expressions and raised tones of voice.

There were four students, all males, who consistently felt their ideas were not being acknowledged and these four boys frequently responded by withdrawing from the group activity. Referring back to the first sociogram, I must note that two of these boys were isolates not chosen by any of their peers, and the other two were only chosen by two of their thirty peers.

One of the boys is new to the school this year. Another of the boys is bilingual and has a reputation for a bad temper and disrespect for adults and fellow students. The third boy is also new to the school, is very bright, but very distracted throughout the school day. He has difficulty carrying on a conversation without his mind wandering somewhere else and “forgetting” what he is saying/doing. The fourth boy is a hard worker in class and is very inquisitive, but does not seem to fit in with the boys in the class. He comes from an English and Russian bilingual family of ten (his mother speaks Russian and his father speaks English) and his closest two friends are female classmates.

One of the fascinating results that emerged from all this team-building and work with building a strong community within my classroom was the propensity of certain
students to lead. I witnessed leaders naturally emerge from the ranks of the class and
was able to draw on that leadership to bring the class together. As noted earlier, I
carefully put the groups together so that there was a “star” (a student most frequently
chosen by their peers to partner with for collaborative work from the first sociogram) in
each group. I assumed these students would end up the informal group leaders, meaning
neither I nor the groups ever defined them as leaders. This assumption held true. These
four students were consistently the ones leading the groups and keeping them headed in
the right direction.

Since there were six groups and only four stars identified from the sociogram, I
had to do my best with placement for the final two groups. In these two groups I
observed two girls stepping up to the lead more by default than by choice. None of their
group members took the initiative to lead the group and these two girls are hard
workers and want to get their work accomplished. When no one else in their groups
stepped up to delegate and get the work done, they probably felt they didn’t have much
of a choice.

As it turns out, five of these leaders are excellent students academically, English
monolingual, and well-liked socially by their peers. Their parents are active in their
education and they are involved in a myriad of extracurricular activities. The sixth
leader, a “non-star,” is a very hard worker who wants to do well in class, is English
monolingual, involved in sports, and gets along well with her peers. The leaders are
evenly divided by gender, with three males and three females.

Having separated these six students into different groups, I carefully observed
their interaction with the group members and looked for behavioral patterns. During
the observations of the team-building activities these students consistently took the
lead. Also the four “stars” not only shared their ideas, but elicited the help of other group members and took care to include even the Spanish-only students wherever possible. The two “non-stars” were not nearly so intentional about getting the group members involved and were more focused on getting the tasks accomplished.

However, when we observed the group interaction during normal class activities, such as math or social studies work times (where the students are usually able to work in small groups and are often given tasks to accomplish with their group), we noticed a couple of different patterns arising. It seemed that on the tasks where the leaders were most comfortable (i.e., either they fully understood how to find the answers or they at least fully understood how to get started), they were confident to reach out to their group as leaders and help the group members solve problems.

We saw this on the easier math assignments and the straightforward book work for social studies. However, when we assigned work that was more complicated, or introduced a new concept that the leaders had not yet grasped, we observed a different pattern. When we broke up to work in groups, the leaders in this situation ceased leading and focused on their own work, asking the teachers for assistance. They did not seek help from their group members, nor did they try to bring the group together and see if they could figure the assignment out together. After observing this pattern numerous times, I interpreted this behavior to mean that when leaders are insecure with their ability to accomplish tasks, they don’t lead. Instead they take care of themselves and leave the rest of the group behind to work on their own.

Desiring to explore this idea further, I briefly interviewed five of the informal leaders to find out when they felt most/least comfortable helping or working with their group. All five students mentioned they were most comfortable helping their group members and took care to include even the Spanish-only students wherever possible. The two “non-stars” were not nearly so intentional about getting the group members involved and were more focused on getting the tasks accomplished.
when they understood what to do and most of them named the subject areas in which they felt strongest. They agreed that when they are not sure how to do a certain assignment, they are not comfortable working in groups. As one female student stated, “It’s hard to try to help others when I really don’t understand it myself.”

It was also evident from watching the group interactions that when groups have a confident leader who they can trust as “right” and “good,” they will likely follow. In the focus group interview, I asked several questions related to how well their groups were interacting and how leadership worked in their groups. The group consisted of a representative from all six teams. Most of them shared very positive comments about their group interactions and how much they were learning from each other.

