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A CASE STUDY OF A KINDERGARTEN TEACHER: EXAMINING PRACTICES
AND BELIEFS THAT SUPPORT THE SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL CLASSROOM
CLIMATE (323 pp.)

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This 5-month qualitative case study investigated the social-emotional climate of
one half-day kindergarten classroom by examining the role of the teacher in establishing
and sustaining a classroom climate that nurtured the social-emotional lives of students.
This case study asks: How and why did the teacher establish and sustain a classroom
climate that nurtured the social-emotional lives of students? Data sources included
extensive observations, interviews, conversations, field notes, research memos, and
school artifacts. Initial findings identified an emergent curriculum that was embedded
within democratic practices which nurtured social responsibility, equity, and empathy
among the kindergarten students. Further examination identified three components that
my research showed to be critical for this teacher to integrate into his classroom:
initiating an environment of care that goes beyond the academics, practicing a deliberate
pedagogical artistry, and incorporating critical reflection. These areas of care, artistry,
and reflection may clash with the traditional teacher-directed lessons that focus on
academic standards. Based on my research, I argued that these areas are essential for
providing a holistic environment for learning; one that nurtures the social-emotional as
well as academic climate of any classroom. This pedagogical stance teaches critical
thinking and is anchored in a safe learning environment.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The early years of education set the foundation for future success in all facets of life, academically as well as socially (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Denham, 2006; Nelson, 1999; Shore, 1997). As our world becomes more globally connected, relationships and the ability to develop creative and innovative problem-solving solutions will be an essential component of success in our rapidly advancing world (Swiniarski, 2006). Being able to interact in a socially appropriate manner includes building reciprocal relationships and developing communication skills that allow for the exchange of ideas as well as the ability to understand and appreciate diverse perspectives (Jingbo & Elicker, 2005; Pianta, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). Education is an important factor in reaching these goals. It is the teacher who has the opportunity and responsibility to develop a supportive classroom climate that foster students’ social, emotional, and academic development (Pianta & Walsh, 1996; Zull, 2002).

Purpose of the Study

Social-Emotional Climates

This research investigated the social-emotional climate of a kindergarten classroom and how it was developed and sustained. More importantly, this study examined the role of the teacher in establishing and sustaining a climate that nurtured the social-emotional lives of students. Withall (1949) renamed the interactions between students in the classroom and students with teachers as the “social emotional climate.” This group phenomenon was described as an emotional factor that occurred during
interactions between members of a group which regarded each other’s needs and goals. Chavez (1984) later explained that all activities within a classroom were interactive; emotional and intellectual on one hand, and individual and social on the other.

Denham (2006) reported that the student who was socially and emotionally competent would do well in our social world. Since experiences and interactions are guided by emotion, understanding emotion figures prominently into personal and social success. This is especially important during the early years. A young child’s ability to develop positive relationships could affect his or her ability to develop friendships and to be successful academically (Denham, 2006; Pianta, 1999). By identifying what interactions support a healthy social-emotional environment, teachers would be able to create relationships that support their students’ social-emotional development. Denham (2006) added, “Social competence and executive control are strongly influenced by a child’s emotional competence . . . in turn, each plays a powerful role in adjustment and success in school” (p. 97). The importance of social competence should not be underestimated (Denham et al., 2003) as it is becoming recognized as an important factor in school readiness.

Relationships and Interactions

The relationships that are established and the interactions that occur between students and teachers are an integral part of the classroom (DeVries & Zan, 1994; Pianta, 1999; Zull, 2002). Within those interactions there is reciprocity between participants; a give and take of ideas through conversation (Jingbo & Elicker, 2005; Pianta, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). These relationships established between students and teachers are an
important aspect of the classroom community and the process takes time to develop considering that all developmental domains are integrated (Howes & Sanders, 2006; Noddings, 2001; Pianta, 1999; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). The teacher’s role within these interactions impacts the relationships that influence the social-emotional climate of the classroom (Pianta, 1999).

Teachers portray many roles in the classroom and each child responds in different ways based on previous interactions (Kesner, 2000; Pianta, Steinberg, & Rollins, 1995). Eisner (2002) described the role of the teacher as a creative artist that encourages a curriculum based on experience. Teachers need to allow students to explore and take risks during the learning process (Eisner, 2002). Aoki (2005) claimed teaching consisted of both leading children as well as working with children such that learning was a joint adventure. Aoki, along with Noddings (2001) and Johnston (2006), believed teachers are to nurture and tactfully lead their students in a caring manner.

By establishing a positive social-emotional climate, teachers support the growth and development of the children in their care (Birch & Ladd, 1997; DeVries & Zan, 1994; Pianta, 1999). Because there are many dynamics related to all children’s interactions with those around them, academic development would also be enhanced by providing an emotionally supportive classroom that fosters positive social interactions (MacAulay, 1990; Pianta, 1999; Shore, 1997; Van Petegem, Aelterman, Van Keer, & Rosseel, 2008; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004; Zull, 2002). Children need to learn how to interact in a positive, social manner that incorporates beneficial and reciprocal interactions. These interactions may be key to our children’s future success.
Conceptual Framework for the Case Study

Relationships established by the teachers need to be supported by sound underlying philosophies. Bandura (1977), Dewey (1938), and Vygotsky (1978) are the theoretical guides behind the importance of social interactions as a critical component of education. These constructivist theorists represent a shift away from the behaviorist philosophies of Skinner who was a dominant theorist from 1930-1952 (Thomas, 2005).

Bandura (1977), Dewey (1938), and Vygotsky (1978) identified social interaction and experience as foundational to learning new concepts. They focused on the importance of social interactions with the exchange of language and ideas between the teacher and the child (Bandura, 1977; Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1978). These theorists considered the child as being a social creature who had the opportunity to explore and create their own understanding of the world around them through interaction with others. Interaction with others in society was crucial to developing a mature individuality where one could accept the constantly changing world (Dewey, 1938). All interactions were social and included communication and contact with others. This social interaction supported the process of learning through language, inquiry, and experience (Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky (1978) felt that interactions between the child and adult were central to the educational process and explained that thinking developed through mediation of others. Knowledge was exchanged and transferred through language and interaction, a social and cultural construct, with conversation encouraging student contributions and creating an understanding of the students’ knowledge, experiences, and values. Moll
(2001) explained that Vygotsky’s ideas provided a framework for understanding the holistic aspects of teaching, learning, and thinking as it relates to the broad social and historical cultures of human interactions. Wood and Bandura (1989) focused on the teacher as a role model who models appropriate behaviors and guides skill mastery, similar to Vygotsky’s theory of scaffolding (also known as Zone of Proximal Development) as a way of developing self-efficacy.

**Statement of the Problem**

Academic and social-emotional competencies are interwoven; therefore they must be integrated to provide the maximum benefits to the students (Porath, 2003; Zins et al., 2004; Zull, 2002). Research shows that positive relationships support academic progress (G. J. Anderson, 1970; Birch & Ladd, 1997; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, & Bradley, 2002; Pianta et al., 1995; Van Petegem et al., 2008; Zins et al., 2004) especially with children that may be struggling in the classroom (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Howes, Phillipsen, & Peisner-Feinberg, 2000). The context and the quality of the relationships in the classroom do have an impact on the child’s competencies (Pianta, 1999). Murphy (1941) suggested that a child’s development during the early years is extremely flexible. Teachers need to be aware of their role in guiding the emotional and social development so students build confidence during the early years. Teachers need to interact with their students in a manner that develops supportive relationships.

With the current emphasis on standardized testing, it appears that the social-emotional climate of learning is starting to be ignored even in the primary years. Based on the definition by Withall (1949), I identify the social-emotional climate as the
relationships that are nurtured during teacher-student interactions as well as student-student interactions. It is a reciprocal relationship that engages both the teacher and the students as they build relationships within the classroom; relationships that support a positive physical environment as well as an environment of empathy and understanding. This social-emotional climate incorporates the needs and goals of members of the classroom. Teachers appear to be so focused on teaching content that the students’ social and emotional well-being is forgotten. Teacher-student relationships influence the social and emotional development of the students, which in turn influence peer interactions and confidence in their academic abilities (Pianta & Walsh, 1996; Zull, 2002).

In addition to the social interactions with the students, it is important for the teacher to support his pedagogy with a sound philosophy that identifies the need for a socio-emotional climate that supports students. With a solid understanding of the philosophy behind his actions, a teacher can validate his actions in the classroom.

Many qualified teachers are competent and caring; however these characteristics appear to be overlooked as many districts focus on academic outcomes (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). Almost 100 years ago G. H. Martin (1915) reminded his readers that even though the format of education has been standardized, education itself is not. Education is based on an individual’s mind and no two minds respond in the same way. Martin stated that many children may learn the same content, but “no two will make the same use of it, and that is the education they get out of it” (p. 6). Children learn differently and the educative value they take away from a lesson will be different than their peers. Standards are something to strive for but not something to be measured by
(Martin, 1915). If we want children to be academically ready then they need to be emotionally and socially ready as well (Denham, 2006; Goleman 1995; Zull, 2002). According to Crain (2005), Rousseau warned, “A preoccupation with our own goals can blind us to the ways children naturally grow and develop” (p. 384). Based on prior interactions, it is important to note that children think differently than adults and often have unique perspectives. This evidence indicates that providing students with a variety of interactive experiences promotes a positive, social, emotional environment and is essential in the process of learning, but the research reviewed did not explain how to develop and sustain this type of environment.

**Research Focus and Questions**

A case study was conducted to understand how social-emotional climate was established in one classroom and what interactions between the students and teacher supported the construction of the kindergarten classroom climate.

**Main Research Question**

How and why did the teacher establish and sustain a classroom climate that nurtured the social-emotional lives of students?

**Supporting Research Questions**

1. How did the teacher interact with the students?
2. How did the teacher explain why he interacted in particular ways with the students?
3. How did the teacher-student interactions support the social-emotional climate in the classroom?
Using case study methodology this study examined how one teacher established his classroom climate. An intense, holistic description of one kindergarten classroom and the significant interactions that support the development of the classroom climate are provided through the use of extensive observations, interviews, conversations, and the collection and examination of field notes, research memos, and classroom and school artifacts. Artifacts included the kindergarten report card, the school mission statement and goals, communications sent home, and guidelines for behavior developed by the class.

The second chapter of this study provides a review of the literature on teacher-student interactions and the benefits of positive relationships between teachers and students. Most of this research is related to the attachment theory, but little is related to the social-emotional climate of the classroom. The rationale for the case study methodology is examined and details for conducting the study are included in the third chapter. In Chapter four, I examine and analyze my data and explain my findings; findings which answer the questions of how and why this individual teacher was able to create and sustain a positive social-emotional climate in his classroom. The final chapter provides a brief review of my findings as I look at the need for change in our teaching practices. I then provide alternative perspectives as well as a look at teaching beyond the academics. I conclude with implications for teacher education and future research.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review examined the historical and current research that related to the social-emotional climates of classrooms to see how the teachers’ interactions and relationships with children developed the climate of the classroom. The expectations for students have shifted over the years as academic standards have become the focus for student learning (Hinitz, 2006). This shift in expectations also created a shift in teacher-student relationships from the social well-being of the child to a focus on academic outcomes.

The social and emotional well-being of students is important because relationships established during the preschool years and early primary years appear to have a significant impact on children’s attitudes towards the remainder of their educational journey (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Howes & Ritchie, 2002). Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005) suggested that researchers address a student’s learning in areas of social, emotional, aesthetic, and civic development and not just academics. Children who interacted effectively with their peers and teachers adjusted better to school routines and procedures and excelled academically (Anderson, Walberg, & Welch, 1969; Buswell, 1953; Solomon, Watson, Delucchi, Schaps, & Battistich, 1988). These children also had a better chance of acquiring the social behaviors believed necessary for effective adjustment in our increasingly complex world (Miller & Pedro, 2006).
Research and Literature on Teacher-Student Interactions

The literature and research during the past 100 years on teacher-child interactions and social-emotional climates identified a shift that occurred theoretically, historically, and educationally. During the first half of the century, research focused on the natural development of the young child where the teacher provided a positive and safe environment for development and social interaction. Literature in the late 1940s and 1950s indicated that research was beginning to examine the need for nursery schools to introduce academic instruction. Over time this change from a social to an academic lens has led to a shift in the relationships between teacher and student (Braun & Edwards 1972). These shifts were evident in the research that was reviewed and are explained in the following chapter.

Actual research on classroom climate extended back to the late 1920s and early 1930s and continued through the 20th century with the work of many. Beginning with the work of Thomas (1929) and Lewin (1935), Chavez (1984) summarized the research of the first half of the century while the work of Walberg (1969, 1976, 1979) examined the changes that occurred in the social and educational arenas of research during the second half of the century. More recently, the work completed by Pianta (1995, 1999, 2002) focuses on teacher-student relationships as it impacts academic outcomes.

Theoretical articles and books that focused on teacher-student relationships began to appear in the late 1960s and 1970s (Anderson, 1970; Cohen & Rudolph, 1977; Czajkowski & King, 1975; Evans, 1976; Flanders, 1970; Gilstrap, 1971; Margolin, 1974; Moos & Moos, 1978; Standford & Roark, 1974; Walberg 1979; Wirsing, 1972). Other
statistical questionnaires and observational research evaluated the effect the social-emotional environment had on academic outcomes (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Freiberg, 1990; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Jingo & Elicker, 2005; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Lambert, Abbott-Shim, & Sibley, 2006; LaParo, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004; O’Connor & McCartney, 2007; Pianta et al., 2002; Pianta et al., 1995; Solomon et al., 1988; Veldman & Anderson, 1980; Walberg, 1969; Walberg & Anderson, 1968). Research identified the interpersonal relationships between teachers and students as an important aspect of the classroom climate (Van Petegem et al., 2008). Few of the studies, if any, identified how the teacher developed this positive classroom climate or what his or her beliefs were about teaching.

**The Educational System: A Historical Overview as Related to Social-Emotional Considerations**

Teaching practices and interactions shifted during the 1900s as the expectations of society changed and knowledge about how children learn developed through the years (Braun & Edwards, 1972; Cohen & Rudolph, 1977). During the first half of the century research paralleled the transition from custodial nursery care, to laboratory schools and nursery schools, and eventually to current preschool and kindergarten programs; many with an academic focus (Barbour 2003; Brawn & Edwards, 1972). Braun and Edwards explained that the focus of the classroom experience during the first three decades of the 1900s was about social, emotional, and physical growth. Early research conducted by Parten (1932) and Fales (1937) focused on the play activities of young children whereas work by Van Alstyne and Hattwick (1939) looked at the behavioral habits of children.
Thomas (1929) and Lewin (1935) also studied social behavior but began to develop new techniques for observation.

It was not until the 1940s that observers began to look at the link between nursery schools and public education (Braun & Edwards, 1972). A shift from custodial care to programs of instruction began as studies showed parallels between nursery school behavior and academic behavior in the higher grades (Braun & Edwards, 1972). Research in the 1950s and 1960s identified the teacher’s role as well as the environment as having an effect on intelligence (Bovard, 1951; Medley & Mitzel, 1959; Moustakas, 1956).

Within the first decade of the 21st century, preparing students to do well academically on standardized tests appears to have become the main focus for many classrooms. Originally, in the mid to late 1900s, kindergarten would be the student’s introduction to academics, beginning with a foundation for appropriate social interaction. With the current standardization of content that began in 2001 in conjunction with the No Child Left Behind Act, academic expectations have been pushed lower into younger grade levels pushing out the time for appropriate social interactions that support social-emotional competency. This shift in expectations which focuses on the importance of an academic curriculum at a younger age also created a shift in the teacher-student relationship. The teacher’s role shifted from nurturer to instructor; from supporting social development to guiding academic learning (Braun & Edwards, 1972). The purpose of my research is to look beyond the academics and examine the importance of teacher-
student interactions that sustain and nurture a positive social-emotional climate in the classroom as a way to support the holistic education of the young student.

**Early Teacher-Student Interactions**

Gilstrap (1971) explained that the purpose of kindergarten was to initiate an educational program designed to promote intellectual, social, emotional, and physical growth of the child. Kindergarten was to be a gradual transition from home to school with the aim of helping children realize their potential. Jacobson (2003) identified kindergarten as becoming a bridge between home or preschool and formal education. He explained that kindergarten did not fit into early childhood or into the primary years of education, but did appear to be a bridge between the two phases of learning. It was a period of transition for many young children whose past experiences and interactions were vastly different.

For some children building relationships was relatively easy, but for others it could be a difficult road to navigate (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Denham, 2006; Howes & Sanders, 2006). Interactions at home as well as during the first few years of preschool provided examples of relationships and influenced the type of interactions children engaged in with their peers as well as others (Howes et al., 2000). These early relationships were important as they set the stage for future relationships in school (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Cohen & Rudolph, 1977; Howes et al., 2000; Howes & Sanders, 2006; Macintyre, 2007; Wylie & Thompson, 2003). Teachers needed to realize that their interactions with students had an impact on what the students learned (Czajkowski & King, 1975; Eisner, 2002; Wirsing, 1972). Examining the complex nature of interactions
in the classroom, the challenge was how teachers create a classroom that supported a child’s social-emotional well-being.

Beyond the child’s family and experiences at home, school was an important factor in providing learning experiences. It was important for the teacher to understand the world in which the child lived. Margolin (1974) discussed the different cultures involved and the different kinds of characteristics in role behavior. The study of various societies and complexity of their structures could provide greater insight into the relationships between the social structure and individual behavior creating a greater sensitivity to the dynamics of learning. These early childhood experiences linked to educational learning capacity later in life (Cohen & Rudolph, 1977). For many children, kindergarten could be a strategic emotional experience, as well as a strategic intellectual one. It was to be the foundation for future learning.

**Historical Progression of Research Studies: Relationships, Classroom Climate, and Evaluation**

**Early Research Studies: 1920-1960s**

Research on classroom climate extended back to the late 1920s and early 1930s with the work of Thomas (1929) and Lewin (1935), and continued through the 20th century with a change from low-inference studies to high inference studies occurring during the 1960s (Anderson, 1982; Chavez, 1984). Low-inference studies were characterized by frequency counts conducted by trained observers on a specific classroom behavior. Observed behaviors were recorded and then statistically compared. These counts were considered objective in nature. Social psychologists with an interest
in teacher-student interactions usually completed this work. High inference studies began to appear in the literature in the 1960’s and utilized environmental indexes, Likert scales, and questionnaires to evaluate classroom climates and were considered to incorporate subjective judgment where observers made inferences based upon a series of classroom events.

Thomas (1929) appeared to be one of the first to develop a study of classroom behavior combining frequency counts with case histories and journal entries. She noted the complexity of social behavior and the use of observational notes and journal entries were a mix of fact and interpretation and not scientific in nature. Thomas explained that social interactions were not easily studied in a laboratory setting. Based on this knowledge, Thomas began to incorporate frequency counts that objectively focused on specific behaviors as she observed two and three year olds in a nursery school setting. As an extension of her early work, she established general techniques which went beyond the basic frequency counts and focused on objectivity and accuracy when studying children. Observing children for a given time period in the nursery school, recording behavior each time it recurred, recording specific social situations made by the child, and creating a psychological test situation were part of her methodology for studying social interactions of young children.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939), Anderson and Brewer (1945), and Withall (1949) examined student and teacher behaviors and the effect these interactions had as children took on various leadership roles in the primary classroom. Their findings identified different leadership styles as having an impact on student
behavior. These researchers described various behaviors that emerged based on the classroom conditions. Lewin, Lippitt, and White (1939) concluded that different leadership styles produced different behaviors in both groups and individuals, producing different social climates. Authoritarian teachers tended to have students that were very aggressive or very compliant. In democratic environments, aggressive behavior was considered average. Aggression in laissez-faire conditions was extremely high. In the authoritarian group, all policies were determined by the leader. Techniques and steps were dictated as well as who worked with whom. The leader was friendly, but remained detached from the group. In the democratic group all policies were discussed and general steps given along with alternative choices for completing the task at hand. Students were allowed to choose their partners and the division of task was left up to the group. The Leader was an active member of the group and was objective in his perspective. In the Laissez-faire group, members had complete freedom without any leader participation. Materials were supplied, but the leader made no attempt to participate. Having developed a similar method of observing both students and teachings in the classroom, Anderson and Brewer (1945) identified similar categories of dominant and social behavior among students which appeared to be influenced by the teachers-student relationships. Teacher personalities influenced children’s behavior, particularly at the elementary levels (Anderson and Brewer, 1945).

Withall (1949) felt the social-emotional climate could be determined by the teacher behavior alone, and created seven categories to identify whether or not an environment was learner centered or teacher centered. Withall developed a Climate
Index that was then validated in 1949 by Withall and his partner Thelen. This instrument was compared to another index developed by Anderson and Brewer in 1945; the Integrative-Dominance Ratio. Withall (1949) renamed the interactions between students in the classroom and students with teachers as the “social emotional climate.” The group phenomenon was described as an emotional factor that occurred during interactions between members of a group which regarded each other’s needs and goals. Chavez (1984) later explained that all activities within a classroom were interactive; emotional and intellectual on one hand, and individual and social on the other.

The work of Withall (1949) was later refined by Medley and Mitzel (1958) who combined observation with objective recording of classroom behaviors; creating the Observation Schedule and Record (OScAR). This tool was simpler, required less training and could be used by a single observer in a classroom. However, the OScAR was only sensitive to three of the many dimensions that exist in the classroom; emotional climate (the level of hostility observed), verbal emphasis (on traditional schoolroom activities), and social structure (pupil-initiated activity).

Two other studies from the early 1950s argued that a group-centered classroom climate was preferred by more students than a leader-centered classroom. In one study, Bovard (1951) used rating scales to identify a preference for verbal interaction at the high school level. High school students identified a preference for verbal interaction in group centered activities where discussion between students was not limited or channeled by the teacher. In a second study, Buswell (1953) focused on social relationships in the classroom as having an indirect influence on the climate of the classroom. Studying a
group of primary students, Buswell found that when comparing a sociometric test and standardized tests, those students who were well accepted by the group had higher academic achievements. The conclusion was that those who succeed academically were also successful in their social interactions.

Jerome (1959) reviewed research in the areas of classroom climate, children’s interests, teacher- pupil planning, discipline, democratic organization, social organization, interaction, and teacher’s attitudes and values towards children’s behaviors. Concerning classroom climate, Jerome noted that the acceptance of the pupil by the teacher is fundamental. Based on his review of the research at that time, Jerome’s theoretical premise was that the development of the right kind of relationship in the classroom could make teachers more effective and pupils better able to develop their potential if the teachers understood that different behavior patterns maybe related to social-class cultures. Jerome suggested that research was needed to identify what constituted good classroom climate, how interests of children affected the teacher pupil relationship, the fundamentals of teacher pupil planning, the fundamentals of democratic organization, and the determinants of the social organization of elementary classroom.

The decade of the 1960s was a period of transition as new observation instruments were developed, some modified from previous studies. Nonverbal and social structure would be classified and measured by the new instrument OScAR. Medley and Mitzel (1958) developed the OScAR rating instrument based on the work of Cornell, Lindvall, and Saupe (1952) and Withall (1949). The OScAR had three different scales that evaluated the emotional climate, verbal emphasis, and social organization of the
classroom (Medley & Mitzel, 1959). The results identified the emotional climate scale as an important factor of identifying the rapport between teacher and pupil, especially when compared with the ECERS (Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale). The ECERS only evaluates the physical environment and interactions in a classroom. Chavez (1984) explained that this research identified the emotional tone of the classroom as an important dimension in classroom research.

Amidon and Simon (1965) created a system that categorized teacher-student interactions which looked at cognitive, affective, and multidimensional practices. They described interaction as two or more persons behaving overtly toward one another so that each receives an impression or perception of the other distinct enough to get a reaction. Using the Flanders (1970) system, they looked at teaching patterns and achievement which focused on climate perception and personality. Observations were summarized with the research evaluating teacher patterns, achievement, client, perception, personality, and teacher interaction. Relationships were established between achievement, perception, and classroom climate; but the nature of the teacher-pupil relationship was unclear (Amidon & Simon, 1965).

**Research in the 1970s**

As expectations for students shifted during the mid 1900s so did the relationship between the teacher and student as academic outcomes became one of the criteria used to identify teacher effectiveness (Anderson, 1982; Chavez, 1984; Flanders, 1970). Extensive research in the classroom was conducted as more evaluative tools and techniques were designed. High-inference studies, classroom rating scales,
environmental indexes, Likert scales, and questionnaires were developed to extend the understanding of the classroom environment and its impact on students. Teacher characteristics, children’s social behaviors, and the interaction between the teacher and student were examined.

High inference studies. Working with other colleagues, Amidon and Hough (1967) influenced the development of the Flanders’s Interaction Analysis System (Flanders, 1970). The Flanders’s Interaction Analysis System, was a modified low-inference study but was the most sophisticated technique at that time and led to the development of other evaluative systems (Chavez, 1984). Analyzing teaching behaviors, the Flanders’s Interaction Analysis System examined the sequence of events in a classroom based on the direct or indirect interaction of the teacher (Flanders, 1970). This system became the conceptual framework for the development of other high-inference measures (Chavez, 1984). These new measures led to extensive research on classroom climates where inferences were developed based on a series of observations which identified teacher behaviors. High inference studies often included multiple variables and subjective interpretation (Anderson, 1982; Chavez, 1984) some focus specifically on teacher behaviors while others do not. As an example, some of these scales evaluated student perceptions of school conditions, involvement, competition, teacher control and how these are related to grades (Moos & Moos, 1978); while other scales looked at the organizational climate of curriculum and instruction and how these components impact the social environment.
**Classroom rating scales.** Classrooms were studied by researchers who developed and implemented various rating scales, Likert scales, and questionnaires. These scales were used to evaluate the characteristics and impact of learning climates in the classroom. Research methods included the Classroom Environment Scale (CES) developed by Moos and Moos (1978); the Likert Teacher Questionnaire by Walberg and Thomas (1974); the Classroom Activities Questionnaire (CAQ) by Steele, House, and Kerins (1971); the My Class Inventory (MCI), and The Learning Environment Inventory (LEI) by Walberg (1969).

Moos and Moos (1978) found a strong relationship between average grades in the classroom and the relationship between student and teacher perceptions of the classroom environment. Classes with higher involvement and less teacher control appeared to have higher average final grades (Evans, 1976; Moos & Moos, 1978; Standford & Roark, 1974).

The LEI (Walberg, 1969) was used primarily for secondary students to evaluate perceptions of classroom interactions. The MCI (Walberg, 1969) parallels the LEI but was developed for use with elementary classrooms. Both the MCI and the LEI have been adapted to fit specific research needs when examining classroom climate (Anderson & Walberg, 1974; Haertel, Walberg, & Haertel, 1981; Walberg, 1979). Most studies were reported quantitatively and linked to academic outcomes.

**Teacher expectations and interactions.** Research during the 1970s examined teacher characteristics, expectations, relationships, roles, beliefs, and classroom performance as it related to the development of the classroom climate (Anderson, 1970;
Cohen & Rudolph, 1977; Evans, 1976; Luce & Hoge, 1978; Margolin, 1974; Wirsing, 1972). Student interaction with all aspects of the classroom environment was considered an important factor in learning (Bandura, 1977; Cohen & Rudolph, 1977; Margolin, 1974; Standford & Roark, 1974; Walberg, 1979; Wirsing, 1972). Personalities of individual learners (Anderson, 1970), diversity of teaching styles (Evans, 1976) and social behavior between students (Travis, 1977) were also examined.

Teacher characteristics identified by Evans (1976) included the need for flexibility, modification, and communication skills that go beyond clarity of meaning both to extend the limits of student thinking and open the doors to broader horizons for learning. Evans looked at interaction analysis, which was the analysis of teacher-pupil interactions, in search of patterns of influence that might have affected pupil behavior. Evans identified enthusiasm as a quality that was mentioned universally by all peoples at all levels as the most desired and appreciated trait of their teachers. Evan’s work also identified group management skills as being important for establishing the classroom environment.

A conscious link between philosophical beliefs and teaching practice was essential to anyone who would be an educator and not a mere technician (Wirsing, 1972). The researcher’s main focus was to present a plea for a holistic approach to classroom teaching. Wirsing situated her work in secondary education; however she believed the connection between beliefs and practice was applicable to any level of teaching. A teacher’s methodology reflected his or her basic assumptions consciously or unconsciously (Wirsing, 1972). Content that was taught by the teacher depended on the
theoretical framework in which he or she operated, what he or she believed about the
good life, how people learn, and what they needed to learn.

**Research in the 1980s: Social Development**

Research during the 1980s found academic achievement influenced by supportive
teacher-student relationships, inter-student collaboration, student awareness, positive
attitudes, and affective processes; all of which were related to the student’s social
development (Solomon et al., 1988; Weinstein, 1983). Studies included research that
focused on the academic tendencies that resulted from teacher effectiveness (Martin,
Veldman, & Anderson, 1980), and student perceptions about classroom climate
(Weinstein, 1983). Weinstein looked at the shift from input-output models and
instructional techniques, to engaging students in thought and action.

Centra and Potter (1980) identified student behavior as having the greatest effect
on student achievement. The inter-relational model of causal relationship used by Centra
& Potter (1980) focused on different factors that affect student learning including:
parents, peers, teachers, schools, and the students themselves. The researchers found that
gains in student learning were most evident at the point of interaction between the teacher
and students. Time spent was not important in and of itself, rather it was the way in
which class time was spent which was predicted in the student growth. Student behavior
may influence the teacher’s response. One such example was that the teacher readily
adjusted lessons in response to the students’ needs. Centra & Potter (1980) concluded
that teachers do make a difference but there is no single teaching performance variable
that should be considered critical for effective teaching. Different patterns of teaching
performances can account for differences in student learning.

Following a five-year longitudinal study, Solomon et al. (1988) identified the role that interpersonal skills played in social attitudes, beliefs, and values which influenced the child’s understanding of society. Success of collaboration was related to the student’s social development. Solomon et al. explained that few studies investigated how teachers can help their students improve appropriate social skills and behavior which would support their academic and intellectual growth.

**Research in the 1990s: Classroom Communities and Social-Emotional Environments**

Research continued to look at social interactions and shared cognitive experiences constructed by young children (Cannella, 1993), but also focused on the physical characteristics of the classroom climate such as organization, cognitive processes, student characteristics, and teacher characteristics (MacAulay, 1990). Theoretical and empirical articles linking caring communities, multiage classrooms, and constructivist best practices to positive classroom climates began to emerge in the literature (Cohen, 1990; DeVries & Zan, 1994; Goldstein, 1999; Johnston, 2006; Kasten & Lolli, 1998; LuluGomolchuk & Piland, 1995; Mason & Burns, 1996). Many of these texts focused on the child and building community in the classroom; suggesting the importance of the social-emotional climate and ways it could be developed within the classroom.

Affective performance based on the physical environment and management style of the teacher indicated that both the physical and psychological environment were important to student performance especially as adjustments were made from preschool to
kindergarten and into the primary grades (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Ladd et al., 1999; Yates & Yates, 1990; Yin Cheong, 1994). The teacher-student relationship was positively linked with children’s academic performance (Cannella, 1993; Pianta, 1999).

Pianta et al. (1995) examined teacher-child relationships and adjustment over the time period from school entry to second grade. The researchers used teacher-student relationship scales along with questionnaires from the first grade and kindergarten teachers. Children who developed positive relationships with their early teachers were better adjusted and more positive in second grade than those who were angry or had dependent child-teacher relationships in prior settings. Other research by Pianta et al., identified that the type of relationships students developed with their teachers from kindergarten through second grade, would be foundational for the type of relationships they would develop with the rest of their teachers as they progressed through their school experience.

**Research in 2000 and Beyond: Classroom Dynamics**

Teaching is a caring profession which required responding to students’ emotional experiences as well as their academic experiences (Johnston, 2006; Noddings, 2001; Rosiek, 2003). As the new century began, researchers were becoming more aware of the importance of quality early care and classroom dynamics. Both, the care and dynamics, influenced the development of children’s foundational skills which later impacted success in school both cognitively and socially (Denham, 2006; Howes et al., 2000; Lambert et al., 2006). Quality care was linked to the adult providing the care (Howes et al., 2000).
Research examined many issues related to classroom climate including: interpersonal relationships and gender bias (Kesner, 2000); the culture of the classroom and embracing diversity (Gallego & Cole, 2001); trusting, caring, and treating students as unique individuals (Howes & Ritchie, 2002; Johnston, 2006; Noddings, 2001); quality preschool interactions as a key component of learning experiences (Wylie & Thompson, 2003); lower ratios, classroom organization, and fewer rules to allow for flexibility and freedom of learning (Jingbo & Elicker, 2005).

Emotional competence was crucial for positive outcomes in both social and academic domains (Bocchino, 1999; Denham, 2006; Goleman, 1995). Helping children find better ways to interact with their peers helped them regulate their behavior which supported their social, emotional, and academic pursuits throughout their life (Denham, 2006). Cognitive development, school readiness, pre-academic achievement were supported by social and emotional competence both directly and indirectly (Denham, 2006). Denham (2006) and Noddings (2001) focused on educating the child socially and emotionally in a nurturing setting where they use their knowledge and ability for students to regulate emotions so interpersonal exchanges were successful. Early educators could promote emotional competence by modeling appropriate emotional responses, helping children understand emotion, supporting children’s regulation of emotion, recognizing and honoring children’s appropriate expressive styles, and giving children opportunities to experience joy and frustration of learning new concepts (Denham, 2006; Goleman, 1995; Zull, 2002).
**Interactions, Classroom Environments, and Academic Achievement**

Teacher-student relationships have been identified by many researchers as important interactions that support social, emotional, and cognitive development in the classroom (Amidon & Simon, 1965; Anderson, 1970; Cohen & Rudolph, 1977; Denham, 2006; Freiberg, 1990; Goleman, 1995; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Howes et al., 2000; Howes & Ritchie, 2002; Jerome, 1959; Jingbo & Elicker, 2005; Ladd et al., 1999; Lambert et al., 2006; O’Connor & McCartney, 2007; Solomon et al., 1988; Wylie & Thompson, 2003; Yates & Yates, 1990; Zull, 2002). Changes in society have impacted teacher-student interactions in the classrooms as well as the expectations for student achievement (Braun & Edwards, 1972). Research has paralleled this shift as various rating instruments were developed during the past century to examine the importance of teacher relationships and the impact on classroom environments (Amidon & Hough, 1967; Amidon & Simon, 1965; Flanders, 1970; Medley & Mitzel, 1958; Moos & Moos, 1978; Steele et al., 1971; Walberg & Thomas, 1974; Withall, 1949). More recently research has examined the teacher-student relationship and the effect on academics with Pianta (1999) being the main researcher identified in the literature reviewed. The significant effect of teacher-student relationships on achievement indicated the importance of considering the dynamic quality of these interactions (Pianta, 1999).

**Current Research on Teacher-Student Relationships**

Pianta (1999) had many different studies with a variety of colleagues; most of his studies looked at academic outcomes as an indicator of the classroom environment. His focus was usually on individual students and not the class as a whole; often researching
ways to support children that struggle with relationships in the school setting. Pianta explained that a stable, supportive, structured relationship between the teacher and student can provide the necessary context for development, especially if the child did not have experience with strong relationships at home.

According to Pianta (1999), supportive relationships were important and contributed to the healthy development of children. His work was based on the General Systems Theory (GST), which was linked to Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). A student’s development should be supported by a stable environment that incorporated supportive relationships with the teacher (Pianta, 1999). Pianta explained that children must be understood within the context of their situation; their behavior cannot be understood by itself. Teacher-student relationships provided a context and focus for social and emotional development of the student.

Pianta et al. (2002) explored the relationship of the kindergarten classroom environment as it related to the teacher, school characteristics, and child outcomes. This quantitative study researched teacher interactions in 223 schools where researchers focused on the interactions between one child and one teacher. Data were gathered from teacher reports and observed child outcomes in kindergarten. The most frequently observed forms of activity were teacher directed activity and whole group instruction. Classrooms high on instructional quality were rated high on instructional conversations between teachers and students. When focusing on improving outcomes, students were more likely to do well when there was a high frequency and intensity of instructional interactions between teacher and child. Positive interactions with the target child,
classroom instructional climate, and classroom child-centered climate were lower when the concentration of poverty school was higher.

This study led to questions about class size issues, equity, and early school experiences. Pianta et al. (2002) identified the teacher-child ratio as more important than class size. The teacher-child ratio was probably a more effective barometer of the frequency of meaningful contacts between teachers and children (Pianta et al., 2002). The researchers also found that experience varied greatly throughout the kindergarten classrooms, and there was no typical kindergarten classroom as interactions were highly variable (Pianta et al., 2002).

La Paro et al. (2004) completed research on teacher-child relationships, classroom environments, and teaching practices looking mostly at classroom quality. The researchers constructed a system for observing and assessing emotional and structural elements of early childhood environments. The dimensions observed were emotional and instructional support that contributed to the quality of the classroom setting from preschool through third grade (LaParo et al., 2004). This research focused on 224 pre-kindergarten classrooms in six states. Ratings compiled from questionnaires reflected a generally positive impression of the classroom.

The nature and quality of instruction was of paramount importance for the value of classroom experiences intended to produce gains in learning environment and teacher child interactions (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). Hamre and Pianta found that school failure may have been moderated by strong support from teachers in the first grade classroom. By offering strong instructional and emotional support, first grade teachers were able to
support teacher-student relationships within the classroom and with peers. Students at risk placed in less supportive classrooms had lower achievement and more conflict with teachers. Children with a negative cycle of relationships needed teachers who were willing to support the child and help them shift to a more positive attitude (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). Their conclusion noted that instructional and emotional support did moderate the risk of early school failure. Children who struggled through kindergarten were more likely to succeed if they were able to develop a positive relationship with their teacher in first grade (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). It was important for the first grade teachers to realize that they had an important role in interrupting cycles of negative interactions; particularly with those students who had social and intellectual challenges.

Another study completed by Hamre, Pianta, Downer, and Mashburn (2007) was based on the teacher’s perceptions of conflict with young students and looking beyond problem behaviors. Older children were more likely to have conflictual relationships with teachers based on their behavior. Teachers with low self-efficacy and less emotional support tended to report more conflict students in a classroom (Hamre et al., 2007). Troubled children as studied by Henricsson and Rydell (2004) also had more difficulty establishing teacher relationships. Children with internalized problems had more conflictual teacher relationships than untroubled children (Henricsson & Rydell, 2004). In other words, problem children have a harder time establishing a positive relationship with the teacher. The research suggested that it is up to the teacher to make an effort to break the cycle so that the child might establish positive connections as he or she
continued through the school (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Hamre et al., 2007; Henricsson & Rydell, 2004).

Other studies identified children in high quality settings were engaged in more complex activities with a variety of materials which may be one reason they score higher on standardized measures (Howes & Sanders, 2006; Jingbo & Elicker, 2005; Lambert et al., 2006; LaParo et al., 2004). High quality preschools tended to provide children with the necessary skills for coping with school tasks (Howes & Sanders, 2006; Jingbo & Elicker, 2005). Those in high quality settings also had greater knowledge of verbal and numerical concepts, had higher social confidence, and were more likely to make normal progress (Jingbo & Elicker, 2005; Lambert et al., 2006). These early experiences have had a lasting effect on academic achievement, social development, and behavioral competencies in many long-term studies (Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Shore, 1997).

**Summary**

As one looks back at the research, the early years focused on the classroom climate as a whole entity with the interactions between the physical setting, the teacher and the student being interrelated (Anderson & Brewer, 1945, 1946; Bovard, 1951; Buswell, 1953; Medley & Mitzel, 1958; Moustakas, 1956; Thomas, 1929; Withall, 1949). The most recent research focused on the individual teacher-child relationship as it supported academic outcomes (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Hamre et al., 2007; Howes et al., 2000; Jingbo & Elicker, 2005; Lambert et al., 2006; La Paro et al., 2004; O’Connor & McCartney, 2007; Pianta et al., 2002; Wylie & Thompson, 2003; Yates & Yates, 1990). A majority of the studies were quantitative which provide statistics and numbers based on
characteristics identified and tallied by trained observers, rating scales and questionnaires (Anderson & Brewer, 1945, 1946; Bovard, 1951; Buswell, 1953; Haertel et al., 1981; Hamre et al., 2007; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Howes et al., 2000; Lambert et al., 2006; Medley & Mitzel, 1958; Moustakas, 1956; O’Connor & McCartney, 2007; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Thomas, 1929; Withall, 1949).

Within these empirical studies were theoretical articles and books that focused on the types of interactions a teacher should establish in order to develop a supportive social-emotional climate (D. L. Cohen, 1990; DeVries & Zan, 1994; Gallego & Cole, 2001; Goldstein, 1999; Johnston, 2006; Kasten & Lolli, 1998; LuluGomolchuk & Piland, 1995; Mason & Burns, 1996; Noddings, 2001; Pianta et al., 1995; Rosiek, 2003; Stott & Bowman, 1996). All of the articles and studies identified the importance of a positive, social-emotional environment for an array of reasons, but how and why does the teacher go about the process of developing a positive classroom climate? Further research is needed to identify the actions, purpose, thoughts, and beliefs behind the teacher’s interactions.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Using a qualitative research approach, a case study was conducted to investigate the teacher-student interactions that supported the social-emotional climate in a kindergarten classroom. This chapter presents the rationale of the research, the research questions, case selection, data collection, analysis, and ethics. Trustworthiness and limitations are also discussed.

Rationale of Research Paradigm

Merriam (1998) described a case study as an intensive, analytical, and holistic description of a single, bounded unit. My research was limited to one, half-day kindergarten classroom in a suburban school district. The focus was on one classroom teacher as I examined how he established the classroom climate. I purposely chose his classroom following a four-month pilot study during the spring of 2008. I observed a classroom climate that was nurturing and supportive of the individual students with few if any behavioral challenges. It appeared to be a positive learning environment that supported the whole child. I returned to this classroom in the fall of 2008 to complete a five-month study to explore how he created this positive and nurturing environment and why. During this case study, I focused on the complexity of this one kindergarten classroom and collected multiple forms of data. Through case study methodology, I identified the interactions of this classroom and the various roles of the teacher. Understanding the dynamics of the teacher’s relationships with students provided
valuable information about developing the social-emotional climate for this particular classroom.

Within a case study, data collection methods are flexible and can be adjusted to meet the needs of the study. A combination of data collection methods was used, including interviews, observations, review of documents and classroom artifacts, and informal study notes (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). This provided for a rich source of data that were triangulated to support findings that emerged from this case (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). During data collection, Stake (1995) noted that researchers need to be prepared for unanticipated developments that reveal the nature of the case even when focusing on other events. Collecting multiple forms of data allows for the emergence and triangulation of information. Since analysis was ongoing during the collection of data, all data needed to be considered as some data may have hidden links that support the case once data collection has been completed. Several seemingly unrelated pieces of evidence may eventually reveal a common theme. Case study methodology was chosen because it offered a way to create a rich, holistic account of a real-life situation by increasing the understanding of a particular phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). In this case it was the phenomenon of the social-emotional climate of one kindergarten classroom.

**Research Questions**

**Main Research Question**

How and why did the teacher establish and sustain an environment that nurtured the social-emotional lives of students?
Supporting Research Questions

1. How did the teacher interact with the students?
2. How did the teacher explain why he interacted in particular ways with the students?
3. How did these interactions support the social-emotional climate in the classroom?

Case Selection

This case was purposely chosen based on a pilot study completed in this classroom during the second half of the 2007-2008 school year. This pilot study examined the type of climate that existed in this kindergarten classroom. I spent one morning a week for 12 weeks examining the teacher’s interactions with his students. Observational notes in the form of running records were collected each week and conversations were initiated with this teacher. One formal interview was taped and transcribed, while other informal conversations were recorded through anecdotal records.

The purpose of this pilot study was to examine how the teacher established a positive classroom climate that supported the social-emotional lives of his students. Observations from the pilot study uncovered a social-emotional climate that could be described as caring, respectful, and child-centered. Students took the initiative in several instances to solve their own problems or to help a classmate who was in need of assistance. During class meetings, students were respectful as they listened to the verbal contributions of classmates. The teacher also modified the daily routine based on the needs of the students. Knowing that kindergarten children arrived at the beginning of the
year with a variety of experiences and social-emotional levels of development (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Denham, 2006; Nelson, 1999; Pianta, 1999; Shore, 1997), I wondered how the teacher developed this cohesive environment. How did he establish this climate and why was it important to him as a teacher? As a result of the pilot study I decided to examine more deeply the teaching practices of this particular teacher.

The case was bounded to a single kindergarten classroom at a public elementary school in a Midwestern town. The school district was located in a suburban residential area that is adjacent to a larger city. This particular kindergarten teacher facilitated two half-day sessions with students attending three hours per session; my case focused on the morning session.

**Gaining Consent**

During the pilot study which occurred spring 2008, I established a professional working relationship with the teacher and the building principal. The teacher agreed to a more in-depth study of how he develops the social-emotional climate in his classroom. The teacher agreed to the observations and interviews that I requested. The principal was also supportive of my return to this particular classroom and appropriate steps were taken to secure permission from the district and from parents. A written request for the proposed study with a copy of the IRB (Internal Review Board) permission was sent to the district office for approval. Thus the following school year, I began this research study.

During the first days of kindergarten, the parents attended school with their child. The morning class was split in half such that one group began on Wednesday, August
27th, and the second group attended on Thursday, August 28th. Both groups would join together for the first time on Friday, August 29th. I attended both Wednesday and Thursday mornings so that I could introduce myself, explain my research, and request the parent’s permission to involve their child in my observations and conversations. I explained that written details would be sent home with their child in two weeks. I remained in the room so that I could speak individually with parents and answer any questions they had later in the morning. Consent forms were sent home the third week of school in an effort to minimize the chance of the forms getting lost with all the other beginning of the school year forms. I received 12 out of 21 consent forms within the first week and five more the second week. I sent a second set of forms home to the families who had not returned them and received all but two parent/guardian forms providing consent. Only one parent asked that I not speak with her son. All other families gave consent for observations and conversations.

The student population of the morning kindergarten class consisted of 11 girls and 10 boys, plus two boys who were integrated from a special resource room and had a full-time aid. The classroom dynamics mirrored the dynamics of the predominantly white community with a majority of the students Caucasian. Hispanic and African American cultures were represented. Socio-economic levels varied across the spectrum and again mirrored the demographics of the community (Appendix A).

**The Teacher Participant**

My research focused one of two male teachers at Mountain Springs (pseudonym), a typical elementary building with 24 teachers. Both male teachers taught kindergarten.
One teacher taught an all day section of kindergarten while the teacher that was observed, Mr. Bell (pseudonym), taught the half-day sections of kindergarten. Mr. Bell holds a B.S. and M.S. in early childhood education and has nine years of teaching experience. Mr. Bell was originally recommended by university faculty for a pilot study conducted during the spring of 2008. Mr. Bell was purposefully selected in order to study how classroom practices supported the social-emotional climate of the classroom. This teacher had completed his undergraduate and graduate work at a university that incorporated constructivist based teaching practices with a strong focus on supporting the social and emotional well-being of young children. Observing during a pilot study in the spring of the 2007-2008 school year, I noticed the cooperative nature and supportive peer interaction of the class. In order to observe how this teacher developed this caring community I returned to his classroom in the fall of 2008 to observe and identify how this community was initiated at the beginning of the school year and sustained through out the first half of the school year. I wanted to examine the interactions between the teacher and the student in order to answer the questions that were raised through my pilot study; how and why did he nurture and sustain a positive social-emotional climate.

**Setting**

Built in the 1960s, Mountain Springs Elementary (pseudonym) was a typical, single story school building constructed out of brick in a Midwest, suburban community. A concrete sign out front identified the school name. A parking lot on one side connected with a drop off and pick up loop at the front of the building. Plants and trees surrounded the outside, and a large playground was visible in the back. The school was
located in a residential area of apartments and modest homes and was next to a neighborhood ball field.

Entering Mountain Springs Elementary students, families, and visitors walked into a lobby prominently displaying student work in a large glass case. A bulletin board to the right displayed names of those rewarded for displaying positive character traits. The office was to the left. All visitors, parents, and volunteers were asked to sign in. Past the office the hallway went left, right, and straight ahead. At the juncture of the three hallways was a banner overhead that read, “Educating Everyone Takes Everyone.” The names of community groups and educational participants were colorfully displayed on this banner.

The left hallway led north to the library, staff lounge, and gym. The gym doubled as the cafeteria and the stage of the gym was used for art classes. The hallways leading straight and to the right connected to the back of the building and created a square layout where classrooms were located. Small courtyards between classrooms allowed sunlight to enter each room. Most were planted with a variety of vegetation but not always maintained. Many had birdfeeders and bird houses. A large playground behind the school included a black-topped area with basketball hoops, a maintained grass-covered field, and an area of mulch that had many swings, a couple slides and several climbing pieces.

Student work in the hallways conveyed the current focus of study or holiday. One wall outside the gym displayed handprints of all the students in a quilt-like manner. Lockers for each student were located in the hallway. The kindergarten room was one of
the rooms in the center of the building and was large and roomy, almost twice the size of the classrooms on the outside wall of the building. The floor was carpeted and the one window in the room looked out into a small courtyard.

Child-sized table and chairs were arranged inside the door. Beyond the furniture was a large open floor space for gathering as a whole group, with activity areas set up around the perimeter. The teacher’s desk in the far corner was piled with papers and books. The north wall was a magnetic chalkboard with the weekly specials (music, art, gym, and library) listed, guidelines for behavior posted, and individual magnetic pictures that could be rearranged based on the activities scheduled for that day. A small set of shelves and organizers against the same wall contained manipulatives and blocks.

Pictures of the students from the first days of school were stapled to a large bulletin board at the back (east end) of the room. Word wall words were stapled to another large area at the front (west end) of the room underneath the letters of the alphabet. On the south wall was another large blackboard and a small set of windows that opened to a little courtyard. The book corner, computers, and house keeping area were located near the windows and were used during indoor recess.

**Entry into the Site**

Being in the room the first day students arrived allowed for easy entry as a passive observer. I began my observations on September 3, the students’ first full day following orientation. The first two weeks the class had a substitute teacher because Mr. Bell was on paternity leave. My goal during the time he was absent was to informally observe and get to know the students. A couple of the students would approach me first
thing in the morning, or during play time to ask me what I was doing and to see what I was writing. They were curious about my laptop on which I wrote, so I gave many of them an opportunity to write their name or draw a picture. This informal conversation and interaction allowed me to get to know the students and for them to feel comfortable with my presence in the room. As the semester progressed, more of the students came to talk with me or ask me to read a book with them. I longed to teach and interact in a more participant manner, but I chose to stay a passive observer so that I would be able to focus on the teacher and his interactions with his students. Being the only observer in the classroom was a limitation and I wanted to make sure I recorded as many interactions as possible as objectively as possible.

**Data Collection**

In order to support the case study methodology, multiple forms of data were collected. Triangulation between sources was implemented in order to extend the depth and reliability of this case study. Integrating the data deepened my understanding of the interactions between the teacher and students and provided a rich description of the social-emotional climate (Merriman, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). The collection of multiple forms of data fully documented the study by providing a chain of evidence that was clearly linked (Yin, 2003).

**Observations**

Field notes documented observations three mornings a week for 3 hours each morning from September 3, 2008, until December 19, 2008. Daily running records documented all that I saw and heard throughout the three hours the students were in the
classroom. The students’ day started at 8:45 am and ended at 11:45 am. I arrived around 8:30 am and left between 12:00 and 12:30 pm depending on the length of my conversations with the teacher participant. Approximately 170 hours were spent at the research site. In my role as a passive observer (Spradley, 1980), I observed in a manner that did not disrupt the normal classroom routine. I was conscious of my interactions with the children so that my impact was minimal. I placed myself in one corner of the room where I could view and hear the daily interactions. When children approached I would respond to their questions about who I was and why I was there, explaining that I was watching how they do things in kindergarten. I also came to know some of the children through informal conversations as they voluntarily shared information about their home and family. I purposely did not approach the students, but did not turn them away when they came to talk with me.

I began my observations the week of September 3rd. This was the first full week students attended school. The previous week students and their parents attended kindergarten orientation with half of the class split between two days—Wednesday, August 27th, and Thursday, August 28th. The whole class met together for the first time on Friday, August 29th. I attended Wednesday and Thursday and used those days to introduce myself to the parents, explain my research, and ask for their consent. I also described the consent form that would be sent home with their child during the next couple weeks. The teacher that was to be observed was on paternity leave and there was a substitute teacher in his place from August 27th through September 12th. The substitute teacher had no objections to my being in the classroom so I observed and recorded
informal notes in an effort to get to know the students and how they were adjusting to kindergarten until the permanent teacher returned to the classroom on Monday, September 15, 2009.

Running records, field notes, and anecdotal notes were used to record teacher interactions with children. Running records were written notes used to capture conversations and interactions in as much detail as possible for all interactions that occurred each morning I observed. These running records were collected daily on my personal computer. In order not to miss any teacher student interactions that occurred outside the classroom, I carried a spiral notebook to record field notes whenever we left the classroom in order to continue my collection of interactions. Field notes were less detailed but focused on direct interactions observed between the teacher and student, usually on the playground or walking down the hallway. Anecdotal notes were written after leaving the site to record my recollection and interpretation of events and conversations that had taken place during my classroom visit. Anecdotal notes were written usually at the end of each week as a way to recall weekly interactions that I thought might be important.

Research Memos

Research memos, along with other data were kept in electronic files. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003), memos can be used to reflect on issues, develop links between data, and extend analytical thinking. Memos from my observations in the field and conversations with the teacher participant were reviewed, analyzed, and used to record preliminary thoughts about the case study throughout the research process.
Memos documented my questions, thoughts, and preliminary ideas that were emerging from the data. These memos were either typed onto my computer within the week or recorded on a small digital tape recorder as I drove home from the research site. During the analysis phase I returned to these memos to recall my initial perceptions and identify emerging themes, creating a focus for further observations and conversations. These notes also provided a written record of trends and interactions that had been observed.

**Interviews and Conversations**

Towards the end of my field observations (the last four to five weeks), I began taping conversations that occurred during my observations. I used a tape recorder to record verbal teacher-student interactions during the morning in an effort to improve accuracy and support my written records. I taped the conversations that occurred between the teacher and class during morning meeting or when there was a group, problem solving opportunity. These conversations were then transcribed word for word as part of the running record.

Three formal interviews utilizing pre-determined questions were conducted with the teacher participant during the semester: once shortly after he returned to his classroom at the end of September, once in the middle of the semester during November, and then at the end of December. These predetermined questions led to other questions as further clarification and explanation were requested. Questions about particular incidents observed in the classroom were also included when appropriate. These interviews were later transcribed word for word by a research lab at my university that offers transcription service. Transcripts are written accounts of the conversation. These
transcripts document the questions and responses of the interviewer and the participant (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) providing a way to triangulate classroom interactions with the teacher’s thoughts and beliefs about teacher-student interactions. The first interview focused on the teacher’s goals and what was important for him to do as a teacher at the beginning of the school year in order to know his students. The second and final interviews were related to my classroom observations. These specific questions allowed me to ask the participant for clarification and explanation of observed events as well as why; a form of member checking.

Daily, conversations were also part of my regular interactions with the teacher participant. These conversations took place before school, during gym, recess, and after the children left. Mondays provided the most uninterrupted time for conversation and interviews. The first couple weeks, I attempted to take notes while we were talking, and record my recollections after leaving the site, but this method did not allow me to capture the full conversation. I would miss some of his explanations as I attempted to write and I wanted to accurately reflect our conversations. After the first two weeks I began taping (with the teacher participant’s permission) all conversations when possible, never knowing when the teacher would offer important information that explained his beliefs and practices. I had a small digital recorder that I could carry in my pocket and easily hold. By taping our conversations, it allowed me to focus fully on what he was saying and to ask questions that would extend his thoughts. We had daily conversations about why he did what he did in the classroom and I wanted to capture his words accurately. I also used our conversations as a form of member checking. I asked questions about my
observations to hear his perspective of the situation and to see if I was interpreting the events accurately.

The teacher participant was also beginning his educational journey towards a doctorate in curriculum and instruction which led to discussions about theory and research that he felt supported his work as a kindergarten teacher. Research memos were helpful, but taping the conversations allowed me to listen to them again and not rely on my memory. Conversations that provided an explanation of my observations or that explained his beliefs were transcribed by myself, the researcher. Memos were written about other conversations in case the information was needed later to clarify or support other data. Conversations were transferred and saved in an electronic file for future reference.

Conversations were also used to share and discuss critical incidents that occurred when I was not present in the room. Critical incidents were events that disrupted the “normal” classroom routine; challenges with a child’s behavior, a child being suspended, or meetings with administration to discuss certain children’s academic and behavior “problems.” I originally requested copies of his teacher journal where he kept personal and professional reflections, but due to new family commitments, he had not kept up with a journal this semester. However, he agreed to keep me updated through our daily discussions. We had several discussions about his beliefs and the underlying philosophy, as well as challenges he encountered as a constructivist teacher with an interest in his students’ social-emotional lives.
Tape recording our conversations allowed me to replay and reflect on the conversation as part of the ongoing analysis of data while it was being collected. Quotes were accurately recorded. Following the study as I continued data analysis I listened to these conversations again and then transcribed those that supported the how and why of his classroom interactions. Memos were written about other conversations to record the main content of the discussion. Conversations that occurred in the classroom during my observations were noted through research memos within my classroom field notes.

**Collection of District and School Documents**

I collected the district and school mission statements and goals from their community website (Appendix B). I also collected a copy of the present kindergarten report card to show how the students were assessed. This report card has been in use since the teacher participant began teaching at this site nine years ago. This information provided background information for my study about the expectations the district has for its teachers and students at the kindergarten level. Occasional newsletters, building publications, and PTO notices were collected, along with a short survey about preschool attendance. All communications were building generated.

**Teacher and Student Artifacts**

Photographs of the physical environment, daily schedule, and student generated guidelines were taken to record progression of work throughout the semester. The teachers were not required to submit lesson plans, and therefore I was unable to obtain a copy of his plans. Children’s work was immediately sent home in most cases unless it was a work in progress; then it was kept in a designated place. Classroom information
was sent home in a building wide newsletter if submissions had been made by the classroom teacher. I used the photographs to document the student generated guidelines for the classroom, thus supporting the evolution of their shifting perspective on what it meant to be respectful and responsible for their own classroom climate.

Data Analysis

Table 1 lists the research questions and the different data sources that were used to examine this case study.

According to Seidel (1998) and Richards (2005) data analysis is a process of noticing the interactions, collecting observational notes, and thinking; it is a cyclical process. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) explained that data analysis is a systematic searching of data to increase one’s own understanding such that you can relay the information to other people. Analysis is an ongoing practice; data were analyzed and compared throughout the study to allow for unexpected questions and emerging themes, as well as a richer understanding of the case on a continuous level (Merriam, 1998). Organization and analysis of the data in conjunction with the data collection was key to understanding emerging and recurring themes (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Detailed data allowed the researcher to discover meaning through the content of text and images (Richards, 2005).

Each unit of data was evaluated and compared for related themes. Recorded interviews and conversations were transcribed within the week of the event and coded for general, topical, themes. Completed transcripts, observations, and memos were stored electronically. Discussions were held with the teacher participant as a form of member checking in order to verify correct interpretation of the data. Research memos were kept
during the semester to record initial thoughts, feelings, and reactions which integral to the data analysis process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Table 1

Research Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions:</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How does the teacher explain why he interacts in particular ways?</td>
<td>Conversations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How and why does the teacher establish and sustain a climate with the students that nurtures the social-emotional lives of the students?</td>
<td>Observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Field notes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Interviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Conversations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Research Memos</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>District Documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do these interactions support the social-emotional climate of the classroom?</td>
<td>Observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Conversations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Research Memos</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Artifacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does the teacher interact with the students?</td>
<td>Observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Artifacts</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Research memos</td>
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<tr>
<td>How does the teacher explain why he interacts in particular ways with the students?</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Conversations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>District Documents</td>
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</table>
Analysis began with a coding for topical themes. Systematic examination of the data was used to clarify and synthesize my overall understanding of the data (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Each type of data was coded for topics and then analyzed. My goal was to learn from the data, and the codes helped me recognize emerging categories, themes, and events (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Merriam, 1998). The various forms of data were reviewed multiple times in order to identify key categories and themes. Once data had been coded, it was sorted and ranked as various patterns emerged and categories or themes developed. According to Merriam categories should reflect the purpose of the research. Categories may be broad, such as Teacher Interactions or Teacher’s Beliefs, with sub-categories within those classifications. Following topical coding, I moved to interpreting the work in order to develop analytical categories. Topical coding identified what this data was about; analytical coding explored ‘why is this interesting?’ (Richards, 2005). Data were reviewed multiple times to generate ideas and questions, to refine thinking, and identify new categories and themes.

**Ethics**

There were many ethical issues to address such that participants were not harmed in any manner. Prior to collecting any data, an application for approval to use human research participants was submitted and approved by my university’s Institutional Review Board. A consent form was given to each participant.

I attended the parent meeting at the beginning of the school year to explain my research and my intentions for being in the classroom. I requested consent from the parents to observe and explained my intent to focus on teacher-student interactions. I
also informed the parents that my focus was on the teacher and how he interacted with
the students, not on their children. The form described the study and explained the rights
of the participant, including anonymity and the right to withdraw from the study at any
point without penalty. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, the school, and the
district, pseudonyms were used in all reports of this study. Participants were not
compensated for their participation.

As the sole researcher who was collecting data, I needed to be aware of other
issues. Bias may enter into the interpretation of data; therefore it was important that
issues of reliability, validity, and transferability were addressed in my study. Since my
results could be influenced by my subjectivity, there was a risk of observer bias (Bogdan
& Biklen, 1998). I needed to clarify my own bias or assumptions that might color the
interpretation either consciously or unconsciously. By being aware of these issues, it
could be monitored through the use of triangulation, member checking, and reflexivity
throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Richards (2005) reminded researchers that reflexivity is a critical component of
social research. It is important to think of how the researcher’s biases, interests, and
areas of ignorance influence how the data were collected as well as interpreted. Since the
researcher was a part of the study, my work needed to be taken back to the teacher
participant to add another layer of interpretation. How did he perceive the situations I
described?

Having been involved in observing many different classrooms I needed to make
sure that I limited my interpretations to the data that I collected during this specific
project. I was aware that my past experiences with other teachers may impact my perception and create preconceived notions. The pilot study provided me with some background data on this classroom, but I needed to be open to new discoveries that occurred as I analyzed data from the actual study. I needed to be careful not to exaggerate or simplify my findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1984; Merriam, 1998).

I needed to be cautious that I didn’t look for interactions that supported preconceived conclusions prior to the complete evaluation of collected data. I needed to be open to interactions that did not support my “perception” of what creates a positive classroom climate based on my own teaching practices and experiences. When I first arrived at Mr. Bell’s classroom, I found a substitute teacher in his place. She would be teaching the first couple weeks until Mr. Bell returned from paternity leave. I introduced myself, explained my research, and assured her that I was not going to evaluate or judge her work. Yet her work and interactions with the students provided an alternative view that could influence my interpretation of certain situations—a bias of which I needed to be aware.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness focuses on whether the research is reliable and valid. Can it be replicated or supported in other situations? A case study is not transferable nor does it have external validity since it is bound to one specific event, but it should have internal validity that is supported by multiple forms of data in an effort to provide a common understanding of the investigation. Reality has multiple dimensions, therefore it was important to incorporate a variety of strategies to support internal validity (Merriam,
1998). Research has reliability if other researchers follow the same process and find similar results observing the same participant.

The qualitative process needed to provide enough detail so the reader could make sense of the researcher’s conclusion. Careful attention must be paid to the design, process, and analysis of the case being studied. In order to support internal validity, certain strategies must be used. Extended observation, member checking, and triangulation help support the internal validity (Merriam, 1998).

**Extended Observation**

Observing over an extended timeframe verified the accounts gathered by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1984). As the researcher, I spent three mornings a week for 16 weeks in this kindergarten classroom. I stayed for the duration of the morning session, three hours, to observe and document the complete routine on a daily basis. Records were collected for every day of observation which verified the consistency of teacher interactions that were observed. Researcher memos were added on the weekend to record my initial thoughts and reactions which were collected over the 16 week period. Extra time was spent beyond the class time talking with the teacher in order to question and extend the field observations. This data provided an audit trail which is another way to connect the data with my findings. An audit trail is a detailed account of the collection process and how categories were derived along with what decisions were made throughout the inquiry process (Merriam, 1998). The process is fully documented so that the reader can easily come to his own conclusion upon reading the study.
**Member Checking**

Stake (1995) also discussed member checking as a way to invite the participant to evaluate and verify the accuracy of the comments and interpretations by the researcher. Member checking was used throughout the study to make sure that I correctly represented the teacher’s thoughts and meaning in my writing. During informal conversations, I would ask questions about an interaction that had been observed that morning; allowing the teacher to provide clarification and background. Conversations also revealed the meaning and significance of artifacts collected in the field; why or how something was created. After formal interviews were transcribed, a copy was sent to the teacher participant to review and add any additional information. In early March we met to discuss a conference paper that focused on his classroom practices. Prior to our meeting I emailed him a copy of the paper because it explained the preliminary findings of my study. I also shared with him an outline of themes that had emerged from my work in his room. As I revisited data during the spring I also emailed the participant asking for explanation and/or clarification of a couple points that I felt needed further clarification from his point of view. Member checking provided an opportunity for the participant to review this material for accuracy and add additional thoughts or comments (Stake, 1995).

**Triangulation**

Qualitative researchers suggest the use of triangulation which incorporates the use of multiple sources of data or multiple methods to reach a holistic understanding (Kyburz-Graber, 2004; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Stake wrote about methodological triangulation where multiple approaches are used within a single study. For this study I
collected running records, field observations, and anecdotal records. I also taped and transcribed interviews and conversations that explained what was seen during my observations. The district and school goals, vision statements and mission statements were collected, along with classroom artifacts that stemmed from teacher-student interaction in the classroom as it pertained to the social-emotional climate of the classroom. Research memos also provided information about my observations, interpretations, and initial reactions.

**Limitations**

Being the sole researcher in this case study, there were limitations for collecting data during my observations. Events occurred in the classroom that I did not see or record when my attention was focused elsewhere. Extended time at the site helped minimize this limitation. Although I aimed for objectivity there was always some subjectivity due to my prior experiences and perceptions. Inviting the teacher participant to verify the meaning in my interpretations provided a balanced perspective. Conversations with the teacher participant on a daily basis helped to validate and inform my interpretations and clarify the interactions I witnessed.

In this case study methodology, the research was limited to one specific classroom. This case study had a particular goal and was not intended to be transferred to other situations. Therefore external validity, or transferability, was an inappropriate goal (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Instead my qualitative research focused on creating a naturalistic generalization where the reader determines if the study is transferable to his or her own situation. People can look for patterns or similarities that may be applied to
their own situation. Even with these limitations, it is my responsibility as the researcher to provide a convincing argument that supports the conclusions drawn from the data.

Summary

A qualitative case study needs to provide rich detail so that the conclusions drawn are easily understood. Modified from Yin’s (2003) work, Kyburz-Graber (2004) argued that in order to overcome the limitations of a case study, five components must be included. First, a theoretical basis is described including research questions. Second, triangulation is utilized between the sources of data. Third, a chain of evidence is designed with clearly linked reasons and arguments. Fourth, the study is fully documented. And finally, the findings are compiled through an iterative review and rewriting process.

A qualitative case study seeks to understand the complex inter-relationships of human experiences. This case study examined one teacher’s philosophies, beliefs, and practices as they were implemented in a kindergarten setting, focusing primarily on the socio-emotional climate of one classroom. A case study is appropriate for analysis and understanding of a single phenomenon within a bounded context through data collection. Kyburz-Graber (2004) explained, “The aim is to understand the meaning behind the actions and knowledge of the participants” (p. 54). The University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study and the appropriate consent was received from the school district, the principal, the teacher, parents, and students.

Reliable findings were collected based on valid research strategies that provided a thorough, intensive description of the case study by implementing the above criteria. The
observed interactions of this kindergarten classroom provided insights as to how and why one teacher developed teacher-student interactions that supported the social-emotional climate of his classroom. The following chapters examine the findings, interpretations, and analysis that support this qualitative case study.
CHAPTER IV
DATA, ANALYSIS, AND FINDINGS

This chapter examines and analyzes the data and identifies the findings from a qualitative case study that asked the question of how and why one teacher, Mr. Bell, nurtured and sustained a positive social-emotional climate in his public kindergarten classroom. Through the use of a qualitative case study which is appropriate for understanding a single phenomenon within a bounded context (Merriam, 1998), I seek to understand the complex inter-relationship of human experiences in Mr. Bell’s kindergarten classroom.

This 5-month case study examined teacher-student interactions and how those interactions affected the climate of a kindergarten classroom. Teacher-student interactions were documented throughout the classroom day, but particularly during student arrival, class meetings, and the scaffolding of individual and group problem solving. These interactions occurred each day I observed. Three formal interviews (at the beginning, middle, and end of the study), and weekly informal conversations provided explanation from the teacher participant, Mr. Bell, about why he interacted in a particular manner.

These conversations and interviews provided an opportunity for the teacher to explain the theorists and beliefs that influenced his interactions. A variety of evidence and supporting artifacts from the classroom and district (i.e., district and school mission statements, kindergarten report card, and photos of class generated guidelines) were collected, examined, and coded for patterns and causal links that would explain the case.
I present several vignettes and narratives from the teacher participant in an effort to convey his actions and words to support my findings which were based on extensive observations, informal conversations, and the three formal interviews.

I begin with a brief explanation of the democratic practices that I found to be an integral part of Mr. Bell’s beliefs and interactions. Then I briefly introduce the three strands that emerge as findings from my research. Next I present an introduction and a description of Mr. Bell’s first day of teaching. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the data that was identified during Mr. Bell’s first day of teaching and consistently present during the subsequent months of observation. I examine in detail the different teacher-student interactions and pedagogical beliefs of Mr. Bell as well as his role as an educational provocateur as he interacts with the colleagues in his elementary school. Analysis and interpretation of this data then leads to a more thorough examination of the three strands that emerged from this case study: student responsibility, sensitivity to students’ needs, and administrative dissension. The emergence of these themes indicate to me as the researcher that Mr. Bell was “teaching against the grain” (Cochran-Smith, 1991).

**Introduction to Democratic Practices and the Thematic Strands**

Initial examination of the data identified that democratic principles were foundational to all of Mr. Bell’s interactions and were strong underpinnings for his pedagogical beliefs. These democratic principles led to the implementation of many democratic practices that supported the social-emotional climate of his classroom. These democratic practices included: sharing classroom decisions, scaffolding problem solving
in a collaborative manner, valuing the voice and work of his students, and involving them in their own process of learning. Through these interactions Mr. Bell promoted respectful interactions, peer support, and social responsibility. He viewed his students as capable individuals, and focused on their needs as emerging scholars. These democratic practices were tightly woven through all of Mr. Bell’s pedagogical practices and beliefs.

Analysis of the data led me to identify three strands that were the underpinnings of his student-teacher interactions. The three strands I identified were: student responsibility, intentional teacher sensitivity to the needs of his students, and administrative dissension. I briefly introduce the strands here as lenses for viewing the extensive and rich data in the first part of the chapter, and examine these strands more fully in the latter part of this chapter. Tightly intertwined, these three strands emerged from Mr. Bell’s democratic practices which were foundational to his interactions as well as his beliefs.

Strand one, student responsibility, foregrounds Mr. Bell’s apt scaffolding of his students in the process of students becoming socially responsibility for themselves, their classroom, and classmates. His insistent, yet patient stance bore the expectation that they would see beyond themselves and understand others through perspective-taking. Through the implementation of democratic practices in Mr. Bell’s room, students were provided choices, assisted in making decisions that affected the class, and were actively involved in problem solving. He wanted his students to think about their choices and how their actions impacted others. These interactions scaffolded the development of social responsibility among and with his students; the first strand.
The second strand, sensitivity to the needs of students, identified by my research was Mr. Bell’s intentional and authentic sensitivity to the needs of his students. As the representational vignettes from the data show, he unconditionally valued his students for who they were and the abilities they brought to the classroom. He worked with students based on their developmental level, their strengths, and their individual needs. He observed and interacted in a manner that allowed him to understand the uniqueness of each individual student in his room, and he looked for ways to support their holistic development through genuine and meaningful interactions. This intentional and authentic sensitivity is noteworthy as an integral component anchoring his classroom in a positive and safe social-emotional climate.

The third strand, administrative dissension, emerged as a result of Mr. Bell’s interactions with other staff members in his building and district. Due to a difference in perspectives, it appeared that conflicts in beliefs created some dissension among peers. Mr. Bell’s intense focus on the needs of his students and his democratic practices that nurtured social responsibility were foundational to his pedagogy, a pedagogy that deviated from the traditional teaching practices of most classrooms. This deviation from the traditional perspective, along with a deep critical reflective stance towards his teaching practices, also created conflict and dissension with other members of his teaching staff and administration. This administrative dissension was the third strand that emerged.

Prior to examining the data I present a narrative of Mr. Bell’s first day of teaching, which describes many interactions that support the emergence of the
aforementioned findings. The interactive patterns that emerged during his first day continued to be replicated throughout the five months of this research and support the emergence of the three strands. As the data show, the three strands that emerged from my findings were intricately woven throughout Mr. Bell’s interactions and beliefs. A narrative of the first day sets a foundation for the data that were consistently collected throughout my study; data that is further examined in the remainder of this chapter.

Mr. Bell’s first day of teaching did not begin as planned on the first day of school. When I arrived for my first day of observation, a substitute teacher was in the classroom. I had arrived at Mountain Springs Elementary for the first day of kindergarten orientation on Wednesday, August 27th, not knowing that Mr. Bell was on an early paternity leave. The baby his wife was expecting arrived a little earlier than predicted. The substitute, Ms. Mason, did not know I would be there to begin my research on August 27, but had no objections to my being in the classroom. Observing in the classroom the first two and a half weeks of September while Ms. Mason taught provided an opportunity to informally observe the students, and for the students to become comfortable with my presence in the classroom.

Mr. Bell initially met his students during the school’s Open House on Tuesday, August 26th, but did not return to the classroom until Monday, September 15, 2008. Once Mr. Bell returned to the classroom, the daily activities for the kindergarten students were similar throughout my five months of observations.
Mr. Bell’s First Day Teaching

On his first day, September 15th, Mr. Bell was standing in the doorway of his classroom as students began to arrive. Mr. Bell is a broad-shouldered male, approximately six feet four inches, has a big smile, and was casually dressed. His height filled the door frame, and his facial expression and voice were pleasant as he greeted students coming down the hall. Former students walked by, and upon seeing Mr. Bell gave him high fives and hugs and then headed off to their respective classrooms. As the kindergartners entered Mr. Bell’s room, Mr. Bell greeted them and invited them into the room. The students placed their backpacks at a table, put up their attendance clip, sat down, and talked quietly among themselves. After a few students had arrived, Mr. Bell moved inside to the classroom and began talking to individual students.

“So you just choose your seat?” Mr. Bell asked Jared.

“Yes,” said Jared.

“And this is how I know you are here?” said Mr. Bell as Jared, Brianna, and Ellen showed him the clothespins and snap cubes that the sub had used for attendance. “I see,” responded Mr. Bell as Jared showed Mr. Bell how to move the clip from one side of the poster board to the other. The boy then took a snap cube from one box and placed it in a specific little plastic bin that was sitting beside the poster board. The poster board was sitting on an easel in the open carpeted area of the classroom. Mr. Bell told the students, “I feel like I missed out on a lot.” One student responded, “You did!”

Even though Mr. Bell had met most of his students at Open House on August 26th, a couple of the students were still hesitant to enter the room. For example, Holly arrived
and cautiously peered in the room. Mr. Bell walked over towards the door, said, “Hello,” and invited her in. He talked to her about friends they had in common; former students that Holly also knew, including her sister who is now in fourth grade. Mr. Bell attempted to make connections with his students by finding something he had in common with each of them. He explained later that having these connections helped to develop a level of comfort as well as a beginning bridge to developing trust with his students.

Students were allowed to enter the building at 8:45am with the beginning bell ringing at 9:00am. In Mr. Bell’s room this arrival time allowed for approximately 15 minutes of conversation with and among the students before the day officially began. Mr. Bell listened as his students talked about their weekends. It had been a stormy weekend and a few students shared their tales of power outages and trees blown down. Mr. Bell had a story to share as well. By sharing his story about a tree falling in his yard and the power going out at his home, some of the other students opened up and also began talking about the storm, a conversation that would resume later during their class meeting.

Continuing to walk around the room, Mr. Bell noticed one little boy, Louie, sitting by himself at table three. “So what’s happening Louie?” asked Mr. Bell as he walked over and sat down next to him. “Hey Jared, I noticed Louie is sitting by himself. Why don’t you come over and join him?” suggested Mr. Bell. Jared moved his backpack to the table where Louie was sitting.

Mr. Bell commented to me later in the morning that even though it was his first day, the students already knew the routines the substitute had established. The substitute
had set procedures for arrival and attendance. Following announcements, her morning routine included the traditional calendar, weather, and song of the day. A variety of nonverbal and verbal cues had been utilized by the substitute teacher to gain the students’ attention and move them from one activity to the next.

Based on my observations most of the children did as they were told and easily followed the daily routine when the substitute was leading the class. However, prior to Mr. Bell’s return to the classroom, there were two students who posed a challenge by not listening or following the substitute teacher’s directions. For one little boy, a trip to the office and a conversation between the mom and the substitute teacher were enough to change the behavior. The second student, Jared, had a much harder time following directions and frequently shook his head “no” whenever the substitute asked him to join the group for an activity or stop a disruptive behavior. When the substitute approached Jared to talk about his refusal to participate he would run and hide somewhere in the room, usually under a table. Ms. Mason finally ignored his behaviors and Jared would wander around the room until he felt like joining the group. I highlight these student behaviors because Mr. Bell’s response to his students’ behavior differed and problems were approached from an alternative perspective. Even on his first day back, there were differences as indicated by Mr. Bell’s interactions in the example below.

The morning routine initiated by the substitute changed on Mr. Bell’s first day. Following announcements, Mr. Bell invited everyone to the carpet. This initial gathering at the beginning of the morning would be identified as their class meeting. Jared ran over and slid feet first into a space. “You’re safe!” said Mr. Bell, and then asked, “Are you
okay?” Jared smiled and nodded. Previously this action would have gotten Jared in trouble with the substitute teacher; however, with Mr. Bell as the teacher, humor and safety began to be interwoven in the dialogue with the students. Once everyone was gathered, Mr. Bell asked the students about how they had been doing things in the classroom, and particularly focused on the use of the attendance clips. The students explained that as they arrived in the morning, they were to move their clothespin from one side of the poster board chart to the other. This procedure allowed Ms. Mason to see quickly who was present. He noticed a couple names had not been moved from the left side of the chart to the right side of the chart. The students explained that those two boys came later in the morning.

“Nathan comes with Andy,” said one student.

“They come later,” added another student.

Mr. Bell’s classroom was an inclusion classroom and he worked closely with one of the special needs teachers to integrate students into his room, a role he has supported over the past several years. This year there were two boys who were part of his class. The boys would go to their home room first and then come to Mr. Bell’s classroom approximately 20 minutes after the start of the school day. One stayed for the whole morning while the second child started off staying for an hour and gradually added more time depending on his comfort level. An aide attended the class with the boys, but based on my observations Mr. Bell worked to include these students in the same manner that he would work to include all his students.
Mr. Bell opened up the floor for conversation; “Who has something they would like to share?” One student asked about his new baby. “That’s where I have been. I have a new baby and I had to take care of everyone,” explained Mr. Bell. Other students raised their hands to ask questions and offer comments. This example illustrated that it was just as important for the students to know Mr. Bell as it was for him to know his students. By relating his own lived experiences to the students’ lived experiences, he was able to develop connections and relationships through conversations which were based on similar experiences.

“Please put your hands down. I’m hearing so many interesting things. We’ll talk later,” said Mr. Bell. He then went on to explain that he usually does a variety of activities so they can get to know each other. “We already know each other,” said Holly. Mr. Bell acknowledged that he was the new person in the room and that he needed to get to know them. He explained a project that involved students writing their names and drawing a picture of something they liked.

Following directions given by Mr. Bell, students chose from two different colors of paper and took one piece back to their tables to draw a picture and write their names. As students returned to their tables and began working, Mr. Bell moved from table to table assisting each student as needed. “I don’t know how to write my name,” said Sarah. Mr. Bell directed her to start with her picture. “I will give you a card with your name on it.”

Holly was having a hard time finding a seat because another student sat in the chair she was previously sitting in. “You need to choose a seat or I will choose for you,”
said Mr. Bell to Holly. Holly didn’t choose a seat so Mr. Bell put her at table five with a group of boys and another girl.

“I don’t like you guys,” said Holly as she folded her arms and sunk down in her seat.

“Be polite,” said Mr. Bell quietly to Holly.

Jared had finished quickly, scribbling on his paper, and then was up wandering around. “Have a seat, Jared. See if anyone at your table needs your help,” suggested Mr. Bell. Mr. Bell handed out name cards to those that needed them. “Nicely done, Luke,” said Mr. Bell as he walked around the room. “Very nice girls. Look you have all this space,” said Mr. Bell to Kelly as he encouraged her and the other girls to add details to their pictures. Mr. Bell showed Steve one way to practice the letters in his name. “Just give it a try,” encouraged Mr. Bell.

As Mr. Bell noticed students were finishing he asked how many needed more time. “We are going to take two more minutes and then meet at the carpet,” explained Mr. Bell. Mr. Bell went around the room and talked to the students about their drawings. After two minutes Mr. Bell invited everyone to the carpet. “Would everyone with empty hands, please come back to the carpet.” The previous examples show the variety of interactions Mr. Bell initiated during one time frame. Issues of being nice, working carefully, and helping others were concepts that Mr. Bell repeatedly focused on throughout the morning.

With all students gathered on the carpet, Mr. Bell asked students for their attention and explained it was time for a little play and asked what they needed to know
for play time. Holly was whispering to a couple other girls and occasionally kicking a couple boys in the back with her feet instead of listening so Mr. Bell sent her to her table. “I would like you to wait at your table, Holly; I will talk to you later.” He listened to several student responses about playing in the room. “Kim offered a suggestion for playing safely,” repeated Mr. Bell. “Ellen has a suggestion,” said Mr. Bell.

“When you get something out, put it away before you get something else out,” said Ellen. Nathan added that everyone needed to use inside voices.

“Why is that important?” asked Mr. Bell.

“So we can hear each other,” said Nathan.

“That’s a good idea,” said Mr. Bell.

Other students offered suggestions about not hurting others. “That’s right we should never do anything to hurt anyone. Good idea!” said Mr. Bell.

This conversation was a typical example of the types of discussions Mr. Bell had with his students. Asking for student input offered them a sense of control, a way to share decisions that would affect the whole class. Mr. Bell valued their thoughts and ideas and encouraged them to think about what they did and why.

As children went to play, Mr. Bell went to talk to Holly, whom he had sent to her seat during the earlier conversation on the carpet. She had her head down and didn’t look up when he spoke to her. “I need you to sit up and talk to me,” said Mr. Bell calmly and quietly. When she didn’t respond or pick up her head, Mr. Bell said, “I can try back in five minutes,” and walked away. In the meantime he checked on Louie who had his head down and was not feeling well. Mr. Bell then visited those in housekeeping and talked
with a few of the girls and encouraged them to invite another girl who was by herself to come play with them.

Mr. Bell returned to Holly. “Are you ready to talk? [paused] We’ll talk politely. Take your hands off your ears,” said Mr. Bell, as he explained that he was afraid she would hurt someone with her kicking and that was one thing he did not allow in his classroom. Holly made one or two muffled comments. “It sounds like you are upset with someone. Who are you upset with? Would you like to talk to him? [pause] When you have a problem, you need to talk to them,” explained Mr. Bell. He encouraged her to talk to those that had upset her and offered his help in mediating the conversation. At first Holly did not want to talk to anyone, but after some encouragement, Mr. Bell found out why she was upset. Mr. Bell shared with me later that morning that earlier during arrival as students were coming down the hallway, Holly thought some of the boys were making mean faces at her. Mr. Bell gathered those involved in the incident that Holly described and talked through the situation, until an agreement was reached.

“Is the problem solved for you guys?” Mr. Bell asked the boys.

“How about for you?” Mr. Bell asked Holly. She nodded.

“Okay, it sounds like it is time to play,” said Mr. Bell and he smiled.

Problem solving was one issue that Mr. Bell continued to scaffold throughout the five months of my research. Sometimes problems were with individual behaviors and other times it involved conflicts among peers. Mr. Bell often provided “wait time” which provided time for the person to think and then be ready to talk. If a student was
emotionally upset, it allowed them a short time period to calm down before discussing the issue.

Mr. Bell explained to me later that by talking with Holly about her inappropriate behavior, Mr. Bell was able to find out that she was mad at the boys she was kicking. By talking with her, Mr. Bell was able to uncover the reason behind her actions and help solve the situation so it did not escalate into a bigger problem. Mr. Bell encouraged Holly to confront the problem and talk with the boys, a process which was scaffolded by Mr. Bell. Holly then found out that the boys were trying to be silly among them, and not mean to her. She had misinterpreted their actions and thought the boys were being mean. Mr. Bell talked with her about the need to take care of problems when they are little, instead of doing things that make the problem bigger. It appeared that Mr. Bell saw this as an important step involving communication. Being able to talk as well as listen helped to keep small problems from becoming bigger. For Mr. Bell discussing problems was an important step in understanding the other person’s perspective.

Following 10 minutes of indoor play, students returned to their tables. Papers from the morning’s work were put in backpacks and most students pulled snacks out of their backpacks. For those without a snack, Mr. Bell had pretzels, but also encouraged a friend with a snack to share. Students were hesitant at first, because this was not allowed with Ms. Mason, the substitute; Mr. Bell, on the other hand, encouraged sharing among the students. These small changes in routine interactions signaled to the students that new ways were involved with Mr. Bell as their teacher. In our brief conversations throughout the morning and at the end of the day, he noted that he wanted students to
learn to help each other, to support each other, to become more responsible for each
other. He expected students to help their peers when needed.

During snack time, Mr. Bell walked around and talked to students. It was
important for Mr. Bell to know his students, as the following example shows. Mr. Bell
attempted to connect and engage with the students in a variety of situations and was
interested in what they liked to do outside of school.

“I like your name, Louie. It sounds like a baseball player, Louie Baker.”

“I play basketball,” said Louie softly.

“Oh, basketball, you play basketball? Me too!” said Mr. Bell with great
enthusiasm in his voice and a big smile. Sarah spoke up and said she played soccer.

“Good for you!” said Mr. Bell enthusiastically to Sarah.

After snack students cleaned up and gathered on the carpet. Mr. Bell read a poem
before getting ready to go to gym, their Monday special. “When I see you looking at me,
I know you are listening” said Mr. Bell. He physically placed his hands on Jared’s
shoulders and gently turned him around to face where Mr. Bell was sitting and explained
that his eyes should be on the person talking which at the moment was Mr. Bell.

Mr. Bell explained that he noted interesting things around the room. “Watch me
as I walk”. Mr. Bell went over to the fuzzy caterpillar poem that was written on chart
paper and hanging on the chalkboard, and brought it back to the carpet area. “I’m going
to stop. All eyes up here girls,” reminded Mr. Bell. Jared was throwing his name tag and
rolling around on the floor. Mr. Bell asked the students if they talked about butterflies
and caterpillars and then listened to see what they knew. Jared continued to spin around on the carpet so Mr. Bell asked Jared to go to his chair. Jared shook his head no.

“If you don’t go yourself, I will take you,” warned Mr. Bell in a calm but firm voice. Jared didn’t move so Mr. Bell picked him up by placing his hands under Jared’s shoulders and carefully set him in his chair.

After a short five minute discussion about the poem and what they knew about butterflies and caterpillars, Mr. Bell lined up the class and walked them down to the gym. Jared stayed behind. Mr. Bell spoke with Jared as soon as he returned. “We are going to have to work together. Do you understand the problem and why I sent you to your chair?” asked Mr. Bell. Jared did not respond, but looked down at his shoes. In a calm and quiet voice, Mr. Bell explained the need for good listeners when on the carpet. Mr. Bell talked about the problem of not responding when Mr. Bell spoke to him. “I can’t help you if you don’t listen. Are we going to work together?” asked Mr. Bell. Jared nodded yes. “Then let’s walk down to the gym,” said Mr. Bell. This example illustrated that Mr. Bell thought it was important to talk to his students, to discuss the problem, and to let the student know his expectations.

Upon Mr. Bell’s return from walking Jared to the gym, we talked about the kindergarten class; this would become a pattern for us. When the students were at a special such as gym, we would process the morning with discussion and extended reflection which provided further insight into Mr. Bell’s interactions and beliefs. During this conversation he used the term “kindergarten scholarship” which he described as incorporating democratic principles into education, and utilizing problem solving with his
students. For Mr. Bell, “kindergarten scholarship” meant paralleling his graduate learning experiences to those of his kindergarten students; he felt his becoming a scholar and teaching kindergarten were interrelated. Mr. Bell had just begun to pursue a doctoral degree in education at a nearby university. He believed that he and his students were both going through similar learning processes; both intellectually significant and neither one more important than the other.

At 11:00am Mr. Bell returned to the gym to meet his students. He explained the need for them to whisper in the hallway so they do not disturb the other classes. Upon entry to the classroom, Mr. Bell invited everyone to the carpet for a story. “Come, have a seat on the carpet. I pulled this book out because you mentioned that you liked caterpillars and butterflies,” said Mr. Bell as he introduced the book *Charlie the Caterpillar* (Deluise & Santoro, 1993). Mr. Bell read with great expression and used various voices for the characters. All eyes were focused intently on Mr. Bell.

Jared came wandering in from the restroom halfway through the story. He had gone to the restroom after gym before coming back into the room and had been missing for about 10 minutes. His name tag was all tangled and wet and he walked right up to Mr. Bell while he was reading. “I will help you fix it after the story,” said Mr. Bell quietly. With the interruption the group started talking about what was happening with the characters.

“Our, you said something about my voice,” began Mr. Bell.

“It’s kind of scary,” said Karen.
“You’re right. It’s kind of rude, isn’t it,” said Mr. Bell (with Mr. Bell’s emphasis on the word rude). The class talked about the voices he used for the different characters in the story. The class talked about how someone’s tone of voice can help you understand how they are feeling. Mr. Bell reminded the students to listen so others could talk. Students talked about Charlie the main character and how he responded to the other characters in the story. Charlie was not being nice to others because they had not been nice to him.

“Charlie should be a little nicer,” said Elizabeth.

“Maybe there is a nicer way to teach them a lesson,” said another classmate. Mr. Bell asked for students’ comments as they discussed how to respond to people who aren’t nice. After several comments Mr. Bell said, “Eyes up here, so we can finish the story.” Mr. Bell completed the story using a variety of character voices.

As with many other activities Mr. Bell chose something that was familiar to the students. As I would see regularly evidenced during my research, Mr. Bell’s choice of activities was based on students’ familiarity and interests. The book was based on their interest in caterpillars and linked to last week’s work with the substitute. He invited their comments and also used the book to support an emergent lesson on how to treat others.

Another lesson emerged shortly after the conclusion of the story as the class was getting ready to go outside for recess. The following example shows the process that commonly occurred when problems developed and Mr. Bell asked for their input to help solve the problem.
“Here’s what I am thinking,” and he explained it was time to go outside for recess. “Would everyone meet me at the door,” announced Mr. Bell. Several of the students ran to the door and as a result Mr. Bell called everyone back to the carpet. “We have a problem we need to work out. I would like to spend the rest of our time outside, but before we go anywhere, there’s a problem we need to solve before going outside,” Mr. Bell calmly explained. He talked about running to get in line and people “crashing” into each other. “I worry that if we aren’t careful someone will get hurt,” said Mr. Bell. He asked students for solutions.

Greg said, “Walk.”

Holly said, “Take turns.”

Mr. Bell repeated the students’ contributions. A small group of four students were throwing little pieces of paper and blocks they had found near the carpeted area and not listening so he sent all the students to their tables. The room got very quiet and students went back to their seats.

“We won’t be going outside,” said Mr. Bell firmly. “There’s a problem that is keeping us from going to the playground.” After sitting without talking at their tables for about one minute Mr. Bell announced in a quiet but firm voice, “I need everyone to come over to the carpet ready to listen.” Students quietly walked back to the carpet and sat down without talking. They talked again about what was needed in order to go outside and again Mr. Bell solicited students’ ideas and solutions. He explained that they needed to listen and they needed to work together to accomplish the different tasks as a class. Their interactions would dictate his response. “Everyone should be listening to Ellen.
Look at Ellen,” directed Mr. Bell as she offered a solution. Mr. Bell reminded everyone to listen politely to those speaking.

The class talked about ways to be safe and how to help each other get ready to go outside. Mr. Bell encouraged the students to help each other and remind each other of what to do. Mr. Bell said, “Let’s try again—walking safely to the door this time.” Molly stayed on the carpet and Mr. Bell invited her over to join the rest of the group. She slowly got up and joined the group. Noticing a struggle in the line to go outside, he had Holly and Karen sit down for cutting in line. “Now ladies, try it again,” said Mr. Bell after everyone else was in line.

The class finally walked down the hall and outside to the playground with about 10 minutes (out of the original 20-25 minutes) left to play. Following their short time outside, students returned to the classroom, quickly gathered their belongings, and walked with Mr. Bell down the hall to meet their parents outside the front door. Mr. Bell spent several minutes conversing with parents on the front sidewalk until all the students had been safely picked up.

From this account of Mr. Bell’s first day, it became apparent that small changes within the teacher-student interactions would have an important impact on the students in the classroom. The traditional kindergarten routine initiated by the substitute that started with the morning calendar, days of the week, weather, and singing, ceased to exist on Mr. Bell’s first day. Mr. Bell invited students to be part of the process as the day unfolded and he expected them to take responsibility for their actions. For these kindergartners the daily routine would begin with time for social interaction prior to the beginning of the
Following the first bell and the morning announcements students immediately gathered on their carpet for their class meeting. Thoughts and ideas were shared and the daily plan discussed. Conversation became an integral part of the morning routine and these conversations often influenced the activities for the remainder of the day. Play and social interaction became a major portion of the day with small periods of academic activities woven in. The students were active participants throughout the day.

Skills needed for listening were explained and students were involved in discussions about ideas that would support a positive and safe classroom community. Routines such as lining up for the playground were discussed with an emphasis on being safe. Behavior issues were also handled as they emerged, and were usually points of discussion on how to interact in a socially appropriate and responsible manner. Problems within the classroom were discussed by the group with students offering solutions; and opportunities to “try again” were presented.

Academically, learning activities varied as literacy and math lessons were implemented into the daily routine. The book Mr. Bell chose to read on his first day, Charlie, was based on their interest in caterpillars, yet the content was used to teach a lesson about different ways to interact with people when they are doing something that is not “nice.” The students’ responses to the story led to an emergent lesson on appropriate interactions with others.

Observations throughout the case study identified these interactions from Mr. Bell’s first day as a typical pattern for every day that followed. Greeting the students during morning arrival, gathering for daily class meetings, linking content activities to
student interests, and modeling problem solving strategies were routine. Within all of these interactions, Mr. Bell reported that it was important that he focus on supporting the needs of the students in his classroom. This type of daily interaction became routine for the five months that I documented teacher-student interactions with the academic activities gradually increasing over the time spent in social interaction and play. It was a daily routine that scaffolded social and academic experiences and integrated responsibility, care, humor, and safety.

It appeared for Mr. Bell that his interactions were an important step in building relationships with his students. When asked about what was an important goal for him as a teacher at the beginning of this case study, Mr. Bell reported that it was “for everyone to get acquainted with everyone and everything, you know it is relationship building, you know student to student, student to teacher” (Interview, September 29, 2008). His interactions, on the first day as well as throughout the study, appeared to provide students with an avenue for creating a nurturing and caring classroom climate and for teaching social responsibility.

**Initial Data and Analysis Foundational to the Thematic Strands**

Based on my observations, conversations, and interviews, it appeared that Mr. Bell’s interactions and beliefs were foundational to a pedagogy that integrated democratic practices and engaged his students as active participants in the learning process. I explain both Mr. Bell’s social interactions as well as academic interactions followed by a section that discusses Mr. Bell’s problem solving techniques. Initial data verifies that these interactions were evident on the first day, as described, and were consistent throughout
the 5-month study. Data describing Mr. Bell’s beliefs suggest the influence of the theoretical perspective of “Curriculum Wisdom” (Henderson & Kesson, 2004), as well as other influential theorists. “Curriculum Wisdom” is briefly identified as a love of knowledge that includes reflection of one’s teaching. Mr. Bell reported a need for critical reflection of himself as a teacher, as well as his impact on students. I perceived that Mr. Bell was making an effort to integrate democratic principles into his teaching and to teach his students the value of being a contributing and caring member of the classroom community. Learning to listen and contribute, learning to be safe and be nice, learning to share and take responsibility for their own actions were important concepts Mr. Bell modeled and scaffolded through his teacher-student interactions. Academics were also integrated in a meaningful manner that was usually linked to the students’ lived experiences and/or emerged from their interests.

**Teacher-Student Interactions**

This section of the paper details the teacher-student interactions that impacted the social-emotional climate of his kindergarten classroom. The democratic practices previously described are an integral part of these interactions. I chose to focus on the teacher-student interactions that occurred during the morning arrival and welcoming of students, class meetings which occurred after the morning announcements and individual and group problem solving. Although the main focus of my research was on the social-emotional interactions, academic interactions were also observed and recorded in my field notes as to how they related to student interests and needs but not examined in detail from an academic view of completing standards.
Eisner (2002) identified interactions as part of the hidden curriculum. How the teacher interacts with students sends a message as to what is important. For Mr. Bell it appeared that meeting the social-emotional needs of his students was just as important as teaching the required academic skills. Extended time spent in the classroom, helped to verify the consistency of interactions observed.

**Social interactions: knowing his students.** The teacher-student interactions observed at the beginning of my study appeared to help Mr. Bell know his students and identify their interests, experiences, and personalities. Mr. Bell took time to observe his students and their peer-to-peer interactions. These observations allowed Mr. Bell to see how his students interacted with others and what interested them as kindergartners. Mr. Bell explained that he watches to see how his students interact: “Which ones appear to be outgoing and more friendly and those that prefer to stay on the edges or do things quietly” (Interview, September 29, 2008). He took time to observe, “Them [the students] finding their place in the room and how they fit in with everyone” (Interview, September 29, 2008). Mr. Bell added that while he valued relationship building, it did not have to be teacher directed where he has to be in control of the process.

One thing I do at the beginning of the year is I have lots of play time and lots of free choice time just so I can see what they are interested in doing. I like in the first several weeks, to see them kind of naturally unfolding... I can be most supportive if I listen first and let them do the doing. (Interview, September 29, 2008)
In talking about his role as the teacher, Mr. Bell discussed the difference between teacher directed interactions and student initiated interactions. Mr. Bell explained his role in the classroom. He wanted his students to know that there are different types of interactions that are part of kindergarten.

I see my role at the beginning of the year as the one who sets up the environment, setting a certain degree of structure with a routine where they get used to the idea that we come here, we sit down and we have a class meeting. Then there are routines where you can go anywhere in the room, there are times when you can talk to a friend. (Interview, September 29, 2008)

When asked about goals for his students, Mr. Bell explained that they develop as he gets to know his students.

My first goal is for me just to get to know who they are. Then I think about different goals for different individuals, but with social responsibility kind of our starting point. From a social responsibility standpoint, the whole idea of rationalizing, which is kind of what I prefer. You know, thus the class meeting: we’ll sit down, we’ll decide how we want things to be. (Interview, September 29, 2008)

Mr. Bell preferred to observe and nurture his students as they developed along their own chosen paths. According to Mr. Bell, this process allowed for student personalities to unfold naturally. This awareness demonstrated by Mr. Bell allowed him to support and utilize the strengths of his students and scaffold skills as needed. Mr. Bell explained that sometimes he would suggest to one student to help another student such
as, “Oh, Michelle, I noticed Samantha is over by herself, maybe you could ask her if she wants to join you? You know, choosing some of the more friendly outgoing kids to play those roles” (Interview, September 29, 2008). Mr. Bell wanted them to be comfortable in the classroom and enjoy learning. Mr. Bell provided a couple of examples during one interview that demonstrated his awareness and sensitivity to the differences of his students.

You know like I look at Brad, who’s intellectually gifted probably, you know, but he doesn’t really want to take charge of anything. And he doesn’t have to. He’s happy playing with his friends and doing things his way. Whereas Michelle kind of wants to be a leader in the room and she plays that role. You know? So I think a lot of that is they kind of find themselves over time. Then there is Larry who is more comfortable being in charge. I can say, “Will you help Louie with his backpack; he is having a tough time,” and Larry will say “sure.” The ultimate goal is comfort and happiness. Like with Brad, I don’t think he’d be happy if I kept trying to make him into a leader. (Interview, Dec 15 2008)

With these insights in mind, Mr. Bell interacted in a variety of responsive ways to each of his students throughout the day. Greeting students and the class meeting were the first interactions of his day and those initial contacts with students appeared to set the stage for the rest of the morning.

**Welcoming students.** When students first arrive in the morning, they wait at the front door until 8:45am before they are allowed to walk down to their rooms. Mr. Bell would wait just outside his classroom door and watch for the students to come down the
hall. Greeting each student, calling them by name and having informal conversations as they arrived appeared to help Mr. Bell establish a positive rapport with his students.

“Come on in. Welcome. Good morning” (Observation, September 26, 2008).

“Good morning Amy! Nice to see you” (Observation, September 29, 2008).

“Good morning Kelly. Here is something for you. I think you had a birthday. You look a little older; a mature six years!” (Observation, October 13, 2008).

“Hey Steve, we missed you horribly [yesterday]. Charlie, good to have you here!” (Observation, October 15, 2008).

Short conversations also helped him learn about their interests and activities outside of the school day. He would ask them how their morning was going, or what they did after school yesterday. Sometimes he would comment about the weather, a new jacket, a new lunch box, or a special toy that someone had brought to school. Other times, students would come in with news to tell, “My mom is going to have a baby!” (Observation, September 22, 2008), announced Holly one morning as she entered the room. “Look Mr. B, I lost a tooth!” (Observation, October 6, 2008), said John as he opened his mouth and pointed to the empty space. “Cool,” responded Mr. Bell.

**Providing choices.** As the kindergarten students entered the room, they chose which table they wanted to sit at and then had approximately 10-15 minutes of free time until the school bell rang and the morning announcements began. Once the students had put their backpacks on their chairs they were free to choose an activity before announcements. When the substitute was in the classroom, students were expected to stay quietly in their seats and complete a worksheet activity that was on the table. It only
took a couple days for the students to realize that the routine was different with Mr. Bell. Mr. Bell used this first 15 minutes of the day to check in with his students to see how they were feeling. He never told the students they had to stay in their seats, nor did he have activities placed on the table. Based on my observations Mr. Bell offered little direction, but let the students make choices about what they wanted to do. Conversations naturally developed between students and a few asked if they could go to the computers or housekeeping. Students were allowed to play at a center of their choice for a few moments, but were reminded that they would need to clean up before announcements. Most chose either the computers or the housekeeping area.

One day Steve saw play dough on a round table that was in the center of the other long tables and asked Mr. Bell about it. “We are going to use it today, but you can play with it now” (Observation, September 22, 2008), offered Mr. Bell. On another morning Jared and Charlie were singing the ABC song and Mr. Bell heard them. “I have just the book for you guys” (Observation, September 26, 2008), said Mr. Bell as he walked away from the door and went to the book corner. Mr. Bell pulled out an oversized book and walked back to where the boys were sitting. “Here, look at that one. I heard you singing the ABCs and I think you might like it, especially the last page” (Observation, September 26, 2008), offered Mr. Bell with a smile as he handed them an alphabet book of animals. The boys quickly laid the book on the floor and turned through the pages, once again singing.

The Friday morning after Mr. Bell’s return (September 19, 2008), a couple girls asked for paper and crayons to make pictures before the bell rang. Mr. Bell responded to
their request by placing the scissors, glue, crayons, and paper on a center table where the students would have easy access on a daily basis. This table was in the middle of the other five tables where the students sat. As the year progressed, this table often held supplies for the students to use. His responsiveness to this student-initiated request affirmed that Mr. Bell valued their thoughts, feelings, and voices and made every effort to meet their needs. By making supplies accessible on a continuous basis he provided an opportunity for students to become independent—to do for themselves things they were capable of doing. “I don’t want to do anything for them that I think that there’s a possibility of them doing themselves” (Interview, November 24, 2008), offered Mr. Bell when asked about helping the students understand their responsibilities in the classroom. From these examples it appeared that Mr. Bell provided students freedom in making decisions; providing them with a sense of autonomy, a sense of control, a beginning sense of responsibility.

Based on my observations, it appeared that Mr. Bell wanted students to take control of their own decisions with little guidance from him. This freedom that Mr. Bell provided was different from when the substitute was in the classroom and everything was structured and predetermined by the teacher. This freedom encouraged students to think and to make choices.

Along with student choice, collaboration appeared to be an important peer interaction that was encouraged by Mr. Bell. He encouraged students to share their ideas and support their classmates in learning new tasks. With paper and art supplies readily available each morning, one girl started making a pop-up book prior to the morning
announcements. When asked, Mr. Bell offered a couple possibilities of how to fold the paper. “You’ve got good ideas!” (Observation, September 19, 2008), said Mr. Bell. Walking around the room Mr. Bell noticed others were making books as well, so he encouraged them to check with each other, to share their ideas on what was working.

“Why don’t you talk to Kelly? She is trying to do the same thing” (Observation, September 19, 2008).

“Hey Kelly, Sue is trying to do the same thing—can you help each other?” Others began making pop-up books as well and were asking Mr. Bell for help.

“Talk to your friends,” suggested Mr. C. “Maybe you can figure it out together” (Observation, September 19, 2008). As the above examples indicate, Mr. Bell provided opportunities for choice and encouraged collaboration.

Another choice for the students was where they sat when they arrived in the morning. During the first couple weeks that Mr. Bell was in the classroom, students were allowed to choose which table they sat at when they arrived. Five tables were near the entrance of the room and students would place their backpacks on the back of a chair. Friends wanted to sit by friends, which for the most part worked out unless there was not enough room at one table. A couple students would wander around the room, not sure where to sit. “Girls you need to find a seat. I’m going to move a few people around anyway” (Observation, October 1, 2008), said Mr. Bell. Others would move spaces once they saw where their classmates chose to sit. However, after Mr. Bell began to know his students, he would rearrange two or three students in order for the students to get to know each other, to encourage positive interactions, and to balance the number of students at a
Mr. Bell explained in one of our informal conversations that this allowed students to get to know each other, beyond the friends they had at the beginning of the school year. Starting mid October, I observed that he rearranged seats almost every day that I observed. Then in November on the 21st, Mr. Bell put a typed list of names on each table that identified which table the students were to sit at. I asked Mr. Bell how this decision came about and he explained that he was trying to extend support to more students and help some students develop new friends. He mentioned it was a way to support Ellen who was quiet and often had a hard time choosing where to sit. Most of the other girls knew each other, but Ellen was new to the school system and didn’t know the other girls. He also mentioned it was to break up a group of four boys that have been together since preschool and spent a large amount of time together, inside and outside of school. Mr. Bell explained that he would leave the groups together for a little while and then switch them around as a way to encourage students to get to know the whole class. Based on my observations, it also appeared to be a way for Mr. Bell to foster peer support, mixing the strengths and needs of individual students socially as well as academically. As his
understanding of the students grew, so did his awareness of their needs and the structure of his interactions. With this knowledge Mr. Bell initiated opportunities that encouraged collaboration and nurtured a positive classroom climate.

As student arrival time was coming to a close, Mr. Bell would refer to a large digital clock that was located on the wall above the door. Mr. Bell would give a two minute warning for clean up prior to the morning announcements which began promptly at 9:00am. “Ladies and gentlemen, you have two minutes before the announcements. Please help each other clean up and find your seats. The boys could use help at house keeping” (Observation, September 22, 2008).

Mr. Bell reported that this early morning socialization prior to the announcements provided an opportunity for the students to get to know their classmates and visit with their friends before the day began, an important social interaction. As soon as the announcements were finished, Mr. Bell invited students to the carpet for a class meeting. “Boys and girls, come on over for a class meeting,” said Mr. Bell as he walked to the open carpeted area and sat down in a small chair.

In one conversation, Mr. Bell explained that having time to socialize helps this group of students get ready for the day. “It’s just like the first 20 minutes of the day. Listening to them, you know having a class meeting and giving them 10 minutes right off the bat to do what they need to do. A lot of people would say that is a waste of time” (Conversation, November 9, 2008). Apparently Mr. Bell did not agree. For Mr. Bell, welcoming his students and inviting them to the class meeting appeared to be an important part of nurturing positive interactions which set the tone for the rest of the day.
Collaborative class meetings. In Mr. Bell’s kindergarten room each day began with a class meeting as soon as the morning announcements were over. “With empty hands come on over to the carpet. Leave everything on your table as it is” (Observation, September 19, 2008). Observed and documented on Mr. Bell’s first day in the classroom, these meetings were held consistently every day throughout my research. For Mr. Bell this was a critical interaction that supported the social-emotional climate of the classroom.

The open carpet area in the center of the room was the central gathering place for class meetings. Class meetings were a time for Mr. Bell and the students to discuss topics that varied from day to day, and would sometimes shift the focus of academic activities or the daily schedule. The carpeted area was used throughout the day as a place for sharing, learning, problem solving, playing, and conversation. My observations suggest that class meetings on the carpet provided opportunities for developing social skills of listening and speaking, for cooperation, communication, and collaboration. It was a place of belonging, a central place for all to gather and be heard. Being polite was expected, new friends were introduced, schedules were negotiated, learning was initiated, and problems were solved.

Class meetings were a way to share information and discuss the daily schedule. Sometimes they would start with conversation and other days they would look at the schedule first. “I want to go over the schedule so you know what is going to happen today” (Observation, September 29, 2008), as he walked towards the picture schedule on the board. In our first interview, Mr. Bell noted that “my major goal is for the routine to
be negotiated, but kind of also understanding too that it’s something that may take place over several weeks. It takes time. . . It’s open for discussion” (Interview, September 29, 2008).

During my pilot study in the spring of 2008, I asked Mr. Bell about his class meetings and how they developed. He explained that he has only been using class meetings for about three years and it was only in the last year or two that it has become part of every day.

It’s definitely become a significant part of my classroom. But it wasn’t until last year (2006-2007) that I saw it as something that needs to be a part of the daily routine in order to give it the attention it needs. . . I think to me the most important thing is that they are active participants in everything that goes on. I think they have more of a sense of themselves as a member of the group . . . I think it gives them a voice, not just being a passive recipient, but actually if they have an idea or they have an interest, they can bring it to the table. It kind of gives them a formal class meeting but it just sets the tone of; you have a voice that is welcomed in this room. (Interview, February 27, 2008)

Through these daily interactions that began during the class meeting, the social-emotional climate of the classroom was supported and nurtured through teacher-student interactions as well as student-student interactions that involved reciprocal dialogue. These meetings provide opportunities for students to express their feelings and voice their opinions in a safe environment where what they said was valued, an important aspect of a supportive classroom climate.
When asked about what he used to do, Mr. Bell explained that he still encouraged the different values of being an active participant and having a voice in the room but the opportunities were not intentionally identified and brought to the forefront as they were during their current class meetings. “I hoped [those values] were portrayed in some way in our interactions or in my teaching” (Interview, February 27, 2008).

Usually students clustered around the chair that Mr. Bell sat on. However, on October 13, Mr. Bell invited students over to the carpet and asked them to sit in a circle. His invitation was based on his observation and conversation with two of his students during morning arrival.

The reason I asked you to sit in a circle was because I was noticing that Larry had something interesting and Kelly had something interesting. So I am going to change the schedule slightly so everyone has a chance to share something interesting” explained Mr. Bell shortly after the morning announcements.

Steve and Zach, let’s listen. It is Larry’s turn to talk; eyes on Larry.

(Observation, October 13, 2008)

After Larry and Kelly shared, others in the class also had an opportunity to share.

Students also shared thoughts, experiences, and feelings during the class meeting. Mr. Bell scaffolded listening skills as the class meeting was also a time to listen politely and take turns. Sometimes he would start by recalling a comment a student said earlier: “Holly, you were telling me this morning about your new baby brother; is there anything you would like to share with the rest of the class?” Based on my observations, I never heard Mr. Bell dictate a specific topic to be discussed. He opened the floor for comments
with phrases like, “So what’s new?” (Observation, October 8, 2008). “I see a hand up. That’s good. It’s a turn taking time” (October 6, 2008), reminded Mr. Bell as he began to call on different students. Mr. Bell later explained,

They have a responsibility to know whose turn it is to talk, and a responsibility to be polite and an opportunity to have a voice. This is what I think is interesting too, just with all of these perceived problems with kids how often the child’s perspective is never even considered. (Conversation, October 8, 2008)

In another conversation I asked Mr. Bell about being polite and he explained that he wanted his students to think about what being polite means. Mr. Bell wanted his students to think about what they were doing; about being helpful.

It means being respectful, being polite. It means stopping and considering someone is upset here. Think about this. “Hey Amy, you are a nice person, but you are not being polite right now. I have asked you three times; you are interrupting everyone. You have a responsibility here that’s not being taken care of.” You know bringing their natural lived experience and wanting them to engage with it, to explore their own thinking. (Conversation, October 29, 2008)

After the first few weeks of school with Mr. Bell as their teacher, students automatically gathered for class meetings after the announcements ended without being asked. Class meetings encouraged conversation and the appropriate use of social skills such as listening and taking turns. “Hey Paul, if your buddies are talking when you are trying to listen, give them a gentle tap on the shoulder to remind them you are listening” (Observation, October 8, 2008). Mr. Bell valued the students’ thoughts, feelings, and
opinions and encouraged other students to be “good” listeners. The following comments were typical words heard from Mr. Bell, during class meetings throughout the five months I observed, reminding students of what good listeners do.

“When I see you looking at me, I know you are listening,” said Mr. Bell (September 15, 2008).

“We need to learn to be good listeners” (Observation, September 19, 2008).

“Luke has his hand raised, let’s listen” (Observation, September 29, 2008).

“Make sure you are listening. It’s very rude if you are talking when someone else is talking” (Observation, October 22, 2008).

“Let’s get ready to be good listeners. Girls scoot up and be polite. Be ready to listen. It’s John’s turn,” reminded Mr. Bell (Observation, October 27, 2008).

“One second Ned, not everyone could hear. Eyes and ears on Ned” (Observation, October 27, 2008).

“Let’s listen to Ellen; eyes and ears on Ellen. Go ahead Ellen, what’s up?” (Observation, October 31, 2008).

“I’m not wanting to talk over you. Stop talking and look at me, that way I can tell you are listening”(Observation, November 5, 2008).

“I want you to sit up and look at Elizabeth because it’s the polite way to listen,” said Mr. Bell to a couple boys (Observation, November 5, 2008).

“Ben is waiting to talk, let’s turn and look at Ben” (December 3, 2008).

Reinforcing listening skills was a continuous process in Mr. Bell’s kindergarten. It was one skill Mr. Bell felt his students needed to have in order to be respectful. By
learning to listen to each other, students became active participants in conversation that often generated new ideas or perspectives. Each voice was valued and had equal opportunity to be heard. Questions were raised and opinions expressed, with Mr. Bell often making his own thinking visible to the students; sometimes questioning their thoughts in order to scaffold their level of understanding. There was a give-and-take reciprocity in their interactions that helped students extend their thinking as well as their understanding of various issues. These conversations also provided an opportunity for the students to get to know each other and to understand what was important to others in their class, creating an atmosphere of empathy or care.

**Inviting student participation.** Class meetings would often become an opportunity for sharing in small groups. Sometimes conversations during class meetings expanded beyond the time planned; especially when students had a lot to share. Mr. Bell noted in one of our conversations that he tried to limit the amount of time spent sitting on the carpet. He also knew it was difficult for children to listen to one another for an extended period of time. As a result, Mr. Bell created a time for sharing their thoughts and ideas with each other in small self-selected groups. Mr. Bell explained that this was not a time to play or get things out, but a time to talk to their neighbors about what they had been discussing during the class meeting, or something special they had brought from home.

In one instance, students had been discussing Halloween and the upcoming costume parties. Many of the students were excited to share what they were going to be, or special events they were going to attend. Mr. Bell set the time for five minutes and
encouraged the students to talk and listen to each other about their Halloween plans in small groups. “Ladies and gentlemen, let’s take a few minutes to share with each other. Let’s stand up and talk to a friend or share toys from home. We’ve been sitting awhile listening and there are still hands up” (Observation, October, 13, 2008), explained Mr. Bell.

For some students this appeared to be a more comfortable avenue for sharing. Based on my observations, some students who rarely spoke up during the class meeting did find others to talk with when they had the opportunity to talk in small groups. Mr. Bell explained this was not a time to play with activities that were located around the room. “Let me explain your choices. You have five minutes for sharing things from home. No computers, no classroom toys. It’s 9:18am. You have until 9:23am” (Observation, November 3, 2008), said Mr. Bell, referencing the large digital clock above the door. At other times, students were given approximately 10 minutes to talk with a friend or share something they brought from home. “You guys have been listening well for quite a while. Now it’s your turn to talk and share. I will set the timer for about 10 minutes. Be safe and nice; nice and safe with your friends. Remember inside voices and inside choices” (Observation, October 29, 2008), said Mr. Bell.

**Welcoming new students.** Another purpose of the class meetings was to identify and support the needs of other students. Twice during my observations, on September 22nd and September 24th, new students arrived to Mr. Bell’s classroom. The students were welcomed upon arrival and introduced by Mr. Bell to a small group of students who, in turn, introduced the new students to others. Then during the class meeting the
students were formally introduced and the class talked about ways to make the person feel comfortable. Both times the class agreed that making pictures and playing with the new students would be nice and helpful.

The following examples show that students were carefully thinking about ways to support and care for their new friends. Scaffolded by Mr. Bell, their conversations explored ways to be considerate of others, to be welcoming. Mr. Bell’s students were learning how to be provide peer support, to be compassionate and caring.

The first example involves welcoming a new student into the classroom. Charlie was a daycare friend of a student that was already in the classroom. “Hey Jared, I have a surprise for you” (Observation, September 22, 2008), said Mr. Bell as he greeted Jared in the hallway. “Come here,” said Mr. Bell as he walked into the room where Charlie was waiting. Charlie had been brought to the classroom earlier by his parents and was quietly standing next to a table, waiting for the other students to arrive.

“All right! My best buddy!” said Jared.

“That’s what I heard,” said Mr. Bell with a smile.

“He’s bad,” said Jared, referring to incidents at their daycare that he and Charlie had been involved in, a situation Mr. Bell had already been warned about.

“I’m sure we will help him have a good day,” responded Mr. Bell.

Jared was excited to know his friend would be in his room and eagerly introduced Charlie to everyone else. At the morning meeting Mr. Bell had Jared introduce Charlie to the group. Charlie was sitting quietly at a table next to the carpeted area where everyone else was sitting. He had chosen to stay in his seat while Jared walked up front to
introduce him. “What can we do to help Charlie [feel welcome]?” (Observation, September 22, 2008), asked Mr. Bell. It was important to Mr. Bell that each student feels welcomed in the classroom. Mr. Bell also wanted the students to consider this perspective of being “new” to the classroom, and to make an effort to include him as a member of the class. Several students offered suggestions.

“He’s feeling scared,” said Jared.

“We could make him a picture,” suggested John.

“We could make him something,” offered Ellen.

“We could play with him,” added Kelly.

Jared went and found a stuffed animal from the book corner to give to Charlie to hold. Students used their work time after the morning meeting to make cards and small paper gifts for Charlie. As students finished their cards and projects they placed them in front of Charlie on his table. You could see a smile creep across his face as the mound of cards in front of him grew. Throughout the day Mr. Bell had several students help Charlie as he transitioned into the routine of the kindergarten classroom. “Ben and Craig, bring Charlie with you as you come to the carpet,” suggested Mr. Bell, following an activity they had completed at their seats. Later, after a short indoor play time, Mr. Bell said, “Linda and Dan, could you go see if you could help Charlie?” as they were cleaning up in the kitchen after a short indoor play time.

The second example shows how a new student who arrived on September 24, 2008, was acclimated to the classroom. Mr. Bell introduced Larry to a couple boys at one table and then formally introduced him at the class meeting by Mr. Bell. He then
asked the students during their class meeting, “Is there anything you want to tell him about our school or room? What’s important to know?”

“Be safe,” said Peter.

“That’s our number one rule!” said Mr. Bell as he walked over and got the large pad of chart paper off the hook. The chart was hanging on the chalkboard opposite the meeting area near their work tables. Mr. Bell brought the pad back to the class meeting area.

“Be polite,” said another student.

“I’ll have to get my marker and add that one to our list,” said Mr. Bell. The chart paper that was hanging on the bulletin board already had “Be Safe” written in black marker. “Does everyone agree in here that it’s a nicer place if we’re polite?” asked Mr. Bell. After some discussion about what being polite meant, the class decided to add “Be Nice” to their classroom chart of guidelines.

Instead of Mr. Bell controlling the situation, he had his students explain what they thought was important which led to an emergent discussion about how they treat one another in the classroom and what those words mean. During this student initiated process Mr. Bell listened to the students’ perspective and their interpretation of what the new student should know about the classroom. It was a place that was safe and nice. These were the classroom guidelines as voiced by the students.

During both of these incidents, Mr. Bell shared the responsibility of welcoming the new students with the students that were already in the classroom. He provided opportunities for peer interaction that welcomed the new students and helped them to get
to know each other. In this kindergarten classroom it was a shared responsibility to make sure everyone felt comfortable and supported each other. Peer support and responsibility was one concept that Mr. Bell continually incorporated into many of his interactions. It was a democratic process that shared the decisions and power of the classroom with his students.

**Reviewing and adjusting the daily schedule.** Class meetings also included a time to look at and rearrange the class activities for the day. These activities were represented by a series of pictures that were magnetically attached to the chalkboard and could easily be moved around based on when the activity occurred. As Mr. Bell discussed the morning plan he would physically point to the pictures on the board and slid activities around as needed. The schedule was often referenced as the day began, but it was not uncommon to refer to the schedule throughout the morning, or for the pictures to be rearranged on any given day, based on Mr. Bell’s assessment of students’ needs.

The following is a conversation about the morning schedule during one observation in December. As Mr. Bell was talking, I observed him pointing to each picture and sliding the picture of each activity up as it had been completed creating a visual break of what had been accomplished and what was still ahead for the morning.

Here’s the plan, let’s take a look at our schedule here. It’s been a busy day. Larry, Shane, John, I’m talking, you may not be. Allison, Steve, I’m talking you should not be. We started the day with a class meeting. Then we went down to the library to preview the gift shop. Then we came back and did some work areas. Then tummies started to grumble so we took a bathroom and snack break.
And now we are going to read a book and then we’ll take about 10 minutes for sharing. And then, there will be a math game, and then there will be something we will do with letters. And then we’ll go outside and play. And then it will be time to hit the road.  (Tape-Recorded Observation, December 3, 2008)

There were variations to the schedule throughout the five months that I observed but the types of interactions between teacher and student were consistent on a daily basis. Negotiating the order of the scheduled events with the students usually occurred during class meetings and was based on the needs and voices of the students.

The following examples illustrate Mr. Bell’s willingness to adjust his day to accommodate the needs of the students. One example was the shifting of snack or play time based on the students’ comments. If many noted they were hungry early, the time for snack would be moved up so snack would occur earlier in the day. “All that talk about pizza made me hungry. So let’s move our schedule a little. Mary said her tummy was growling earlier so let’s take a 10-minute snack and restroom break. It is 10:00am” (Observation, October 27, 2008), said Mr. Bell.

During another class meeting (approximately four weeks into the school year, and two weeks after Mr. Bell started teaching) a few students voiced their need for time to play outside before they began their work. Following a discussion with the whole class, recess was moved to the first activity of the day. “We talked about this yesterday, wanting to go outside earlier” (Observation, September 26, 2008), reminded Mr. Bell when they got to the end of the class meeting and looked at the schedule. Zack wanted an earlier snack so the class discussed that possibility as well. Then several asked to use
the restroom and get drinks. Mr. Bell asked how many needed to go. Several raised their hands, so they decided to go as a class to the restroom, get drinks, and then go outside. In Mr. Bell’s class, students used the restroom and got drinks as needed; it was encouraged during snack time, but they may ask permission to go at any point during the morning. The restroom is next to their classroom and this was the only time I observed them going as a class when Mr. Bell was present in the hallway with them.

During our first formal interview I asked Mr. Bell about his classroom routine and how he determined the schedule. I explained to Mr. Bell that I had heard him ask for the students’ input. Mr. Bell responded:

My major goal is for the routine to be negotiated. . . . Negotiating the whole thing is kind of a big discussion that might take place over several weeks . . . At the beginning I do provide more structure. Like earlier playtime, which actually seemed to work out pretty well with these guys, it kind of becomes a regular thing until it comes up again and then it’s open for discussion . . . Over the course of time I want it to become less mine, and more shared. (Interview, September 29, 2008)

Having recess first thing after the class meeting (usually around 9:15am) appeared to work well at the beginning of the year when the weather was still nice. However as the year progressed, recess time was renegotiated as a group and was pushed back until a later time in the morning and sometimes to the last activity of the day. There was a scheduled time for recess when aids were “on duty,” but Mr. Bell explained one day when we were outside that he took his students out on his own so that they could have the
flexibility needed to meet their needs. He was willing to incorporate their suggestions to see if it improved the daily routine of the class. If the change didn’t work out, it would be discussed and then re-negotiated with the students. When asked about focusing on the needs of the students, Mr. Bell responded:

I hope to have plenty of opportunities where as a group they see the ideas of how they want their classroom to be as something that is open for negotiation and conversation where they are contributors to that discussion and those decisions . . . I think for many of them it’s a new thing that’s being asked of them; to make a decision for how you want the room to be and take responsibility for it and really think through all these things. It’s a big responsibility that’s [pause], I know that for several of them, it’s the first time they were really explicitly asked to participate in that. (Interview, September 29, 2008)

Discussion and negotiation appeared to be a key component of interactions in Mr. Bell’s classroom. Mr. Bell reported that he wanted to know and extend his students’ thinking. He wanted his students to consider different perspectives and to learn to make choices. It was a process that continually evolved throughout the semester leading to various degrees of social responsibility.

**Interpretation of social interactions.** Based on my observations I believe that class meetings were the “heart” of the classroom. It was the first gathering of the day for the class as a whole community and provided students the opportunity to listen to each other, share their ideas and plan for the day. These meetings also appeared to provide Mr. Bell with an assessment of what his students were thinking, what was currently
important to them, and how they were feeling as the day began. These conversations also provided insight into their developmental levels of understanding. This information sometimes determined the activities for the remainder of the morning, especially if Mr. Bell observed or heard comments that would lead to an emergent lesson or a teachable moment (Hyun, 2006). It was a time for Mr. Bell to listen and to plan for social and academic interactions that were meaningful to his students and met their individual needs. According to Mr. Bell, class meetings provided an environment of natural provocation based on lived experiences where an emergent curriculum had the opportunity to unfold.

Mutual respect cultivated through teacher-student and peer interactions I believe is crucial for social-emotional development as well as intellectual development. Within the context of the morning arrival and class meetings in Mr. Bell’s classroom, a variety of experiences take place as learning and understanding becomes integrated. This initial time provided the teacher an opportunity to observe, listen, share, and promote dialogue about things that mattered to the students. Research has identified interpersonal relationships between teachers and students as an important aspect of the classroom climate (Pianta, 1999; Van Petegem et al., 2008). This awareness by Mr. Bell was foundational to his interactions. It allowed Mr. Bell to differentiate his interactions and his teaching methods to support all his students no matter what their level of competency, socially or academically.

In Mr. Bell’s room, his initial interaction in the morning provided opportunities for building trust and relationships, learning how to understand another’s perspective,
respectfully exchanging ideas in a socially appropriate manner, and setting the tone for
the day. Mr. Bell provided a safe and non-judgmental climate where students were
comfortable and willing to take risks, willing to explore new ideas. Mr. Bell provided
opportunities for conversation, negotiation, and collaboration. He shared decisions and
power with his students giving them a sense of ownership and a sense of pride in what
was their classroom. For Mr. Bell, the first 15-30 minutes of each morning became a
natural context for meaningful exchange of ideas and interaction.

Just like adults who visit and share information about their personal lives and
experiences in the staff lounge or office work room before their work day begins,
students also need the opportunity to talk, visit, and share information prior to beginning
their “work” for the day. Students need this time in the morning to build relationships
among themselves; to establish reciprocal relationships and gain an understanding of
their peers. Knowing each other helps create interactions that support a caring climate
and one of understanding differences. From Mr. Bell’s perspective, it appeared providing
time for the social-emotional needs of his students also provided a supportive climate for
building academic skills.

**Academic interactions.** In observing teacher-student interactions that nurture
and sustain the social-emotional climate of the classroom, I also observed Mr. Bell’s
academic interactions. It appeared that his approach to incorporating academic skills also
promoted a positive social-emotional climate in the classroom. Not only did Mr. Bell
want his students to take responsibility for their social interactions but he also wanted
them to take responsibility for their academic work. He wanted students to take their
time, think about what they were doing, and put forth their best effort.

This next section explains a combination of pedagogical techniques that allowed
Mr. Bell to meet the needs and interests of his students and incorporate the required
academic skills, both student-initiated as well as teacher directed. I highlight this aspect
of Mr. Bell’s classroom because his approach to teaching varies from the traditional
format of writing lesson plans with specific objectives and a structured, teacher-initiated
lesson. Instead, Mr. Bell’s interactions are student-initiated and come from a theoretical
foundation of constructivism, one that allows students to co-construct (although
unknowingly) the curriculum.

**Teacher planning and goals.** During this case study I asked how he decided
what standards to incorporate into his lessons and activities. Mr. Bell explained that
while some lessons were planned, there were times when the class meetings or students’
interests would shift the focus of the academic activity. He explained that he uses the
students’ ideas and interests as a starting point which tends to have the standards
embedded into them. “They’re kind of natural activities when they are writing, making
patterns, working with numbers and letters. The standards kind of come out of all those
things they are doing” (November 24, 2008).

Mr. Bell continued to explain that plans he writes as the teacher can be taught at
any time; he would prefer to pursue the interests of the students when the opportunity
presents itself. Mr. Bell believed in his own abilities to teach from a constructivist
theoretical perspective allowing content to emerge from students’ interests and lived
experiences. He explained that standards can be integrated into many different activities. “Even today with the puzzles they ended up making, and the card writing and letter writing, it kind of evolved into some different areas, but they initiated it” (November 24, 2008).

These comments from Mr. Bell showed the importance of the connections he built with his students and how it impacts the academics in his room. The curriculum he incorporated was student initiated but guided by his knowledge of the required standards and skills. Knowing the required standards and skills allowed Mr. Bell to be flexible in his teaching of content and relate new knowledge to lived experiences and student interests.

In some instances academic standards would be incorporated into the class meeting based on student comments and conversations. One example that developed from a class meeting was a lesson on directions and map skills initiated by Charlie. Amy was missing one morning and Charlie said something about her going East. So Mr. Bell took the opportunity to make a sign for the direction east, and gave it to Charlie. During the class meeting the group talked about directions and identified which wall was east in the classroom. Students were not sure which wall was east.

“Charlie knows something about the sun” (Observation, November 5, 2008), offered Mr. Bell (based on his conversation with Charlie earlier in the morning), and had Charlie explain that the sun comes up in the east and goes down in the west. Together as a class they figured out which wall was east. “Sounds like we have a project that we’ll need to work on together,” explained Mr. Bell after discussion occurred about the
different directions and who knew what. Mr. Bell talked with the class about making
signs and figuring out where to put them. When I returned two days later, I noticed there
were directional signs posted on each wall.

When teaching specific skills such as phonics and letter identification, he would
use direct teaching but still apply those skills to students’ lived experiences. It appeared
Mr. Bell knew his students were unique individuals with varying degrees of knowledge
and experience. As a result several of the activities Mr. Bell implemented were open-
ended which allowed each student to progress at his or her own level of development and
comfort.

When I asked about his goals for his kindergarten students, Mr. Bell had two main
areas on which he focused.

I think my main goal is I just want them to think about, you know think what they
are doing, think about their learning. I guess I kind of see it as it is something we
share and it’s something each one of us possesses. So I want them to kind of take
ownership over their own learning. I want them to be curious and comfortable
with their curiosity, and comfortable with their not knowing, comfortable with
just thinking about the decisions they make, whether it is social, or academic.

(November 24, 2008)

His second goal was to provide a solid foundation in literacy. Whether it was through
direct instruction or an emergent lesson, Mr. Bell wanted writing and literacy to be part
of their lived experience. Mr. Bell wanted them to see themselves as beginning readers
and writers with something meaningful to contribute.
I want them to start playing with letters and sounds. I want them to, you know, see it as part of them as a growing literate person. What we don’t do is let them experience [literacy] as part of their life. “I can be a beginning writer and make something thoughtful for my friend who’s sick.” Or you know, Alana, “I can be a beginning writer and make a book that I can share with the whole class.” But then a kid like Charlie says well let me take this activity and do it my way. And I think that’s exactly my goal. Take this and do it your way. Play with it. And so they’re doing the literacy; they’re doing the books; they’re writing; they’re drawing. And those are all pre-literacy skills. (Interview, December 15, 2008)

Data indicated that Mr. Bell modified activities to meet the needs of individuals, encouraged collaboration and peer support and tried to create activities that were related to the students’ lived experiences. His interactions and scaffolding of new skills allowed his students to explore and construct their own knowledge in a way that was meaningful to them. Flexibility and individuality were encouraged as Mr. Bell focused on creating a learning environment that supported and nurtured the needs of his students. Mr. Bell explained that he administered the required standardized tests, but uses his own observations and informal assessments to plan interactions that would be meaningful to his students.

**Emergent teaching.** Observations, discussions, and interviews throughout my research indicated that when possible, Mr. Bell used an emergent curriculum. Lessons would be initiated by students and Mr. Bell would develop the idea and incorporate required standards into the activities. Mr. Bell explained his interest in an emergent
curriculum was based on the constructivist theory which Mr. Bell identified as foundational to his pedagogy. His goal was to make learning meaningful through lived experiences, exploration, and natural provocation.

He explained that his lessons and the incorporation of standards were implemented when “teachable moments” (Hyun, 2006) were presented by the students. Teachable moments are considered impromptu lessons, ones that occur spontaneously. They are not planned but have an element of importance in them and can be used to teach a lesson. Mr. Bell added that he had a thorough understanding of the required curriculum, and by being aware of the interests and needs of his students he was able to incorporate required skills into his daily interactions and lessons. Observing and listening to his students provided Mr. Bell with activities that would relate to or emerge from the students’ lived experiences. “I think it’s all there if, you know, I am able to see it and hear it” (Conversation, September 28, 2008).

These lessons were not planned ahead of time but developed as the opportunities presented themselves. Once the idea was initiated by the students, then Mr. Bell would develop and facilitate related experiences. In some instances learning activities would materialize based on student comments and conversations at the morning’s class meeting. Written lesson plans were not required in Mr. Bell’s district. “I’ve covered everything kind of mentally. Whereas in my opinion what we’re supposed to be doing in here is carefully observing kids and then responding to what they need as they go” (Interview, November 24, 2008).
Personal stories and examples were often foundational for literacy activities. For example, late in October, after another strong storm, many students had stories and feelings to share. After many comments about loud thunder, trees falling, and power being out, Mr. Bell decided that the morning’s literacy activity would be individual books, authored by the students that shared their experiences about the storm. Their written stories would be “read” to their book buddies later that morning. (Book buddies were fourth grade students with whom the kindergartners met each week to read for a half hour.) During an informal conversation with me later in the morning, Mr. Bell explained, “Sometimes I have some things that are part of my agenda and then other times, like today it was just kind of improvised. I want them to write with a purpose” (Conversation, October 28, 2008).

In talking with Mr. Bell, he noted that this class seemed to be particularly interested in creating “books” so he used this interest to incorporate literacy activities that would support their academic development and cover required standards. Around Halloween, conversations during the class meeting focused on what characters the students were going to dress up as, or events they had attended with families. This topic also became a focus for writing a book based on their personal experiences. These examples demonstrated Mr. Bell’s willingness to be flexible and to let the curriculum develop or emerge based on students’ interests.

Knowing the required academic standards Mr. Bell was able to use the conversations that developed during the morning meeting to initiate some of the learning
activities later in the day or week. In our first interview I asked for clarification on how he incorporates the academic skills and standards into his classroom, Mr. Bell explained.

I am thinking a lot about how can things emerge from interests and how can activities be negotiated. . . . I guess my thinking is, that it is maybe the best learning, but at the same time, not every activity is quiet at that level where it has emerged from student interests or a natural provocation. Some is more teacher-initiated and even balanced. While I’m convinced that a constructivist method of discovery is the best learning, that doesn’t mean necessarily that there is not a place for direct instruction. So, you know, I think it is just kind of finding different times and places for different things. (Interview, September 29, 2008)

Mr. Bell also facilitated activities that would support student learning in a manner that was engaging and appropriate for each individual student. It appeared that Mr. Bell validated the importance of their lived experiences by providing these opportunities to share with others. Observations showed that when students approached Mr. Bell with something to share, he provided time. A couple students asked to read books they brought from home, whereas another student brought in something she had made at a museum when on a family trip. Another student brought in photos of her ride on an elephant. These opportunities not only provided a chance for students to share their ideas, but it also encouraged conversation and listening skills. Students had the opportunity to co-construct the curriculum with Mr. Bell; to be active participants in their own learning. Their ideas were valued and when possible Mr. Bell connected new
knowledge to prior experiences, an important process in building new understanding (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978; Zull, 2002).

The following vignette is one example of how Mr. Bell supported educational experiences brought to him by his students. One morning a student came in with a book to share, one he had written himself. Mr. Bell invited students to the carpet for a class meeting.

“There’s a new teacher in the room. Mr. Thomas,” said Mr. Bell as he introduced one of the students who sat in the teacher’s chair. Mr. Bell had him put on the microphone.

“Tell them about the book you are going to share,” suggested Mr. Bell.

“It’s about the water park I went to,” said Thomas.

“Thomas wrote a book about his weekend at Laguna Bay,” explained Mr. Bell.

Thomas read his book and Mr. Bell helped hold up the pictures and photographs. The other students got excited and wanted to comment about their own experiences.

“Stop—hold that thought, keep listening, there’s more,” said Mr. Bell.

After Thomas was done, then Mr. Bell asked the students for their questions. Some of the students started clapping.

“You are right Kelly, we should show him that we enjoyed his book,” said Mr. Bell and they all clapped for Thomas (Observation, November 17, 2008).

This example identified the importance of sharing student work and building confidence by providing opportunities for the students to teach each other. In Mr. Bell’s classroom, students were valued for who they were and the experiences they brought to
the classroom. These opportunities also reinforced skills needed for being a respectful listeners as well as a contributing member of the class. It provided an opportunity for students to appreciate each other’s work.

Mr. Bell wanted learning to be pleasurable but at the same time expected students to take responsibly for their learning. He provided choices and invited student input. As the teacher he noted that he can provide the experiences, but what the students do with it was their choice. While it appeared that Mr. Bell wanted his students to take responsibility for their own learning, he added that it was his responsibility to make it engaging and meaningful.

From a constructivist perspective, Mr. Bell allowed his curriculum to emerge from his students’ conversations and questions, from their lived experiences. Implemented in a non-traditional manner of teaching, learning still took place in Mr. Bell’s classroom. He applied skills to activities that were meaningful, such as writing a letter to a sick friend, or making a card for someone special. Throughout this process Mr. Bell continued to incorporate the democratic principles that appear to underlie many of his interactions. He shared decisions with his students, thus sharing the power of the classroom. Choices were offered and discussions were encouraged as knowledge was individually constructed by each of his students.

Throughout his academic interactions, Mr. Bell focused on the needs of the students as his guide when planning academic activities. Mr. Bell administered the required tests, but used his own observations and knowledge of his students when planning lessons. Open-ended with room for individual growth and development, Mr.
Bell allowed student-initiated activities to guide curricular decisions. He did not have everything pre-planned with little room for change. Instead he focused on the students’ interests and conversations as he developed integrated activities that supported the whole development of his students, academically as well as socially.

**Academic collaboration.** Encouraging peers to share and discuss their work was another interaction Mr. Bell scaffolded. It appeared Mr. Bell wanted his students to be aware of others’ perspectives and encouraged conversation and collaboration to help develop language and communication skills. By talking with their peers they were able to generate more ideas. This also demonstrated to the class that he valued their ideas, thinking, and work.

One example observed, on the morning of September 26th, was at the end of the class meeting. Mr. Bell explained to students that they were to take a piece of paper and write or draw anything they liked—anything in which they were interested. Mr. Bell walked around the room and checked on each student’s work, engaging several in conversation.

“Tell me about your work Larry” (Observation, September 26, 2008), said Mr. Bell to the new student.

“Wow, waterfalls and ocean—wonderful, very interesting,” commented Mr. Bell. Greta was drawing water also. “You should talk with Larry. He’s drawing water falls and oceans,” suggested Mr. Bell, encouraging collaboration and sharing of ideas.

After several had finished their work, Mr. Bell invited them to gather on the carpet to share their work with each other. It was also a time for Mr. Bell to ask his
students to explain their thinking; to think about what they were doing. Mr. Bell added
during one of our informal conversations that he wanted his students to value each other’s
work. Kelly was looking at Charlie’s work and said, “That looks great, Charlie. It looks
like a colorful waterfall” (Observation, September 26, 2008).

Mr. Bell had Charlie explain his drawing. “I have a question for you Charlie,”
said Mr. Bell. “This is a wonderful picture. What made you think of this?” asked Mr.
Bell.

“It makes me happy,” said Charlie. Other students were also asked to explain the
thinking behind their work.

“Let’s listen to Paul while he talks. Let me hold it up so all can see,” offered Mr.
Bell. “Sounds like you had a lot of interesting things to write about,” said Mr. Bell to
Paul. “Any questions for Paul?” asked Mr. Bell. Mr. Bell then gave students the
opportunity to share their work with each other at the carpet, or go back to their tables to
finish their works. Mr. Bell reminded those that chose to stay on the carpet, “You need to
be sitting here. It’s not a time to play” (September 26, 2008). It appeared that Mr. Bell
was encouraging students to be creative in their own work as well as respectful of others’
work and thinking,

Mr. Bell appeared to nurture a positive climate for learning as students were
encouraged to do their best, and to try again if necessary. Mistakes were okay, but he
continually encouraged students to do their best work. One example was when students
had been handed a letter worksheet and Jared raced through and just scribbled quickly
across the page after he had trouble making the letter G. Mr. Bell explained, “Oh Jared,
get a new one. I want you to do your most careful work. Take your time. Slow down.

Do one at a time” (Observation, September 29, 2008). Mr. Bell walked over to the pile
of papers and got a new one for Jared. Handing him a clean paper, Mr. Bell said, “Try
again. This is for practice. It’s okay to make mistakes,” said Mr. Bell. Mr. Bell walked
around the room and then returned to check on Jared’s progress.

“It’s way too hard,” said Jared.

“At least you gave it a try,” said Mr. Bell. “Now see if you can find some G’s on
the other side,” encouraged Mr. Bell (Observation, September 29, 2008).

Other lessons at the carpet would involve reading a book or sharing a story. Mr.
Bell would use an enthusiastic voice with various intonations engaging the students with
the text and encouraging students to read with him. He would pause throughout a story
in order for students to share their comments or offer their predictions. This engagement
with books was demonstrated the very first day Mr. Bell was in the classroom and
continued throughout my research. It appeared that he did not mind when students would
join in with him and read along. On October 24th Mr. Bell had invited students over to
the carpet so he could read a book to them. In the process of reading, students began to
read with him as he used his finger to point to the words. As the story progressed, Mr.
Bell’s voice dropped off. When the story was completed Mr. Bell commented with an
enthusiastic voice, “Guess what? I was wrong! I didn’t read. You did the reading!”
(Observation, October 24, 2008). Then Mr. Bell pulled his fingers across his mouth and
zipped his lips. The students giggled. His humor and enthusiasm provided an enjoyable
context for listening and learning, fully engaging his students. He explained he was not
going to say anything as the students read through the book again as a group. After the students had read the book for the second time, Mr. Bell gave high fives to those close by and then told them to give a friend next to them a high five for doing such a good job.

It appeared that this was an opportunity for all levels of readers to be included in the process. Mr. Bell’s humor and his willingness to share the direction of the lesson with his students appeared to create a positive climate for learning by allowing his students to take control of this learning opportunity. In our conversations, Mr. Bell explained that he invited students to participate and take responsibility for their own learning; he wanted them to be actively involved in the process of learning. “I really want them to enjoy learning, to become life-long learners” (November 11, 2008).

During another group interaction with a book, Mr. Bell identified what good readers do. On October 3rd, Mr. Bell introduced a big book on animals and animal sounds. As Mr. Bell opened the book, Jared said “Cats meow” (Observation, October 3, 2008). “Jared is doing something that good readers do. He is thinking of what he already knows,” explained Mr. Bell. Then he encouraged Jared and the rest of the class to look closely at the letters and think of another word that might be a cat sound. After looking closely at the letters students concluded that it said, “Cats purr.” As Mr. Bell read the book, students began identifying the animals on each page and making the sounds for each animal. After the book, Mr. Bell said, “Two things I noticed as we read this book together. Two things people were doing that made this book more fun and interesting” (October 3, 2008), said Mr. Bell as he pointed out their use of sounds and the use of the pictures to figure out the word pairs. This conversation about how the pairs of words
went together led into their activity for the morning. “I want you to pick an animal and write or draw something that the animal does,” explained Mr. Bell as he put out blank sheets of paper at a couple different places around the group.

This group of students appeared to enjoy making books, so Mr. Bell connected many of his literacy activities to their interests in drawing, writing, and book making. “I’m trying to think carefully about how do I present this in a way that allows them to feel confident, how does this affect their overall achievement, how does it translate to everything else?” (October 8, 2008), explained Mr. Bell in a conversation a couple days later when talking about how he decided on what to do. As the previous example illustrated, even when teaching phonics and language skills, Mr. Bell took into consideration the needs of each of his students. His activities were often open-ended allowing each student to work independently at their own level of development.

Throughout the morning Mr. Bell supported and monitored the students’ activity and interaction through individual conversations and physical proximity. He was always available to his students. I never saw him sit at his desk. He encouraged students to work at their own levels and modified lessons based on students’ interests and needs. He never compared students, but often praised their work and encouraged them to work together. “Larry, were you helping Louie? Good work, good work, guys, you were working nicely together,” said Mr. Bell (Observation, October 15, 2008). In asking about the different levels of abilities in the classroom, Mr. Bell responded, “Sometimes it’s the more independent looking after the less independent, and sometimes, it’s just a matter of certain kids get more time” (December 15, 2008).
Integrating meaningful experiences. Field notes showed that Mr. Bell provided both direct as well as student initiated academic experiences. Mr. Bell explained that the adult has the greater responsibility when planning lessons to meet the needs of the students. It is up to the teacher to figure out how to support each student. He explained his plans as a “rough draft” that has to be flexible; it has to be negotiable depending on the needs of his students.

I think you have to listen. You have to watch. That’s the key piece; is to be fluid and flexible. Where you have to be willing to say, this isn’t working. What can we do about it? It’s not necessarily that the child has no responsibility; it’s that I have equal or more responsibility as the facilitator or leader I have more responsibility. (December 156, 2008)

Mr. Bell continued to explain that teachers need to make the adjustments in what their teaching, not the students. Teachers need to be flexible.

In traditional classrooms I think it is all on the child. You know when the unit or program is inflexible; it is all on them [students] to make the adjustments to change their thinking whether that’s possible or not. It’s [responsibility] on them. And it’s just kind of backwards. (December 15, 2008)

For Mr. Bell even his academic interactions were embedded with democratic principles which supported the social-emotional climate of his classroom. Students were invited to take part in the process, to be active participants. Students were encouraged to think about their work, make choices, put their best effort into their work, share their work, and work with others. For Mr. Bell, being flexible and knowing the required
curriculum and standards enabled him to facilitate an emergent curriculum based on the interests and needs of his students. He reportedly did not rely on test data, but his own observations and understanding of his students to make connections between the curriculum and the students’ lived experiences. Mr. Bell explained that in order for the learning to be engaging and meaningful, “there has to be some kind of connection, personal connection to something they have experienced, something they are connected to,” explained Mr. Bell (Interview, December 15, 2008).

Another question that Mr. Bell raised during one of our discussions was whether teachers tapped into student interests enough so their learning was meaningful. Mr. Bell explained that he just read a book by Zull, where learning was linked to survival and pleasure. Learning was something humans wanted to do because of the pleasure it provided. Mr. Bell offered a quick summary.

He [Zull] said basic human needs are survival and pleasure, and learning he was saying is both. We learn for survival purposes, but also it is something that innately human beings want to do. They feel a need to do, they get gratification. It’s a pleasurable thing. (Conversation, November 11, 2008)

Mr. Bell questioned how many students have had experiences where learning was not pleasurable. Learning for most people was equated with school and for those that did not like school; people assumed they did not like learning. From Mr. Bell’s point of view he added, “It’s the structure of the school, not the learning” (Conversation, November 11, 2008). Mr. Bell felt the standardized, rigid, school setting led many students to dislike their educational experiences. Mr. Bell talked about the need to provide an environment
where learning was meaningful; and in his class it was a learning environment that included democratic principles that incorporated sensitivity to the needs of his students.

In a democratic classroom the level of freedom has to be theirs [the students] I can never control their learning. I can control certain experiences. I can control certain input, but what they do with it is 100% theirs. (Interview, November 11, 2008)

Mr. Bell focused on what a child can do and the strengths they bring to the classroom. When talking about children and their learning experiences, Mr. Bell said, “One size fits all, does not work in a classroom. Scaffolding needs to be differentiated to fit the needs of the students” (November 6, 2008). Mr. Bell shared the contributions of a couple students who had various individual challenges in the classroom; contributions that others might overlook. Mr. Bell also pointed out the role that social-emotional climate had on learning.

Look at Charlie, he contributes. And I think it’s just comfort and happiness. That now he’s fine because he knows, “I have friends. My teacher likes me. My teacher knows what I can do.” And I think it’s the same for each kid. Louie’s another one. “I have friends in this room and they’ll help me. My teacher knows I like what I like and that I want to read these books.” And same with Jared: he knows he’s seen as someone with something to contribute, not as this kid that we’re gonna have it out with. And it’s just I guess to me almost a common sense thing. We work better with people who care about us, that we respect, and they respect us. (Interview, November 24, 2008)
Interpretation of academic interactions. Even in an academic setting, Mr. Bell nurtured an interactive context where students were an important and contributing part of the learning community. According to Pianta and Walsh (1996), providing an interactive context promotes both cognitive and social development for young children. Mr. Bell took time to build appropriate social skills at the beginning of the year which in turn created a respectful classroom climate where students know each other and the teacher knows the students. These relationships and a sense of trust help nurture a positive environment for learning that supports the whole child, socially as well as academically. It is a climate that provides students the opportunity to interact, experience, and reflect on the learning processes that are a part of. It was a positive social-emotional climate that Mr. Bell nurtured consistently through daily interactions with his students.

Students arrive in kindergarten with a variety of experiences, some with limited experiences and others with a broad range of understanding about the world around them. Because of this disparity, students need opportunities to explore and experience both social and academic learning opportunities and interactions. According to Zull (2002), prior knowledge is the beginning of learning. Linking new experiences to prior experiences increases the chances of new knowledge being “wired” into the brain such that it can be easily recalled. Intertwined within these connections are emotion and feeling; all of which trigger recall of experiences stored in one’s memory (Bocchino, 1999; Jensen, 2000; Shore, 1997; Sousa, 2006). Through his use of humor and active engagement, Mr. Bell created a learning climate that was socially interactive as well as enjoyable. This concept was integrated into Mr. Bell’s lessons and activities as he
worked to link academic content to the lived experiences of his students and scaffold new content based on what they already knew as well as their own experiences.

This constructivist approach, as observed in Mr. Bell’s classroom, allowed the teacher to differentiate the curriculum by linking to student interests and making the interactions meaningful. It also allowed for positive interaction, peer support, and collaboration. With this emergent process of learning, Mr. Bell was able to link the wide range of abilities and needs in his classroom to the academic content standards. Instead of the standards dictating irrelevant and disconnected lessons, he consistently used the student interests and discourses to initiate learning experiences. These experiences actually provide more opportunities for repeatedly focusing on and integrating content standards in ways that are applicable to real life classrooms and home experiences. Mr. Bell’s academic interactions created a context for learning that was not only meaningful but enjoyable. It was a pedagogy that supported and nurtured the social-emotional climate of the classroom so that all students felt valued as collaborative members of the learning community.

**Interactive Problem Solving**

Another key interaction implemented by Mr. Bell was the process of problem solving. Problem solving in Mr. Bell’s class appeared to be another way he nurtured and sustained the social-emotional climate of the classroom. This section of the chapter provides several examples of how problem solving was used in Mr. Bell’s classroom. In Mr. Bell’s classroom data suggest that problem solving referred to situations that needed changed or corrected. Problem solving was used for individual behavior problems,
individual and peer conflicts, as well as challenges faced by the whole class. Mr. Bell was not confrontational and appeared to be focused on creating respectful interactions by understanding the catalyst behind the behavior. Students were part of the process which involved discussion and reflective thinking. Their goal was to determine a solution for whatever problem the situation presented.

Mr. Bell did not just tell students what they should and should not do, but discussed why certain behaviors were or were not appropriate. Based on my observations and conversations, he asked the students to think about their actions and how it impacted other students. He asked the students to explain their feelings related to the situation so students would be aware of the impact they had on others. Data showed Mr. Bell valued the students’ perspectives, and used these opportunities to encourage listening and negotiating skills, and to facilitate respect and understanding of others. He wanted students to learn how to work out their differences and understand others’ perspectives, not just see someone as “bad” because they did not follow the “rules.”

They can solve their own problems, understand their own problems without kind of that thoughtless system of someone gets blamed and someone always gets in trouble for whatever problem and then we move on. They could hopefully solve different dilemmas that will inevitably be in a more productive way. (October 28, 2008)

Based on many of his comments, Mr. Bell wanted his students to see that working together and helping each other made the classroom a much nicer place to learn. He
wanted his students to take responsibility for themselves as well as the manner in which
the classroom functioned.

My research identified a couple different ways problems were handled in Mr.
Bell’s classroom. Sometimes his response to issues in the classroom was direct and non-
negotiable; at other times, conversation, scaffolding, and guidance were offered.
Problem solving included discipline issues with individuals as well as conflicts between
peers. I defined discipline issues as behaviors that created conflict between the teacher
and individual students. Challenges or conflicts between peers also provided
opportunities for problem solving with Mr. Bell scaffolding appropriate ways to interact
or solve misunderstandings or disagreements. There were also situations when the whole
class would be involved in the problem solving process.

Based on my observations, several of the teacher-student conflicts were related to
students not hearing or following directions when asked to do something, not being nice
to others, or not being safe. Students would be asked to leave the group or sit at their
table until Mr. Bell could talk with them one-on-one, usually during snack or indoor play.
The situation usually involved particular behaviors which would be identified and
discussed. The following examples were typical conflicts that were observed on a regular
basis during the first two months of my case study. Mr. Bell did not use punishments or
rewards in his classroom, but felt it was important to talk with the students and let them
know what was and was not acceptable behavior.

Through our conversations, it appeared that it was important for Mr. Bell to know
why the behavior happened; what was the underlying cause? He did not want to just fix it
or make it go away. He wanted to understand the behavior and he wanted his students to do the same. He did not want students judging each other based on what they saw. He wanted them to understand on a deeper level what the cause of the behavior was and how could it be changed.

When talking about problem solving and discipline in the classroom and the process Mr. Bell used with his students, I asked Mr. Bell about his goal for the students and he responded, “I want them to be thinking about what they are doing” (Conversation, November 11, 2008). I then asked if he would consider that part of a democratic classroom and how he would define a democratic classroom. Mr. Bell explained,

To me it’s a mix of personal and social responsibilities. The thing that I think of, I think Maxine [Judith] Green wrote about *Deep Democracy*. It’s kind of . . . part of a democratic classroom is the egalitarian approach. Like when I was talking to Kelly; my goal isn’t for her to do what I say. It wasn’t about “Hey I told you stop and you didn’t.” What it needs to be about is “Kelly are you thinking about these” [pointed to a sheet of paper on the black board], which are really their rights and responsibilities. “Are you thinking about, are you being nice? Are you thinking about are you being helpful?” (November 11, 2008)

The following examples show a variety of situations and ways in which Mr. Bell helped students solve different types of problems. Sometimes Mr. Bell was direct and the situation was non-negotiable. Other times negotiation was scaffolded by Mr. Bell and with all the students that were involved in the conflict.
Non-negotiable behaviors. In one example, observed October 13, 2008, students were gathered on the carpet for a story and related literacy activity. “Stop talking and look up here,” directed Mr. Bell once students were gathered on the carpet. He began explaining a related activity when he stopped, “You need to leave and you need to leave,” said Mr. Bell as he tapped Brianna and Mary on the head. “Meet me in the kitchen, we have a problem to solve,” said Mr. Bell in a firm voice. Once the other students had their papers and were seated back at their tables, Mr. Bell walked over to the kitchen area to talk with Brianna and Mary about being rude and asked them to think about what they could do to improve the situation.

A couple days later Mr. Bell sent Steve to his seat for crawling around under the easel and throwing little blocks during the class meeting, “Steve, that’s not safe. You are making it harder for your friends to hear. You owe me snack time” (Observation, October 15, 2008). Owing Mr. Bell snack time meant that before they could eat their snack they had to come talk to him about the problem or misbehavior that caused them to be sent to their seat or away from the group. It was a time where Mr. Bell could speak individually with students. A short time later Mr. Bell spoke to another student. “Jared, we’ll talk during snack time. That’s the third time I’ve talked to you about that [needing to listen when spoken to],” stated Mr. Bell in a firm voice. For this student, listening was often an issue and many times he chose not to respond when spoken to. Mr. Bell had often talked with this student about listening so the problem does not become bigger. Jared had crawled under the table when Mr. Bell asked him to sit down in his seat. Mr. Bell explained to Jared that he would make the problem worse if he didn’t listen and sit
in his seat. Later that morning, Mr. Bell announced, “I have 2 appointments during snack
time” (Observation, October 15, 2008). Mr. Bell spoke to both boys; “I need people to
listen. I am willing to give reminders but I don’t like being ignored. It’s a problem,”
explained Mr. Bell as he proceeded to quietly discuss their behaviors individually
(Observation, October 15, 2008).

During another class meeting, Mr. Bell spoke to a group of girls.
Kelly, Liz and Amy, you girls were not doing a good job listening. I gave you
reminders. What you were doing was rude. At snack time we’ll talk at the carpet.
We’ll talk about manners and what we can do to solve this problem.
(Observation, October 24, 2008)

When asking Mr. Bell about his direct approach to handling the above issues, Mr.
Bell talked about the importance of being blunt when in a respectful relationship with
students. “Students need to be challenged about what they are doing and why. However
blunt only works if there is trust that he, the teacher, is there to support them”
(Conversation, November 24, 2008). Mr. Bell added that he has to have a positive
relationship with students in order for problem solving to be effective.

The above examples highlight the importance of being safe and being polite.
These were usually the two reasons Mr. Bell would ask students to leave the group.
Being safe and being nice were expected by Mr. Bell and were non-negotiable; in other
words these behaviors were not open for discussion. Being safe and being nice were also
key components of a democratic classroom where everyone had the right to be safe and
the right to be treated nicely.
**Negotiable behaviors.** Negotiable behaviors were behaviors that required discussion and the creation of a solution that was acceptable to all parties involved in the conflict. Communication and understanding others’ perspectives were the keys to resolving these types of conflicts. In some instances individual conflicts were discussed quietly by Mr. Bell. He would approach the student or pull an individual aside and talk calmly and quietly with them one on one trying to help them understand the situation. On one occasion he talked with Amy about being a good listener. “Your talking makes it hard for your friends to hear,” reminded Mr. Bell as he was preparing to read a story (Observation, October 1, 2008). In another instance Mr. Bell walked over to another student who was up and out of his seat. “Jared, politely ask them to pass the crayons. That’s all you need to do is talk to them,” reminded Mr. Bell. “Don’t turn it into a bigger problem” (Observation, October 22, 2008).

Problem solving in other situations was a process to help students handle different situations in a responsible manner. Sometimes, problem solving was directly scaffolded by Mr. Bell through the use of a simple, direct, comment made to the parties involved. “Hey guys, let’s watch the potty mouths,” said Mr. Bell. “It doesn’t help to point fingers. Larry and Chris don’t like it when you use those words, so just stop talking” (Observation, November 17, 2008), said Mr. Bell to table three and all the boys that were sitting there. In another example at the beginning of the year, Mr. Bell reminded one student of his choices. During snack Charlie was bothering Steve. “Steve you have choices. You can talk to him politely or you can walk away” (Observation, September
24, 2008), reminded Mr. Bell. Charlie (who was new to the classroom two days earlier) was taking things and throwing things at people along with using inappropriate words.

A third example took place on October 13, 2008, when Mr. Bell modeled an appropriate dialogue for one student. “Jared, Mary will listen but you need to speak with a polite voice and kind words,” explained Mr. Bell as they were working at their tables. “Mary, will you hand that book to Jared when you are finished?” asked Mr. Bell (modeling process for Jared). Mary shook her head up and down and said yes. “Did you hear her answer, Jared?” asked Mr. Bell. “She will share when she is done” (Observation, October 13, 2008), repeated Mr. Bell.

**Scaffolding peer interactions.** Besides offering direct suggestions when conflicts developed, Mr. Bell encouraged students to talk about the situation in an effort to have the students learn how to handle their own conflicts. When conflicts developed between students, it appeared that Mr. Bell made sure both perspectives were heard, feelings were recognized and validated, and then a solution had to be agreed upon by both parties. Based on my observations and conversations, Mr. Bell scaffolded problem-solving between peers with the hope that they would be able to handle the process on their own later in the school year.

One example occurred when Jared took Larry’s play dough and Larry went to get it back. Mr. Bell saw the incident from across the room and called both boys to the carpet. “I don’t know what happened, but I do know you are two nice boys. But I was worried about safety” (Observation, October 3, 2008), said Mr. Bell. Mr. Bell had the boys sit down facing each other with Mr. Bell in the middle off to the side. He had each
boy explain what happened and then they had to figure a way to work out their problem. Mr. Bell asked about apologizing and whether or not Larry was ready to accept an apology from Jared. “What can you do?” Mr. Bell asked Jared. Mr. Bell encouraged them to keep talking. And then Mr. Bell came over to me and explained that it was hard for Jared. “He didn’t quite understand that doing something together can also be fun,” said Mr. Bell. Jared also did not realize that he had hurt Larry’s arm when he went to take the play dough away. As a result of the incident, Mr. Bell sent them both to the book corner to help clean up books as a way for them to work together (October 3, 2008).

Mr. Bell explained to me that he was trying to figure out each child’s perspective.

I am wondering with Jared, trying to see if from his perspective, what is the problem? Does he not know what is appropriate, is it that he doesn’t care, or got carried away. That is the challenge trying to see it from his perspective. And then trying to see it from Larry’s perspective, what is he seeing, what is he understanding, what is he expecting? (Conversation, October 3, 2008)

Being aware of the student’s perspective was an important piece of the problem solving puzzle for Mr. Bell. It was a perspective that focused on uncovering what the student was thinking, what was the reasoning behind the behavior and how did the student interpret the situation. It appeared that through conversation Mr. Bell was able to “see” some of the thinking behind the students’ actions, providing a glimpse of the developmental levels of understanding that his students were or were not capable of.

When conflicts occurred between students he would have them talk and come to a solution that satisfied everyone involved in the situation. Sometimes Mr. Bell would help
mediate the conversation as with Jared and Larry in the situation above; other times he would leave it up to the students as shown in the following incident.

Three boys were kicking each other under the table during snack. Mr. Bell walked over to the table because the boys were arguing about who was doing what. “I don’t care who was doing what, but you need to talk to each other and decide if you can solve the problem. You talk to each other” (Observation, September 17, 2008), explained Mr. Bell. “Listen to Jared,” said Mr. Bell as Jared offered a solution. Mr. Bell told the three boys to talk together to solve the problem and let him know when they were done. Jared called over in a couple minutes and said, “We’re done talking.” Mr. Bell asked if everyone was okay with what they decided (not asking for the specifics). All the boys shook their heads up and down.

Another example happened between Holly and two boys. The two boys were complaining to Mr. Bell that Holly had drawn on their papers. Mr. Bell approached Holly. “They drew on mine” (Observation, October 31, 2008), said Holly. “To the carpet,” said Mr. Bell to all three students involved as he followed them. “This is what I am hearing,” said Mr. Bell as he recapped the problem as he understood it. “How are we going to fix this and what would you like for me to do? It sounds like you all are doing something that someone doesn’t like. How can you fix it? How can I fix it?” (Observation, October 31, 2008). Mr. Bell then listened to their comments and suggestions. “Does that work for you?” he asked Holly. “Would it solve the problem?” asked Mr. Bell. “If it works for all of you, it works for me” (Observation, October 31, 2008), said Mr. Bell and sent the three of them back to their table.
This process of allowing students to provide their own solutions with little interference from the teacher scaffolded opportunities for negotiation and understanding as well as the development of autonomy. He encouraged students to speak up and make their voice heard and their perspective known, an important component of effective communication. And as later explained by Mr. Bell, it kept little problems from becoming big problems.

Other times, conflicts were more personal between peers, and then Mr. Bell worked to help those involved talk their way through to a solution that was acceptable to all parties involved. At the end of one week in September, Mr. Bell noticed that two boys, who were typically friends, were not speaking to each other when they arrived in the morning. Mr. Bell talked to Paul quietly on the side and then invited Ned over to talk with Paul. “Paul would like to talk to you a moment” (Observation, September 26, 2008), Mr. Bell said to Ned.

Mr. Bell talked with them about being friends and that they appeared to have a little problem. He had Ned talk and then Paul talk. Mr. Bell then gave them a few minutes to talk on their own. After they had a chance to talk Mr. Bell checked back with them and asked “Problem solved? Are you happy?” Mr. Bell asked Ned. Then he turned to Paul and asked him the same question, “Are you happy?” (Observation, September, 26, 2008). Ned shook his head up and down and smiled. Paul also shook his head up and down.

As the weeks went by Mr. Bell began encouraging students to solve their own problems without his support. He always encouraged them to talk to the individual(s)
who were causing the problem. Mr. Bell wanted the students to take responsibility; to speak up and let others know how they made them feel and then talk together to resolve the situation. In the classroom, Michelle came over to Mr. Bell and complained that Steve was bothering her. Mr. Bell responded, “Tell him. He needs to know” (Observation, October 1, 2008), as he encouraged Michelle to talk to Steve. Michelle did talk to Steve and then Mr. Bell asked, “Did that solve the problem?”

“Yes,” said Michelle.

“Good. See sometimes you just have to talk to him and that solves the problem” (October 1, 2008).

In another situation Mr. Bell reminded Holly to speak up. “Talk to him politely Holly, he’ll listen. If you walk away you won’t solve the problem” (October 31, 2008), said Mr. Bell when Holly was having a conflict with another student at the computer area. Even on the playground when one student was bothering another, Mr. Bell would always ask, “Are you okay?” And then tell the student, “Talk to those that were bothering you. Tell them what you don’t like,” encouraged Mr. Bell (October 13, 2008).

No matter what the problem was Mr. Bell would encourage the students to find a solution together. In some situations, Mr. Bell noticed nonverbal cues from his students and asked if there was a problem and whether or not he could help. Other times he would enlist the aid of a peer to help with the situation. One morning Mr. Bell was walking around the classroom as students were working on creating a booklet at their desks. Mr. Bell called two students to the carpet. “Grace, come here. Kelly, come here” (Observation, October 8, 2008). Mr. Bell waited until both had gotten to the carpet.
“Kelly is upset; you two need to talk about it,” said Mr. Bell. I am not sure how Mr. Bell knew there was a problem, but he seemed to be aware of how his students were feeling and was sensitive to changes in their behavior. He left the two girls on the carpet to talk and then checked back in five minutes. “Did you work it out?” he asked the girls. They shook their heads and smiled. “Okay, Good” (Observation, October 8, 2008), said Mr. Bell as the girls went back to their table.

In another incident that occurred the same day, Mr. Bell scaffolded a conversation between Grace and Ellen about who wanted to play with whom. Ellen was looking kind of sad and when Mr. Bell spoke with her, she whispered into his ear. “Grace, can you help with that?” (Observation, October 8, 2008), asked Mr. Bell after talking with both girls about the play situation.

Other times Mr. Bell would ask the student if there was a problem. “What happened Amy? You look upset” (Observation, November 19, 2008). Amy explained to Mr. Bell that she also wanted to play with the blocks. “You need to talk to them. They won’t know what’s wrong” (Observation, November 19, 2008), said Mr. Bell as he encouraged her to go talk to a couple other students with whom she wanted to play.

Mr. Bell continued to use the process of scaffolding conversation throughout the semester to help his students solve problems that usually involved social interactions. Another example occurred November 24, 2008, when Steve was hiding under the easel and Mr. Bell asked if there was a problem. “Hiding under the easel will not solve the problem” (Observation, November 24, 2008), said Mr. Bell after talking to Steve. Mr. Bell called Larry and Louie over to see Steve. “He needs to talk to you.” Steve took off
running to hide, but Mr. Bell had him sit in his chair and then sat next to him to help scaffold his conversation with the other guys with whom Steve wanted to play. “What we need guys . . . ,” started Mr. Bell as he talked about what it would take for them to play nicely together. “If Steve talks to you nicely, can he join you? Remember each of you has the right to be treated nicely. Steve, you have to talk nicely and they will share with you. Do you all agree?” asked Mr. Bell. “Good, shake on it” (Observation, November 24, 2008), said Mr. Bell as he encouraged the boys to shake hands.

Mr. Bell felt it was important for his students to talk about their situations so they could find out why there was a problem and to find a meaningful way to take responsibility for the situation. As with all other interactions, problem solving was based on the individual needs of the students. It appeared through his interactions that Mr. Bell was aware there were a couple students that needed consistent reminders of what was acceptable. When asked if there are certain students with whom he had to work a little more Mr. Bell explained that some kids, like Jared, “needed a very concrete operational type of thinking before we can sit down and rationalize” (September 29, 2008).

I think it’s different for each kid, like Jared as an example. He was a kid where this was one of the first times that boundaries were drawn for him. And I started off with him in a very concrete way and yet he has progressed over the semester. One of the things in terms of boundaries that he was able to do last week that he wasn’t able to do at the beginning of the year was to see that the boundaries have to work within the rights of everyone in the room. It was an initial step of seeing
your own responsibilities, like with Jared and understanding you don’t always get immediately what you want when you want it. (Interview, November 24, 2008)

Mr. Bell explained that other kids are self-motivated. “They can regulate and keep themselves on track; they are fine” (November 11, 2008). Observations show that Mr. Bell had those that were socially competent and responsible assist those that needed a little more guidance. Once again, based on my data, it appeared that Mr. Bell individualized his interactions based on the needs of each individual student.

**Scaffolding group interactions.** Besides encouraging individuals and small groups to take responsibility for their actions, social responsibility and problem solving with the whole group also appeared to be an important component of developing the social-emotional climate of the classroom. Issues with the whole class were usually related to listening, following directions, and working together to make their room a nice and safe place. These group conversations were more prominent at the beginning of the semester with their biggest challenge being listening.

In one example on September 19, 2008 (Mr. Bell’s first week), students had been asked to help clean up their snack and put work from the morning away in order to get ready for the next activity—recess. Mr. Bell felt it was taking too long and called everyone to the carpet in a loud, firm voice. The following narrative presents the process that Mr. Bell facilitated with the class, inviting the students to be part of the solution.

“There’s a problem in this room and we may not get out for recess. Simple things are taking a lot of time. I had to be mean. People didn’t care what I was saying,” explained
Mr. Bell as he gave examples and explained why it took so long. He added that he felt ignored—nobody was listening.

“I don’t like talking that way. Have you seen this problem? Not really. Has anyone noticed?” asked Mr. Bell. “What can we do to help? What can we do to help each other?” asked Mr. Bell. “Megan said one thing, let’s listen to Megan.”

“Clean up after ourselves,” she repeated.

“Is there something people could have done to help each other?” asked Mr. Bell.

“Ellen, listen to Ellen, she has a very smart idea that might make it a nicer place.” Mr. Bell repeated what she said. “Ellen said she could talk to her and help her.” Ellen was referring to one little girl in particular who always seemed to need help. “Do you need to tell me every time? No,” said Mr. Bell.

“A little help from a friend; that works out very well,” said Mr. Bell with a smile.

“Let’s walk to our tables,” directed Mr. Bell as he asked the students to clean up their snacks and put their papers away.

“As soon as you are done, please come back to the carpet,” directed Mr. Bell.

Mr. Bell had David help Amy put her papers in her backpack.

“Someone help Ariel” (She was slow getting to the carpet).

“Can someone help Andy find his square?” (His special place to sit on the carpet), asked Mr. Bell. After everyone had cleaned up and was back at the carpet Mr. Bell continued. “Did you notice how polite Jared and Steve were? They were being helpful,” pointed out Mr. Bell. Mr. Bell then asked students about the type of behavior he expected in the hallway when they lined up to go outside.
One student said, “No talking.”

“I’ve never said you had to be perfectly quiet in the hallways. I am wondering if you can talk with friends and be polite when you are in the hallway,” offered Mr. Bell as he listened to students’ comments.

“Keep it nice and keep it safe! Two smart ideas from Liz and Kelly,” repeated Mr. Bell.

“What if someone has a problem and they are getting too loud?” asked Mr. Bell.

“Tell them politely to be quiet,” said one student.

As students shared their ideas, Mr. Bell reminded others to be listening. He tapped a couple students on the head and quietly whispered, “She’s talking.”

“If someone is forgetting their manners, remind them; help them,” rephrased said Mr. Bell. At 11:25am the class finally went outside for recess (September 19, 2008).

Mr. Bell reported that his goal was to have the students think about their behavior and how they can help each other remember what to do. This process was evident on the first day of Mr. Bell’s teaching as well as throughout the five months of my study. Students were asked for their input and assistance in finding a solution to the problems or situations as they occurred, providing a more productive way to complete the required tasks. From these situations, discussions emerged as to what was acceptable and appropriate behavior and what changes needed to be made. Scaffolding this awareness helped students develop an understanding of what was expected and why it was important.
A couple days later, Mr. Bell reminded students that not listening tended to make the problem worse. “If you listen to me, I will be happy to listen to you. When I have to ask three and four times it makes the problem bigger. If I have to shout it makes the problem bigger,” explained Mr. Bell (Observation, September 22, 2008).

Mr. Bell often raised his voice to get the attention of his students. His voice would become loud and firm. Depending on the activity, he would also turn the lights off to gain everyone’s attention. Part way through the month of November, Mr. Bell was given an amplification system to support one integrated student with hearing issues, but the system appeared to benefit the whole class. The amplification system allowed all students to hear his voice equally from any where in the room. When first given the system, Mr. Bell commented about not having to yell or raise his voice. “I like it because I want to be able to project without it being perceived as a yell” (Interview, November 24, 2008). In an interview that occurred a couple days later, I asked about his comment (about yelling) and whether or not he believed the students perceived him as angry when he used a loud, firm voice. As the researcher I raised this question because I often interpreted his voice as angry and I wanted to know his perspective. I wanted to know if his voice might create fear which would defeat his attempt to build positive relationships with his students.

I think most of the time no. But I kind of, I guess I see it as most of the time no in most circumstances with most children. I think I remember even last year it came up once where someone said that I was yelling something across the room at a class meeting. And someone said, “well, he wasn’t ‘yelling’ yelling. He just had
to be loud so people would hear him.” And then they talked about it and they said;
“I knew he wasn’t mad” is what someone else said. And they had a discussion
and they talked about that. And they talked about how they can tell when I’m
upset and when I’m not. (Interview, November 24, 2008)

Based on my observations, using his voice was the primary way Mr. Bell gained
students’ attention for most of the transitions that occurred in the classroom. Although
Mr. Bell did not believe his students interpreted his voice as angry, I wondered if there
were at least a couple students that may have similar feelings I had during my
observation. Occasionally he used the lights as a signal that he had something to say, but
I could not help wondering if there was another way to gain student attention that would
not conflict with his democratic principles. The activity and the level of the students’
participation often dictated how loud his voice would become. In many instances he had
to raise his voice to a fairly loud level to be heard, particularly before he received the
amplification system.

Another group problem solving discussion that occurred about a month later
created a focused discussion on being safe. Mr. Bell had sent students into the hallway to
get their jackets to go outside for recess. All had rushed towards the door in one mass
group. Mr. Bell used humor, modeling, and discussion to help students understand the
situation and identify a solution.

“Whoa, come back, not that way. Sit” (Observation, October 22, 2008), said Mr.
Bell. “Excuse me, excuse me, my voice is yelling and it shouldn’t be.” Mr. Bell called all
the students back to the carpet to talk about safety.
“What are some things we need to see before we go outside?” asked Mr. Bell.

“Right now I am afraid we’re going to hurt each other. What do I need to see? I’m worried it’s not safe.” Mr. Bell listened to suggestions from the class.

“I need to do it this way. I need to walk over and sit carefully, not running across the room and climbing over the tables,” said Mr. Bell as he used modeling to demonstrate what not to do by running across the room and jumping up and over one of the tables.

“See, Charlie was afraid I was going to smoosh him (Charlie had moved out of his seat and out of the way as Mr. Bell climbed over the table). What do we need to do to be safe and be polite?” The class then discussed being safe and being nice, and what actions would allow that to happen. Mr. Bell went to the chalkboard and brought over the large chart paper that was hanging up with the class guidelines.

“I’m going to write two words under being safe.” And he wrote, “Be careful.”

“Are you ready to try it again?” asked Mr. Bell.

“This time walk to the door. Let’s do it safely,” reminded Mr. Bell.

Once they were in line, Mr. Bell added, “Ladies and gentlemen, one more thing. To be polite, let’s use quiet voices in the hallway” (October 22, 2008).

Throughout the different interactions in the classroom both individually and as a whole group, reminders of what students were supposed to do to make their room a nice and safe place were discussed along with how to improve the situation. As different situations arose, discussions about classroom guidelines and responsibilities developed. It appeared that Mr. Bell wanted to create an awareness of how the students’ actions
affected others in the classroom and wanted them to speak up and use their voice; to take responsibility for their actions. Mr. Bell explained,

Part of teaching is just bringing out parts of their experience and saying, “think about this. You know, stop, wait a second here. You have a responsibility here that is not being taken care of.” You know, bringing their natural lived experiences and wanting them to engage with it. (October 29, 2008)

While the process of problem solving was directed or scaffolded by Mr. Bell during many of my observations, eventually the students were able to implement the process of solving problems on their own. One incident I observed where the students were able to solve their own problem occurred during one of the last days of my study. It was indoor recess and a group of students were working with play dough at one table. There appeared to be a problem with sharing the play dough and one girl walked away visibly upset. Within a couple minutes, others from the table negotiated the conflict between this girl and the person with whom the conflict had developed. Before Mr. Bell had a chance to work his way to their table, the group had solved the conflict and all participants were successfully engaged with the play dough.

These types of interactions appeared to support the development of a caring classroom, of a room where students took responsibility and worked together to make sure their classroom was one that valued the unique individuals that made up the whole class. Through modeling and scaffolding Mr. Bell encouraged his students to communicate and focus on solutions. The problem would be identified, but then as a
class and through discussion, solutions were explored. No one was ever blamed and I rarely saw any student being “punished” for a particular behavior.

Mr. Bell wanted his students to think and adapt their behavior appropriately for the situation they were in. One goal was to encourage communication, to let others know what they were thinking and to make others aware of what they were feeling. Another goal was to encourage responsibility and autonomy; learning to make choices and decisions that were respectful to others and considered others’ perspectives, to think beyond themselves and develop empathy.

**Scaffolding peer support.** In addition to scaffolding students’ interactions so they would become independent in their ability to respectfully solve problems, Mr. Bell also encouraged students to support each other, creating a nurturing climate of empathy. Knowing his students, Mr. Bell was very aware of his students’ feelings and how that impacted their interactions during the day. He was able to recognize when students needed a little extra attention or care. Instead of taking on this role himself, he shifted this responsibility to his students in an effort to encourage social responsibility, empathy, and peer support. Most of his interactions involved talking, and finding out what it was they needed. Then he would enlist the help of classmates to support each other. Whether it was making cards, being a “buddy” for the day, or just offering an extra pair of hands when the crayon box spilled, Mr. Bell encouraged his students to be sensitive to the needs of each of their classmates.

Greeting students each morning as they arrived allowed Mr. Bell to quickly observe the mood of his students. When necessary he would facilitate interactions among
peers, or bring the issue to the attention of the group during the class meeting. One observation that provided evidence of this type of interaction occurred at the beginning of October.

Jared was normally one of the first students to arrive, bouncing through the doorway and talking to Mr. Bell as soon as he set foot into the room. On this day, Jared came into the classroom shuffling his feet, walking slowly with his head hung down, and a sad look on his face. Another student who had arrived earlier warned Mr. Bell that Jared was “stuck” in the hallway. Mr. Bell asked if he was okay and the student said Mrs. Marchione, the principal, was talking to him. When Jared arrived, Mr. Bell asked if he was okay. Jared just hung his head. Mr. Bell invited him to talk as he entered the room, “Here, let’s go talk—you look upset” (October 1, 2008). They walked over to the book area which had a small designated quiet area of the room and talked for three to four minutes. Jared then found a seat at a table and Mr. Bell went back to greeting students as they arrived in the room, making sure he said hello to those he missed when talking with Jared.

As we see in the following vignette, in addition to talking discretely with Jared, there are more ways to supporting the social-emotional needs of this one student. It also shows how Mr. Bell used a lived situation as an emergent lesson to educate his students about seeing and understanding people’s feelings. The class meeting was the context for this discussion on being happy and for the emergence of additional guidelines for the classroom. On the same morning that Jared arrived unhappy (October 1, 2008), Mr. Bell asked a question at the class meeting.
“I have an important question,” and he asked about being safe and being nice. “Another thing I want; I want people to be happy. How can we work together to make sure we are safe but happy?” Mr. Bell asked the class.

“Be nice,” said Zack.

“Yes, that was on our list. Tell me more. What do we need to know about being nice?” asked Mr. Bell.

“Don’t bother people,” said another student.

“Explain your answer, Brett. Don’t bother people. Tell me more,” encouraged Mr. Bell as he walked to get the large note pad of paper from where it was hanging on the chalkboard. The top sheet had a couple guidelines for the class already listed. Then Mr. Bell asked several other students, “What do we need to know to make this a happy place?” He used Jared as an example and explained how he came in sad. He demonstrated the way Jared was walking with his head down and a sad expression. Then Mr. Bell talked with the students about recognizing body language and facial expressions.

“When we notice someone is sad, how can we make him happy?” asked Mr. Bell.

“We could help him,” said Liz.

“Draw him a picture,” said David.

“Cheering him up,” said Mary.

“I like how you are thinking,” said Mr. Bell with a smile.

After listening to several suggestions and discussion from the students, the group agreed on four phrases to add to their classroom guidelines. Mr. Bell wrote down the students’ responses on the large sheet of chart paper and then hung the pad of paper back
on the chalkboard that was on the opposite side of the room near their seats where everyone could easily see them. The responses written underneath “Be nice” included:

- Don’t bother people—listen to other people
- Try to help if someone is hurt or upset
- Try to make others happy
- Make sure you are being helpful. (Observation, October 1, 2008)

This example highlights how important it was for Mr. Bell to create a climate that was supportive of his students, a place that was happy, nice, and caring. He wanted his students to be aware of others and to support their social-emotional well-being.

Encouraging these types of interactions happened at various times throughout the school day. As the morning progressed, Jared did receive a few cards from others in the classroom and Jared’s normal happy demeanor returned.

Snack time provided one opportunity for peer support with conversation and unstructured social interactions being allowed by the classroom teacher. If a student forgot his or her daily snack, sharing was encouraged. At other times, if a child was not feeling well a friend was chosen to help comfort that particular child. When assistance was needed either on a class assignment or for a trip to the office, the student in need was encouraged to ask a friend to assist. Mr. Bell encouraged his students to ask each other, to speak up, when they needed help. It appeared that he wanted them to know it was okay to ask—that there was nothing wrong with needing help and that everyone needs help sometime. It appeared he wanted his students to take care of each other and be aware of others’ needs.
The following observation illustrated one example of peer support that occurred during the class meeting in early November. Through his interactions it appeared Mr. Bell was modeling and encouraging empathy for a fellow student. One student, Louie, came into the room upset first thing in the morning and through conversation Mr. Bell learned that there were a few changes at home in his mom’s work schedule and Louie was missing his mother. The class meeting was approximately 15 minutes later and had already started when Mr. Bell noticed Louie was silently crying.

“Louie, are you okay?” (Observation, November 17, 2008), asked Mr. Bell. “You look teary eyed.”

“I can’t breathe,” said Louie through muffled crying.

“I have an idea. We’ll find someone to take good care of you today; a special friend. Raise your hand if you are someone who will sit with Louie and take good care of Louie. Louie pick one person to stay with you.” Several students called his name and wanted to be his “buddy” for the day. Louie finally chose one little girl, Liz, to support him.

“Did you pick Liz?” asked Mr. Bell. Louie nodded.

“Okay, give him some room. Liz, sit right next to Louie and take good care of him. Louie you are in good hands with Liz. Okay, everyone’s eyes up here. We have one more thing to take care of. Amy, eyes up here,” directed Mr. Bell as he continued (Observation, November 17, 2008).

This process of encouraging empathy was observed several times in the classroom, and with various levels of need. Mr. Bell would invite students to take
responsibility for helping each other feel better. It appeared that having a little bit of extra attention from a peer comforted the student in need. Instead of dealing with the problem as a teacher (controlling the situation and taking time away from the rest of the class), it became a class process, a group responsibility. It provided a way for Mr. Bell to share the responsibility of caring for others and to facilitate the development of students who care—modeling empathy and providing opportunities for students to help each other.

In some instances, the student having difficulties chose a “buddy,” someone with whom they felt comfortable. At other times, Mr. Bell appointed someone to assist; someone whom he felt would be a good role model, or knew the way to the office. While many students volunteered to help, they did not appear upset when not chosen. In most situations everyone was able to help the person that was having a difficult day, but just in different ways. Sometimes cards and pictures were made and offered; other times the person in need was invited to play by others that wanted to help.

Peer support was not limited to just one person. Many times the whole class was asked to treat others with extra care during the day. For example Jared arrived one morning with a pain in his neck. “We’ll have to be extra careful today. We’ll let the others know at morning meeting” (Observation, November 10, 2008), said Mr. Bell. After announcements and moving a few people around the tables, Mr. Bell said, “Jared is saying ‘ouch.’ Let’s come to the carpet and see if we can find out why.” Mr. Bell first had students ask Jared about his neck and why it hurt. Then students offered suggestions which included going to the nurse, getting him some medicine, visiting the drug store,
and putting cold water on it. After listening to all the possible solutions Mr. Bell concluded with, “We’ll be extra careful with Jared today” (Observation, November 10, 2008).

Mr. Bell used these events to create an awareness of other’s feelings and how they can work together to make the situation better. He acknowledged the feelings of his students. In the example with Jared, it provided Jared with a little more attention which is what appeared to be his need, a need recognized by Mr. Bell. Some might think this type of response would create more “needy” students who wanted extra attention, but throughout the five months of my research I did not see that issue develop, even with Jared.

Another incident that was observed was that of two challenging boys who were best of friends at day care and had a reputation for causing trouble when they were together at day care. The one child, Charlie, did not attend Mountain Springs at the beginning of the year, but transferred in at the end of September. Jared was already in Mr. Bell’s class when news arrived of a new student. He was excited to learn his best friend would now be in his classroom. Mr. Bell was warned to keep them separate. At first Mr. Bell did not heed the other teachers’ warnings, but found they worked better when not seated at the same table. Yet one day, later in the semester when Charlie was having an extremely difficult day, Jared was the one Charlie picked as his “support buddy.” At first Mr. Bell hesitated, but since it was Charlie’s choice he respected it. Charlie did not want to leave the room to go with the intervention specialist so Mr. Bell asked Charlie if he would like a friend to go with him and that was when he chose Jared.
Jared took his responsibility very seriously and it was Jared who was able to calm Charlie down and walk with him down to the intervention session. Jared provided the support needed to help Charlie feel better and guide his friend in making the right choices. Not only did this situation help calm Charlie, it provided an opportunity for Jared to be responsible and supportive of his peer, a positive interaction for Jared as well.

For Charlie who was later considered for special services, having people around him who he knew and who he trusted was important. Mr. Bell shared the following insight,

“It’s anxiety, and when he gets put in a position where he is frustrated he doesn’t know what to do, he becomes oppositional. I think the reason he is successful in here [his kindergarten room] is because he’s comfortable with the kids in here and he’s comfortable with me and he trusts us. He’s happy here. It was just a matter of him finding his place in this community of kindergartners. (Interview, December 15, 2008)

Again data showed that Mr. Bell supported the social-emotional needs of his students through his interactions and his awareness of the needs of his students. The examples above showed that Mr. Bell scaffolded these concepts with his students. Mr. Bell was willing to take the time to intentionally care for his students and he encouraged his students to do the same for each other. This careful attention to the social-emotional needs of students appeared to support and nurture a positive, caring climate in this kindergarten room.
**Scaffolding rights and responsibilities.** In addition to caring for others within their classroom community, Mr. Bell also wanted his students to understand that as students in his classroom they had certain rights, and that they also had responsibilities as a member of the classroom community. Mr. Bell reported that he set boundaries as an initial step for the students to see their own responsibilities. Mr. Bell explained it was his responsibility to help students realize they have to work within the rights of everyone else in the room. He reported that he wanted the students to recognize that their behavior impacted others in the room and in the building. It was a process that developed over the course of my research. As problems appeared conversations emerged. As situations developed, new guidelines for interaction were added with Mr. Bell scaffolding discussions as to why these types of interactions were important.

Mr. Bell had been absent the first two and a half weeks of school and upon his arrival in the classroom, he found five rules written on chart paper and taped to the blackboard. The substitute’s list of rules quietly disappeared by the end of Mr. Bell’s first week and I observed a new list being generated by the students. Mr. Bell explained his reasoning.

I threw it away from the kids because it was blocking their thinking about what they were doing with each other and in the room. So I pulled it off and told them to forget about this and crumpled it up and threw it away. And I said, “We need to talk about what we need to have a room be the way it needs to be. We need to think about this, we need to talk about this.” I know several teachers here [in the building] went “what?” (Conversation, September 29, 2008)
Mr. Bell explained that rules, or as he called them, guidelines, needed to emerge from actual situations. Discussion about why and how these guidelines (that the students initiate) support the community of the classroom was an important step in the process. With the exception of safety most “rules” were developed as needed and were negotiable. Safety was the one guideline he put up first and explained to the students was non-negotiable. Their classroom would be a safe place for everyone.

This list of guidelines was generated with the class as needed, usually based on an incident that occurred or was discussed at a class meeting. (A couple examples have been previously noted in early sections of this paper.) Mr. Bell would invite students to the carpet or call their attention to a problem as incidents surfaced. “There is something I am noticing that is going to get in the way of this being a nice day” (November 7, 2008), said Mr. Bell as he explained that people were not being helpful cleaning up. “Things were being thrown on the floor. I need everyone to stand up and help clean up” (November 7, 2008).

These class meetings were used to identify the problem or challenge and ask students for suggestions on solving the issue. It would be during these times that students would suggest “guidelines” for classroom behavior. As the semester progressed, and specific incidents occurred, more guidelines were added or expanded (Appendix D).

At one point in November, the guidelines were rewritten and identified as “rights and responsibilities” (Appendix E). I missed the initial discussion which occurred on a day I was not observing; however, in talking with Mr. Bell, he explained that his goal was to balance the power in the classroom and to encourage social responsibility and
solve their dilemmas in a more productive way. Students were still seeing the guidelines as the rules: be safe, be nice. But Mr. Bell wasn’t sure if they saw the responsibility they had as a member of the classroom community, and did they actually understand the purpose behind the guidelines? Mr. Bell explained,

As I was thinking about it I wondered if they see it as the classroom rules that I enforce? Or do they see it as something they owe to other people and that they also deserve . . . Do they see their responsibilities in it? (Interview, November 24, 2008)

He reportedly wanted the students to see their role in the process, that everyone has the right to be treated nicely and it was everyone’s responsibility to make that happen. It appeared Mr. Bell wanted his students to understand and solve their own problems without blaming others. Even if someone didn’t follow the rules, they still had the right to be treated nicely. Mr. Bell explained,

Some kind of saw it as other people’s problems or my rule to enforce and kids were saying, if they don’t do I should put them in time out. And I’m like, wait a second here; “they have the right to be treated nicely. And you wrote up here [pointing to the paper on the board] that it’s a shared job to help people.” So I thought about what is it that they are not seeing here. And I think what the key piece was, were they seeing being treated nicely, being in a safe place, and getting help when you need it as rights? And then also were they seeing their role in it? Are they seeing what their responsibilities are to keep it that way for everyone? (Interview, November 24, 2008)
Mr. Bell also explained that he wanted students to have as much power as they were able to handle and be successful with. He wanted them to take responsibility for their actions, and for their interactions with others.

Some students needed to understand that they don’t always immediately get what they want, while other students needed boundaries to help them self-regulate appropriate behaviors. Mr. Bell balanced the power in the classroom, by putting some of the control in the hands of his students. “You have a responsibility to listen politely, and she has a right to be treated nicely” (Observation, November 21, 2008), a phrase Mr. Bell used to remind students of their responsibility in the classroom, especially during class meetings.

When problems did occur they were discussed. Mr. Bell wanted students to “solve different dilemmas that will inevitably happen in a more productive way” (Interview, November 24, 2008). He wanted his students to understand when things weren’t fair and to think differently about situations so that they might question:

Is this kid and his rights being respected, is he being treated fairly? That’s what I think is interesting, is kindergartners, they understand what it means that somebody has rights. Last week, I told Jared, you have the right to be treated nicely; you have the right to be safe and you have the right to get help when you need it. But you don’t necessarily have the right to always get what you want.

It’s kind of the initial step maybe of seeing your own responsibilities. (Interview, November 24, 2008)

When asked about the benefits of this type of approach, of sharing decisions and responsibility with his students, Mr. Bell explained that he hoped as these students
progressed through school, this experience and perspective would be beneficial and the
idea of social responsibility would serve them in many ways. When asked about the
benefits of creating this type of understanding with his students he replied,

One is they can solve their own problems, understand their own problems without
deferring to that kind of thoughtless system of someone gets blamed and someone
always gets in trouble for whatever problem and then we move on. (Interview,
November 24, 2008)

As part of implementing democratic principles in his classroom, Mr. Bell changed
the wording and the focus of his classroom guidelines to reflect his vision of what he
wanted his students to understand about interacting with each other in a common space.
Mr. Bell referred to shared values. Mr. Bell did not believe in just putting up rules. He
felt guidelines should emerge as needed based on situations that occurred in the
classroom. He also felt guidelines should be flexible. Discussion among students was
key to developing and understanding the rationale behind these guidelines. It was
another way for students to share their voice and influence decisions made in and about
the classroom.

The last four to five weeks of my research, I tape recorded several classroom
conversations initiated between the teacher and the students in an effort to accurately
describe the events that occurred during the day. The following vignette was taken from
both my observations and the tape recorded conversation that occurred in the classroom.
It was similar to other instances that had occurred during the five months of my research.
The example below starts with a monologue by Mr. Bell and ends as a conversation that he initiated with his students in order to explore a problem the class had, and then their plans to “fix it” or do it better the next time. Mr. Bell often started out in a loud firm voice, but ended up with a calm guiding voice that facilitated the students’ development of possible solutions. Within this conversation he explained his behavior and thinking to the students. This incident occurred while students were returning from the library. Students normally went to the library on Fridays but it had been moved to a Wednesday due to changes in the schedule later in the week. Mr. Bell is speaking (Tape Recorded Observation, December 3, 2008) reminding them about their rights and responsibilities.

In this room people decided that in order to have this room be the way we want it, there are three things that every person has: the right to be safe, every person has the right to be treated nicely and every person has the right to get help when needed. And right now number 2, [pointed to the paper on the board] in the hallway, didn’t happen. There were people in our school, there are other rooms, and we were rude. When we are going down the hallway, we had people running, jumping screaming. It’s not okay. It’s not nice! And if we are to have a nice room, there are responsibilities. Let me read this—this is from the afternoon classroom; they said: Responsibilities people have is to make sure everyone is being treated nicely.

One: Be helpful, try and help if someone is hurt and upset.

Two: Try to make other people happy, don’t be mean.
Three: Be polite.

Four: Don’t bother other people.

Mr. T (the janitor) was trying to clean the floors and we were in his way. There were a lot of people who didn’t even notice he was there trying to clean the floors. Unacceptable.

Five: Be kind, use kinds words and a nice voice.

Six: Listen when someone is talking.

Seven: Think about where you are—be quiet in the library, in the hallway, be as loud as you want on the playground.

Now what I am worried about is responsibilities: be kind, use kind words and a nice voice. Because I noticed, when I was telling people, trying to tell Mary, trying to tell Shane, trying to tell a few other people we were in Mr. T’s way, and that we needed to walk quietly in the hallway; and you were ignoring me, I noticed my voice changed. I said, “No talking! Two lines! Right here, right there! One line behind Michelle, One line behind Larry!” [Mr. Bell purposely raised the volume of his voice and made the tone deeper with emphasis on all words.]

My voice wasn’t as nice as I’d like it to be. I was also noticing there were other responsibilities that weren’t being taken care of. Is there anything we need to add to this list? To our responsibilities to keep this as a nice place? To make sure everyone is being treated nicely?
At this point Mr. Bell paused and then called on Brad who had his hand raised. Brad suggested walking in two straight lines. Mr. Bell then continued.

Now wait a second, do we have to have two straight lines to be polite? I’ve seen people walk safely, politely in the hallway when they were not in a line. All I ask is that you are not running and screaming.

Mr. Bell paused and then asked the rest of the class,

Do you need straight lines and no talking in order to not run and scream? Will you run and scream unless I make you walk like a robot? I am wondering can we work together on this so we don’t have to walk in two straight lines that are silent?

Mr. Bell paused but no responses were offered by students.

We are going to have to; we can’t disturb every classroom we walk by. And I would like you, I would like for us, to work together so you can talk to a friend in the hallway. I shouldn’t have to hold your hand if you are being responsible in the hallway. If you are being responsible on the carpet, I shouldn’t have to move you away. We should be able to talk, with you listening to the person who is talking, with out me moving you. I move you, and I hold your hand when you are not thinking of your responsibilities. And right now you weren’t taking care of any of them. And I had to take care of them for you. If you are in a straight silent line then I am the only one taking care of the responsibilities.

Mr. Bell then called on Jared who had his hand raised. Jared offered a suggestion of tapping people on the head.
So a good way to make sure someone is hearing, or if they are not listening, we could go like this [Mr. Bell tapped someone gently on the head with a finger] to get their attention in a nice way? Okay, so I can add, get someone’s attention in a nice way. That’s a good suggestion.

After others added their suggestions, Mr. Bell concluded the conversation.

Well, all I ask from you is to work with me; to keep it a nice place. You have responsibilities too; I shouldn’t have to hold your hand to make sure you are being a nice person. Should I? I think that is something you can do by yourself and we can do together. (Tape Recorded Observation, December 3, 2008)

I use this example to highlight the differences in Mr. Bell’s expectations of his students and what it means to be responsible and “polite.” A couple of the students’ comments suggested they were already socialized to walking in two lines with no talking when they were at school, a point that Mr. Bell contests. During this conversation Mr. Bell tried to get his students to see a different point of view: Is there more than one way to walk down the hallway? It appeared that Mr. Bell was trying to help his students develop an awareness of others around them, again focusing on how their actions impacted those around them. This awareness of others appeared to be a continuous theme that was heard in many of Mr. Bell’s conversations with his students. Based on many different conversations, it appeared his focus was on encouraging his students to be responsible, to work together, and to be aware of their impact on others. He wanted the students to know they had rights, but that they also have responsibilities.
Mr. Bell used the experiences of his students to discuss appropriate and respectful behavior. Communication and discussion, what could even be considered as critical reflection, were initiated and scaffolded by Mr. Bell. He wanted his students to be aware, he wanted them to be able to evaluate their own actions and make the necessary adjustments so when they were in a similar situation again, they would be able to act appropriately and in a manner that was considerate of others, a manner that exhibited responsible actions.

**Interpretation of problem solving and peer interaction.** By involving his students in the process of developing classroom rights and responsibilities, Mr. Bell provided opportunities for his students to take control of how their classroom functioned. He encouraged his students to be aware of how their own actions affected others. He did not want his students blindly following rules just for the sake of doing what someone else tells them. He wanted his students to think about their choices. He wanted students to understand the purpose of guidelines. It was their responsibility to make the class a nice and safe place. They had a right to be treated nicely but also a responsibility to treat others with the same respect and to help their peers. Mr. Bell also explained that just because someone did not follow a rule, it did not make them a bad person; it was just a bad choice. He wanted students to look beyond the behavior and realize that the person is still a good person. He wanted students to question whether or not people were being treated fairly. It appeared that by focusing on autonomy, deliberative problem-solving, and developing and sustaining a classroom of “trust,” Mr. Bell created a classroom environment for children’s growth and development.
Students need opportunities to think for themselves as they construct their own perspectives about the people around them. This type of interactive problem solving I believe develops mutual respect, cooperation, equity, and empathy. Sharing the power of decisions with students provides opportunities for students to think, to be aware of others. It is a way of thinking and living that values self-learning and the unique strengths each student brings to the classroom. It is an intentional sensitivity towards diversity; of understanding the morals and values that our students bring to the classroom (Devries & Zan, 1994). These interactive discussions allow for multiple views to emerge and be valued. This type of discussion also helps students become aware of their own actions and how it impacts others. Through this process, understanding is facilitated and in turn supports the positive social-emotional climate of the classroom where diversity is valued.

When conflicts and problems did occur in Mr. Bell’s classroom the students were not just “punished” but explored and discussed until an acceptable solution for all parties had been implemented. His process of negotiating, and communicating with his students, suggested that it is important for teachers to take the time to understand the interactions in their classroom and to facilitate problem solving strategies that support and nurture the social-emotional climate of the classroom. When situations do occur, students need to be involved in finding a solution. When students are involved and problems are discussed, it creates a greater awareness and allows the teacher to understand the situation from the students’ perspective. As adults we often impose our own views or interpretations on situations that happen. Students have different views, and if we do not ask them about
the situation, we may misinterpret the situation. Mr. Bell valued both their voice and their perspective.

Developing problem solving skills, learning to critically think about situations, and encouraging students to support their peers provide the opportunity to consider and understand multiple perspectives. This ability to see other viewpoints will hopefully become a life long skill, a necessary skill as our society becomes more diverse. It is a process that encourages students to understand the situation before blaming or judging others. I believe problem solving, even at this young level, is a core component of democracy where people work together for the common good of all in a community. It is a process that shares power and promotes understanding as well as equity. In Mr. Bell’s classroom this process as it was initiated through his teacher-student interactions promoted a caring community of students who took responsibility for each other and created a positive social-emotional climate for learning, socially as well as academically.

**Deliberative Pedagogical Beliefs**

According to Eisner (2002) the artistry of teaching refers to the ability of teachers to use their professional beliefs and creativity to initiate learning experiences based on the students’ interests and curiosities about the world around them. It allows students to explore and take risks as one learns. In Mr. Bell’s classroom, his beliefs are foundational to his interactions, interactions that are grounded in human experience that creates a holistic application of learning; what Aoki (2005) referred to as authentic teaching where, “Good teachers are more than they do; they are the teaching” (p. 196). In this section of the chapter I examine the beliefs held by Mr. Bell and the theorists behind those beliefs.
His beliefs in “Curriculum wisdom” (Henderson & Kesson, 2004) along with his own personal experiences strongly influence his interactions with his students. It is these beliefs that explain why Mr. Bell teaches in the manner that he does.

In most cultures, one’s beliefs provide guidelines for one’s actions. What one considers important often emerges from one’s moral values and experiences. For Mr. Bell, it appeared that his beliefs in democratic principles strongly influenced his actions in the classroom. Conversations about his background and how he has grown as a professional were first examined during my pilot study. Further conversations during this case study examined the beliefs he currently holds. Through these conversations I was able to examine some of Mr. Bell’s experiences and beliefs which were foundational to his teaching pedagogy. These beliefs were deliberately implemented into his interactions with students even though these beliefs (and interactions) differed from others in his building and district, causing a self-reported dissension which is explained in detail later in this chapter.

At the beginning of his career, Mr. Bell knew he wanted to work with children in some context. “Because of a few experiences with coaching and working at a park center with kids, I decided that I enjoyed being with children more than I enjoyed the prospect of sitting in a cubical” (Interview, February, 27, 2008). Pre-service teaching experiences throughout his undergraduate teacher education program provided field work that “opened my mind to what teaching could be, especially in early childhood education” (Interview, February, 27 2008), said Mr. Bell. At that point in time, Mr. Bell
explained that he had not really thought about why he did what he was doing and that it took a couple years to develop that kind of introspection.

I think it kind of developed over time, especially being submerged into traditional, typical, school culture for my first job. I never really thought I fit into it, and I always kind of felt my belief systems or beliefs about children and teaching and learning were different from what I guess you call the norm here [current school] ... I didn’t really think it through to the point of, what about my professional identity in the sense of my purpose as a teacher was different from theirs, or why these things that I believed about how schools could be or should be, why they were so significant in the big picture. (Interview, February 27, 2008)

Mr. Bell explained that he had not thought much about his professional identity until he started exploring his own memories of school during his graduate work. “More [significance and depth] came out through my graduate work when I was working on my master’s degree [which is] where I really gave careful consideration to who am I in this mess of things” (Interview, February 27, 2008).

At the beginning of this case study, Mr. Bell was beginning his ninth year as a teacher and his first year as a part-time doctoral student. He had also been participating in a “Curriculum Leadership Institute” program sponsored by a local university the previous summer. Mr. Bell would be the first one to say he still continues to develop his professional identity and beliefs each year he teaches. When asked about successfully blending his philosophy and ideas with his classroom teaching, he responded, “I think it
As stated earlier, Mr. Bell felt he did not fit in to a traditional school culture and that his beliefs were different from others in the classrooms. He also added that at his school there were “a lot of the traditional behaviorist approaches” of the “formal nature” that the “older teachers really felt were necessary” (Interview, February 27, 2008). When he first started teaching, Mr. Bell reported that he had not yet thought much about the larger social issues of education or the individual lives of his students, but knew he had a different perspective about education.

I was a 20-year-old guy teaching kindergarten so I don’t think anyone really expected me to have much in common with a 55-year-old lady across the hall but at the same time I think it was kind of deeper philosophically. (Interview, February 27, 2008)

His philosophy and beliefs about teaching continued to develop as he gained experience teaching and took advantage of professional development. Data from my interviews and conversations identified the theorists that influenced his beliefs about educating young children and the need for continued conversations that focused on his professional growth as well as what was best for the students in his classroom. Mr. Bell explained that his graduate course work led to a greater exploration of his beliefs and practices as a classroom teacher, taking him to a level of deeper thinking about why he teaches in a particular way.
Curriculum wisdom. Conversations about Mr. Bell’s kindergarten class during my five months of research led to discussions about theorists, courses he was taking as a new graduate student in the Curriculum and Instruction doctoral program at the local university, and books he had been reading. Some books he talked about were required reading for his graduate course work. Other books were recommended by professors or other colleagues in his classes. It appeared that these different resources helped Mr. Bell examine his own beliefs and classroom practices.

It was evident from the interviews and conversations that his professional knowledge developed over time and that continuing education at the graduate level impacted his understanding of curriculum theory and critical reflection. These changes impacted the way Mr. Bell thought about his teaching. He considered different perspectives and was always looking for ways to improve his own understanding and interactions with his students. Mr. Bell reported many of his interactions were based on his beliefs of theorists who supported democratic principles and social interaction which included multiple perspectives and valuing the voice of students.

Mr. Bell said he was always interested in learning more—he always wondered if there was more to know. It seemed like each weekend he read another book. Mondays when I would arrive, he would ask if I had read a certain author or book and then proceed to tell me about the book that he just read. Mr. Bell noted that he wanted to read as much as possible. Mr. Bell talked about reading Eisner’s (2002) book for one course and talked about the artistry of teaching. In another course he read Hyun’s (2006) work on “teachable moments.” Watson and Ecken’s (2003) work on building trust, R. W. Greene
(2008) on behavioral challenges in the classroom, and Palmer (2007) who explored teachers’ lives and work were just a few elective reading choices. Other readings he mentioned focused on curriculum theorists and various educational philosophies such as Noddings (2005) and Foucault (MacNaughton, 2005). Over the semester, he mentioned several different theorists during our various conversations, so at the end of my research I asked Mr. Bell to list those he found influential. He presented me with the following names: Jim Henderson, John Dewey, Elliot Eisner, Nel Noddings, Fred Korthagen, Neil Postman, Noam Chomsky, Carl Rogers, Alain Badiou, Michel Foucault, and Jean Paul Sartre.

Conversations identified Dewey as a strong influence over much of Mr. Bell’s thinking about democratic practices in the classroom. Dewey promoted the concept of teachers as life-long learners who continually modified and changed their teaching practices, and incorporated social interaction for the good of the learning community (Tanner, 1997), a key component observed in Mr. Bell’s teacher-student interactions. However, the theorist that Mr. Bell reported most strongly influenced his current beliefs was Henderson.

Dr. Henderson is a well known professor of Curriculum and Instruction as well as an accomplished writer with several books and publications at a Midwestern university. Mr. Bell participated in a curriculum leadership group during the previous summer which was facilitated by Dr. Henderson. At the end of my research, I realized the impact this program had on Mr. Bell’s beliefs and teaching practices and decided I needed more clarification about his participation in this group, so I asked Mr. Bell to
describe how he became involved in this group and its influence on his thinking and teaching. Mr. Bell emailed me his response and how he has used this information in his own teaching.

The curriculum leadership institute advances a democratic alternative to the Tyler Rationale. I became involved because I read and was fascinated by Henderson’s Reflective Artistry book [2001] and Henderson & Gornik TCL (Teacher Curriculum Leadership) 3rd edition [2007] just before beginning doctoral studies. My role has been to provide a concrete example of a creative enactment of Henderson’s conception of TCL that has impacted my kindergarten students. My participation in the group has shaped my thinking that my life as a kindergarten teacher and as a doctoral student is interwoven. The group now often refers to Shade’s “Habits of Hope.” The four interrelated habits of TCL are study, reconceptualizing, systemic deliberation, and a “for all” ethical fidelity. Any creative enactments that occur in my classroom are informed by these four habits and my experiences teaching greatly impact my cultivation of these four habits. I’ve also always considered these “habits of hope” to be a natural way of being and learning. This is why, in my mind, Henderson’s conception of TCL is carried out intuitively by many good teachers and why so many children are intelligently resilient to unjust and undemocratic “institutions of power/knowledge” (Foucault, discipline and punishment). (Email communication, May 29, 2009)

Interviews and conversations indicated that Mr. Bell’s beliefs were strongly impacted by Henderson’s work and ideas. “He’s such a different thinker, and he’s so
unique but yet he’s so practical” (Conversation, October 28, 2008). Mr. Bell then referred to the content of his course work with Henderson.

With all of these kinds of intellectual exercises, you know playing with curriculum theorists and different models and ideas, I’m just, I’m really interested. You know I see Henderson’s work as kind of being the big picture of everything. It’s the study of everything So how does that translate into early childhood into the classroom? I’m wondering is there a way, you know to frame it? (October 28, 2008)

Mr. Bell talked about a perspective that he worked on over the summer with Dr. Henderson and a classmate. The two students were playing with three perspectives that had been developed by Henderson which were labeled and drawn in a three-dimensional representation: horizontal, vertical, and diagonal. These directional labels referred to an intersection of practical reflection and deliberation, self-exploration, inspiration, and fidelity. Mr. Bell explained that one needed to be aware of multiple perspectives and be aware as to which identity one used to view a particular situation. At the intersection of all three was “where all truth, all understanding develops from,” said Mr. Bell (Conversation, October 28, 2008).

The following was Mr. Bell’s explanation of his view of the multiple perspectives which he began exploring during the summer with the leadership group. It was a concept he explained to me and then referred back to during our conversations in his classroom.

We [he and a classmate] wanted to play with Henderson’s vertical-horizontal. I said it’s like; I can see it as a cube that has all of these explosions (Appendix C)
and what I’m interested in with those explosions, is the three person narrative which one you’re operating with and which one you’re cognizant of . . . Practical reflection, deliberation and I separated that out using Sartre’s being and not beingness. You have to have a certain amount of being in the present to know what’s going on or to even be aware of your current circumstances but then, if you’re going to really have thoughtful deliberation you need to remove yourself from it and think. And you know, even when you think about it that way, like what I call Socrates being and not beingness; or a past with a history of inquiry and knowledge, and understanding versus innovation in the future. Then you have inspiration versus fidelity of acting upon what we’re inspired by. You know, this is three dimensional, a three person narrative. You know, we live in a three dimensional world. It’s just infinite connections and they’re all meshed together and they all intertwine, but then they all have to work together to bring out the practical. I think it means that, that there are three disciplinary major questions that are being asked about self-examination, deliberation, and inquiry. But then also, on top of that I think it looks at perspective taking. You know, always asking who’s being represented? (Conversation, October 28, 2008)

As a result of this perspective Mr. Bell viewed the school as being limited in their perspective; one that was shallow and lacked meaning. He talked about the different voices or perspectives being taken away.

I think that’s kind of how I want to frame it. What’s being sliced away? And you know, I’m arguing it could even be the depth of our education system. That third
person narrative, the depth of it is sliced away. You know, there is no diagonal.
There is no self-examination. You know, and even the verticality of it goes very shallow. (Conversation, October 28, 2008)

Mr. Bell recalled another point that Henderson had brought up in class. “It’s up to you what you do with your scholarship . . . Does this open up inquiry or does this stop the conversation,” rephrased Mr. Bell. In referring to his own practices in the classroom, Mr. Bell described the need to continue to explore and understand these multiple perspectives. “Kind of like the complicated conversation [referring to Pinar, another theorist], you can never quit inquiring. You can never quit asking” (Conversation, October 28, 2008).

Mr. Bell shared another focus of Henderson’s work that impacted his beliefs. The other cool thing about Henderson, is his interest in the Greek philosophies and philosophy in general. My first time really meeting him and hearing him he was, he kept referring to the ancient Greeks and their love of wisdom and how only the gods can be wise. All we can do is love wisdom and like, pretty much through this continued cycle it just keeps coming back. I remember he closed the session with, and then we’re back to all we have as human beings is love. Love of wisdom, that’s all we have to offer. You know, that’s all, that’s up to us and you know, and it was a really powerful closing to this session he had at AAACS [American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies conference] and there was like a panel he was with and like all of the big guys, like Pinar was part of it and you know, I’m fascinated with him [Henderson] because I think
whatever practicality it is, all you can do is continue inquiry, it’s a continuous process. (Conversation, October 29, 2008)

According to Henderson and Kesson (2004) wisdom in one’s teaching often requires qualitative dimensions that tend to be missing. Values, aesthetics, justice, and meaning need to be part of a teacher’s curriculum decision; it is a process, a way of living based on morals. Educators need to “integrate the subject matter learning into democratic self and social learning . . . educators should be encouraging their students to be both smart and good” (Henderson & Kesson, p. 11).

For Mr. Bell, it was important to integrate democratic and reflective practices when utilizing professional judgment in the classroom, a combination of interactions that were frequently observed in Mr. Bell’s classroom. Mr. Bell, in a unique manner, integrated students’ interests and experiences into the required curriculum. He was aware of the students’ needs that went beyond the academic expectations of a traditional classroom. It was a balanced approach that integrated subject matter, the student, and social learning advocated by Henderson and Kesson (2004). This balanced approach was what Mr. Bell incorporated into his classroom.

My findings support the fact that Mr. Bell reconceptualized the big ideas and the subject matter of the required school curriculum and implemented them through the use of an emergent curriculum based on the interests and needs of his students. His pedagogical artistry combined his professional knowledge and beliefs to present a holistic approach to his teaching. These purposeful and authentic teacher-student interactions
helped to create a caring classroom climate that was nurtured through democratic practices which promoted social responsibility.

**Critical reflection.** Mr. Bell appeared to reflect on and question what he did in the classroom in an effort to take theory and implement it into his teaching practices. He questioned his teaching pedagogy and beliefs in an effort to improve his interactions as well as his own understanding of what it means to be a caring teacher who constructs his classroom around the needs of his students. Henderson (1992) explained that reflective teachers are educators who look at teaching as more than a job, more than just teaching subject matter, more than being content specialists. Reflective teachers often examine their own “theoretical assumptions and practices” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 211). Later, Brookfield wrote, “Creating connections between educational processes, students’ experiences of learning, and what they feel are important concerns in their lives becomes a guiding principle” (p. 42). According to both Henderson (1992) and Brookfield (1995) this line of reflective inquiry leads pedagogically to democratic practices.

Observations and conversations indicate that for Mr. Bell teaching was more than a job; it was his passion. According to Mr. Bell it was important for him to go beyond teaching the academics and to also support the social-emotional lives of his students as unique individuals.

You know [as a teacher] you are responding to them, you’re reacting to them, but are you hearing them well enough to respond to them in a meaningful way? Do I have an understanding of the classroom climate in here well enough to respond to it in a meaningful way? (Conversation, November 6, 2008)
He wanted to understand his students and grow in his own professional understanding by critically reflecting on his teacher-student interactions and beliefs that impacted what he did and why. He reported that he does not consider himself an all-knowing expert but that there was always more to learn.

I guess I’m critical of myself in terms of always thinking and rethinking how I am responding to kids, why I did it, what I like and what I don’t like. You know, seeing the classroom community as being a big priority of mine, an idea of wanting to engage in conversations with young children about what are their rights and responsibilities. Not wanting to be permissive and have an anything goes classroom culture, but at the same time, wanted to empower children . . . I need to keep questioning myself. (November 24, 2008)

During my research in his classroom, Mr. Bell initiated conversations before and after school, during gym time, recess, and even a few minutes while students were working independently in the classroom. He shared his beliefs and often questioned in our conversations what he was doing and why. As the researcher, my role during these conversations shifted from a passive observer to an active participant as I listened and questioned his views as we discussed various matters related to curriculum theory, child development, and classroom practices that supported the student in a positive manner.

Early in this research we talked about his beginning the doctoral program at a near by university. This was one of the many conversations we had in which we discussed what he was learning from his courses and related readings. This new knowledge of curriculum theory and practice appeared to encourage a deeper reflection on what he was
currently doing with his own kindergarten students. In one particular conversation, Mr. Bell related what he had learned in one class and how it impacted his thinking about his current kindergarten class.

Discussing scholarship at the graduate level, encouraged Mr. Bell to reflect on the process of how his learning experiences paralleled the learning experiences of his kindergartners, a process he labeled as “Kindergarten Scholarship” (September 15, 2008). He talked about infusing democratic principles into their education and using problem solving strategies with his young students on a level that treats the students as intellectuals. Through this process students learned to: understand and share multiple perspectives, listen to their voices, collaborate, and be respectful of others’ ideas.

The term “Kindergarten Scholarship” may have been a new label by Mr. Bell, but he had already incorporated many of those practices into his interactions which I previously observed in the spring of 2008 during my pilot study as well as in this case study during the fall of 2008. His goal was to model the practices he was learning about with his students in an effort to help them understand and interact with others in an appropriate manner, creating what might be referred to as a democratic community, a process that transferred theory into practice.

Observations, conversations, and interviews supported the findings that Mr. Bell did use his professional judgment in the classroom and he did integrate democratic and reflective practices on a daily basis. Mr. Bell continually reflected on and questioned what he did in the classroom in an effort to take theory and implement it into his teaching practices. He explained that he constantly questioned what he did in an effort to
improve his interactions as well as his own understanding of what it means to be a caring
teacher who constructs his classroom around the needs of his students.

Mr. Bell did report that he was also aware that the school system was often
influenced by the powers that are present in society. He often disagreed with school
policies and wanted to discuss his views but no one seemed willing to engage in what Mr.
Bell identified as “critical conversations.” Mr. Bell reported that some of the other
teachers appeared fearful of disagreement and avoided his conversations of questioning
policies and practices. Mr. Bell continued talking about a teachers (in general) need to
have a sense of purpose or a certain set of values to guide his or her interactions.

One of the major problems in education is when critical reflection isn’t there;
there isn’t a place for it or it’s not welcome. Then all we have is tradition and
policy and it’s just kind of a narrow view of teaching. (Interview, November 24,
2008)

Mr. Bell reported feeling isolated at his school because he had no colleagues that
shared the same passion for understanding theory and how it informed his practices.
According to Mr. Bell, outside of one special education teacher, no one was willing to
engage in reflective dialogue.

Mr. Bell reported that several of the teachers told him the first few years that he
was treated differently. He said they quoted “gender” as one reason for him being able to
do things that others “would be put to more careful scrutiny than me” (Interview,
February 27, 2008). Mr. Bell added that he does not expect everyone to be like-minded,
but that he does “approach my differences differently. I just go do what I decided to do.”
When asked about discussing differences or opportunities to collaborate with other teachers in his building Mr. Bell responded,

I think most teachers in the building either, because of the difference in grade level or whatever else, they see what we [kindergarten] do as so different. The other kindergarten staff here isn’t really interested in the kind of reflection that I am interested in. (Interview, February 27, 2008)

The other kindergarten staff member was also a male, which negated the issue of gender.

During the pilot study Mr. Bell spoke about how most teachers have had positive experiences and never had to struggle through the educational system. They think the system is fine the way it is. They do not question school policy or practices and there is no need to improve the system or themselves. Mr. Bell added,

You know it’s frustrating sometimes to work with teachers who say they don’t read. Or they look at continuing education as the quickest, easiest, cheapest way to get their hours to renew their license, you know. I guess with those approaches, tradition and policy is the best you can do. (Interview, February 27, 2008)

My data identified Mr. Bell as a critically reflective educator who was continually thinking about what he did in the classroom. With his recent beginnings in graduate work, it appeared he was thinking carefully about his teacher-student interactions and was deconstructing and reconstructing his beliefs about what best supported the students in his classroom. Towards the end of my research I asked how this new perspective had changed his thinking about children, education, and teaching. He responded,
Well and I think it’s something that it’s always being deconstructed. You know and it’s always in the front of my mind and in the back of my mind. I guess it’s kind of critical of myself in terms of, you know, always thinking and rethinking how I’m responding to kids . . . I need to keep questioning myself. And it’s time to be concerned if I feel like I’ve figured out young children or figured out kindergarten or figured out teaching. (Interview, November 24, 2008)

In our final conversation, I asked Mr. Bell about opening the door and inviting other teachers into the process of collaboration. He reported that it would be a process that would take time because trust needed to be established in order for a group to comfortably discuss critical issues. However, he was not sure anyone would want to put in the effort or time, or even had the interest to participate. As an alternative, he said he would talk with colleagues that were attending the same graduate courses and he would continue reading. He also reported that he would continue to reflect on his own work and interactions with his students in an effort to create a classroom climate that supported the social-emotional lives of his students.

Reflecting on one’s practices is a critical component in understanding and improving one’s teaching. For Mr. Bell continuing to learn and educate himself was important. Data suggest having a theoretical background that encourages critical reflection increases one’s depth of understanding in the field of education. As a researcher, I believe it was his critical reflective stance that sets him apart from other teachers. His professional knowledge about theory and practice had a depth of understanding that surpasses many teachers I know. His willingness to continually
improve for the sake of providing authentic and holistic experiences for his students’ educational journey was characteristic of his pedagogical artistry.

**Lived experiences.** Mr. Bell first identified the lack of reflective conversations at his school during my pilot study. At that point I asked why he perceived his beliefs and interactions as different from the majority of the teachers at this school. It was a conversation that repeated itself during another interview in the fall of 2008. Asked what influenced his beliefs, Mr. Bell explained his experiences and reasons for thinking differently about his teaching.

> Well, I think for a lot of reasons, I think one reason is my child and personal experiences. I think my experiences as a child were different from everyone here. I think I’m the only staff member that got into trouble as a kid. I think I am the only one I know that hated school K-12. You know, choosing it as a major then as a profession I think I am one of the few that made that decision hoping to try something different. Thinking school could be better than what I experienced. . . For me I guess I didn’t, never really trusted the policy or embraced the tradition. (Interview, February 27, 2008)

Mr. Bell explained that it took awhile to become comfortable teaching at a school where his methods were different, but he reported that he knew his methods were pedagogically sound and supported by current theory and research. Fortunately during his undergraduate work, Mr. Bell had the opportunity to collaborate with a skilled mentor who had a strong foundation in project-based teaching that focused on the natural emergence of the child’s curiosity to learn.
I had a chance to work in a classroom with Ms. Kline who was very comfortable with emergent curriculum, project-based learning; very comfortable with kind of, I guess you say, letting the structure fall away, pursuing the interests of the children. So I think that kind of helped me be in the mind set—or remind me of that mind set of—more constructivist based learning approach. I think I am more comfortable just negotiating in my own mind. You know the first few years in teaching you see so many things across the hall and down the hall. And other teachers telling you so many things about what you should be doing and I think, your first, or at least for me, my first and second year, that I think I second guessed myself more. Now I know the curriculum well enough to know, or I know the formal curriculum well enough to know and feel comfortable and confident that I can follow their [students’] interests and still meet those academic standards. (Interview, September 29, 2008)

Mr. Bell reported that his own past experiences were a starting point for questioning policies and dealing with student issues from a different perspective. Mr. Bell’s own personal experiences of challenging the school system reportedly played a role in his awareness of the power issues and struggles that students face when constraints limit or try to control their individual lives. It appeared Mr. Bell was comfortable voicing his perspective or raising difficult question and truly exploring whether or not his teaching practices authentically met the needs of his students.

I asked Mr. Bell to explain his experiences that supported his view of young children and their behavior: why knowing his students was important to him. Having his
own negative experiences in school, Mr. Bell shared his challenges of being the student
that would just get through. “I kind of bought into the dumb jock think, you know, and
C’s. I mean I had people telling me, ‘those are smart kids, and this is you.’ I was the big
dumb guy, you know?” (Conversation, October 28, 2008)

Mr. Bell then shared a story about one physics teacher who saw through his
attitude and behavior and explained to him that he was very capable of figuring things out
on his own and becoming a much better student. This was a teacher Mr. Bell trusted and
had a good relationship with because of a sports related interest. The teacher explained
that he suspected Mr. Bell never took a book home and probably never studied. This
teacher was also aware that Mr. Bell slept through half of his physics classes; yet Mr.
Bell was still able to debate, argue, and figure things out in class. He explained that even
though he may not have done well on the tests, he was probably smarter than most of the
other students in the physics class.

He goes “sooner or later you’re not gonna be a basketball player anymore.
Sooner or later, the dumb jock thing’s gonna get old.” He goes and “I just want
you to know you can hang with whoever you want. It’s just up to you whether
you decide when and how you decide to do it.” And you know, it was really cool,
you know to know this (that he was smart). I didn’t realize that. I truly accepted
what I was hearing from him. (Conversation, October 28, 2008)

This example showed the importance of making connections and building relationships.
For Mr. Bell, finding a teacher with a common connection beyond the classroom helped
build a sense of trust, something Mr. Bell strives for in his classroom.
As a result of his own lived experiences, Mr. Bell appears to be sensitive to his students’ individual interests and needs. In response to his own struggles, Mr. Bell added,

When you had to struggle to get through school as a student you have experiences. You have interactions that you draw on; what you should or should not do as a teacher when you have struggling students. So you tend to understand those struggling students a little bit more and you tend to at least try and find ways, either alternative ways with them to share their knowledge or help make them shine whatever their strengths are . . . At least I can relate to them because I have been a 5-year-old little boy who got in trouble. I have been a 5-year-old little boy with a smart mouth and a mind of my own. (Interview, February 27, 2008)

Based on his lived experiences and beliefs, it appeared Mr. Bell had a broader perspective about what was important when he interacted with his students. As a critically reflective teacher, he viewed situations from multiple perspectives. He tried to see the situation from various points of view; his point of view as the teacher, the child’s point of view as the student, and the point of view from the class perspective. Based on my observations it appeared his goal was to be responsive to the individual needs of his students socially as well as academically.

Mr. Bell’s lived experiences, focus on reflective thinking, and the influence of certain curriculum theorists appeared to be strong underpinnings for the beliefs that influenced his teacher-student interactions. The interconnectedness of his interactions
and beliefs appeared to create a complexity to his teaching that went beyond the basic academics, beyond basic content knowledge. As both Henderson (1992) and Brookfield (1995) wrote, being a reflective educator who is concerned about positively impacting the lives of his students often leads to the implementation of democratic practices. Observations support this point. Mr. Bell’s beliefs were expressed through democratic practices that involved: sharing power and control, encouraging problem solving, promoting respectful interactions and peer support. When asking Mr. Bell to define democratic principles and what it meant to him, Mr. Bell responded:

To me, my definition of democracy is just the whole idea of “for the people by the people.” I consider me to be the leader of a democratic classroom. The leader of a democratic system I guess you’d call it. Then, I need to be for them [the students] and also led by them. There has to be a level of freedom . . . without freedom or without voice there’s no democracy . . . They learn from the choices they make. And they learn what is and isn’t acceptable based on what is or isn’t respected or respectful. (Interview, October 28, 2008)

My initial observations support the findings that democratic practices were foundational to Mr. Bell’s teacher-student interactions. Implementing democratic practices through his teacher-student interactions provided learning opportunities that went beyond the required academic skills. These interactions combined with his beliefs led to the development of a pedagogy that supported the social-emotional climate of his classroom. Teaching and modeling social skills allowed students to become socially
responsible and aware of the needs of others. These teacher-student interactions provided a climate that supported learning. As Mr. Bell mentioned in one of our final interviews, 

It all goes back to the adult meeting the needs of the child. Taking care of the social and emotional needs first because that’s when learning can really take place at an optimal level. You can’t necessarily do it the other way around. (Interview, December 15, 2008)

**Interpretation of Mr. Bell’s pedagogical beliefs.** The integration of Mr. Bell’s theoretical perspectives and beliefs about young children support a pedagogy that focuses on the needs of his students. His pedagogical thoughtfulness is based on his own experiences as well as interfacing with the work of Henderson and Kesson (2004) where practical wisdom is blended with a love of wisdom; this leads him to consider the art of inquiry and a focus on the possibilities of the democratic good life. It is an educational journey that Mr. Bell voluntarily and enthusiastically entered into to allow him to exercise human judgment and moral sensibility on the teacher level, just as he was teaching and guiding the children in his classroom. Authentic interaction between Mr. Bell and his students created a reciprocal sense of shared power and educational opportunities. Clearly, this angle also supports the democratic practices that I found integral to his belief system.

**Interactions with Colleagues**

Mr. Bell perceived his beliefs about what was important for his students as different from several of the staff members in his building. As a result of these perceived differences, Mr. Bell felt he did not fit in with the teachers in his building, and therefore
did not feel he had anyone with which to discuss his teaching practices and beliefs. According to Mr. Bell several of his co-workers followed the traditional practices of a behaviorist classroom. There were a couple teachers whom he considered to have a constructivist approach but he did not feel they include the social-emotional needs of the students. Data support the conclusion that for Mr. Bell the social-emotional needs of the student came first, then the academics. This belief about what was “best” for students led to a self-reported conflict in teaching methodology with some staff members in his building as well as a couple intervention administrators with whom he had contact. Mr. Bell attributed these differences of beliefs to his disagreement with behaviorist practices and theory.

**The need for critical colleagues.** Whereas Mr. Bell reported feeling some isolation, he reported a similar situation with a colleague of his who taught in a different school district. This teacher also implemented a constructivist-based pedagogy in a school where other teachers taught with strict behaviorist methods of punishment and reward. Mr. Bell reported that his colleague felt she “stuck out like a sore thumb” (Conversation, November 9, 2008).

With Sarah, at her school it was sometimes a drastic difference. It was very behaviorist oriented people that didn’t mesh with her. Where here I think there are some strong constructivist teachers, it’s just, I don’t know. I don’t really know how to interact with the community here; at least the teaching community. I just don’t really have a place—not really a collegial community. You know what I mean? It’s not that I disagree that drastically. I think a lot of it is that the
constructivist teachers here aren’t comfortable with having a voice. You know?

(Conversation, November 9, 2008)

Mr. Bell felt he was in a similar situation where his pedagogy was different from the others in his building, but he was willing to speak up when he disagreed with policies or practices that were implemented in his school. Based on his comments, this willingness to disagree with the “traditional” practices made others feel uncomfortable; but he reportedly wanted others to try and see his point of view, to make some attempt to understand his perspective. There was one special education teacher Mr. Bell said he was comfortable talking with and was able to share his frustrations and differences of opinion. This teacher had had several students placed in Mr. Bell’s class for inclusion purposes over the past several years.

During my research in Mr. Bell’s room, she occasionally stopped in to visit Mr. Bell and checked to see how her students were doing. At times they would discuss the challenges with the school intervention programs and administrative policies. These two teachers occasionally disagreed over certain issues but sought to understand each other’s view points through questioning one another. One conversation reported by Mr. Bell happened in the office with the principal near by. The principal asked them if there was a problem and if they needed to step into her office to settle their differences. Apparently the principal was worried because they were disagreeing on some point. Mr. Bell did not elaborate but explained that their conversation made the principal very uneasy, although the two of them were very comfortable with their conversation. For Mr. Bell he reported that he did not see anything wrong with disagreeing with someone else’s point of view.
and for him it was a way to understand another person’s perspective. Mr. Bell and his colleague had a strong, professional relationship and valued each other’s viewpoint. For Mr. Bell, it appeared that these conversations with this colleague were one of the few opportunities he had for critical reflection.

I observed Mr. Bell talking to different teachers at different times, but the depth of the conversation did not appear enough for Mr. Bell. Based on our conversations, he was interested in having critical colleagues with whom he could examine and discuss different theories and perspectives as they related to education, and more importantly to teaching and students. According to Mr. Bell, in-depth conversations and critical reflection were lacking at his school. He was willing to explain his pedagogy and why he had a different foundational perspective, but his comments led me to believe that no one was interested; no one was willing to take time to understand his constructivist viewpoint that focused on the social-emotional climate of his classroom. As I examine later in this section, Mr. Bell was often considered “unprofessional” when he expressed his perspective that differed from the majority of other staff members.

When I observed Mr. Bell’s class during my pilot study, Mr. Bell had a student teacher from a nearby university that incorporated a constructivist based pedagogy in their teacher education program. He explained that he enjoyed having student teachers because it provided an opportunity for him to talk about current theory and practice.

One reason that I enjoy having student teachers is so I have a source of collaboration. The other kindergarten staff here isn’t really interested in the kind of reflection that I am interested in . . . I don’t really like behaviorist approaches
of adult control, rules, rewards and punishments. Class meetings are kind of something I stand alone on. Interest in democracy and education with young children is something that I think I kind of stand alone on. (Interview, February 27, 2008) 

From his comments it appears that Mr. Bell feels isolated because he implements a pedagogy that for him is based on theory and research and the understanding of young children. His beliefs in a constructivist theory and democratic principles that invite students to be co-constructors of the curriculum vary from the traditional colleagues in his elementary building. It appeared to be a pedagogy that others were not interested in discussing. He confided that many of them were excellent teachers, but they did not seem to understand his passion for putting the social-emotional climate of the classroom ahead of the academic standards. Several teachers still implemented the behaviorist techniques, where Mr. Bell appealed to the interests and lived experiences of his students. He engaged the students as active participants in their own learning. He explained through many of our conversations that he does not want to control his students, but wants them to take responsibility as learners in a democratic society who can make decisions and contribute to the learning community in a respectful manner; as caring and responsible classmates. Even with this self-reported disconnect from other staff members, Mr. Bell was able to teach in the manner that he felt best met the needs of his students.

**Teaching methodology.** Mr. Bell (Conversation, October 26, 2008) admitted his freedom to teach in a manner that he chose even though it did not follow the “traditional”
methods or behaviorist methods implemented by several teachers in his building. His principal allowed him the freedom to teach in a constructivist manner, as long as he “did not cause any problems.” Further explanation by Mr. Bell identified “problems” as complaints from the parents. As long as his students mastered the appropriate skills and parents did not complain then the principal did not deny him the opportunity to teach in a manner that he felt was productive.

Some principals really rule with an iron fist. I have this rapport with Stephanie [principal]. I have some leeway. As long as I don’t rub it in her face she is happy to pretend we are on the same page. Other principals would know I disagree and would attack. (Conversation, October 26, 2008)

From what I observed as a researcher, he had very few if any problems with students, and Mr. Bell never reported any difficulties with parents. Through his implementation of democratic practices and building positive relationships with his students, there were very few behavior issues. When there were challenges with certain students Mr. Bell took the time to listen and get to know the student in an effort to identify why the behavior occurred. Then he worked with the student to change or modify the behavior. This was usually accomplished by finding a way for them to contribute to the classroom in a positive and productive manner. Jared was one such example. He was one student always striving for attention and had no awareness of appropriate social parameters. Mr. Bell integrated many ways to keep him involved. The following comments were just a couple examples of ways Mr. Bell worked with Jared.
“Jared, careful, I am worried about you down there [he was under a table]. I want to keep you safe” (Observation, October 1, 2008).

“Jared, I want to see your book, would you share it with me?” (Observation, October 8, 2008).

“Jared, you are in the right place. Now do the right thing, sitting looking and listening” (Observation, October 8, 2008), noted Mr. Bell after he asked the class to come to the carpet.

“Jared has something to share” (Observation, October 31, 2008), said Mr. Bell as the students gathered for their class meeting. Mr. Bell invited Jared to sit in the teacher chair and explain the drawing he had been working on.

“Jared, make sure you are making good choices. Let’s work together” (December 12, 2008), reminded Mr. Bell as the class was cleaning up.

My field notes indicated that Jared was one of the students who needed more attention. Mr. Bell had many conversations with Jared about his behavior, but also worked hard to bring Jared’s strengths into the classroom. He let Jared know that he was liked, but that he needed to change some of his behaviors. Over time Jared learned to become responsible for his own actions, without coercion or punishment and without confrontation. Based on my observations, Mr. Bell never sent any student to the office for behavior related issues. He did not use punishments or rewards, but worked towards developing intrinsic motivation to act in an appropriate manner because it is the right thing to do, and it makes the classroom a more pleasant place to be.
Besides having a different way of handling behavior challenges, it appeared Mr. Bell’s teaching practices and beliefs also varied from several staff members in his building. From Mr. Bell’s point of view, his teaching methodology was based on a completely different perspective than those in his building. Mr. Bell explained that when he first arrived as a first year teacher he reported that several teachers told him he was treated differently. Mr. Bell relayed that the other teachers didn’t think they would be allowed the same leeway he had. Many were not even sure how he got away with what he did, or rather did not do. Mr. Bell responded.

In terms of flexibility that I am allowed, it’s kind of more than intended by administration I am sure. But you know I cover the standards. I don’t completely ignore the course of study; it just isn’t mapped out to where I know exactly when each standard will be covered on what day and how . . . It’s just incorporated throughout the year. (Interview, November 24, 2008)

This flexibility allowed Mr. Bell to teach in a manner that supported his students, what I previously described in this chapter as an emergent curriculum. He reported others outside the classroom identified him as a “bad” teacher because he did not always agree with the traditional perspectives and he chose to teach in a manner that was different than the mainstream of the public school where he taught. From my perspective as a researcher he did not conform to the “status quo” or “the way everyone else did it.” He chose his own methodology based on theory and research that was foundational to his interactions with his students: Interactions that sustained and nurtured a positive social-
emotional climate in his kindergarten classroom, interactions that supported the education of the whole child.

**Bad teacher versus good teacher.** Because of the democratic principles and beliefs that supported Mr. Bell’s interactions with his students, he appeared to have a different perspective when discussing various practices that were implemented as part of the school structure. “I’m cautious about unintended consequences” (Interview, November 24, 2008). Mr. Bell noted in our conversations that he questioned and disagreed with some policies and requests that occurred at the building level. Two examples most apparent during my research were that Mr. Bell did not make his students walk down the halls in two perfectly quiet lines, and he did not participate in the “Character Counts” awards each month. Because he was unwilling to conform to these building-wide policies and practices, he believed he was identified by some as a bad teacher because he did not always agree with what others were doing. If he felt a policy or program was not in the best interests of his students then he chose not to participate. He did not expect his students to conform just for the sake of conformity. He did not want to be controlling but wanted his students to think about situations and learn to make good choices.

You know how I have said I make people mad, I offend people, some people think I am a pain or arrogant or whatever. The one thing I have been called frequently is unprofessional; unprofessional because I disagree. Being a nonconformist is being unprofessional. (Conversation, November 9, 2008)
Mr. Bell identified himself an “outsider” or “nonconformist” because other staff members did not seem to understand the theory or reasoning behind his actions. Mr. Bell explained his perspective.

As teachers we’re responsible for what we do and the thinking behind it. . . . You have to have theory behind it [practice]. You have to think about it and then you have to be able to admit, well, maybe I was wrong. Or maybe I need to reconsider. (Conversation, October 28, 2008)

As a result of his different teaching practices and the depth of his own theoretical knowledge and professional reflection, he felt his colleagues did not understand his perspective, nor did they want to. As reported above, Mr. Bell mentioned several times that some of the other staff members labeled him as a “bad” teacher or maybe not as good as he should be. When asked about this label, Mr. Bell responded.

I think for a lot of teachers here, the difference is personality. They are making judgments about what they think goes on in here but without really having much understanding or knowing what I am doing. For example, we [his class] talk about our responsibilities in the hallway, but at the same time I don’t enforce straight, silent lines. I have no interest in doing that. So several teachers I think see me as permissive, but at the other end of it, the interesting thing is, I put more responsibility in these kids’ hands than most second or third grade teachers put in their kids hands. (Interview, November 24, 2008)

One example that supported this issue of different expectations for the students occurred one morning as Mr. Bell’s substitute teacher took the kindergarten students to
visit another class prior to Mr. Bell returning from paternity leave. The substitute had the
students walk down the hall in two quiet lines to visit a classroom of older students. As
we walked into the room and the students found a partner, this teacher commented on
how nice and quiet the kindergartners were walking down the hall. “It won’t be that way
when Mr. Bell returns,” she said to the two of us (Observation, September, 10, 2008).

I later asked Mr. Bell to explain what the other teachers expected or what he
thought their definition of a “good” teacher would be. Mr. Bell responded,

Well, I think that’s the major difference. I don’t know if I say a lot, but several
teachers here I think see good teaching as following tradition and policy and
doing it somewhat blindly. And they see obedience and professionalism as one in
the same. Using the Indian Day as an example, [the teachers asked him], “if it’s
bad then why have we been doing it for 20 years?” And my only response was, “I
don’t know, why have you?” (November 24, 2008)

This example about “Indian Day” recalled by Mr. Bell illustrated a difference in
pedagogical beliefs between the two kindergarten teachers (as well as others in the
school). The issue that created the dissension was the traditional Thanksgiving
celebration at his school. Mr. Bell was identified as “lazy” or “not dedicated enough”
because he chose not to participate in the traditional ‘Indian Day’ [the label given by the
school] and the other kindergarten teacher told him to expect complaints from parents for
not participating. This holiday function appeared to be a tradition at this school that Mr.
Bell disagreed with even during his first year of teaching. Mr. Bell did not mind
discussing the holiday and sharing books about the holiday particularly if the topic was
initiated by the students, but as he later stated, he felt strongly about perpetuating myths about the American Indian that he perceived to be untrue.

As a researcher, I had the opportunity to be an outside observer of this celebration which occurred during one of my observation days in November shortly before Thanksgiving break. Many of the activities were set up in the hallway and music was heard through the classroom walls. Students were dressed up in Indian vests made from paper bags and wore headbands with feathers. The students spent the day rotating through various “Indian” activities and had a feast with their parents at the end of the morning. Indian songs and dances were presented using the beating of drums and verbal sounds made by patting their mouths with the palm of their hand. “Nothing authentic about it,” said Mr. Bell later that morning as we could hear the music through the walls.

During one of our interviews I asked Mr. Bell to provide more details about this conflict which he noted occurred when he first started teaching.

I got called into the office and asked to explain why I didn’t want to participate in the Indian Day, and you know really, that was the only time I really just kind of had to share my concern that it was culturally biased, and it was ethnic tokenizing of a culture, and even that it was disrespectful to a culture and you know, it kind of bothered me. I was forced into being reflective with someone who didn’t really want to be sharing collaborative reflection with me, but I was kind of forced into it in a way of either you do it my way or I am offended. It shows my greater responsibility was to what I do with my kindergartners as compared to hurting another staff member’s feelings. (Interview, November 24, 2008)
This example helped identify some of Mr. Bell’s core values about teaching, that content should be based on truth and not perpetuate myths about other cultures. “I feel completely uncomfortable with it. It feels disrespectful, not meaningful” (Conversation, November 24, 2008), noted Mr. Bell on the morning the “Indian Day” took place while I was observing. It showed that Mr. Bell’s beliefs strongly impacted his teaching and he was not willing to compromise.

A second example that was initially a source of conflict was the building wide program Character Counts. “It takes what is done and places a ‘reward’ on it,” said Mr. Bell who felt students should do things because it was the right thing to do. The related traits should be, “A way to support each other and to build a collaborative community. You shouldn’t be ‘nice’ just because you can earn a pencil. You should be ‘nice’ because it is a good way to treat other people” (November 24, 2008).

The character traits that were identified as part of the Character Counts program included: citizenship, fairness, caring, responsibility, respect, and trustworthiness. All of these traits were part of the democratic principles Mr. Bell integrated daily into his teacher-student interactions. These were traits Mr. Bell felt were important, but the dissension came when students were to be identified and rewarded for being “caring” or whatever the trait of the month was. According to Mr. Bell, these were traits that should be part of each student’s everyday interaction.

Students would be called down to the office to receive a pencil or sticker or some other small award for demonstrating the “character quality of the month.” Mr. Bell’s perspective was, if he singled out one child to receive the reward, does that mean the
others don’t or aren’t being compassionate or caring? Mr. Bell explained that these traits were things that children should “learn to do because it makes them a better person, not because someone is watching and they will get a pencil” (Interview, November 24, 2008). Mr. Bell explained his perspective.

A lot of people thought it was petty details that I was arguing about. You’ve heard them on the announcements. “Come get your pencil! Come get your pencil.” It is about the perspective of a 9-year-old. “Come get your pencil” because you were caring. Well what is so funny is that Alfie Kohn (2000) explained that as soon as we start giving an award it takes the value out of the behavior itself. (November 24, 2008)

Data suggested that Mr. Bell’s beliefs of what was important for him as a teacher led to conflict based on his personal values and professional beliefs that were the underpinnings of his teacher-student interactions. Mr. Bell was willing to raise his concerns publicly, particularly if he thought it was in the best interest of his students.

Observations indicated that Mr. Bell preferred to focus on intrinsic motivation and not external rewards. These character traits were an integrated part of Mr. Bell’s interactions as he implemented democratic practices that supported social responsibility. Unfortunately, rewarding students for behaving in a respectful manner did not fit well with Mr. Bell’s beliefs. “It has the connotation that I have to bribe you to do it because you wouldn’t otherwise do it” (Conversation, November 9, 2008). My observations support the fact that Mr. Bell’s students did not need external rewards as these characteristics were modeled and scaffolded by Mr. Bell throughout the five months of
my research and appeared to become an integral part of the classroom, individually as well as collectively. Knowing his students and establishing relationships built on trust created a classroom of students who did not need to be rewarded or punished for their behaviors.

**Interpretation of Interaction with Colleagues:**

Mr. Bell wanted students to make responsible choices as an important part of belonging to a community, not because they were rewarded. He wanted his interactions to be authentic and meaningful, to be respectful and collaborative. He wanted his relationships with his students to be built on trust and understanding. As a result he valued the knowledge and skills they brought to the class. Even though he obviously had more years of experience, he did not want to assume he was smarter than his students on all topics. Academically and socially he welcomed his students unconditionally and worked with them at their level of development on various learning topics. Every student was important and he worked diligently to support each one.

Mr. Bell felt it was his job to create a classroom that met the needs of his students; not force the students into meeting the needs of the school based on adult prescribed “rules” and “acceptable behaviors.” It was important for him to put student needs first and the needs of the building second. He did not want his students following rules that were implemented by adults for the comfort of the adults such as being quiet and sitting still. He did not want to teach compliance, but independent thinking. He wanted his students to learn to make good choices. He wanted them to consider issues of fairness, equity, and empathy.
This focus on the social-emotional climate was a priority for Mr. Bell but he reported that he believed this was not understood by other staff members or administrators. From his perspective, they did not seem to understand Mr. Bell’s theoretical perspective or the importance of nurturing an equitable and/or caring community. Part of understanding these different perspectives requires teachers who want to extend their understanding and improve their professional knowledge. Mr. Bell was willing to share his theoretical perspective and research that supported his interactions in the classroom, but he reported that few colleagues seemed interested. Willingness to share and engage in critical reflection can be a generative process leading to new understanding of diverse perspectives in the field of education. But teachers need to be willing to engage in these conversations. They have to want to understand the theory behind their practices. Mr. Bell seemed eager to have these discussions, but reported that this did not seem to be an interest of the teachers in his school.

I believe that Mr. Bell’s pedagogy required time and thoughtfulness along with a thorough understanding of child development and theory. Careful observation along with an intentional awareness of the needs of students and critical reflection are important components of his teaching philosophy and is supported by research in the field (DeVries & Zan, 1994; Dewey, 1902; Henderson, 1992; Henderson & Gornik, 2007; Henderson & Kesson, 2004; Hill, Stremmel, & Fu, 2005). Mr. Bell considered his students as the ones in control, the ones who guided the learning process, the ones who knew what they needed. It was his job to meet their needs, not to implement a standardized curriculum that he felt ignored the individuality of his students. Instead of the student fitting the
structure of the school, Mr. Bell modified his interactions to meet the needs of his students. His students were his priority. His goal was to educate the whole child and for him that meant focusing on and supporting the social-emotional competencies, in addition to the academics which were necessary for success in the early years of school.

I believe fostering social-emotional competence supports the development of a caring community, a goal that was foundational for Mr. Bell’s interactions. Teaching social skills is necessary to help our students interact in a positive manner with one another and to understand the importance of supporting their peers. Not being able to interact in a socially appropriate manner affects the ability to build relationships, and may limit educational opportunities for individuals as well as the whole class (Pianta, 1999). Most classroom challenges reported by teachers are related to problems with behavior and not academics (Watson & Ecken, 2003). We expect our young students to have mastered socially appropriate behavior before they enter our classrooms; however they often arrive with their social skills not fully developed (Denham, 2006). Mr. Bell focused on this need and as a result nurtured a class that became socially responsible and caring. He knew that social-emotional competence was a foundational skill needed in order to provide an optimum environment for academic learning. Having few if any problems to handle, he had more time to focus on the needed academics. My findings indicate that the time he took at the beginning of the semester to understand his students, build relationships, and meet their needs, provided more uninterrupted time later in the semester to focus on academics. As these students improved their social-emotional
competence, their ability to focus and engage appropriately in the learning activities also increased.

Incorporating a holistic approach such as Mr. Bell’s, supports student learning beyond cognitive processes with emotion and social interaction being an integral part of learning (Vygotsky, 1978). For Mr. Bell this holistic approach was a key component of sustaining and nurturing a positive social-emotional climate in his classroom. Mr. Bell focused on the needs of his students using a theoretical perspective that differed from the staff in his building which led to his perceived role as the “outsider.” His awareness of his students’ needs emerged from his critical reflective stance, a practice that is foundational to Henderson and Kesson’s (2004) “curriculum wisdom,” a pedagogical practice of critical reflection where Mr. Bell as the teacher continually evaluated his interactions with his students as they progressed along their educational journey as young scholars.

Implementing critical inquiry or a professional reflective stance provides an opportunity to look at one’s teaching practices and how it impacts students. Critical inquiry goes beyond the basic academics and explores the relationship between what is taught and how it affects students. Mr. Bell exemplifies this process by being intentionally aware of the needs of his students and self-reflecting on his own practices. He also engaged in critical conversations with classmates and faculty at a nearby university. These conversations provided depth to his understanding about current theory and research; a depth of knowledge that then translated into a passion for teaching his students in meaningful ways.
Teacher as Provocateur

Teaching from a critical theoretical perspective created challenges for Mr. Bell. Other teachers reportedly questioned his teaching pedagogy, but none seemed willing to engage in conversation or critical reflection. He was willing to disagree if it was in the best interest of his students even if he was labeled as “unprofessional.” It did not matter if it was an incident that involved one student or if it involved his whole class. Through our conversations he reported that his goal was to facilitate interactions that met the needs of his students and allowed his students to develop into the best possible people they could be. He wanted his students to think about what they were doing, and make good choices that were respectful and responsible. For Mr. Bell, encouraging his students to take responsibility and to care about one’s peers was more important than dressing up like Indians or naming letters on a standardized test.

Standardized testing and intervention. As a result of these beliefs that focused on the needs of the student, Mr. Bell also had a difference of opinion when it came to standardized test scores and intervention. Beginning the last couple weeks of December, tutors started pulling students out of Mr. Bell’s class for literacy intervention based on test scores. Tests had been administered the week of September 15th, the first week Mr. Bell was back in the classroom. Observations and conversations indicated that these interventions were viewed as disruptions and created frustration for Mr. Bell.

These interventions were prescribed with very little knowledge of the student and reportedly based on one test score from the beginning of the year. Students were coming and going throughout the morning disrupting the flow of the class activities. Students
were pulled out of the room in small groups or individually to drill specific skills. On some days I observed, it seemed like half the class left; eight out of 21 students were gone at one time for approximately a half hour to 45 minutes. In Mr. Bell’s opinion these interventions were pulling the students out of the very context they needed to support the development of literacy and language skills: conversation and interaction in the classroom with their peers. It appeared that Mr. Bell’s beliefs about intervention differed from those of the specialists. His view on what was best for the student did not coincide with what the school psychologist thought was appropriate.

**Outside administration and student intervention.** During my research, beliefs about what was best for students also created points of dissension with district personnel who were to be support systems for the students in the classroom, specifically the school psychologist and other intervention “specialists” who were supposed to support individual students that needed special services. Besides having several students in his room identified as needing literacy intervention, Mr. Bell had one student who needed to have a new Individual Education Plan (IEP). Based on our conversations, both of these issues became a major source of frustration for Mr. Bell during the fall. Meetings, with the intervention specialists, were often held in the morning before school began and on some of those mornings I would observe Mr. Bell entering the room visibly irritated. He would often throw a handful of papers on his desk and make a couple brief comments to me (about the process) if the students weren’t already in the room. Sometimes our conversations later in the day would focus on his interactions with these “specialists” and their ideas for “intervention.” Within these conversations he would explain his
perception that the support staff did not value the professional knowledge of the teacher. His work was not valued even though it was observed to be effective. “They [administration] don’t understand the basis for focusing on the needs of the child, they basically look at test scores and they use one test score,” said Mr. Bell.

**Class interventions.** One example of discrepancy between Mr. Bell’s beliefs and the intervention specialist’s decisions was the use of the Aims-Web test. It was given within the first month of school and was a timed evaluation of how many letters a student could name in one minute. It was usually administered by someone the student did not know. This one test was used to decide if intervention was needed; and that was very frustrating to Mr. Bell because he knew the students on a much deeper level. “Drill and kill is implemented and not once did they ask or discuss what was in the best interest of the child,” added Mr. Bell (Conversation, October 27, 2008). Mr. Bell integrated different activities in the classroom to support those students needing intervention as well as all of his students, but those interactions reportedly did not appear to be as valued as the psychologist’s “knowledge.” Mr. Bell promoted collaboration and conversation to promote the development of language and literacy in a naturalistic environment while he reported that the school psychologist pulled students from the room to individually complete worksheets, isolating students as well as skills. Language is not learned in isolation; it requires meaningful interaction and conversation and is foundational to learning. Bandura (1977), Dewey (1938), and Vygotsky (1978) remind us that children are social creatures who need opportunities to explore and create their own understanding of the world around them through interaction with others. This theoretical perspective
was consistently evident in many of Mr. Bell’s interactions and activities throughout the five months of my research.

Shortly after testing, Mr. Bell reported that the school psychologist began suggesting phonics activities to the kindergarten and first grade teachers, based on the Aims-Web results. Mr. Bell had 9 years of teaching experience and the other kindergarten teacher had 20 years of teaching experience. “Here is this psychologist, with no literacy background and no experience teaching in a classroom, and she is trying to tell us how to teach phonics skills!” said Mr. Bell with anger in his voice (Conversation, October 27, 2008). As Mr. Bell noted, the kindergarten teachers had the knowledge and the experience, but for some reason the power lay in the hands of the psychologist. The teachers knew the children, the psychologist did not, yet she was the one making the decisions on what was “best.”

According to Mr. Bell, every student in the building (no matter what grade level) received the exact same intervention. There was no individualization. Mr. Bell reported that this frustration, this lack of confidence (by the administration) in their teaching abilities, was felt by many staff members, but few if any raised their voices against this discrepancy. It appeared that teachers were not encouraged to use their professional knowledge or experience; they were just given a way to “fix” the problem. When Mr. Bell exerted his voice and tried to explain his perspective, he was considered a “non-conformist” or “unprofessional.” Mr. Bell valued his students for what they could do; the psychologist looked at what the students could not do. He went against the grain of the “traditional” teacher, against the “compliant” image of the teacher. He went beyond the
behaviorist practices to a constructivist approach which valued students and their willingness to learn when appropriately engaged. Using democratic practices that valued his students, their ideas, and their experiences went beyond the academics to support a holistic approach to educating his students.

**Individual interventions.** In addition to the whole class evaluations and interventions, were the encounters with the school psychologist in an effort to help one individual student in Mr. Bell’s class who had been on an IEP at another school, was taken off, and now needed to have a new IEP. One event that was the catalyst for renewing this process happened when a substitute was in the room (on a day I did not observe), and the student was suspended within the first 10 minutes of the day. Mr. Bell reported to me the events that happened and that the substitute asked why there was no behavior plan in Mr. Bell’s folder for this student. Mr. Bell explained that he had been told that Charlie had no plan because he had no IEP. It was reported that the student had been released from the program and no longer needed services. Mr. Bell talked about his frustration with the administration saying there is no problem with Charlie, but then getting on his case for not having a behavior plan for him. “I’m not authorized to write a behavior plan. The district told the parent that an IEP was needed in order to develop a behavior plan, and he doesn’t have an IEP” (Conversation, October 3, 2008).

From the arrival of this student, Charlie, at the end of September all the way through the month of December, Mr. Bell had to constantly advocate for this student and what was in his best interest. “Why is the school fighting over this issue? Why aren’t the needs of the child top priority?” (Conversation, October 3, 2008). As the semester
progressed, I observed Mr. Bell successfully integrating this student into his classroom, but according to him, his input was never requested by administrators connected to this issue.

Conferences for this student were held at various times in the day. However, Mr. Bell reported that his voice was often disregarded and on occasion he was not even invited to the conferences. Even when he did talk they appeared to ignore him. He said one day, “We’ll let you talk, and I’ll take notes so I look like someone who thinks what you are saying is important, and then we’ll go down the hall and have the real meeting” (Conversation, December 19, 2008). It appeared from Mr. Bell’s comments that he was angry because no one was willing to listen to his ideas; and even more importantly no one was really considering the needs of this student. He was not even invited to some of the meetings, and when he did go, he was not expected to offer any input. As the researcher I asked what made this process so frustrating to him as a teacher.

You asked me what makes me so mad. They could do it without us. The deliberation can happen without us, so why even bother with a four year degree. Why even bother with professional development. Why not just have any good intentioned person step in and follow the protocol? (Conversation, December 19, 2008)

Mr. Bell explained his process in working with this student, Charlie. He started with the behaviorist suggestions from the school psychologist but after two weeks switched to other methods that seemed to have a more productive outcome for this student. Unfortunately implementing methods that were based on his beliefs of
supporting the needs of the student met with opposition and he was reprimanded for not using the sticker charts and individualized picture schedule. Mr. Bell had found that those procedures did not work with this student. Forcing particular behaviors and creating confrontation was not a successful intervention for this individual.

Instead, Mr. Bell used “wait time” and did not initiate situations that forced confrontation. He let the student participate in activities as he felt comfortable; if Charlie wanted to stay at his seat instead of sitting on the carpet for class meetings or learning activities that was fine. Mr. Bell purposely had Charlie sit at a table that was right next to the gathering area, so Charlie would not be excluded. He kept Charlie informed of the schedule and changes as they were made (something he did with the whole class). He would even ask Charlie what he thought about the order of events, inviting Charlie’s input prior to the beginning of the class meeting. “Hey, Charlie, come here. I want to show you something. Here is what I am thinking. Look at the schedule, what do you think? Is that a good idea?” (Observation, December 12, 2008), asked Mr. Bell as they looked at the class schedule together and moved a few pictures around. He explained his process of working with Charlie.

The first step I did was set clear boundaries, praise, reward, punishment; and I had two weeks of disaster. With that not working, I decided I had to try something else. I had to try a different intervention and we had dramatic progress. And then the psych said you did not try this plan, this is a brand new plan. And all it was, was another behavior sticker chart, the process was still the same. It’s the same theory restructured in a different way. I told them [those at the IEP meeting],
“My problem solving comes from a completely different theoretical approach. I am assuming that he wants to and will if he can. You are assuming he doesn’t want to and he needs motivated.” (Conversation, December 19, 2008)

Mr. Bell clearly and extensively explained his dislike for the school psychologist and even just talking about her created frustration and anger in his voice.

I could care less if she thinks her knowledge is superior to mind but what offends me more than anything is that she thinks that she is superior. And all she does is cut and paste . . . She asserts herself as above, however, she doesn’t have working knowledge that is superior to any, any teacher in the building. All we have is this cut and pasting procedure. She is a blind procedure follower. And like I said, the intervention is the same regardless of the kid. (Conversation, December 19, 2008)

When asked about working with the individual students, Mr. Bell responded,

She doesn’t know them, she doesn’t even know them, and she shows no interest in taking time to get to know them; or listening to people who do know them. So yeah, there’s no way she is taking the individual into account, but of course she will say she is because she has the labels; she has the data or whatever else, so of course we are looking at the individual. But at the same time we are cutting and pasting sticker charts for behavior, we are cutting and pasting the same phonics program from early literacy. (Conversation, December 19, 2008)

Mr. Bell continued to explain that it appeared that this administrator did not realize that all sticker charts and traffic light systems were all based on the same
behaviorist principles. “Evidently, it’s never occurred to any of these people that they
have a responsibility to understand what they are doing” (Conversation, December 19,
2008). With frustration in his voice, Mr. Bell explained,

It’s amazing to me how many people walked through in 15 minutes and leave.
They are so focused on documentation for everything as far as an assessment tool
and a way to evaluate and re-evaluate and implement and so on . . . The picture
schedule is the answer, these things are the answer. Why? Why would you say
that about this child? (Conversation, December 19, 2008)

Mr. Bell continued to add that they don’t listen to his perspective or his suggestions.

“I’m just a teacher, what do I know?” said Mr. Bell with a frustrated laugh (Conversation,
December 19, 2008). His overall distrust for the process appeared evident in his tone of
voice as he talked. It appeared from our discussions that the administrators lacked
sensitivity about the needs of this student and no one valued Mr. Bell’s insights. “I don’t
even know how to argue against them, the administration. Their focus is solely on test
scores” (Conversation, October 31, 2008).

At one of the last IEP meetings in December, he finally spoke up and shared his
frustrations (with the intervention team) that in his opinion the student’s needs were not
being considered. According to Mr. Bell some of the other staff members reportedly
disagreed with the psychologist’s methods as well, but were not willing to speak up. Mr.
Bell explained what happened.

What they [other staff] are not willing to do is what I did yesterday, because, what
I did yesterday was—it started off, and here’s how the meetings work here, and
they shouldn’t, but the psychologist starts, opens up her folder, pulls out the documents and starts reading and explaining. The room teacher usually says very little. In fact, the director of special services even said to me, “we’re not used to teachers having such strong opinions.” (Conversation, December 19, 2008)

Mr. Bell added,

What I find frustrating, is when you look at the whole purpose of IEPs, why we are getting together and meeting, I think it is kind of frustrating in terms of, [pause], it’s like you said, it is supposed to be individualized. I think being individualized needs to be so thoroughly and carefully considered. And I think an IEP that isn’t argued over a little bit maybe isn’t worth the paper it is printed on. (Conversation, December 19, 2008)

In response to the push for accountability through standardized testing Mr. Bell noted that no one has even questioned whether or not testing really has any impact on “being competitive in the global economy” (Conversation, October 27, 2008), said Mr. Bell, referring to comments made by both presidential candidates during the fall of 2008. But everyone is “educating to pass the test.” Mr. Bell continued to explain, “Everything is so objective to the point [that] we’re factoring out so many variables. One thing that we’re factoring out is them [the students]; their emotions, their thinking, their everything” (Conversation, October 27, 2008).

This comment highlighted the importance that Mr. Bell placed on supporting the social-emotional lives of his students.
Getting them to identify letters faster is not about children. It’s about us, and it’s about our reporting our numbers so we can prove to someone that we’re doing a good job. It’s not about serving them [the students]. (Interview, December 15, 2008)

As the researcher I included the above excerpts of my conversations with Mr. Bell to portray the frustration that I sensed in his interactions with those outside of his classroom. Coming from a different theoretical perspective appeared to initiate many conflicts in providing intervention with students, a frustration that was shared with me on several occasions and in particular at the end of the semester. Mr. Bell used alternative assessments and observations from his daily interactions to judge the child’s capabilities and whether or not the test scores were accurate. Mr. Bell looked at what a child was capable of doing in the context of the classroom, whereas the administration looked at test scores and what they could not do. During one of our conversations Mr. Bell gave the example of one student who did not do well on a particular test where the child was expected to identify as many letters as possible in one minute. The impact of the standardized test was discussed, and based on Mr. Bell’s comments the student was left out of the process. Mr. Bell reportedly felt that the administration was trying to put everybody into the same model and “it just doesn’t fit.” While it appeared that the administration looked at what the students could not do, Mr. Bell focused on their strengths.

Look at Steve, he’s a nice kid that cares about people and why aren’t we pointing that out to him and welcoming him [to kindergarten] instead of pounding into his
head you don’t know your letters yet and you need to? (Conversation, October 28, 2008)

**Interfacing with district goals and vision.** Assuming most districts and schools now have mission statements, visions, and goals, as the researcher I examined the statements published on the district’s and school’s websites (Appendix B). I was interested in seeing if Mr. Bell’s teaching practices supported the district’s and school’s statements. The vision statement published for this school system stated: “To actively engage all learners in meaningful experiences which enable them to acquire the tools necessary to become productive, responsible citizens.”

Data from this case study indicate that Mr. Bell’s teacher-student interactions clearly supported the expectations of the district as well as the vision and goals of the school. One of his main goals was to help his students think about what they were doing in an effort to become responsible classmates. In order to accomplish this goal, Mr. Bell engaged his students in democratic practices that promoted social awareness and responsibility in his kindergarten room. When asked to describe how he viewed his classroom practices, Mr. Bell said,

> In my opinion, right now, here, it’s a democratic classroom in an authoritarian school . . . There has to be a level of freedom . . . Without freedom or without voice there’s no democracy . . . They also learn from the choices they make. They learn what is and isn’t acceptable based on what is or isn’t respected or respectful. I want them to take ownership over their own learning.

(Conversation, October 28, 2008)
However, when asked about his building, Mr. Bell added

And I think that is why I see this building right now as profoundly undemocratic.

There is no voice even to the point of you can’t even say yeah, I disagree . . . no matter how respectfully it’s done or phrased. Critical reflection isn’t there; there isn’t a place for it or it’s not welcome. (Conversation, October 28, 2008)

Being a provocateur, Mr. Bell raised many questions about how and why teaching is implemented in the classroom. Mr. Bell’s teaching methodology presented a different perspective; a methodology that was supported by different beliefs, beliefs that appeared to be misunderstood by others in his school and his district. Following this different theoretical perspective that valued the strengths of his students appeared to be in direct conflict with a district that reportedly looked at test scores and the deficits of students. Based on Mr. Bell’s comments, it appeared that being different from his teaching colleagues was equated with being “bad” or unprofessional. However, based on my research, Mr. Bell was not afraid to go “against the grain” and speak up for what he believed in and what he felt was in the best interests of his students. He was comfortable disagreeing, but he wanted others to consider that there are multiple perspectives and methodologies in the field of education. He encouraged collaboration and discussion in his own classroom, valuing the different perspectives of his students, but was unable to engage in this same type of activity with his peers.

**Interpretation of teacher as provocateur.** Democratic practices along with a constructivist theoretical perspective were important to Mr. Bell and were strong underpinnings to his teaching but were often misunderstood by his peers. His teaching
strategies reflected his philosophical beliefs and he reported that these were vastly diverse from others in his building even though they were using the same curriculum. According to Mr. Bell’s own account, and my observation of his beliefs in action, he was greatly influenced and inspired by one of his professors, Dr. Henderson, and his writing. Keenly inspirational to Mr. Bell was Henderson’s (1992) notion of democratic practices as a way of living, an intelligent way of learning and teaching; one that supports the subject matter, the self, and social learning. These three “S’s” are foundational to democratic living and learning and what Henderson and Gornik (2007) later identified as 3S Understanding. This was a meaningful and engaging philosophy for Mr. Bell and seemed to provide a different perspective for teaching, one based on democratic ideals, as I repeatedly and consistently note. Through the work of Henderson and Kesson (2004), Mr. Bell thought deeply about the consequences of his teaching and sought to apply sophisticated professional judgment to the curriculum that was to be implemented.

According to Marshall, Sears, Allen, Roberts, and Schubert (2007), curriculum is not just the content that is taught, but an understanding of how knowledge is constructed and this type of curriculum making was evident in the daily practices of Mr. Bell. Teaching requires a continuous cycle of implementation, observation, and reflection with critical reflection and dialogue being an important part of that cycle (Henderson, 1992; Hill et al., 2005). This process was important to Mr. Bell; however he had to go beyond his school to the local university to engage in discussions that allowed him to critically explore his beliefs and evaluate his teaching interactions. One can extend that into Eisner’s work (2002) where he noted that theoretical frameworks allow teachers to focus
on aspects of classroom life that might otherwise go neglected. In this sense, Mr. Bell was attune to the many parts of classroom life and made this the curriculum. He was authentically present (Greene, 1988) and available to his students.

**Emergence of Three Thematic Strands**

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the initial coding and analysis of data from this case study resulted in identifying the teacher-student interactions and constructivist-based beliefs that were incorporated into Mr. Bell’s teaching pedagogy, a pedagogy based on democratic principles. Further analysis of data, as it related to the social-emotional climate of the classroom, led to the emergence of three thematic strands: student responsibility, sensitivity to students’ needs, and administrative dissension. Mr. Bell’s teacher-student interactions and his deliberate pedagogical artistry support the thematic strands of student responsibility and sensitivity to the needs of his students. The data that support Mr. Bell’s role as a provocateur and interaction with colleagues is foundational to the thematic strand of administrative dissension; a dissension created by a different teaching perspective, a perspective that went “against the grain” of traditional, teacher directed instruction. Following a brief review of Mr. Bell’s democratic practices and the strands that emerged from my findings, the remainder of this chapter examines the three thematic strands as they relate to the democratic practices that Mr. Bell embedded in his interactions and beliefs.

Democratic practices used to nurture and sustain social responsibility included learning to be respectful, collaborating and working together to support each other, and understanding the rights and responsibilities students had in the classroom. It appeared
that Mr. Bell intentionally integrated these concepts into his classroom interactions which allowed the room to function in a safe and nice manner. For Mr. Bell creating a positive social-emotional climate that supported his students appeared to be his main priority as demonstrated through his teacher-student interactions.

Findings suggest that based on these democratic principles, Mr. Bell directed and scaffolded the development of student responsibility through an intentional awareness and sensitivity to the needs of his students; the first two strands to emerge from my research. However these very practices that supported a positive social-emotional climate in his classroom also created a self reported dissension with others in his building and with the administration; leading to the third strand of administrative dissension.

**Overview of the Three Strands**

Student responsibility was the first thematic strand that emerged from my examination of Mr. Bell’s beliefs and teacher-student interactions. Through the implementation of democratic practices Mr. Bell scaffolded an awareness of how their actions impacted others. In addition to this awareness, he modeled and nurtured the development of peer responsibility such that his students became caring and contributing members of their classroom community, each in their own unique way. Students were also involved in a problem solving process which encouraged students to communicate, negotiate, and collaborate.

Observations indicated that he gave his students as many opportunities as he thought they could handle to make decisions and share responsibility. It appeared that his goal was to create respectful and collaborative interactions. Mr. Bell explained in one of
our informal conversations that he was trying to help the students see beyond their own perspective. If the students wanted to have a voice and share the power of making decisions, which Mr. Bell keenly wanted, then they needed to be responsible and make good decisions that were respectful of others.

Mr. Bell’s sensitivity to the needs of his students was a second strand that was identified based on several observations and conversations that indicated the importance of nurturing a caring and supportive classroom climate for all of his students. Data suggest that Mr. Bell made the effort to know and understand the abilities of his students socially as well as academically. Observations verified that he listened and was available to respond to their needs, building a sense of trust between him and his students. He included his students in negotiations, extended their thinking through questioning, and invited them to become contributing classroom citizens. This intentional sensitivity also allowed him to create meaningful learning experiences which were related to the lived experiences and interests of his students.

The third strand that emerged from this case study was administrative dissension. Based on our conversations Mr. Bell felt his beliefs were reportedly different than those with which he worked. Mr. Bell noted he did not always agree with school policies and programs that were implemented to “support” students. Mr. Bell also chose to focus on the social-emotional needs of his students and their strengths, whereas he believed the administration appeared to limit their focus to standardized test scores and what the student could not do. This created a self-reported conflicting view of what was needed to meet the needs of the student.
The remainder of this chapter takes each strand and analyzes the data that supports these findings. Beginning with the first of the three strands, the following section analyzes the teacher-student interactions that nurtured the development of student responsibility. Woven into these interactions were democratic practices initiated by Mr. Bell. Democratic practices included shared decision making and problem solving which encouraged students to think about their decisions, have a voice, offer input, and share the responsibility for how the classroom functioned.

**Student Responsibility: The First Strand**

Influenced by his beliefs in democratic principles, Mr. Bell facilitated conversations and interactions that nurtured the development of student responsibility: a key strand to developing a supportive social-emotional climate. For the purpose of this case study, student responsibility was limited to the interactions that involved the students of this one kindergarten classroom. It included individual responsibility for one’s self and one’s possessions as well as a responsibility to one’s peers and to the class as a whole. Based on my observations, Mr. Bell’s use of democratic practices in his teacher-student interactions encouraged student responsibility. It appeared that components of student responsibility included the expectations that students would learn to be respectful, collaborative and supportive of their peers. These various interactions were initiated and nurtured as Mr. Bell worked towards developing a supportive classroom climate. The following findings suggest that the democratic practices were a socially constructed process which in turn supported the development of student
responsibility, the development of good citizens (classmates), and the development of a caring community.

Mr. Bell fostered social interactions that were positive for all students, no matter what their level of social competence. For some students this was the first time they had been given responsibility for themselves. Sometimes Mr. Bell talked about appropriate choices, sometimes he modeled appropriate actions, and other times he asked students to help their classmates when assistance was needed. Observations showed that as the weeks went by, this group of students became a class that helped take care of each other. It did not matter if it was sharing a snack, walking with someone to the office, or being a special buddy, all interactions were important in establishing a caring climate. Mr. Bell also reported that “this group I think is getting really good at the idea of their responsibilities at different times” (Interview, November 24, 2008), referring to the students’ willingness to help others in their class.

By learning to interact in a manner that supported and respected each other, students learned to understand perspectives beyond their own. Communication and collaboration instead of competition became a focus of the classroom community. Students were expected to be helpful and take responsibility for the room being a safe and nice place to learn.

For this kindergarten teacher, findings suggest that initiating teacher-student interactions, modeling and scaffolding problem-solving strategies, and encouraging peer-to-peer interactions allowed students to take responsibility for behavior that supported the social-emotional climate of the classroom. Through these interactions students were able
to provide guidance and support for their peers. Those that were more competent supported those that still needed assistance. Mr. Bell reported that supporting the social needs of the child was more important to him; academics would follow once a student was able to listen, follow directions, and interact and support his or her peers in an appropriate and respectful manner.

Data also suggest that being respectful was one element of students being socially responsible. Being respectful required students to listen and consider the other person’s perspective. Data indicated that class meetings as well as all other classroom interactions nurtured skills needed for building student responsibility: how to be good listeners, how to take turns, how to be respectful in a manner that was considerate of other students’ thoughts, ideas, and work; and I regularly saw these behaviors acted upon by the kindergarteners. Mr. Bell encouraged his students to think of others and be considerate of how their actions impacted others. He encouraged students to think beyond themselves.

Getting ready to go outside, collaborating on academic work, sharing a snack, or helping each other clean up was everyone’s responsibility. It was this type of interaction and conversation with students which helped to nurture and support the social-emotional climate of the classroom. In addition to learning these skills in his classroom, he also wanted these skills to be applicable to their everyday life, to their life beyond the classroom. Students were to be responsible, to be respectful towards others, to listen, and to be nice; not because school policy said so, but because it was the right thing to do.
As noted earlier in this research, establishing relationships with his students was an important task for Mr. Bell. His teacher-student interactions were crucial for social-emotional development as well as intellectual development. Knowing his students and being sensitive to their individual needs allowed for the development of meaningful engagement in a democratic learning environment. Providing his students the opportunity to share in decisions created a sense of shared power. Encouraging sharing and peer support nurtured a trusting and caring environment for his class. These democratic practices facilitated the respectful, cooperative nature of his students that was consistently nurtured throughout my research. Mr. Bell identified his students as capable individuals who had something important to offer as contributing members of this kindergarten learning community. His interactions showed that he valued the knowledge his students brought to the classroom.

Implementing democratic practices allowed students to develop responsibility in a socially constructed learning environment, an environment when the power of the classroom was shared between the teacher and the students. Teaching and learning in Mr. Bell’s room was a reciprocal process with each participant learning from the other. It was a two-way interaction that scaffolded new perspectives and understanding for the teacher as well as the students. When knowledge is socially constructed, there has to be conversation, an exchange of ideas, an interaction that generates new understanding and meaningful knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). Based on this theoretical perspective, democracy is a socially constructed ideal and was foundational to Mr. Bell’s beliefs and interactions which were consistently implemented throughout my research.
With this focus on democratic principles, the interactions between the teacher and students were genuine and he had the best interests of the students in mind. Chavez (1984) explained that all activities within a classroom are interactive; emotional and intellectual on one hand, and individual and social on the other. Brookfield (1995) wrote that it is important to make connections between students’ lived experiences and learning which is what Mr. Bell did through his emergent curriculum. What was important to his students became his guiding principle for his teacher-student interactions. Both of these perspectives support the need for an integrated learning process; one that connects knowledge with socially constructed experiences academically as well as socially.

**Intentional Sensitivity to the Needs of His Students: The Second Strand**

A second important strand that emerged from the research was the intentional sensitivity Mr. Bell demonstrated towards his students. This strand also emerged from Mr. Bell’s teacher-student interactions and his beliefs that stemmed from a constructivist framework. Findings indicated that in Mr. Bell’s kindergarten classroom, teaching went beyond the basic academics in Mr. Bell’s kindergarten classroom. In many classroom teachers usually focus on academics and meeting the standards, but in Mr. Bell’s case his initial focus was on the students. Findings suggest that Mr. Bell did not follow the same constraints as other teachers when it came to implementing academic standards. He did not have written plans and he did not plan specific academic objectives for each day. Written plans were not required in his building. He reported that he had a general idea of what he would teach, but intentionally watched for teachable moments (Hyun, 2006) and let lessons emerge from his students’ interests. Part of that may have been due to the
grade level expectations, but also because Mr. Bell felt standardized teaching did not meet the needs of the students.

Mr. Bell’s students arrived at the beginning of the year with a variety of social, emotional, and academic abilities. And on any given day students would arrive with various challenges that affected their daily interactions. Mr. Bell was aware that when students misbehaved it usually signaled that some particular need was not being met (Bocchino, 1999). It was up to Mr. Bell to be aware, to be sensitive to the social-emotional needs of his students, and to make sure underlying causes were identified. Even with misbehavior, punishment was not the solution for Mr. Bell. His perspective was from the point of view that teachers need to take the time to truly know and understand their students. Knowing and valuing his students was part of his authentic interactions that impacted his relationships with his students. This was evident in many of our discussions during the five months of this study. It was important for him to talk to his students and find out their perspective, why were they feeling the way they were, or acting in a particular manner. He intentionally sought to uncover the reasons for their behavior. I used this stance to support my notions of intentional sensitivity.

Mr. Bell unconditionally accepted all of his students as unique individuals with something to offer. He took time to observe and watch his students unfold, allowing him to see their personalities emerge. He became aware of how his students responded in different learning situations. He created a positive rapport through his sense of humor and his willingness to view situations from their perspective. He was available to talk and to listen which provided him a greater understanding of the needs of his students,
socially, emotionally, and academically. He was genuinely responsive to their interests, experiences, and needs. These teacher-student relationships he established were built on trust and respect and nurtured the social-emotional climate of the classroom.

Getting to know his students and being sensitive to their unique, individual personalities was important for Mr. Bell as he strived to build positive relationships and a sense of trust with his students. Mr. Bell cared about his students with an emphasis on the relationship between him and his students. It was a genuine responsiveness that listens to others in an attempt to address their expressed needs (Noddings, 2005).

Understanding his students and being sensitive to their strengths and needs impacted everything else that happened in the classroom. From the moment students walked into the door, until the parents picked them up at the end of the morning, Mr. Bell was involved with his students, fostering their development of social skills and responsibility. Listening to his students, focusing on their strengths and scaffolding needs, encouraging them to share and support their classmates, and inviting them to participate in the learning process created a climate that supported the social-emotional lives of students and created a caring community among the students.

This genuine, intentional sensitivity to the whole development of his students, I believe was one of the most important findings of the case study. It appeared to be the catalyst for all other interactions in Mr. Bell’s classroom. He took the time to know his students from a naturalistic context, one that unfolded over time. As Mr. Bell noted in one of our first interviews, he preferred to sit back and observe his students the first couple weeks in order to see their personalities. As he grew to understand his students he
incorporated that knowledge into his interactions. To him, every student was important and every student had something to offer. “I think that the key piece is every kid has something to contribute. And too often I think that’s what the missing piece is when kids get turned off” (Interview, November 24, 2008). In conversations about his different students, I found that Mr. Bell had a deep understanding and appreciation for each student’s strengths. Conversations with Mr. Bell uncovered a detailed understanding of each of his students based on intense observation that appeared to occur throughout each day in the classroom; examples of which were provided earlier in this chapter. He used this knowledge to nurture meaningful teacher-student interactions which in turn supported a positive social-emotional classroom climate.

It appeared that this intimate knowledge, this depth of caring, allowed Mr. Bell to individualize his interactions with each of his students in a manner that supported their unique personalities. Based on observations some students needed little guidance while others needed constant scaffolding. Yet all of those interactions were implemented with care and a genuine interest in their social-emotional development. He let the day unfold based on his knowledge of the curriculum and more importantly his sensitivity to the needs of his students. He believed in the student as a valuable asset in his classroom and he wanted his students to feel comfortable, to feel safe. Mr. Bell reported that he wanted his students to enjoy being in his room. He wanted his students to enjoy learning. He wanted his students to be happy, and for different students that meant different things.

Not only did Mr. Bell listen to the voices of the students, he responded to them and incorporated their ideas into the classroom activities, providing ownership to his
students. Students were co-constructors of knowledge. Mr. Bell explained that students do have a voice and it was the responsibility of the teacher to make sure their words were heard, and then interact with those ideas. Mr. Bell believed he could learn from his students and he was interested in hearing their perspective; how they understood things. "The adult’s perspective tends to be a little different" (Conversation, October 8, 2008).

During this study, Mr. Bell assessed and modified his curriculum to meet the needs of the students and fulfill academic requirements. Mr. Bell listened and watched and took his cues from the students, critically evaluating his teaching. If something wasn’t working he modified his interactions and methods to meet the needs of the student. Observing his interactions, I found he was not demanding or confrontational, but let the students advance at their own individual pace. He allowed students time to adjust to changing situations and he offered choices. My research identified that the variety of Mr. Bell’s interactions coupled with his beliefs demonstrated a pedagogical artistry that valued his students and highlighted the importance of understanding and being intentionally sensitive to the unique needs of each of his students; an important strand of nurturing and sustaining the positive social-emotional climate of the classroom.

Being sensitive to the needs of his students, and knowing that an emergent curriculum focused on engaging the child in meaningful interactions, Mr. Bell had found a way to successfully blend his beliefs and democratic practices into his classroom teaching. He was very careful about presenting lessons in a manner that encouraged confidence. He was aware that his interactions could affect the overall achievement of his students, as well as how they interacted with others. As a teacher it is important to
support the efforts of students as they strive to develop confidence in their own abilities to succeed. Watson and Ecken (2003) offered support for Mr. Bell’s interactions and explained that children have three basic psychological needs: the need to belong, the need to experience competence, and the need for autonomy. Mr. Bell appeared to be aware of these needs and intentionally focused on building confidence in his students. While it is a need all teachers should be aware of, I found a heightened sensitivity in Mr. Bell’s practices that helped me to glean this strand from the many classroom practices.

We might extend these practices in considering the diversity that is now part of our classrooms and embrace, just as Mr. Bell did consistently, the strengths and challenges all students bring to school. I believe that relationships teachers establish are the most important part of teaching; it certainly appeared true in Mr. Bell’s case. It was critical for Mr. Bell to know his students and to support them in every way possible. The individualized attention and understanding provides many students with the support to take risks and to feel confident about the efforts they put forth in the classroom. Sensitivity to one’s students, especially those that are struggling, makes a difference between success and failure (Pianta, 1999). Mr. Bell’s interactions continuously showed this to be true throughout my research. Having a teacher who builds trust and does not judge others helps to minimize behavior issues creating an environment with fewer conflicts (Watson & Ecken, 2005). These relationships also modeled appropriate interactions that were supportive of others and promoted what Noddings (2005) referred to as ethics of care. