First Grade Problem Solvers

**Chicago Foundation for Education
Teachers Network Leadership Institute
Katie Peterson, June 13, 2005**

QUESTION

What happens when I teach and practice interpersonal problem solving skills in my first grade classroom?
- How do students think they should solve interpersonal problems?
- How do students actually solve interpersonal problems?
- Do they demonstrate any of the skills that they learned in class?
- Which teacher problem solving skills are effective for me and my students?

RATIONALE

At ages six and seven, my first graders have already been exposed to a great deal of violence. Each year there are several occasions when I need to dismiss my students quickly and escort them to the curb because there are threats of an impending shooting between gangs across the street from the school. There are numerous fights inside our school and the police are often seen dealing with students in our main office. Many of my students have also had their families personally affected by violence, including violent deaths or murders of fathers, cousins, aunts and even younger siblings. I could tell that these deaths were fresh on their minds when I noticed students re-enacting funerals in the block area and heard students write about deaths in their journals. I also noticed that my students were quick to respond to disturbances in the classroom aggressively.

Over the past ten years, early childhood teachers have reported an increase in children arriving at school angry, aggressive and lacking interpersonal problem solving skills (Adams,1998 in Adams, 2001). I too have been amazed at my students' impulsive and aggressive responses to everyday problems that come up in my classroom. When one student gave another child a bloody mouth for sitting to close to him on the rug, I realized that something needed to be done in my classroom.

Pedro Noguera (2003) believes that our country has a growing fear of our youth and especially Black and Latino youth in the inner city and we are often misguided in our efforts to address our concerns. This fear is evident in the increasing number of schools that have installed metal detectors, adopted zero tolerance policies and added security cameras and guards. While these efforts to maintain a 'safe school' may diminish violence in the short term and may add to an illusion of safety, they are not long-term prevention plans (p. 127). Stevahn (2000) states that violence intervention needs to start at an early age. She references Eron and Tolan's (2000) study of violence among 5,000 children over 7 years that concluded that:

> 1) children often learn violent behaviors as early as kindergarten 2) without intervention the violence tends to persist and escalate, 3) by the time children are
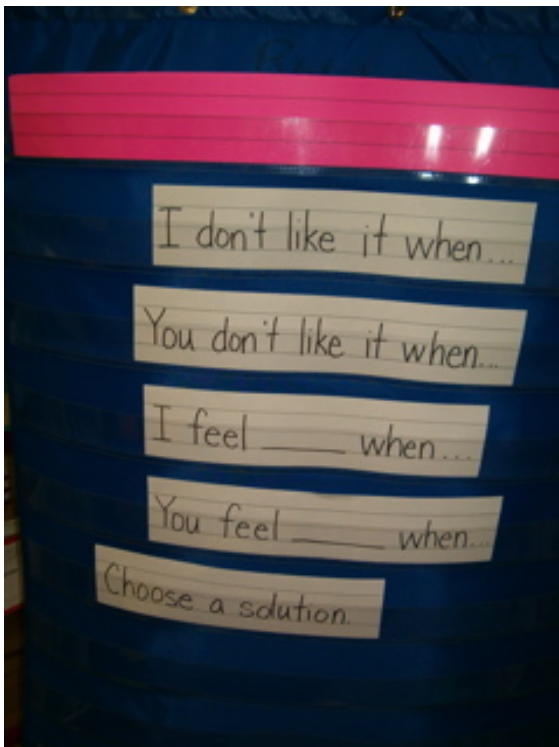
8, violent habits are almost impossible to break and 4) intervention programs should begin as early as possible. (p. 779)

The frequency of physical violence and aggression that I observed in my classroom motivated me to investigate interpersonal problem solving skills that I could teach my students. I would like my students to have non-violent ways to deal with frustration and disagreements when they occur inside and outside of school. This year I decided to investigate what happens in my classroom when I teach my first graders interpersonal problem solving skills and model them as well.

PROBLEM SOLVING SKILLS

Various definitions of problem solving exist, but most describe a process in which children define the problem, brainstorm alternative solutions, evaluate the solutions, agree on a solution, and try the solution (DeVries & Zan, 1994, Levin, 1994 in Adams, 2001). The problem solving processes that I chose to explicitly teach in my classroom were the steps of the "peace path" and the steps of "decision making with a partner."

- *Peace Path*: I learned about the peace path from a teacher who had been exposed to it in her Teach for America training (Ricks, 2004). She described her peace path that included two sets of footprints protected under a clear plastic covering. Students walk along the path, stopping to complete a step in the problem solving process at each footprint. I borrowed the idea of the peace path as the physical space for problem solving and assigned my own questions that I wanted my students to talk about at each step along the path. Our peace path has 2 sets of footprints walking side by side for two steps and the fourth set of footprints are facing each other. These are the problem solving steps for each footprint:

The peace path

-I don't like it when… (listen to kid with complaint)

-You don't like it when…

-I feel ___ when… (listen to kid who offended)

-You feel ___ when…
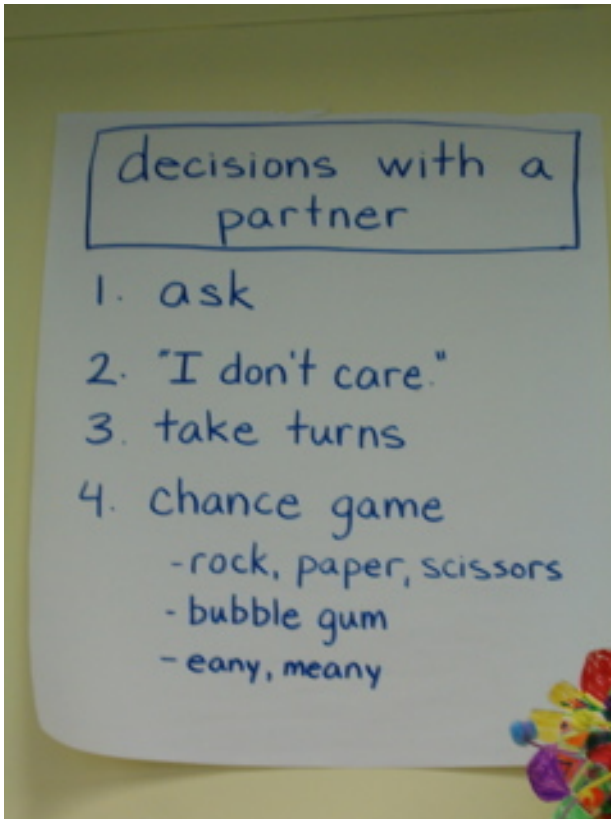
-Pick a solution and shake. (negotiate)

To help students solve interpersonal conflict, many teachers find it helpful to use a physical space such as a "peace path," "peace table" or "peace rug" as the site for problem solving. Moving from

3

the site of the conflict may allow for some emotions to calm down and the familiar space may help children to remember the steps of the problem solving process.

- *Decisions with a Partner*: I learned about this process of making decisions with a partner at a literacy workshop led by a drama teacher (Erickson, 2004). This process is for a partnership of two students who have to make a choice such as assigning each partner a different role. For example, they may have to determine which person drawers and which writes. First, students ask each other about their preference. This step stresses that *both* members of the partnership need to be asked about their preference. If both partners want the same choice they continue to step two. In this step, they check to see if one member of the partnership

doesn't care and will change their preference. If both partners still want the same choice, they determine whether it's an activity where they can take turns. If it is not, the partners play a game of chance to decide. These are the steps listed on our chart:

1) Ask.

2) "I don't care."

3) Take turns.

4) Play a game of chance (eany meany, rock paper scissors, bubble gum)

The steps for "decisions with a partner" assists students in problem solving by guiding them through a formalized way of making choices in a fair way.

- *Modeling*: I am aware that the way I solve problems as the teacher serves as an example of acceptable problem solving in the classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Moral reasoning develops through social interactions. DeVries and Zan (1994) point out that according to Mead (1934) and Piaget (1932/1965, 1954/1981) the child's consciousness of self as a social object emerges through social interactions. Initially, young children are not aware that others are different from themselves or have different desires or feelings. As children interact with others they learn not only that other children have different feelings and desires, but also how to negotiate their feelings and desires to be mutually beneficial (Selman 1980 in DeVries and Zan). These experiences interacting with others are the beginning of a moral consciousness.

Moral development occurs best when children engage in their own problem solving. When teachers remain the sole judges of classroom disputes and impose punishments on misbehaving students without inviting students into a problem solving process, they are not inspiring the moral reasoning of students. Many teachers have found that even after

receiving a punishment, students will not change their behavior. "Students internalize when they think about how their behaviors affect others, then choose to act differently based on a personal reflection or 'internal voice' (Covaleskie 1992 in Brown, 2002).

A problem solving process can serve as what Bruner describes as a scaffolding technique for students learning to negotiate with their peers. Bruner's concept of scaffolding refers to the varied levels of social support that a child may need to successfully accomplish a task (Berk, 2002). Initially, students may require concrete steps to take as they solve a problem and may need to be prompted at each step, but over time less assistance may be required and the student may only need a reminder or help initiating the process. Eventually the student will be able to decide when and how to use the problem solving steps independently.

Another type of scaffolding that I used in my classroom relies heavily on the development of the child's self-concept. I call this type of moral scaffolding *redefining the identity* because it guides the child to see themselves as a more capable problem solver by expressing confidence in their ability to make particular positive choices. By defining and describing the elements of their actions that could be the beginning of appropriate behavior, the child is made aware of their ability to develop further as a moral thinker. This method is closely related to Mead's and Piaget's concepts of the construction of self. Summarizing Mead and Piaget, DeVries and Zan (1994) explain that "Experiences of realizing how others see us, lead to new consciousness of ourselves as social objects and thus to new constructions or elaborations of our self-concepts" (p. 44).

Since young children are self-focused, many believe they are not capable of imagining a situation from another's point of view and are limited in the kind of problem solving they can learn. However, in a study of kindergarten classrooms in which a problem solving strategy was explicitly taught through a thematic unit on friendship, practiced through role play, and reinforced through modeling, Stevahn (2000) found strong evidence that young children can learn the integrative negotiation procedure and internalize it (Stevahn, 2000). Stevahn believes it was successful because it was incorporated into the curriculum and practiced intentionally in many ways.

While problem solving skills that are reinforced by curriculum can be powerful, the hidden curriculum that is the teacher's beliefs and values are perhaps more influential as they are demonstrated and taught daily. As teachers, our most effective method of instructing our students in problem solving strategies may be through modeling appropriate ways that we deal with problems ourselves. Today's urban schools have no shortage of problems for teachers to react to. Given the many challenges that students and schools face in our cities, it's not surprising that "students in urban environments are more likely to display disruptive behaviors in school, causing more disciplinary problems for teachers who have an inadequate number of support systems available to handle the challenges (Gibbs, Huang, and Associates 1998 in Brown 2002, p. 66)." The way teachers respond to discipline problems or class disruptions is a teaching model that students will learn from.

CONTEXT: DESCRIPTION OF SCHOOL

The neighborhood my school is in has a rich history as part of the company town that industrialist George Pullman built for his railroad car employees in the 1880's. It is also the site of the first successful African American labor strike. Many of the historic buildings are in disrepair or have already been torn down. The factory building that used to manufacture the wheels for the Pullman cars was turned into a public housing facility in the 1980's and many of our students live in this building. The school also draws its students from a cooperative living complex that includes many section 8 units, a homeless shelter, and a number of single family homes nearby. All of the students at my school are African American. Most qualify for free lunches (88%). The neighborhood has a high unemployment rate and there are some shootings in the neighborhood every year, including one bullet that came into the school library this year.

There is a culture of fighting in the school community. Our local school council is notorious for getting bogged down in petty politics and power plays. The physical renovations of the building were delayed for three years because the LSC could not agree on the paint color. The school looks like a big metal box in the corner of a city park. Until this summer it was a faded black color with windows so fogged with dirt that no one could see in or out. Last summer the school was re-painted blue and yellow, new windows were installed and old carpet was replaced by tiles. It looks much cheerier and cleaner now. The parents often express dissatisfaction and actively complain to the board of education about a variety of topics. According to a former principal's conversation with the offices downtown, our school has by far the thickest file of formal letters of complaint from community members, parents, teachers, and the Chicago Teachers Union regarding a variety of topics. [1]

Our school also has a culture of transience and instability. Wendell Smith receives many bus students because it is an overflow school. When schools with limited enrollment in our area reach capacity, they bus their kids to our school. Students transfer in and out of our classrooms often. Last year, I ended the year with only half of the original kids I started with. The school staff and administrators are equally transient. While this is only my second year at the school, there is only one teacher out of the seven primary teachers who has been at the school longer than I have. There are many classrooms that have had substitute teachers all year and many whose teachers have left mid-year to change schools or who have simply quit. Our school has had trouble filling its teaching positions which has also resulted in overcrowding. For the first five weeks of the school year both first grade classes had 40 students. Now there is a third first grade teacher and the class sizes are at 28. We have had three principals this year alone and the school has had nine principals in the last six years.

This instability of the administration and staff has left a void in the area of school wide discipline. Teachers can write discipline referrals, but most of the time they do not get processed and consequences are not enforced. Students have realized that the

---

[1] Conversation with Dr. Sanford, Staff Meeting, April 2004.

consequences are not consistent and many classrooms are experiencing severe discipline problems. The hallways are very loud and students often roam at their leisure. Some teachers have started locking their doors so that students from other classes will not wander in to disrupt their class. The disciplinarian often uses the P.A. system during instructional time to yell at groups of students who are not in classrooms. The tone of discipline set by the principal who started the year is an authoritative one. Children are not expected to respond or give any input when they are being reprimanded. The police are at our school almost daily, breaking up fights or filing reports.

There are 28 students in my first grade class: 15 boys and 13 girls. All of my students are African American. According to my class roster, very few of my students have involved fathers. In the place to list the father's name, 1 marked N/A, 9 wrote unknown, 2 wrote deceased, and 2 have been wards of the state.

Students came into my classroom displaying behaviors that concerned me. There are frequent physical or verbal fights. When students get in trouble, it is not uncommon for them to display obstinate, aggressive, or immature behaviors such as yelling "no" in response to an adult's directions, throwing over desks and chairs or falling on the floor kicking and screaming.

TOOLS

My research is limited by the tools I was able to use. Since my first graders needed my attention at all times, I was not able to conduct interviews with them. A volunteer conducted the interviews and recorded them for me to listen to after school. While the volunteer followed my questions word for word and collected interesting data, I was not able to question some students further to challenge or clarify their thoughts. The data I collected from my teacher journal also has some limitations. Since I was interested in how the teacher's problem solving relates to the student's problem solving, I kept a journal of my fresh thoughts.

- *Student interviews*: Students were interviewed once in January and once in March about problem solving. An aid administered the interviews using a tape recorder. The questions were:
  - o What would you do if there was only one seat open at the dough table and you and another student both really wanted to go there?
  - o What would you do if someone said something mean about your mother?
  - o Can you solve most problems by yourself or do you need the help of an adult?
  - o Who are 3 students in our class that you like to share and work with as a partner? Why?
  - o Who are 3 students in our class that you do not like to share and work with as a partner? Why?
- *Socio-gram*: The information gathered from the interviews about which students the class likes to or does not like to work with was represented visually with a socio-gram.
- *Videos*: The six students that I focused on were videotaped working with partners that I assigned and partners that they identified as students they like to work with.
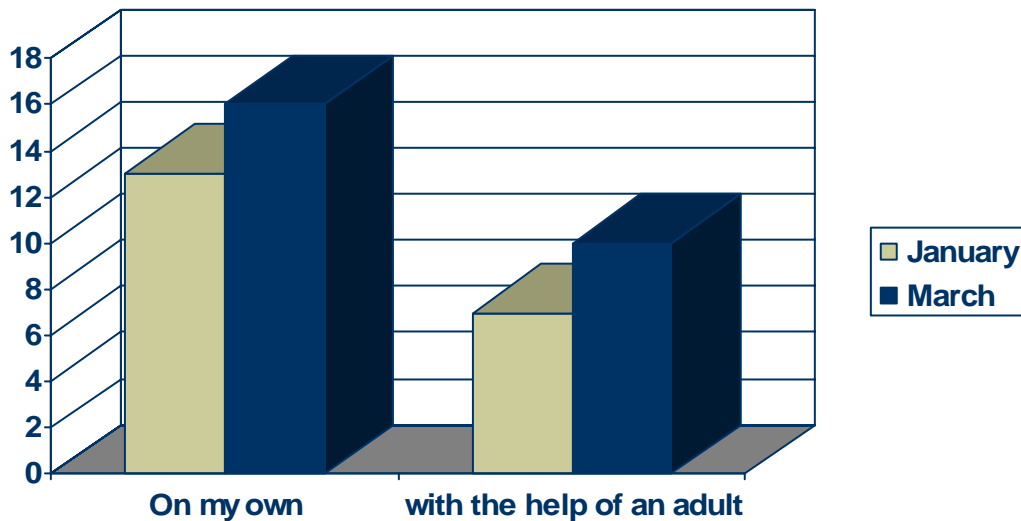
- *Teacher Journal*: From October through March I recorded my reflections in a weekly journal. I documented the incidents in my classroom that stood out to me as related to problem solving. I recorded a sampling of the formal partner and group activities I used as opportunities for students to review and practice appropriate ways to work with others as well as informal problem solving interactions that I noticed between students. I also recorded many of the fights and tantrums that students had in my class and my attempts to respond to or avoid these incidents.

DATA & ANALYSIS

Student Interviews*: The next three questions were part of the student interviews. 20 students were interviewed in January and 26 students were interviewed in March. Most of the student responses fell into categories; however, when they did not I included their responses. In question 1, all the responses fell into two categories. In question 2, all but two responses in January and one response in March fell into the categories. In question three all but four responses fell into the categories.

Question 1) Can you solve problems on your own or do you need the help of an adult?

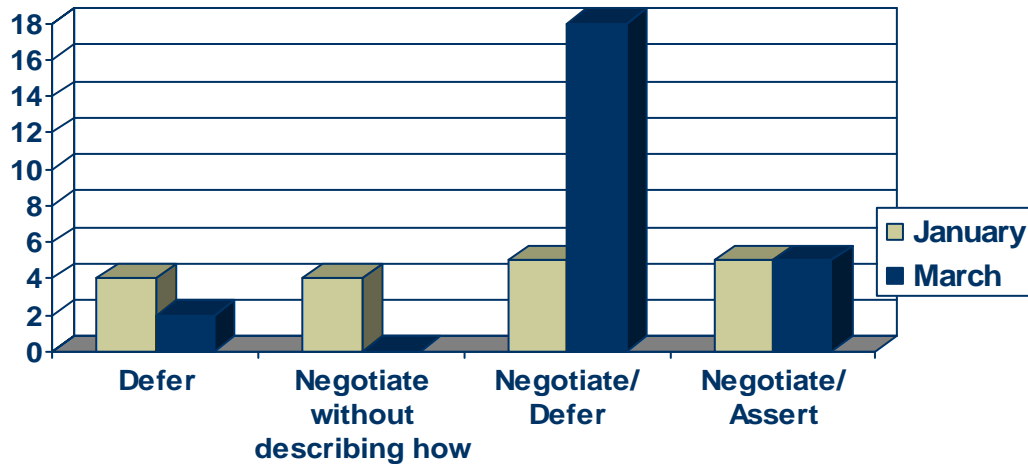|	On my own	I need an adult
January	13 (65%)	7 (35%)
March	16 (62%)	10 (38%)

Since I interviewed 20 students in January and 26 in March, this data is not as accurate as I would have liked. There is a slight trend toward more students responding that they do need the help of an adult in March; however, this trend hinges on three student responses when I interviewed 6 additional students in March. Over time, students didn't appear to significantly change their minds about whether they could solve problems on their own or with the help of an adult. In the future I would like to follow up this question by asking

students to give examples of problems that they could solve by themselves or with an adult.

Question 2) What would you do if there was only one seat open at the dough table and you and another student both really wanted to go there?

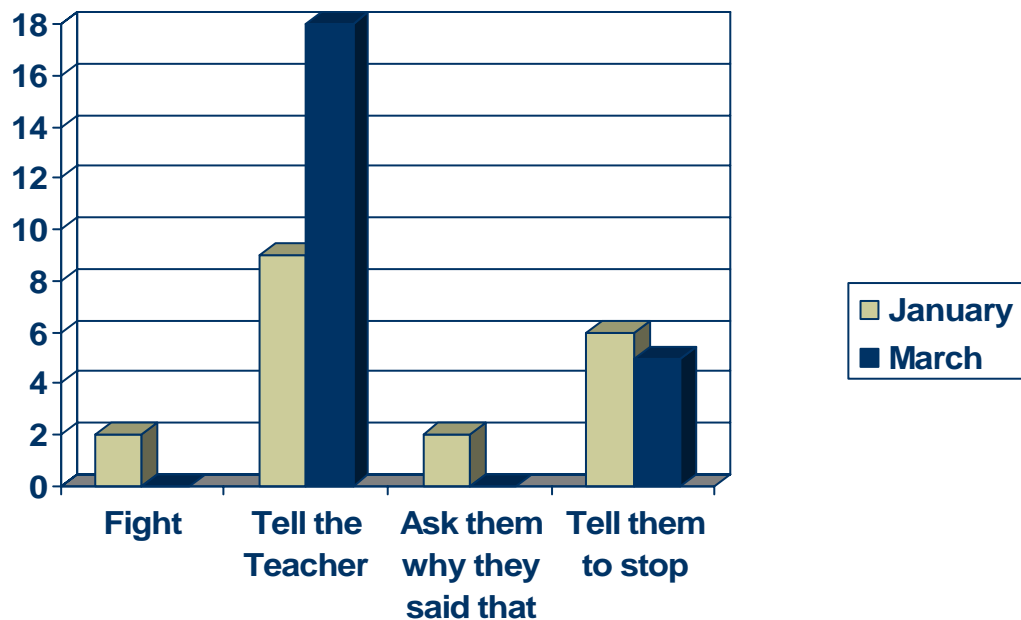|	Defer: "you could take my turn"	Negotiation without describing how: "We will take turns"	Negotiation/ Deferring: "You go, when your done I'll go"	Negotiation/ asserting: "When I'm done, you go"
January	4 (20%)	4 (20%)	5 (25%)	5 (25%)
March	2 (8%)	0 (0%)	18 (69%)	5 (19%)

Responses that did not fit in the categories:
-In January, DO answered, "Be sad."
-In January, MA answered, "Go there."
-In March CM answered, "Ask the teacher if she could get a chair."

The data from the dough question implies that more students knew how to negotiate as the school year progressed. When presented with a decision making moment in January, 22% of the students deferred and did not say they would engage in a problem solving negotiation. By March, only 12% of the students deferred and 88% did engage in some form of negotiation about this decision as opposed to 88% in January. All 88% of the students who did not defer the decision making in March were also able to describe how they would negotiate the process by saying they would go first or second whereas in January only 56% of the students who gave a negotiation response described how they would take turns.

The responses that did not fit into the four categories support the idea that students are learning how to negotiate. The two January responses that did not fit into the above categories emphasize the lack of negotiation and problem solving skills in January. When DO said she would "be sad," she communicated that she did not have the problem solving skills to know how to take turns. When MA answered "Go there," he also showed a lack of awareness of this situation as a problem solving moment. Both these students gave more sophisticated problem solving responses in March that fit into the categories. In addition, CM's response in March that didn't fit clearly into the other categories showed a developed sense of negotiation. She looked beyond simply taking turns and wanted to draw in additional resources. In the future, I would be interested to see the data if students were explicitly asked how they would decide who went first. I would like to know what students think is a fair way to decide who goes first.

Question 3) What would you do if someone said something mean about your mother?

	Fight	Tell teacher or mother	Ask them why they said that	Tell them to stop
January	2 (10%)	10 (50%)	2 (10%)	6 (30%)
March		17 (65%)		5 (19%)

Did not fit a category:
-In March AP said, "Ignore them."
-In March DAA said, "Call the police."
-In March DR said, "Say somethin' bad about them."
-In March ML said, "I don't know."

Interesting responses from the categories:
<u>Tell them to stop</u>:
-In March DA said, "Stop talkin' about my momma or go tell the teacher."

-In March KS said, "I would tell them could you please stop talking about my momma, and I'm gonna tell, ignore them, and I know it's not true."
Tell the teacher:
-In March MJ said, "Tell the teacher. If the teacher don't do nothin' I'm gonna hit them back."
-In March SD said, "I would tell the teacher and the teacher might put them in detention."
-In March AC said, "I would tell the teacher instead of saying something bad back to them."

As the school year progressed, students in my classroom began to deal with verbal insults in similar ways. In January, students responded with four different ways they would solve the problem of someone saying something bad about their mother. In March, most students responded that they would tell the teacher or tell the student to stop. The narrowing of responses in March may reflect the methods that have worked in solving this problem in their classroom. No students responded that fighting was a good way to solve the problem in March; perhaps they learned that this brought on more problems. There was one student who responded that he would "say something bad about them," which seems to fall under the category of fighting only in a verbal form. While most students seem to have decided not to fight over a verbal insult, students also seem to have decided to stop negotiating.
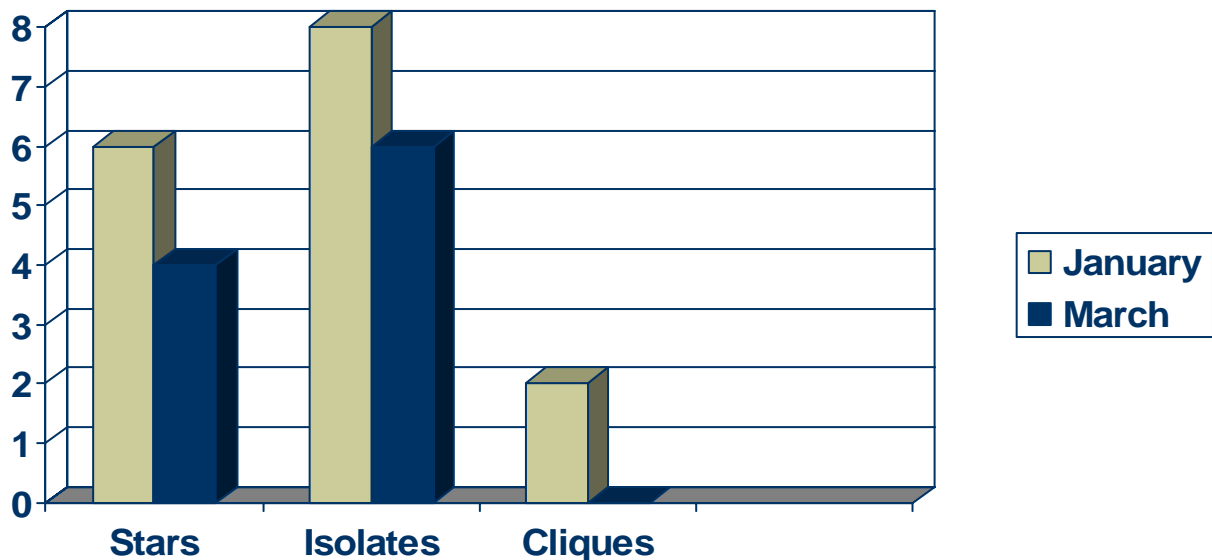
The responses to the verbal insult question imply that students are using less negotiation in situations of verbal insults as the school year progresses. In March, no one said they would ask the student why they said that. This negotiating technique may have been frustrating if students were not communicating well. In March, students preferred dealing with verbal insults by telling the student to stop. One student whose response did not clearly fall into the above categories has a response similar to this. She said she would ignore the student, which seems to me like a non-verbal form of telling the student to stop. It may be that despite my efforts to teach them how to listen to each other and express what they do not like to their peers, students are still not able to solve this kind of verbal insult by themselves.

The number of students who said they would tell the teacher doubled between January and March, reflecting the teacher as the central problem solver in the classroom. One student responded that he would tell his mother, which relates to the category of telling the teacher since he is looking to an adult to solve the problem. The student who responded that he would call the police seemed to be joking at the time, but nevertheless was referring his problem to an adult. There was one student in March who did not know what he would do, but the trend definitely shows more students looking to the teacher to solve this scenario of verbal insults. This was surprising to me at first, since I tried to emphasize solving problems on their own. However, telling the teacher is the solution that I hear many parents telling their children to use. For further research, I am interested in finding out the correlation between student's beliefs about problem solving and their parents beliefs about problem solving. I wonder how much more effective a problem solving program would be that introduced parents to the methods we use in the classroom.

Most of my students can describe appropriate methods of solving problems, but they are still learning how to solve problems in real situations. While my students may be able to name the steps of the peace path and the steps of making a decision with a partner, knowing a process does not mean that they are able to use the process when the occasion arises. The interview question about the one open seat at the dough table revealed that students learned problem solving strategies in context. Most students responded in the way that I coached them to respond in that particular situation- to ask if the other student can tell them when they are done. None of the students applied the steps of making a decision with a partner to the dough table scenario. This implies that the practiced, coached, real-life scenarios teach problem solving skills more effectively than the out-of-context processes.

Socio-gram: The data for the socio-gram was taken from the student responses in the interview to who they would like to work and share with in the classroom. I identified students who fit in the category of a star, meaning many students identified them as preferable to work with. These students had more than double the average number of students indicate they preferred to work with them. I also identified isolates, students who were not chosen by anyone as preferable to work with. The last distinction I noted were cliques, groupings of 3 or 4 students who only chose each other as preferable to work with.

	Stars	Isolates	Cliques
January	6	8	2 sets
March	4	6	0 sets

Interesting responses:
Who are some students that are *good* to share and work with?

13

-In March DA: "D.S, A.C. and Mrs. Peterson, they be nice"
Who are some students that are *hard* to share with and work with?
-In March AC: "my teacher. She be givin' us hard stuff to work with."

Over time the number of stars and isolates went down in my classroom. There were also
no cliques in March. This reflects that students are more willing to work with a greater
number of students in my classroom. There are still 6 isolates, which does not reflect a
completely safe classroom community, but it is an improvement from 8. This could be a
reflection of the number of partner activities and community building activities that we
have done.

Aggressive students such as AC, MJ and DA continue to be desired students to work with
in my classroom. I was surprised that my class was not deterred from working with these
explosive and aggressive students. Some students expressed that they would like to work
with these students because they have been friends for a long time and they are used to
sharing with them. Knowing another student well and being friends seems to be of more
importance to my students than if the student can be explosive. Another factor may be
simply their popularity.

I was surprised by DA and AC' choice to include me in their responses in the March
interview. While the question was clearly asking for *students* who they like and dislike
working with, they chose to use the interview to communicate some experiences working
with me. DA thinks he works well with me. I would be interested to know why. DA
added "because they be nice." His response could be a result of my efforts to give him
special attention and to form a bond with him. AC shared that I am a hard person to work
with. Her reason was that I give her hard work. She was interviewed during an
introductory math lesson in which she was very frustrated. This may simply be a reaction
to her feelings at the time, but it may also reflect her feelings of overall frustration
working with me. I often challenge her to treat others more respectfully by "rewinding
and saying it again." This problem solving curriculum may also feel challenging to her.
Regardless, DA and AC highlight the reality that classroom interactions are personal.
Students and teachers often understand our interactions relationally.

Video: I observed that some of the partner groups I assigned did not work well as
partners. Even though I thought they might work well together, they did not. I thought
that putting a dominate kid with a more agreeable kid would be a good combination, but
this did not work for one partner that I observed. The dominating kid bossed the other
one around and yelled "Dummy" at him repeatedly.

When I tried putting that same dominating kid with a student that he said he would work
well with they did great. I would not have guessed that his choice of partners would
work because he chose another dominating personality. I video taped two other sets of
dominant kids working together and observed that they also worked well together.

Students determining who they would work with may also have set up successful
partnerships. In the interview many students supported this finding when they shared that

they would like to work with individuals because they are friends or they are used to playing together. In the video students demonstrated that in their work with their friends they were able to maintain control and be helpful partners.

Teacher Journal: In my teacher journal I documented what stood out to me as important problem-solving events in our classroom each week. When I started my teacher journal, I did not have a clear idea of what I was looking for, just a vague idea that by writing these events and reflections down I could learn how to grow my classroom into a better place for students and teachers to learn and work without getting sidetracked by disagreements that turned into aggressive events. When I looked over my notes at several points, I started to notice interesting trends that mostly focused on what I, as a teacher, did to prevent or respond to aggressive student misbehavior.

There were six main ways that I attempted to prevent aggressive student behavior:
- creating a logical stable environment
- providing clear roles when working in groups
- anticipating individual needs of children
- providing special attention
- teacher bonding
- giving positive reinforcement

Creating a Logical Stable Environment:
I realized quickly that an introduction to problem solving skills was not effective as a replacement to other systems of justice and order in my classroom. The more I taught students the steps to solve problems on their own, the more I started to think that they could maintain a sense of order and justice in my classroom without a strong teacher authority. This was not the case in my classroom as I reflected on the growing sense of instability:

> I feel like there has to be a base level of obedience of authority that they understand in their "language" and culture that I am the authority before I can teach problem solving skills. The skills I am teaching really only work in a logical environment where there are consequences for kids who do the right or the wrong thing. Last year I tried a lot of problem solving but it meant nothing – why should a kid go through the trouble of using an "I statement" when they know the bully will be allowed to just hit them when they talk like that. (Teacher Journal, 12/1) [2]

At different points in the year I had to re-establish the baseline of order with my teacher authority. When I tried to have a "family meeting" (a class meeting) at one particularly chaotic time in the year, the problem solving discussion was ineffective (see p. 29, appendix 1, paragraph 3). I found that there were times when students would start coming up to me and telling me who had hit them or called them a name. My first reaction was to ask them how they solved the problem or what they could say to the other student. However, when the frequency of these pleas for teacher help was very high, telling the students to solve the problem on their own only added to a sense that there

---

[2] For more examples of creating a logical and stable environment see Appendix 1.

were no consequences for misbehaviors. At this point the problem solving steps became ineffective. There seemed to be a general sense that if someone hits you, you should hit them back because Mrs. Peterson will just tell you to use your words. Several parents responded to the apparent lack of teacher discipline like DH's mom did:

> I called DH's mom at lunch to tell her he hit a kid hard (making the kid cry). She told me on the phone that DH had told her kids were messing with him and that she had instructed her child to hit back. I told her that in school that just will not work. I said I understand if you tell your child to defend themselves outside of school, but if they use that strategy in school they are going to get in trouble, detentions and suspensions. She said DH told her he was trying to tell me that kids were bothering him but I didn't listen and nothing happened to the kids. I tried to reassure her that I would keep a special eye out for when DH was trying to tell me something. On Tuesday, DH hit again and got detention (which I told his dad about). On Wednesday DH shoved his desk into NS's stomach, threw NS against the wall which banged her head hard, and punched EMC hard. He made all three cry. He got a suspension written up. Thursday he did try hard to tell me when kids were bothering him… but he still got 2 checks for putting his hands on other kids (though he didn't make them cry). I feel the tension between the way the mom's want me to discipline and the way I have been trying to. The moms want me to forcefully and dominantly enforce no touching at all- "because I said so." I did try to start the year pretty much like that, but I also have been teaching problem solving skills- "I don't like it when…" going to the peace path, telling the kid to stop. (Teacher Journal, 1/29)

At this point in the year, I was still thinking of classroom management being one of two distinct forms: teacher authority or student problem solving. I had started the year out with a firm teacher authority that enforced the ground rules for how we treat each other in the classroom. As I introduced more problem solving skills I stepped back as the authority. As the year went on, I found that my students needed me to remain the authority that enforces justice in the classroom even while students learn to solve some of their problems by themselves. My students were not ready for a dramatic change, but did benefit from adding the layer of problem solving skills on top of an orderly classroom. I had to focus especially on the bigger issues of justice in my classroom such as disciplining the kids who are chronically misbehaving while the rest of my class could experiment with problem solving on a more introductory level.

> I think I'm noticing the behavior of my 2 explosive kids a lot in my notes because they are the ones that often throw off this feeling of stability and buy in that is necessary for the problem solving to work. I need to both get them under my thumb and also work extra hard to have those two buy in to the process. (Teacher Journal, 11/28)

Students like AC and MJ, were able to create a feeling of instability in the classroom if they were not kept under control and these students could prevent the tone necessary for problem solving to take place effectively in my classroom. At one point in the year MJ called me a curse word and I decided not to model an "I statement" but to give him a feisty response. At the time I wondered if this response was compatible to what I was trying to do with problem solving in my classroom, but I now see that I was maintaining a sense of justice in the classroom that was allowing students to begin to learn about problem solving. During these times when I was enforcing a safe classroom where

misbehaviors were dealt with logically and immediately, students were also able to use more of their problem solving skills (see p. 29, appendix 1, paragraph 4).

Clear Roles:
I noticed that my students' problem solved much better with clear roles and clear steps to decide roles in a group. I did two group projects as end of unit performance assessments. In November I had students make a poster for a tree animal of their choice. They self selected their topic and the students they worked with. They were given a question to answer for each student in the group and told to draw and write the answers. In that project time six students ended up crying or sitting out and choosing not to participate out of frustration. We tried a similar project in January to summarize their research on Mexico. Again, they self-selected the topic and the students that they would work with. This time I also had four specific jobs that they needed to assign to each group member. We reviewed the steps to making a decision. I didn't give them their supplies until they could all tell me their jobs. In that group work time, there were only two students who ended up crying or frustrated:

> Kids were working in their table groups to make research posters of Mexico. There were
> 4 designated jobs: question writer, question answerer, picture drawer, boarder drawer.
> AC wanted to be the boarder drawer and got frustrated when she couldn't and threw a
> chair. I told her to cool off in the back and she screamed loud. Then I saw her slapping
> DO and I forcefully took her to time out. She screamed loud. We tried our best to ignore
> her. She did calm down and fixed her desk... Overall I think this group work experience
> was better than the time we made tree home group projects. That time it was not just AC
> and GM who flipped out crying and yelling or self-isolating. That time AP, AB, AC,
> GM, DA, ML and many more had issues that needed my "urgent" attention. (Teacher
> Journal, 1/20)

Like a safe and logical tone in the room, these clear roles prepared the students to use their problem solving skills effectively. In the first group project, students had to decide what jobs there were *and* who would do each job. In the second group project, students were given the jobs and only had to decide who would do each role before they started working. Keeping the decisions to a minimum seemed to help the group interactions. It also appeared to be helpful to review the decision making process before they started working in groups. This reminded them of a process they could use as a tool immediately before they had an opportunity to practice it.

Anticipating Needs:
I recorded four times in which I anticipated the needs of an individual or the whole class and found the result very successful. By adjusting for students' needs they were able to be successful as cooperative members of our class.

> On Wednesday I started off determined to be positive and anticipate all their needs. After
> we returned from lunch (when the chaos usually kicks into high gear) I had them stop in a
> good line and I waited for them to do it. Then I instructed them to say good afternoon to
> me as they came in the room and they could give me a hug if they wanted. In the
> bathroom line we played statues and they all quieted and moved exactly how I told them.
> We also took our bathroom break earlier in the afternoon and I think that helped. At the
> end of the day I allowed 30 minutes to get coats, stamp behavior sheets and line up

nicely. The time seemed to help and I made a big deal of kids picking up coats if one of them fell. (Teacher Journal, 2/4) [3]

I adjusted to my class's needs by providing more time for them to settle down in our line after lunch, providing a way for them to get a moment of individual attention through an afternoon greeting, providing a way for them to move in our afternoon bathroom line by playing a mirroring game I call statues, and by providing more time to get ready at the end of the day. I found that some of my students were growing in an awareness of what their individual needs were when I took the time to ask them or listen to them (see p.30, appendix 2, paragraph 1). Other times, students did not express why they were upset, but I chose to address what I thought might be their real need:

> AB was very upset she didn't get to finish her writing. She started to push her chair back into a stubbornness pout. It was easily diffused when I said, "I know you really wanted more time because you love writing and you are such a good writer. We need to clean up now but I would love for you to keep writing at home. Would it be okay if I give you some special writing paper to take home so you can write when you get home?" She said yes. (Teacher Journal, 3/4)

Instead of spiraling into a tantrum, this moment may have helped AB realize how to express her real need instead of acting out. These adjustments took a little forethought or extra effort in the moment, but they really seemed to avoid the usual times for student outbursts. When their needs were met, my students were successful. I was surprised that even though some students missed an assembly or a field trip, their success at the activities I had them do instead made them proud (see p. 30, appendix 2, paragraph 3). Providing for their needs did not mean always giving them what they wanted or always accommodating their desires, but providing for their basic physical needs and their needs to be successful (see p. 30, appendix 2, paragraph 3).

Special Attention
Lavoie (1989) in Brown (2002) defined fair as "each student getting what he or she needs." I suspected that my students who are most often disrupting my class with aggressive outbursts also have some of the highest need for attention. I recorded ten ways that I gave special attention to these students and found that each time it resulted in an improvement in behavior. I used extra classroom jobs (see p.31, appendix 3, paragraph 1), roles for helpers (see p.31, appendix 3, paragraph 2), and tutors (see p.31, appendix 3, paragraph 3), as ways of giving students frequent opportunities to feel special. I also kept my eye out for academic areas of expertise in my five most explosive kids in order to use them as teachers:

> That week part of the growing connection I felt with MJ started when we learned number grids. He is really good with that kind of math. I complimented him a lot both privately and publicly. I had him work ahead on the next project so he could demonstrate it to the class. I used his math demo as a motivator to get him through that day. He made it with one check that day. (Teacher Journal, 12/6) [4]

---

[3] For more examples of anticipating needs see appendix 2.
[4] For more examples of special attention see appendix 3.

MJ stayed on task and worked ahead when he knew that he could explain his project as a model to the class. I think the special attention encouraged a successful day for MJ.

Teacher Bonding:
Brown describes the findings of Brendro and Long (1995) stating that 'chronically violent behavior may result from broken social bonds, stress and conflict, a culture of violence, and unhealthy brains.' Brown (2000) believes that developing close social bonds with teachers is a way for children to build trust with adults. A trusting relationship is required to gain student's cooperation. DeVries and Zan (1994) emphasize that cooperation serves as the foundation for developing the social negotiation skills: "the motive for cooperation begins in a feeling of mutual affection and trust that becomes elaborated into feelings of sympathy and consciousness of the intentions of self and others" (p. 49). I noticed improvements in my students' behavior when I took time to form a connection or a bond with a student. When MJ shared with me what he saw as a unique feature about his eyes, I understood this to be an effort on his part to form a caring bond with me:

> MJ told me that his eyes change color each day. Some days he said they are blue, green, yellow or red when he's mad or in pictures. I've been using compliments about his eyes to give him special attention at moments when he seems at risk of engaging in off-task or aggressive behaviors. This simple compliment has nothing to do with his work or his behavior but the positive comment seems to help him stay on track. (Teacher Journal, 3/4) [5]

These compliments both got his attention and may have reminded him that his teacher cared about him. I was also intentional about saying goodbye each day to students like MJ. Especially on days that MJ got in trouble, I wanted to re-establish our connection at the end of the day (see p. 32, appendix 4, paragraph 2).

Another way I made efforts to forge bonds with students was through home visits. I visited every student in my class (see p. 32, appendix 4, paragraph 1). This was a trust-building experience for students and also for families who saw their teacher entering into their world outside of school. On my visits to one of the housing projects where many of my students live, DA served as my tour guide. His assistance as my guide made him a special helper to me and I noticed his eagerness to show me to everyone's apartment on the days I did visits and his continual questioning afterward about if I needed his help to visit kids again. I feel this bond that we had made helped him desire to cooperate. I was often able to pull DA aside when I saw him misbehaving and ask him to do the right thing, and he would (see p. 32, appendix 4, paragraph 1).

Positive Reinforcement/ Encouragement:
I noted nine occasions that using positive reinforcement or encouragement was successful in my classroom. I used this in both private conversations and public affirmations. Whenever I saw a student solving a problem nicely, I would announce to the class what I saw and how I thought that student must feel proud of themselves. I was careful to say

---

[5] For more examples of teacher bonding see appendix 4.

"you must be proud or yourself" instead of "I am proud of you" to create a situation in which the student could take ownership of the positive feeling. Through these affirmations I wanted to affirm the students who made good choices and also to teach through real classroom examples the behavior I expect from my class. These immediate compliments often resulted in a day with fewer outbursts:

> On Wednesday the kids were much better and they had choice time for the first time in months. I started off the day giving them positive compliments and catching kids immediately when they were doing a great job and immediately when they were not listening. The day was in general very good. I had goldfish as incentives all day. (Teacher Journal, 3/11)[6]

I also utilized peer compliments in my classroom. Sometimes I lead the way and asked students to join me in celebrating with a student such as the day MJ did not get his name on the board for the first time in many weeks:

> When we got to choice time today and MJ got to choose first because he didn't even have his name on the board I told the class we needed to celebrate with him and they all cheered and clapped. MJ's head wobbled down, trying to conceal the big proud grin on his face. (Teacher Journal, 12/6)

I was glad to see that MJ was proud to be celebrated for his positive behavior. He so often has received attention for his negative behavior that it may be part of forming a new identity that allows him to be a "good kid."

There were two methods that I used as problem solving strategies in the moments of student outbursts:
- teacher demeanor
  - confrontational
  - calm and firm
- scaffolding problem solving skills in students
  - coaching
  - re-defining identity

Teacher demeanor:
A confrontational demeanor: I wrote about five times when my demeanor was confrontational in my class. Four out of the five times I was acting out of my own frustration with the class and one time I was intentionally employing this demeanor as a discipline strategy with one student. When I allowed myself to yell and be angry, it did little to allow the upset students to choose more appropriate behavior. It also did not allow me to calm down or see a better resolution to the situation. I remember ending my day upset and with a feeling of defeat when I chose to yell:

> I got so mad I saw stars- I think this is a serious sign of not enough blood to the head. I yelled a lot. I was annoyed and negative a lot. It was mostly because kids were taking so so so long to quiet themselves – but the thing that really made me mad was the blatant disobedience, right in front of me. I told the class not to talk in the hallway and AC

---

[6] For more examples of positive encouragement see appendix 5.

> turned and yelled at her cousin in another class. I said stand in line and MJ starts
> swinging on the stair railings. (Teacher Journal, 2/4) [7]

These journal entries demonstrate how personal classroom management can be. Students quickly learn how to push the teacher's buttons; they get personal. There were days that I was very upset and not able to sleep at night (see p. 34, appendix 6, paragraph 2). The teacher needs to practice staying calm amidst this and also do everything she can to prevent students from misbehaving in the first place. But when outbursts do occur, it is important to acknowledge that there is a strong connection between student and teacher emotions. When I displayed confrontational and angry emotions, my students did not calm down. Even when I was not personally angry, but tried to use a confrontational attitude as a discipline experiment, I found that my students' emotions escalated:

> On Wed. and Thur. I tried "giving attitude" as a technique for AC. Her teacher from last
> year told me that's what worked for her. I tried it. It was awful. It somewhat worked for
> AC in the immediate situations. She showed remorse and cried a bit. But she still acted
> up in the long term. The major backlash came from others in the class. The same day I
> yelled and basically insulted AC as a management technique, there were tons of outbursts
> of tears from other kids. One over a hangnail, one over a head ache, another over a friend
> dispute. I think the kids felt the tension in the room of their teacher acting unusual. They
> respond to the stress in the room and to any changes from normal. (Teacher Journal,
> 2/11)

Although AC changed her behavior in the short term, the other students appeared to have been emotionally effected by the confrontational event. Perhaps because I was not actually angry, I was much more aware of the effect that my demeanor had on the rest of the class. I interpret the outbursts of crying as a sign of student's stress surrounding the demeanor of their teacher. This could simply be because it is not my usual demeanor with the class and the change was stressful or it could be the yelling actually affected them.

A calm firm demeanor: There were nine incidents I recorded when I was able to stay calm and firm amidst escalating aggression or frustration in my classroom. In four of these incidents, students who were having tantrums were able to return to their work after a short time to cool off. In three of the incidents I had to immediately pass them on to the office or the police because of the severity of their tantrum or fight. But in all of these incidents, the rest of the class was able to continue learning after the incident, and I was able to continue teaching. In his advice to new urban teachers, Brown explains that when dealing with disruptive students, "effective teachers act calmly, but firmly, when they address disruptive behavior" (Brown, 2002). I found this to be good advice when I tried it with DB:

> DB got a check on Wednesday and started bawling. I tried to stay calm and for the most
> part did as he kicked the desk. I told him he'd be fine, everyone makes mistakes
> sometimes and sometimes kids need to cool off in the back of the room for a minute. He
> went and layed on the rug belly down kicking and bawling and yelling "I'm gonna get a
> woopin'!" I tried to keep a calm voice and say, "Yes, there are consequences for our

---

[7] For more examples of a confrontational demeanor see appendix 6.

> actions. You'll think about it next time before you choose not to follow directions." He cried louder and louder so I told him he needed to calm down in another room because he was too loud. He went to Ms. Fossett's room and calmed down before he even got there. He came back in a few minutes and was ready for the day again. (Teacher Journal, 11/5)[8]

By staying calm in this situation I did not encourage DB's escalation and he was eventually able to calm down. I have found that many of my students respond better when I speak calmly and firmly (see p. 35, appendix 7, paragraph 1). When I am calm I am also more able to actually listen and negotiate as a teacher. By staying calm when MJ had a tantrum one day, I was able to pick up on his desire to actually do his work (see p.35, appendix 7, paragraph 4). Hearing a subtle difference in his words allowed me to guide him into a successful work time. If I had been personally angry at MJ, I probably would not have heard the subtle difference in his words and would have been in a power struggle in which I wouldn't want to give him "one last chance" to do his work.

One way that I have been able to stay calmer this year is by keeping a healthy distance between me and my students. I know that what makes me a good teacher and how my students behave are not always directly related (see p. 35, appendix 7, paragraph 2). Students will still misbehave in a classroom where the teacher is a good problem solver, but the difference is how these events are handled.

Another way I was able to stay calmer this year was by knowing that the class can always stop and calm the class down with a brief rest (see p. 35, appendix 7, paragraph 6). Last year it felt like a failure to me if I had to stop instruction to calm everyone down, but this year it is clear to me that being able to discern when the moments are that we need to calm down allows for good instruction the rest of the day.

I have also noticed that I calm down as a teacher when I see my students calm down. Just as they react to my emotions, I also react to their emotions. On days when I am having trouble being the first one to calm down, I have to be creative about finding new ways for both the student and myself to calm down:

> After a day of lots and lots of hitting I made them hold up their hand and promise to keep their hands to themselves. The very next morning, DO slugged a kid in the hall- right in front of me. I was so mad inside. I told her that made me mad to see her hurting a friend. I told her to look at the kid's face (who was crying) and to tell me how she thinks he feels. She said sad. I had her walk next to me as our line finished walking back to the room. I was so mad on the way back I knew I couldn't let this incident slide without consequence or we'd have another hitting frenzy day. When we sat down in the room I had DO stand next to me for a talk. I asked her what she thought should happen after she hit a kid so hard that they cried. She said she thought her name should go on the board. I wanted her to get a check also. I pried a little and tried to get her to come up with the consequence I had in mind but she didn't. I asked her if she wanted me to tell her what I thought should happen or if she wanted the class to tell her. She opted for the class. I told the class that DO and I had talked and she was feeling really sorry for hitting. She's being very responsible and she's trying to fix the problem but she's not sure how to fix it. She would like your ideas about what should happen to fix the problem. DO called on several

---

[8] For more examples of a calm, firm demeanor see appendix 7.

> kids and two ideas surfaced. She could apologize to the class because she broke the
> promise we had made yesterday to keep hands to ourselves and she should get her name
> on the board and a check by it. Those two things happened and she sat down nicely.
> (Teacher Journal, 1/29)

Even though I felt very upset with DO when she first hit another child, I started to calm
down as I described how she wanted to fix the problem. By voicing the feelings I wanted
her to have even though she had not expressed them to me, I saw both DO and myself
start to calm down. It was also a helpful technique to let the class "help her fix the
problem." This strategy transformed the situation from one that appeared to me to be a
blatant act of defying authority into a situation where the class was helping DO. Once I
distanced myself in these ways, she was able to fix the problem appropriately and I was
able to avoid a battle with her about fair consequences.

Scaffolding students in their problem solving skills:
Coaching: I recorded 5 incidents of coaching students through the problem solving or
communication steps we had learned. In these incidents the students knew what to do,
but they needed to be prompted and guided. These coaching events clustered in the
earlier part of my journal.

	October	November	December	January	February	March
Number of coaching moments documented	2	0	2	0	1	0

> Yesterday DH was mad at DO. I pulled them aside and had DH tell DO what he didn't
> like. DO was so quick to try to jump in and yell back with "I didn't…!" I made her
> follow the steps of the peace path even away from the path. When she had to repeat DH,
> she repeated him incorrectly first. Then when she finally was repeating she calmed
> down, it was like the form of repetition as opposed to defense was relaxing. Then they
> continued and DO said she felt sad when she hit DH and they decided to apologize and
> shake on it. (Teacher Journal, Feb. 18, 2005)[9]

It was amazing to see DO negotiate beautifully once she gave up her familiar
tactic of yelling "I didn't do it" to any accusation. All I needed to do was prompt
them in the pattern of expressing I statements and repeating the other person's
statement. However, without my promptings, I don't think DH and DO would
have resolved their problems. Hopefully the students would need my prompting
less and less over time, but there are several students who seem to know the next
steps and still wait for me to prompt (see p.36, appendix 8, paragraph 4). For
these students, this type of coaching is not pushing them to the next level of their
competence.

Identity redefinition: This is the technique I used most frequently to de-escalate angry
students and guide their behavior in appropriate ways. I recorded fifteen separate
incidents in which I scaffolded students through appropriate responses by directly making

---

[9] For more examples of coaching see appendix 8.

positive statements about what kind of kid they were, reinterpreting their actions as positive responses, or thinking aloud about the appropriate internal feelings they should being having. I call this scaffolding because I am pushing kids, who appear to be angry and stubborn, to search for moral feelings, urges to act responsibly and the belief that they are good and capable kids. I found this technique particularly helpful with students who are in trouble a lot and may have a view of themselves as "bad kids." By assuming that their actions and thoughts are the beginning of positive choices, I am supporting them to grow into a new level of moral behavior. Nine of the occasions in which I used identity re-definition were mainly positive identity statements. I used many phrases that started with "You are…" or "You are able to…" and even if I didn't have the evidence to believe the student was able to, I said it believing that they could. Two occasions were thinking alouds about the feelings they should be having. Four occasions that I documented were mainly reinterpretations of their actions.

	Positive identity statements	Thinking aloud about their appropriate feelings	Reinterpreting actions as the beginning of positive responses
Frequency of documentation in my teacher journal	9	2	4

The first time I tried re-defining the identity, it was not a premeditated strategy. It just came out of my mouth but I was struck by the results:

> When AC was sent out I ended up using that scenario to help the other kids who were on the verge of serious misbehavior pull it together. I told the class that sometimes kids have so much trouble getting their controls back that they are not ready to be in school right then. Then I firmly said everyone in here knows how to get their controls back. AC is still learning how to do that and the best way we can help her is by letting her leave and earn her way back, and also by showing her a good example of getting your controls back. As I said these things DO who was standing (twirling) in the back of the room in a "time out" stopped spinning and stood up straight. (Teacher Journal, 11/5)[10]

When I emphasized that everyone in the room was the kind of kid who could get their controls back, they rose to my expectation. I was struck by how immediately DO straightened up. I consider these identity statements a form of scaffolding since Mead and Piaget point to our concept of ourselves comes from our social interactions. I believe that my students are still forming their identity by how others talk about them and our identity can significantly influence we how choose to act. I also hope to scaffold students to a new level of internal moral feelings by thinking aloud. After DO hit another student, I expressed her feelings aloud even though she hadn't shared them with me. I assumed the feelings that I thought were appropriate for her to be having:

> It's interesting for me to notice how I can talk about a kid and try to influence how they choose to act. I guess its scaffolding. DO's usual way of handling being in trouble is

---

[10] For more examples of identity redefinition see appendix 9.

> pouting, giving an attitude, and rejecting all authority, basically running away from the consequence. But when I told the class how she was feeling- which was an exaggerated interpretation on my part, she rose to the occasion. There are several kids who respond really well to that… I told the class that DO and I had talked and she was feeling really sorry for hitting. She's being very responsible and she's trying to fix the problem but she's not sure how to fix it. She would like your ideas about what should happen to fix the problem. DO called on several kids and two ideas surfaced. She could apologize to the class because she broke the promise we had made yesterday to keep hands to ourselves and she should get her name on the board and a check by it. Those two things happened and she sat down nicely. (Teacher Journal 1/29)

I believe that deep down most children do feel bad about their mistakes and want to repair the situation, but sometimes there are kids who do not show remorse and respond with defiance if the teacher encourages the student to mend the situation. These more defiant students in particular have responded well to the strategy of thinking aloud about appropriate feelings. When I told the class that DO felt very sorry for hitting and that she wanted their ideas about how to fix the problem, I had not seen any outward signs to communicate to me that DO actually did feel sorry for hitting. In stead she had been dragging her feel as I made her come talk to me and she had been rolling her eyes. I assumed that deep down she did feel remorse and I expressed these feelings to the class while she listened. After hearing my think aloud of appropriate feelings, DO seemed to step into the identity I had laid out for her and she ended up apologizing to the class. Some students seem to get past their feelings of anger and defiance and are actually able to recognize appropriate emotions as I describe them. This is essentially re-defining their identity through think alouds. I also was able to re-define students' actions in order to inspire more appropriate responses:

> She (DO) shoved over her desk at one point and I told her to go cool off in the back. She was using a marker while sitting in the back (not what she was supposed to be doing) and I commented that she needed to put the marker down.   She paused and I said, "oh. unless you are making me an apology note." She nodded yes, gave me her note a few minutes later, and then picked up her desk and joined in with the class. (Teacher Journal, 12/6)

DO knew the rules of time out and she knew she should not be using the markers, but by assuming that she was doing something positive, I gave her a way out. These re-interpretations of actions assumed the appropriate behavior that the students had not chosen and gave them an avenue to do the right thing.

Of the behavior scaffolding that I did, the coaching technique worked as an initial review of the steps of problem solving, but I did notice some students waiting for me to prompt them when I thought they could do the steps on their own. After students had familiarity with problem solving steps, coaching did not seem helpful. When I used identity re-definition, students were encouraged and empowered to solve problems appropriately, but the decision was still up to them. Most times they did choose good problem solving skills after this scaffolding moment. This can be empowering for students to carry out decisions on their own instead of simply being coerced to "do the right thing." It seemed to allow them to try on a more mature problem solving technique for size.

I observed that positive social behavior is related to a positive identity. DeVries and Zan (1994) explain that "these experiences of realizing how others see us lead to new consciousness of ourselves as social objects and thus to new constructions or elaborations of our self-concept… according to Mead (1934), we become conscious of ourselves in the course of experiencing the reactions of others to our actions." My use of identity re-definition was the most successful technique with my explosive kids. My explosive students seemed to have an idea that they were either good or bad but had difficulty making a mistake and then fixing it. They seemed to easily accept that they were a "bad kid." I saw this with MJ:

> I've sensed that the last week he (MJ) has made a connection with me and started wanting to behave in school, but been stuck with his "old" identity as a troublemaker. The thing that made me guess this is that every day last week he did not get checks by his name for most of the day and then at the end of the day, it was almost like he'd notice he had no checks because he'd yell out loud or shove his desk back in a way that made me give him a stern warning look. When he saw my "look" he'd yell out "give me a check, I don't care, give me another check, underline my name!" (Teacher Journal, 12/6)

MJ appeared to be struggling to step outside his old identity as a troublemaker. At the end of the day he seemed more unsettled by the fact that he did *not* get in trouble than his regular pattern of getting in trouble. Through my moments of bonding and statements that helped to re-define his identity, MJ occasionally stepped into the role of a well-behaved student. When MJ earned choice time for the first time in many weeks I had the class celebrate with him. I was struck by his shy smile that he tried to hide. It seemed to be a struggle for him to accept praise for doing the right thing:

> MJ was standing already (ready to dart to his choice) and the whole class cheered! He sheepishly turned his head down, trying to hide a smile. It was no use trying to conceal his pride, when his head came up it was filled with a huge grin. It was so nice to see him proud for being good. I didn't realize how much of an identity struggle it has been for MJ to change to being good to get their attention. (Teacher Journal, 12/10)

For his positive behavior habits to last he needs to be able to see himself as a "good kid." It was important to emphasize that "good kids" make mistakes too, but they try to fix their mistakes.

Problem Solvers:
Throughout my journal entries, I documented when I observed students successfully solving problems on their own. I recorded 12 incidents of students displaying problem solving skills among themselves without my prompting. Starting in December I have noticed about one successful independent student problem solving event each week. These events clustered in the later half of my journal. Ten out of twelve of the students who problem solved were my most explosive students who did not always display appropriate problem solving skills at the beginning of the year.

	October	November	December	January	February	March
Students solving	0	0	2	3	3	4

problems						

When I noticed MJ upset and students all pointing to DA, I simply told DA to "be a gentleman and go take care of it." I did not coach him in what to do, but I did give an identity statement by calling him a gentleman:

> I told DA to be a gentleman and go take care of it. He slowly stood up, walked to where MJ was hiding behind the door, said, "MJ, I'm sorry I took your pencil," gave him the pencil, shook hands and walked back to his seat. I was so happy to see that all on his own that I made a big deal and told the class that he must feel proud of himself and listed the steps he took to fix the problem. (Teacher Journal, 12/17) [11]

I was glad to see DA could solve this problem on his own. While he did not use the problem solving language I taught the class, he did handle the problem appropriately. Most of the appropriate problem solving that I observed in my classroom did not involve students using the actual language that I had given them. This could be because we did not practice it enough for it to become a part of their working vocabulary, it could be because they did not see it modeled by me very often or it could be because the students were applying the concept to fit their own situations more appropriately. In many of these examples, students were able to calm themselves down after being very upset. After a brief teacher interaction, students were able to make more positive choices (p. 40, appendix 10, paragraph 2,3,4,6,7). In two situations students were able to express a concern to their peers and students changed their behavior (p. 40, appendix 10, paragraph 1, 5). And on one occasion I documented a student helping me problem solve:

> In the afternoon Tuesday GM came to give me a hug and said, "this is 'cause you're having a bad day." I was amazed at her ability to see my emotions and name them and then think of what she could do to help. (Teacher Journal, 2/4)

GM was able move beyond her self-focus to think about my experience as a teacher and to provide for me her remedy.

Policy Recommendations
For the classroom:
- Teachers can avoid or reduce some of the aggressive behavior in their classrooms by anticipating and providing for students individual needs.
- Teachers should learn student preferences for who they think they'll work well with.
- Students internalize problem solving skills that are learned in the context of authentic classroom situations. Teachers need to use practical problem solving skills for the classroom coupled with "teachable moments" for the most effective problem solving instruction.
- Since students learn problem solving through authentic experiences, teachers need to be aware of the responses to problems that they model and use the way they handle their own emotions as a teaching tool.

---

[11] For more examples of student problem solving see appendix 10.

For the school:
- Schedules allowing choice time, free play time or recess are important because they are the context for social learning and identity development.
- Mentoring for new teachers should promote:
    – ways to prevent outbursts by building good classroom community
    – reflection on finding their calm, firm demeanor
    – education on positive identity development

For the district:
- Character education should not be based on a program or curriculum but on staff development regarding social-emotional needs of students at each age group.

Appendix 1:
Additional examples of creating a logical stable environment

"The kids all wanted to make the words up at the front and of course it could only be a few kids. I think I need to keep stressing the language of everyone taking turns in the classroom (Teacher Journal, 11/5)"

"I want to be teaching my kids these problem solving skills, but I feel instinctively that they need to know there is a baseline of order in the room before they will use any of these strategies effectively. They need to know that they will have to sit out if the teacher finds them goofing off. These problem solving strategies are foreign to them at this age and in their daily life I don't think they see them in use. So, it feels like I am training them in the motions and hoping that the belief in these strategies as helpful will come later as they see it modeled appropriately enough and as they see the whole class buy into it (Teacher Journal, 11/28)."

"We had a family meeting on Monday- the awful day- and the meeting was awful. It was a day to cut as a loss. Kids were talking and not listening, turning cartwheels during writing time, talking back, fighting. The family meeting didn't work because there wasn't a baseline of respect (Teacher Journal, 11/28)"

"Today when MJ called me a b****, I already knew the firm comeback that I wanted to say. Instead of ignoring it and being mad like I did last year, I got right up in his face and said calmly, "Do I look like your momma?" He turned his head in anger. I continued, "then don't speak to me any other way than you would to your mother." I'm not sure he got the double meaning, but nonetheless it had the feel of a feisty comeback. How does a feisty comeback fit into problem solving skills? (Teacher Journal, 12/1)"

"Maybe it was calmer today because it is the first full week following a full week in a long time! Maybe its because I just visited 8 kids homes last weekend. Maybe I was in a good mood. Maybe they were in a good mood (Teacher Journal, 12/6)"

"Now she (AC) still tries saying "no" a few times, but she does do what I tell her to if I consistently wait for her to follow directions. She did sit out of choice time today. She did sit out during part of independent reading today until I saw her sitting quietly (instead of yelling across the room). Friday she did sit out of part of the art lesson (instead of yelling and insulting), and she did sit out of part of learning centers time (instead of yelling and running). This is an improvement (Teacher Journal, 12/6)"

Appendix 2:
Additional examples of anticipating needs

"He had a pretty successful week. He was telling me more of his needs and I was finding ways to accommodate. He wanted to sit with a group and I tried him at the back table, when he asked to sit by himself I moved his desk back to the front. He seems to know some of his needs (Teacher Journal, 2/11)."

"Then Friday I planned ahead for those three. I knew they wouldn't be able to handle a long assembly so I sent them to other classrooms while we had our assembly. It was great for MJ and AC. But DAA ended up getting suspended. He was in a room with a frustrated teacher and he got frustrated. I should have sent him to one of the rooms without frustration. MJ and AC actually seemed to have their identity boost because they were so successful in those rooms and came back with good reports of doing all their work quietly and efficiently. DO seemed to have the same experience when she missed our field trip. She stayed in the other first grade room and worked on her packet of work. Giving her work that we had learned about made her feel successful and she was proud to return to me with good behavior (Teacher Journal, 2/25)."

"MJ got to be a tutor to DA with his math packet on Friday- that seemed to help nicely. He worked efficiently in the back of the room with DA (Teacher Journal, 2/25)."

Appendix 3:
Additional examples of special attention

"Next week I am trying giving jobs to every kid in the class as an attempt to meet some of their needs to be special and noticed. Every day they will have a new job. The challenge for me is to train them well in all the expectations of the jobs and to keep them running smoothly. But I think this work on the front end will help out in the long run. This week I also tried one other thing to try to address the kids need to be special and noticed. Every afternoon when they return from lunch and enter the room I have them tell me good afternoon and give me a hug if they want. The kids are very good at remembering this and its been a neat time for kids who have been good and bad so far to connect with me. AB and GM have both used that moment for an apology during the week (Teacher Journal,)"

"On Thursday I tried to continue the active involvement of MJ. He took over the job of overhead setter-upper and some days he's been leading the alphabet warm up. I have been letting him do it and trying to make it sound a little like I asked him to do it. The other kids don't seem too upset that he is doing extra jobs. BJ and AC and DPO want to help a lot, but when I tell them to sit, they don't argue (Teacher Journal, 1/7)"

"MJ got to be a tutor to DA with his math packet on Friday- that seemed to help nicely. He worked efficiently in the back of the room with DA (Teacher Journal, 2/25)"

Appendix 4:
Additional examples of teacher bonding

"Last weekend we did home visits for 1/3 of the class. I love visiting kids at their homes… we went after school on Friday. The first kid I visited was DA. He is quite a handful in class but his parents weren't home. But DA agreed to show us where all the other kids in our class lived… When we walked down the hall with DA we were greeted by swarms of kids in all grades running up and yelling out of doors "Mrs. Peterson!" and then running to get their friends to tell them who we were there. When we passed groups of older kids or adults who didn't know me, they all said, "Hey little D." DA knows EVERYBODY in the building. So we went around getting permission from guardians to do the research project on conflict resolution in my room and passing out pencils to kids. At each home I had a different wonderful experience of connecting. When we went to EMs door (which had no number on it and I never would have found!) she jumped back and yelled "Oh my God! Mrs. Peterson!" Then she gave me a big hug. Her daughter had not told her I was coming and she couldn't stop laughing and carrying on. It was so fun. At DH's house I learned that his sister's face had been slammed against a wall by a substitute at our school and she was pressing charges. That's why DH missed a day of school that week- her mom was really shook up by the experience. (that is the class that I taught last year and has had a different sub almost every week this school year.) At AC' home, I met her 2 baby twins and some of her mom's friends…. At AB's house, her mom kept showing us special talking books that she bought for her kids but were not working anymore. Nils fixed 2 of them while we were there (Teacher Journal, 12/10)"

"I've been trying to make a point of saying goodbye to MJ since he is often a problem kid, he came by my room today after being out of it… now I think he was coming to say goodbye (Teacher Journal, 2/18)"

Appendix 5:
Additional examples of positive reinforcement

 "MJ and DA have been responding when I come quietly whisper reassurance and encouragement in his ear (Teacher Journal, 11/5)."

"I noticed that I was able to make more positive and calm comments today. When AC sighed angrily because I was not dismissing her to the bathroom I said, "Good, you're taking a deep breath. That's exactly what you should be doing when you need to cool off." She sort of cooled off, but was mad she didn't get to go when she wanted to (Teacher Journal, 12/6)."

"DO did well today too. I also tried those positive comments. Or maybe I was willing to see positive efforts (Teacher Journal, 12/6)."

"I was so happy to see that all on his own that I made a big deal and told the class that he must feel proud of himself and listed the steps he took to fix the problem (Teacher Journal, 12/17)."

"Wednesday there was a foot of snow so 8 kids were absent. MJ, AC, DA, DO, AB were all present- but I only had 21 kids. It was a heavenly day. MJ and AC both did a lot of jobs in the room and got enough attention that way. I had time to acknowledge AB throughout the day so she was happy. DO was able to be encouraged- it was fabulous (Teacher Journal, 1/7)."

"Since he didn't get stars all 5 days he didn't technically qualify for a prize from the box. But I asked the class what they thought. I told them that he had never gotten all stars before and that he showed great improvement. I had the class vote if we should make an exception to reward him with a prize. All the kids voted yes except for JP- a friend of MJ's who always gets stars. Interesting. MJ was so happy (Teacher Journal, 2/11)."

"I made a big show to the class of how DA felt bad about taking the necklace and he did the right thing to fix the problem. I told them that he had made a mistake as we all sometimes do but he wanted to fix his problem. I told the class that he must feel proud of himself for doing the right thing. Then on the way out I told him privately that he was a real gentleman for dealing with his mistake that way (Teacher Journal, 2/25)."

Appendix 6:
Additional examples of a confrontational demeanor

"On Tuesday, I got the most mad I have gotten all year and I threw my keys down and yelled loudly. AC was being very disrespectful and talking back and not doing anything I said. On top of that MJ started to act up in conjunction and I could not take it. I had an explosion, then I removed AC from the room (Teacher Journal, 11/16)."

"I woke up in the middle of the night thinking about AC and resolved that I need to find those small consequences that I can immediately enforce… but, when I tried it this week, I just got mad and tried to take away her things in her desk and she exploded. I know that is not right! (Teacher Journal, 11/16)"

"My low point was this afternoon when MJ would not sit down. He tried to shove past me to "leave" and I didn't feel like ignoring him. I stood in his way and he got into a wrestling match. I shoved him which I shouldn't have done, but it's hard to know what to do when the kid is shoving you! I feel like the downside to the leniency is when I am fed up and the kids push it and then it feels out of control. I probably need to go back to more of a strict order in my room. Last year it seemed all kids thrived and enjoyed the order once I mandated it (Teacher Journal, 2/18)."

Appendix 7:
Examples of a calm, firm demeanor

"She (AC) did not obey the directions I gave her in front of the class… She does respond better when I take her out into the hall and privately tell her what to do firmly and with the expectation that she will do it (Teacher Journal, 11/16)."

"Yesterday one of my explosive kids slapped me. The last 2 weeks she's started defiantly saying "no!" to my face when I tell her to sit in the back of the room for inappropriate behavior. She yelled "no!" in my face. I took her gloves and started to put them on me saying if she didn't know how to handle her things in my room I would keep them until I thought she was ready. She yelled, "don't take my stuff!" and slapped me on the arm right under my face (it had the feel of a slap in the face but I don't think she dared). I stayed calm this time and was able to sternly tell her that she had crossed the line and you never lay your hands on a teacher. I called the office and there happened to be a police officer in there already (for a separate incident) and so I sent her to the cop (Teacher Journal, 12/1)."

"Last year around this time a boy in my class aggressively grabbed my collar and shook me. I did not handle that situation quite as well. I remember being so so so mad at the kid. He clearly had anger problems, but I didn't have the distance I needed to handle it calmly. This year the biggest difference is in my calmness and ability to trudge through and demand good behavior because I know they can do it. Last year when I saw their behavior I really didn't believe they could control themselves until April when a lot of lessons and experiences and wisdom came together for me. This year I still have kids who turn cartwheels in my room, who just don't seem to know how not to yell (even when they are just talking it's a yelling volume), I still have kids punch each other and step on each other, hide in the coat rack and today I had a kid call me a b****. But last year I was so shocked and mad about their behavior that I could not separate myself enough to be the calming stabilizing influence on the room (Teacher Journal 12/1).

"My kiddoes definitely feel the holiday crazies. Yesterday I sent AC home ½ hour into the day because she kept telling me "no! no! no!" DA had to be physically restrained at lunch by 2 security guards when he flipped out after a teacher told him to stand in line. He was blowing punches at the security guards! 3 kids intentionally threw their desks over. GM flipped her desk, and threw all the kids' books off her table group and laid down on the floor yelling/crying in a 2 year old style- twice. Then today I had 4 kids crying helplessly complaining of hurting ears, heads, fingers. 2 desks were flipped. DA, DH, Demitruis, DO and MJ were running around cursing and punching kids whenever they could. General pandemonium. I remember this happened last year too… slightly more chaotic, but pretty close to the same. But the difference was last year I was really really angry while it was happening. Somehow I have been able to stay calmer this year. I still yell at them and put them in their place, but I am not really truly mad at them. And I know if we stop at those chaos moments, the class can calm down (Teacher Journal, 12/10)."

"He ran into the coat rack and fell down crying and wailing and kicking. I calmly told him that he had not done his work and now he would have to finish it in Mr. Robert's room. He yelled out "I was 'finna do it!" again and again. This seemed new to me. Usually he doesn't even claim that he wants to do the "right" thing. In the past he has still stubbornly yelled, "I'm going home." So I said, "Last chance" and let him go to his seat. He used invented spelling for the first time! (Teacher Journal, 1/7)"

"Friday was a great day, again I am amazed at how tied into my emotions these days are. I was feeling positive and the class ended up feeling positive (Teacher Journal 2/11)."

"On Wednesday the students were talking and fussing and out of their seats all day! It was really getting on my nerves. At the end of the day I had them write a letter to their families: "Dear family, Today I had a hard day. I will do better." Then I had then draw a picture of themselves doing what they need to work on. It made for a nice calming exit and all but 10 brought back the paper signed. I called the others (Teacher Journal, 2/18)."

Appendix 8:
Additional examples of coaching

"Friday morning JE was returning the <u>Stuart Little</u> book and at the same time EV and DH grabbed it. Just as a little bit of a tug started, I came over and asked them what the problem was. JE explained they both wanted it. It looked like EV was going to take it and DH was going to concede but I asked them how they could solve the problem in a fair way. I walked them through the decision making steps. They asked each other what book they wanted, neither of them didn't care, they agreed they could take turns, but they still needed to decide who got to check it out first. EV remembered that they could play rock paper scissors. They played, and DH won. EV smiled and let him take the book (Teacher Journal, Oct 29, 2004)."

"GM started this week very upset with PB and KS for being mean and teasing her. She didn't seem to know how to ignore things or assume they liked her. I had to guide many interactions she wanted to have to "make-up" with her friends (Teacher Journal, Oct 29, 2004)."

"Yesterday EMC was coming in the room and he said, "It made me feel mad when JE bumped into me." I asked him if he had told him that and also to be more careful. He said no and then went to tell JE (Teacher Journal, Dec. 1, 2004)."

"Last week GM came to me at the end of the day saying that EM had teased her. I asked if she wanted to take GM to the peace path. She said yes and they went through the steps. They seemed to know them but waited for me to prompt them at each step. I hope they will get better at just doing it. We need to practice the peace path more (Teacher Journal, Dec. 1, 2004)."

Appendix 9:
Additional examples of redefining identity

"AC was very explosive. She did not obey the directions I gave her in front of the class. I told her to go cool off in the back and she put her feet on the desk, I asked her again and she threw her crayon box across the room… I told her she was a kid who knew how to fix problems and that I was sure she would come back in and clean up her crayons. After speaking to her outside she did go back in to her desk and did not clean up. Eventually, during the next activity (story at rug) she did clean up the crayons and join us. I mentioned publicly that she must feel proud of herself. But the afternoon was not better (Teacher Journal, 11/16)."

"Thursday MJ stormed out of the room. I asked the class if they knew what had happened and they all pointed to DA. I told DA to be a gentleman and go take care of it. He slowly stood up, walked to where MJ was hiding behind the door, said, "MJ, I'm sorry I took your pencil," gave him the pencil, shook hands and walked back to his seat. I was so happy to see that all on his own that I made a big deal and told the class that he must feel proud of himself and listed the steps he took to fix the problem (Teacher Journal, 12/17)"

"He likes writing lines and often asks for them. I think its because its something he can do well. I told him that after he had read 2 books during independent reading I would let him write lines. He completed this work and then I asked him what he is good at. He told me, "a lot of things." I let him write lines today saying "I am good at a lot of things" instead of "I will listen" (Teacher Journal, 2/18)"

AC started to sit back in defiance. I stepped aside and told her we were just talking about how much better she was at controlling herself. All she needed to do was sit up straight and do her best. She did (Teacher Journal, 3/18).

"On Friday ES wore a big necklace to school, I told him not to wear it to school again and to put it in his book bag. He did. Mid-day kids were telling me that someone took Edward's necklace. At the end of the day kids were saying that either DH or DA had taken the necklace. Both denied that they had it. I told them how serious stealing was and then told them that I'd have to talk to both of their parents to let them know how serious it was. At the very last minute DA handed me the necklace. I made a big show to the class of how DA felt bad about taking the necklace and he did the right thing to fix the problem. I told them that he had made a mistake as we all sometimes do but he wanted to fix his problem. I told the class that he must feel proud of himself for doing the right thing. Then on the way out I told him privately that he was a real gentleman for dealing with his mistake that way (Teaching Journal, 2/25)."

"When AC sighed angrily because I was not dismissing her to the bathroom I said, "Good, you're taking a deep breath. That's exactly what you should be doing when you need to cool off" (Teacher Journal 12/6)."

"I also started "re-interpreting" many of his actions as good. When he would stand up during rug time I would make it sound like I had asked him to do that in advance and I'd ask him to come hold the book for me (Teacher Journal, 12/10)."

"MJ had DB in a headlock and they were both grabbing hard and their faces were flushed (yes, even with dark skin you can tell when someone is flushed). It was the end of the day and I didn't feel like yelling at them, so I looked at them and said… "Ohhhh, do you need a hug? It's okay to ask for a hug." I opened my arms and they both separated and ran. Neither accepted my hug but many others did and a small outburst of hugging erupted in my room, left and right kids were giving hugs! (Teacher Journal, 2/18)."

Appendix 10:
Additional examples of student problem solving

"Yesterday EMC was coming in the room and he said, "It made me feel mad when JE bumped into me." I asked him if he had told him that and also to be more careful. He said no and then went to tell JE (Teacher Journal, 12/1)."

"DA immediately made a "sorry note" to EV's mom and the rest of the class asked if they could make cards to EV. They did. Wednesday DA wrote about the event during writing time and then Thursday EV was back in class. She was writing about it in her journal. I asked her if DA had shown her what he wrote yesterday and he already had. I was glad they were sharing about it. EV from the start was quick to say it was an accident. Even though it was an accident that her head "got busted" it was not an accident that the tower was pushed down (Teacher Journal, 1/7)"

"MJ came in yelling about wanting to go home and not wanting to do work. I lured him to his seat with the bribe of a job. I basically ignored his bad attitude and calmly said, "when I see you sitting right with your busy book out I have a job I need your help with." He eventually did it (Teacher Journal, 1/20)."

"AC wanted to be the boarder drawer and got frustrated when she couldn't and threw a chair. I told her to cool off in the back and she screamed loud. Then I saw her slapping DO and I forcefully took her to time out. She screamed loud. We tried our best to ignore her. She did calm down and fix her desk (Teacher Journal, 1/20)."

"DA said the word stupid at our book club meeting and Edward gently put his hand on D's shoulder and said, "we don't say that word in here" (Teacher Journal, 3/4)."

"AC started to have a tantrum, I pulled her aside to encourage her and she agreed she's growing up and did not have a tantrum (Teacher Journal, 3/11)."

"AC started to sit back in defiance. I stepped aside and told her we were just talking about how much better she was at controlling herself. All she needed to do was sit up straight and do her best. She did (Teacher Journal, 3/18)."

Bibliography

Adams, Suzanne K.. "'I Had It First.'" *Childhood Education* 78 (Fall 2001): 10-15.

Berk, Laura K. *Infants, Children, and Adolescents*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2002.

Brown, Dave. *Becoming a Successful Urban School Teacher*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002.

DeVries, Rheta, and Betty Zan. *Moral Classrooms, Moral Children*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1994.

Erickson, Karen. Workshop: "Exploring Books Through Drama," August 18, 2004, Chicago.

Noguera, Pedro. *City Schools and the American Dream*, New York: Teachers College Press, 2003.

Ricks, Alice. Conversation with author, August 2004, Chicago.

Sanford, Jarvis. Speech at staff meeting, Spring 2004, Chicago.

Stevahn, Laurie, David W. Johnson, Roger T. Johnson, Katie Oberle, and Leslie Wahl. "Effects of Conflict Resolution Training Integrated into a Kindergarten Curriculum." *Child Development* 71 (June, 2000): 772-284.