They felt the benefits of working in there groups were, “You get to hear other people’s ideas,” “you can get your work done easier cause you get all the answers,” “you get to help people,” “you have fun,” and “you get to hear what other people think the problem is asking.”

When asked who they thought the leader of their group was, each group member identified the very same students whom I had expected to emerge as leaders. I followed up that question by asking each student how they and their group members felt about the leader of their group. They were all pretty comfortable with the leaders because the “leaders” are “smart” and are good at helping everyone. The representative from the Clunk-Slunk group said, “I think it’s better for one person to be the leader because if two people are in charge then they can get in an argument.” They liked that there was only one person in the group who usually took the lead because they thought it kept the conflicts down and the group members knew their role.
In addition to carefully placing potential leaders in each group, I also took great care in placing the bilingual and Spanish monolingual students in the groups. The Spanish monolingual students needed to be grouped with at least one bilingual student to facilitate understanding and inclusion in the group and the class. Even though I speak Spanish, there is only one of me and I did not want the two Spanish-only students to be dependent upon my translating everything because between answering all the questions and teaching in English, I can only translate so much.

Pairing them with a bilingual student gave them someone nearby to ask clarifying questions and facilitated the partner work we do throughout the week. While I focused a great deal of attention on working in small groups for my research, a lot of our regular work time (especially in math) was done in partners within each team. Because I kept a bilingual student next to each Spanish monolingual student, they always had someone to work with who could help them in English but was also able to communicate with them in Spanish.

Toward the end of my data collection time, I became concerned that my Spanish bilingual students were tired of helping translate for their peers. I wondered whether the bilingual students understood what a critical role they played in our classroom community and whether they were appreciated or affirmed for this role. I observed their interactions in their groups and they continued to be a bridge to the Spanish monolingual students.

In addition, their English monolingual peers continually looked to them for help in communicating to their Spanish-only peers. But I noticed there were times when they simply didn’t translate assignments well or they would briefly describe an assignment but not give all the details so the Spanish-only student would not be able to start and
the bilingual student would work on their own. I wondered if this was not a similar situation to what the “leaders” experienced when they were uncertain about a given assignment. I also wondered if I was assuming the bilingual students understood more than they actually did.

Having only recently gained a foothold on Spanish myself, I knew the difficulties of learning a second language and realized there may still be a great deal of vocabulary and content the students had never been exposed to in Spanish or English and therefore had a hard time translating directions or ideas when they themselves did not have a firm grasp on whatever was being taught.

I reasoned that when bilingual students are struggling with vocabulary in content areas (especially in math and science) or vocabulary used in direct instruction, they are not going to help translate because they are trying to keep themselves afloat in their own minds, which are constantly humming back and forth in English and Spanish, just trying to find a context for the new words and ideas being presented. I know this was true for me in learning Spanish, so I asked some of the bilingual students if it was true for them as well.

In each case, the interviewees shared that their greatest difficulty in translation was in content areas where they were not yet familiar with the vocabulary in either Spanish or English, or when they didn’t know the word to translate from one language to the other. But without exception, the bilingual students said they really enjoyed translating because “it’s fun and it’s helping others.” Hearing this dispelled my fears about them growing tired of translating and showed the bilingual students do indeed see that they play a valuable role in our classroom community.
One of the shining pieces of data that builds a strong case for the model I used in team-building toward a stronger classroom community, deals with “Maria,” our female Spanish monolingual student. She had moved here from Mexico a couple of weeks after school started and was placed in our classroom knowing absolutely no English. We paired her up with female bilingual students each time we changed the seating arrangement. She is excessively shy and rarely smiles, but has a sweet personality and does good schoolwork.

Maria would scarcely talk with her classmates or share any ideas even in Spanish. I carefully chose “Elisea” to be paired with her as we embarked on our team-building journey in January because Elisea was also quiet, but also extremely helpful, patient, and willing to ask for help when needed. Elisea turned out to be a wonderful match for Maria, and their team, *Chowie Chocabo*, worked well together.

The leader of this group was a bright and friendly Caucasian girl who is extremely attentive to including everyone in group work and making sure each person is heard and very much a part of group decisions. Each of the students in this group is a good student, yet they found themselves struggling at times on math problem-solving prompts (fairly challenging word problems). However, Elisea was able to expose an incredible gift Maria has with numbers because she carefully and patiently translated for Maria and then worked through problems based on Maria’s ideas. Maria was really able to shine in math, not only in her own group, but solving several problems the entire class could not understand. And Elisea was able to shine in translating and being the teacher she aspires to be in the future.

When the students were asked to share what they had learned about each of their group members in their final journal entry, each member of *Chowie Chocabo*
mentioned how helpful Elisea was at translating and communicating, and how good Maria was with math. They truly discovered the strengths of their own teammates and expressed strong feelings of team unity. Maria had shown up as an isolate on the primary sociogram I conducted in November, when her classmates barely knew her. But on the final sociogram conducted in March she was no longer an isolate. She had connected with several of her peers who wrote, “She is a great problem-solver,” “always tries until she succeeds,” “is a good girl and always helps when [Elisea] needs it,” and “is good at math.”

Chowie Chocabo was not the only team that discovered the strengths of its members. The final data set I collected included a journal entry addressing what worked well/poorly in their teams over the last two months and sharing at least one positive thing they had learned about each student in their team (Appendix I). I believed that students needed to experience the talents and strengths of one another in a collaborative setting in order to see how they fit into and benefited from the team and classroom community.

From the data gathered in the previous team-building activities, I knew they had had several opportunities to see each others’ talents in action, but I did not know if they were conscious of what they had experienced. Once again their journal entries dispelled any doubt in my mind, as all six groups clearly shared what role each student played in their group. Working together with the same students for two months enabled them to see each other in all subject areas and in various learning situations. On the last two formal observations we made during a math lesson, it was clear the students knew who they could go to for help on their math when the teachers were answering questions elsewhere.
Not only did the students gain a better understanding of the strengths of their classmates, but they also established some great friendships they never expected. The *Wiskers de Gato* team surprised even me, as they are a group of students with very different backgrounds even though they are all English monolingual students. None of these students were friends outside of school, nor would they have chosen one another to work together in class.

However from the two months of working together under the *Wiskers de Gato* mascot, they gained strong friendships and discovered they had a lot more in common than they had imagined. They were not the most productive group, as the observations consistently showed them off-task and chatting or laughing about one joke or another not related to their assignments. But they became good friends and showed great value in a good sense of humor. One of the boys shared that another boy in the group had “become a really good friend” and he would never have taken the time to find that out if they had not been “stuck” in the same group for so long.

So how does all this relate to creating a cohesive community that encourages meaningful interaction and collaboration between students? Sure, the students made good friends and learned who was good at different things in the class. But what evidence did I find that shows these children felt themselves a part of a meaningful community?

The first time I really saw a change in the feel of the room as a community was at our Valentine’s Day party. I had previously seen this class get pretty wild during classroom parties when treats were distributed; therefore, I was quite nervous about what this energetic bunch was going to do with bags full of Valentine candy. But what I saw, and later wrote about in my researcher’s journal, was actually quite moving.

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Yes, they were wild and loud, but everyone in the class was interacting together. Not one student was left sitting alone. They were all moving about the classroom like busy bees, talking and laughing together, as if all their barriers were down for the day. Reflecting on the party in my researcher’s journal I wrote, “After watching the Valentine’s party—the interaction between all different kids and the energy level of the interaction and fun and laughing going on—touched me deeply. I’ve never seen the kids so closely bonded before and it’s helped me to see how gelled they have become.”

In Shaw’s stages of group development discussed in my literature review, I noted the community stage, the final of four stages groups tend to move through. That stage is characterized by there being a point at which you can just sense a feeling of community (Shaw, 1992). That is precisely what could be felt in our classroom at that time. Several students shared that they just feel like they could be “themselves” in their group. They could be open and did not have to pretend to be someone they were not. I also observed an increase in respect and care for the feelings of fellow classmates.

At the beginning of the year, I never had students approach me with concerns about someone else’s feelings or something that happened to a classmate out on recess. But during the final weeks of my data collection, there were three separate occasions with different students who approached me about private situations they were concerned would not be addressed because the students involved would not speak up. They were bullying type issues that I would not otherwise have known about but for the concern of these classmates.

Overwhelmingly the data shows an increase in willingness to work together. I very rarely hear, “I don’t want to work with ______.” or “I won’t work with ______.” when at the beginning of the year it was all I could do to get some students to work.
with anyone in the class. The final sociogram illustrates an increase in willingness of girls to work with boys and vice versa.

On the primary sociogram, 50% of the girls and 39% of the boys chose at least one classmate of the opposite sex as one of their top three candidate to work with on a class project. On the final sociogram, 58% of the girls and 56% of the boys chose at least one classmate of the opposite sex to work with. The number of isolates was reduced from five students on the primary sociogram to only one student on the final sociogram. This means there was only one student in the entire class that no other student would place in their top three pick of people with whom to work.

This final “isolate” is a female English monolingual student who does not connect well socially with very many of her classmates. Any time I pair her up with a classmate, I always get a “do I have to?” look from the student I have paired her with. She struggles in all subjects in school and does not like to put a great deal of effort into her work. During group work, she tends to sit back and let the rest of the group do the work, and I have often observed her trying to annoy her group members, indicating she is socially immature and has not figured out how to make friends her age. She has had some very difficult situations to deal with this year in her personal life, which has undoubtedly affected her interactions at school.

The sociogram results are also much more evenly distributed between students on the final sociogram. In the first sociogram, the stars shined and the isolates were all alone, meaning the students who were frequently chosen scored a great deal higher than the rest of the class. But on the final sociogram, most of the students were chosen by two or three classmates, while only a few were chosen by five or more. I believe this is the fruit of students getting to know each other and realizing that the “stars” they chose
at the beginning of the year for their good grades were not the only ones who would be
good to work with on group projects.

The students have learned the strengths of other classmates and have built friendships with them as well, making them great potential project partners. This is true, too, in the interactions between Spanish and English-speakers in the class. The Spanish monolingual students actually chose some English monolingual students as one of their three top choices on the final sociogram, and several of the English-only speakers chose bilingual students to work with.

In the first sociogram there was very little crossing over language lines, leaving the Spanish monolingual students as isolates. But none of the Spanish-speakers were isolates in the final sociogram, and two of the bilingual boys have become quite popular and known for their sense of humor and good schoolwork.

**FURTHER REFLECTION AND QUESTIONS**

The journey to building a cohesive classroom community in this class of thirty energetic and unique children has been incredibly rewarding. More than ever, I now believe that intentionally emphasizing community-building in the classroom is imperative as I prepare to take on my own classroom. I have seen very clearly how limited classroom time is and am fully aware of the pressures placed on teachers to squeeze an excess of content in while wanting the students to develop into well-rounded and well-adjusted individuals. As I reflect on this community-building experience I believe my class made great strides in learning how to work together and work through problems with peers, while digging deep into the key fifth grade content. The class will soon be moving on to middle school, but they have a support structure in place that will
help guide them if they continue to develop strong networks with their classmates and work together and use each others’ strengths to make a better whole.

I am quite pleased with the results of this action research project, and there are very few things I would change were I to do it over again. One area I would change is my unwillingness to change groups mid-stream. After I selected the groups and introduced them to class, I did not want to change them around because I wanted the students to learn how to “make it work” within their groups, regardless of whether they liked each other or not.

The problem I saw, albeit too late in the project, was that the Wiskers de Gato group was social to the point of distracting themselves and other groups and kept the students from getting their work done. I wanted them to just work through it, but because it was a matter of being too social rather than not getting along together, I wish I had figured out how to split up the group without “messing up” the dynamics of the other groups.

The other area I would have liked to change was that of time spent on problem-solving within the groups. Because the research took place during months where the academic emphasis was on preparing students for state testing, it was very difficult to get time set aside for community-building activities. I would have liked 30 minutes a week at least twice a month to do some problem-solving as groups and to work together on conflict resolution so the students would have those skills to take with them beyond our classroom. Time constraints simply did not permit any more time being set aside for these types of activities, even though I believe they are well worth the time they take in the time they save later in resolving petty conflicts.
This action research project has completely redefined my understanding of research. Action research is real and dynamic, and it cannot help but drastically affect my practice of teaching. I did not realize I could effectively implement actions in my classroom that could so significantly impact not only my current students, but my future students as well.

Nor did I understand the depth to which my own reflection and interactions with students—regarding their perspectives on learning and the goings-on in the classroom—could impact the success of our learning community. I have learned that part of being a good teacher is being willing to ask students whether their classroom experience is lining up with what I am interpreting from the students and their behavior. Each time I sought the students’ feedback on my interpretations during this research project, they were appreciative of my taking the time to discuss my ideas with them and gave excellent responses to my questions, which helped to further clarify my conclusions. It is now quite clear to me that action research is a cyclical process of implementing an idea, collecting data, analyzing and interpreting the data, and then drawing conclusions which lead back to a new idea to be implemented.

For me, the action research process was deeply reflective because it required me to think about both the actions being implemented as well as how those actions actually impacted the students once they were implemented. I daily had to reflect on my teaching and approaches to classroom activities, including my interactions with the students and how my attitudes and actions may have affected the students.

I also realized how complex action research is because I did not have the typical control group that scientific researchers often use. As I reflected on the success of our class in building a cohesive classroom community, I could not help but wonder.
how much of the cohesion was due to the activities I implemented for my research and how much would have naturally happened simply due to time spent together in the classroom. I thought of all the other interactions where I had no control: lunch and recess time, P.E. and music, reading block, and outside-of-school activities such as athletics, Scouts, and church.

While I taught these students in the classroom each day, they also had plenty of time together outside of our classroom, which could have helped to strengthen or weaken the sense of community. My cooperating teacher brought up the fact that these students are together much more frequently than all day each school day. They live in a relatively small community and many of them have interacted since kindergarten, play sports together, play over at one another’s house, and go on camping trips together during the summer. What we saw and what impacted classroom reflect only a fraction of their experiences together.

In all that I have learned from this action research experience, there are no doubts in my mind that I will be using this process as I enter the professional field of teaching. This particular project has opened to me the world of building community in the classroom, but there are so many other pieces of teaching and structuring a classroom that I would love to explore in a way similar to what I did with community-building. It has been an exciting journey to better understand myself and the students in my classroom and to see how interrelated we are.

Even within this realm of building a cohesive classroom community there are still many questions I would like to explore. In my action research project I focused on building small team unity as a means of creating classroom cohesion. But I realize strong team cohesion does not necessarily translate into a strong community for the
entire class. In this case it did, probably because we participated in several other whole-group activities.

It would be interesting to explore this concept further and find a good balance between small-group and whole-group community-building. I would also like to examine the roles students take on in their small groups, particularly how the leadership role is filled and what happens when leaders do not rise up.

Other questions that have risen from my action research project revolve around my passion for bilingual education and a commitment to helping the English language learners in my classroom feel very much a part of our classroom community. I know my being bilingual impacted the results of my action research project because I was able to strongly connect with the Spanish monolingual and bilingual students both linguistically and culturally.

There were times when I intentionally targeted the Spanish-speakers to draw them into the classroom community, beginning with the Spanish immersion experience I gave to the class. I wonder how the results of my project would have changed had I not made those connections, or if I had not been so intentional about emphasizing their important role in our class.

Along the same lines, I would like to investigate the different options for teaching classrooms with multiple native languages spoken. All students deserve to learn and be held to meeting their potential, regardless of their native language. Yet our education system struggles with effectively teaching content in a way that non-native English-speakers can understand it. My action research touched on this by using partner and group work to increase comprehension for the ELL students.
But I want to experiment with different methods of teaching and classroom structure that could further enhance the learning for these students. I don’t want my students feeling like they should give up knowledge and understanding for the sake of the majority of the class, as Maria expressed in a journal entry quoted previously.

The process of compiling all of this research data into this paper has proven to be extremely rewarding. I am amazed at what my class, my cooperating teacher and I accomplished in building a strong community. This year is a year of transitions for these students and I believe the work we did together will be helpful as they make that move up to middle school next year.

Although I am no longer teaching these fifth grade students, I spend 15 minutes with them each day reading aloud to them from a class novel. Each day as I walk into the room, I am reminded of how far they have come since the beginning of the year. I can truly sense that they are a community, and I miss being part of it. They often share the fun things going on in the classroom and I see them working together better than ever. I feel privileged to have been a part of their community and to be able to drop in each day and witness the fruits of our labor together. Because of this energetic group of fifth graders, I look forward with great anticipation to the years to come of building meaningful classroom communities with new and unique groups of bright young minds.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES

APPENDIX A:

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

November 6, 2003

Dear Parent and/or Guardian,

My name is Cindy C. I am the student teacher in Mrs. M’s classroom. I am working toward a Master of Arts and Teaching degree. Beginning November 12, I will be teaching a social studies unit on the colonization of the Original 13 Colonies of the United States. During the unit we will focus on the geography of the 13 colonies and what colonial life was like. If you would like to work with your child at home to extend their learning, you are more than welcome. You could support their learning by helping your child study their colonial map to understand the locations of the colonies and the major landmarks. Also you could ask them about the differences and similarities between colonial life and life today. You could share with them any similarities you see between your life and colonial life that they may not think of because of their age.

During this colonization unit and the remainder of my student-teaching, I will be studying my own practice of becoming a teacher by conducting a teaching/learning project. I will be using teaching strategies to help the students increase their ability to work together with their classmates and to encourage a strong sense of community within the classroom. To evaluate the effectiveness of this, I will carefully observe the students’ interactions with their peers and identify changes in their ability and desire to work as a team during our regular classroom projects. All of this will be done during the regular teaching/learning process. After my student-teaching, I will write a report about what I have learned. This report will be presented to University professors and to my peers in the graduate program. At no time in my report will the community, the school, or your child’s name be used. Pseudonyms will be used to keep all students anonymous.

If I may use data from your child’s work and observations from their classroom interactions for this project, please sign the form below and return it to school with your child. If you have any questions, please feel free to call Mrs. M. or myself. I look forward to this learning experience and the opportunity to work with your child!

Sincerely,

Mrs. Cindy C.

Email address
School phone number

Please fill out the bottom part and have your child return it as soon as possible. Thanks!

________________________________________________________________________

______ Yes, my child’s work and observations from my child’s interaction with students in class may be used for Mrs. C’s teaching/learning project. I understand that the data is being
used to assist Mrs. C in becoming a better teacher and to improve the learning environment for my student. I also understand that my child’s name will not be used in the final report and that I may request a final copy of the report.

______ No, I would rather not have my child’s work and interaction used in this project.

Parent’s Signature ___________________________ Date ________________

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### APPENDIX B:

#### TIMELINE OF ACTIONS IMPLEMENTED AND DATA COLLECTED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Set</th>
<th>Date of Action</th>
<th>Action Implemented</th>
<th>Data Collected</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>11/7/03</td>
<td>Conducted a sociogram recording top 3 students each child would prefer to work with on a class project</td>
<td>▪ Sociogram identifying stars and isolates within the class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11/12/03 through 11/25/03</td>
<td>Colonization Unit: Students worked in groups on a colonial region project. CT and I observed group interaction during group work time</td>
<td>▪ Artifact #1(A#1) – Students listed characteristics of an ideal community ▪ A#2 – Journal entries from group projects ▪ Informal interviews with group leads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>12/5/03</td>
<td>Students drew and described their ideal community</td>
<td>▪ A#3 – Student pictures and descriptions of ideal communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>1/5/04</td>
<td><strong>Spanish immersion experience</strong>: 30 minutes solid instruction in Spanish with class meeting to follow (no clues were given in English)</td>
<td>▪ Field notes by CT ▪ Notes taken from student responses in class discussion ▪ Student journal reflections on feelings during immersion experience and what they learned about their classmates ▪ Researcher’s journal entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4</td>
<td>1/16/04</td>
<td>Each team created and named a <strong>team mascot</strong> then wrote a description of mascot’s diet, hobbies, and a strange thing the mascot could do. This mascot became their team name.</td>
<td>▪ Field notes on group interaction ▪ Researcher’s journal ▪ A# (???) – Team Mascot Posters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>1/23/04</td>
<td>Teams imagined they were a team of <strong>famous scientists</strong>. They had to draw and describe an invention that would make the world a better place.</td>
<td>▪ A# Picture/description of team inventions ▪ Researcher’s journal ▪ Field notes on group interaction during team-building activity ▪ Field notes on group interaction during cooperative science activity ▪ Student journals on group inclusion of all members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>1/30/04</td>
<td><strong>Team word creation</strong></td>
<td>▪ Focus group interview of a student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity Description</th>
<th>Data Collection Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| #6 | 2/11/04  | **Silent Castle Building:** Teams had a stack of scratch paper and a roll of masking tape and were given 10 minutes to construct a freestanding castle without the aid of any other materials or the use of written or spoken language of any kind. | - Researcher’s journal  
- Field notes on group interaction by CT and myself  
- Notes on group discussion responses  
- Student self-reflections on who they do/don’t work well with and what they can personally do to make their group function better  
- Anecdotal notes on group interaction during M&M math lesson (2/5/04) |
| #7 | 2/20/04  | **Take a Good Look Game:** Teams were given one minute to memorize a picture displayed on the overhead, then the picture was taken away and the teams listed as many things as they could remember from the picture. | - Students’ lists of picture observations  
- Field notes by University Supervisor on group interaction during game  
- Time interval field notes by University Supervisor during math partner work  
- Researcher’s journal  
- Time interval field notes by Cohort leader on group interaction and inclusion during group work time on math worksheet (2/17/04) |
| #8 | 3/3/04   | **Star Share:** Within individual teams, each student draws a card and shares with his/her group who/what they would be and why, based on the card they drew (card says “movie star” – student shares which movie star from each group (tape-recorded)). | - Student journals on what they’ve learned about each group member and what worked/didn’t work in their groups  
- Individual interviews with unofficial group leaders  
- Individual interviews with bilingual students  
- Researcher’s journal |
| 3/4/04   | Conducted final sociogram recording top 3 students each child would prefer to work with on a class project. | • Interview with CT sharing preliminary results of research and seeking her feedback on those results  
• Sociogram identifying new stars and isolates within the class |
APPENDIX C:

PRELIMINARY SOCIOGRAM
### 11–7–03 Sociogram Results

| Name            | April | Alicia | Alvin | Brittan | Bob     | Chuck | Chelsea | Diego | Ella | Ender | Estée | Eli | Fess | Fion | Gari | John | Brando | Juan | Pablo | James | Basel | Nat  | Ron  | Shay  | Cynli | Jack | Joyce |
|-----------------|-------|--------|-------|---------|---------|-------|---------|-------|------|-------|-------|-----|-----|------|------|------|-------|------|-------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| S 1             | 3     |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 2             | 1     |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 3             |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 4             |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 5             | 2     |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 6             |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 7             |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 8             | 1     |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 9             |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 10            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 11            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 12            | 2     |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 13            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 14            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 15            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 16            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 17            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 18            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 19            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 20            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 21            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 22            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 23            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 24            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 25            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 26            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 27            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 28            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 29            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| S 30            |       |         |       |         |         |       |         |       |      |       |       |     |     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |       |      |       |      |      |      |      |      |
| pts             | 19    | 1      | 2     | 6     | 2      | 11    | 4      | 12    | 3    | 0    | 12    | 18    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 14    | 4    | 2    | 4    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 2    | 2    | 2    |
| chosen          | 9     | 1      | 2     | 6     | 2      | 11    | 4      | 12    | 3    | 0    | 12    | 18    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 0    | 14    | 4    | 2    | 4    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1    | 2    | 2    | 2    |

First Choice = 3pts.  2nd Choice = 2pts.  3rd Choice = 1pt.

Stars (chosen by 6-12 classmates)  Mid-Range (chosen by 4-5 classmates)  Low-Range (chosen by 1-3 classmates)  Isolate (not chosen by any classmates)

S 11 (19, 9)  S 6 (11, 4)  S 14 (8, 3)  S 15
S 17 (12, 6)  S 12 (12, 5)  S 16  S 16
S 20 (10, 12)  S 13 (7, 4)  S 18 (6, 3)  S 18
S 21 (14, 8)  S 19 (8, 4)  S 23 (7, 3)  S 23
S 7 (5, 3)  S 22 (3, 2)  S 24
S 8 (4, 2)  S 28 (4, 2)  S 29
S 9 (7, 3)  S 20 (5, 2)  S 30 (5, 2)
S 10 (4, 2)  S 30 (4, 2)  S 11 (4, 3)

First number in parentheses denotes point total for the student. Second number denotes the number of classmates who chose the student.
APPENDIX D:

SAMPLE OBSERVATION – JANUARY 16
APPENDIX E:

SAMPLE STUDENT JOURNAL ENTRIES

I: I think that it was fun because we got to learn what the Spanish people feel when the teacher talks in English. I learned that my classmates might feel funny learning a new language.

J: I think this was fun because we get to know how our classmates feel. I think that the teacher talking in a different language was very fun and very educational.

Did you get to participate in the creation of your group's invention?
Yes

2. Did your group listen to your ideas?
Yes

3. Did you like working with your group? Why or why not?
Yes I liked work with my group because we get more work done.
APPENDIX F:

SAMPLE RESEARCHER’S JOURNAL – JANUARY 16

Creating a Team Mascot – 1-16-04

Today’s team-building activity went incredibly well. I had originally planned a 30-minute block of time for the kids to create, color, and describe their mascot of choice. (The first 25 minutes was to do the creating piece and the last 5 minutes was for the kids to journal about how well their groups interacted.)

However, the kids got so involved in the activity and were all so engaged in the creation process that I didn’t ask them to stop to journal because it was clear the experience was a completely positive one. This is the first activity the entire year where every single student has participated and been engaged the entire time. Even the kids who usually don’t get along with others in their group were lending a hand and taking part in the decision-making for the group. This was an exciting time where I just tried to take down as many notes as I could about who was interacting with the others and whether the students were taking into consideration the ideas of the others.

I could feel the energy in the room and the finished products were great. Each team made an 11” x 17” poster with their mascot’s name, description, and details about the mascot’s various silly attributes. They were all colorful and creative, and the teams were eager to share their work with the class.

As I walked around the room jotting down anecdotal notes about the different groups, I was all of a sudden overwhelmed by the subjectivity of my journaling and each of my observations. The data that I can collect during my observation of the group interaction is so limited by my ability to record and properly interpret words, responses, facial expressions, and tones of voices.

The team-building activity was not only fun for the kids, but it also brought up the energy level for the rest of the morning. The Chowie Chocabo group did a great job of including all students, even our Spanish-only girl. The Wiskers de Gato group was more cooperative than I have ever seen, laughing and suggesting wild ideas while keeping everyone involved the majority of the time. The Camron the Camel group also did much better than I’ve seen in the past. They actually all gave ideas and even though the two boys were off task intermittently, they did cooperate with their group the majority of the time.

The Clunk-Slunk group completely took me by surprise, as this is my most difficult group of students to get to work together. Every single one of the students stayed engaged the entire time and they worked together as if it were their favorite thing in the world to do. They were all smiles and excitedly showed me their finished product, calling me over several times during the work time to show me their progress.

The Rainbow Candy group had a tough time getting started and figuring out how to work together. They were the group that had the hardest time on this activity as they subdivided along gender lines at first and were not accomplishing much. After some time they began to come together and eventually had some good cooperation going on near the
end of the activity. They did not get their mascot finished however, probably because they did not work together from the outset of the project.

The Rizo the Rat group also surprised me. This has turned out to be a great group of boys who work wonderfully together. This is the only all-boy group and they get their projects done quickly and listen well to each member’s ideas. They also have fun working together without doing too much socializing. This was a group I was nervous about putting together, but they are doing great.

Overall I’m really excited about how well this activity went. I think this set an excellent stage for the team-building activities in the coming weeks and set a good foundation for working together and listening to everyone’s ideas. This was a great activity to start with because it was fun, creative, and made room for those students who are more artistic and who don’t always have a place in group activities.

APPENDIX G:

SAMPLE DRAWINGS AND DESCRIPTIONS OF IDEAL COMMUNITY

"Why live out of the city in ebrabary Has a Job in We cheer food to go get food we Haft go to the city to get food we Haft many mony to bay food. Family is important to me."

We live out of the city and everybody has a job and we share food. To get food we have to go to the city. We have a lot of money to buy food. Family is important to me.

In my ideal community it is important to have family and friends around and to have fun. There is one school and a bunch of churches. No one gets left behind.

In my picture I show children playing and having fun; a church/churches where people can believe whatever they want. There is no slavery in this town. Everybody in the town is helpful and likes each other’s company. Lots of money and jobs for everybody. The town is near the mountains and rivers. The schools have nice and loving teachers!

"Esta es mi comunidad en esta comunidad existe la amistad la alegria nos apoyamos unos a los otros tambien podemos salir ala calle ir al mar sin nigan peligro. Tambien en mi comunidad poseemos divertirnos con la arena cuando estamos de vacaciones o tambien nos divertimos en la escuela."

This is my community. In my community there is friendship and happiness. Everybody helps each other and we can go out in the street without danger. Also in my community we can have fun playing at the beach in the sand when we’re vacationing or we have fun at school.
APPENDIX H:
SAMPLE TEAM MASCOT POSTERS

APPENDIX I:
SAMPLE FINAL STUDENT JOURNAL ENTRY – MARCH 8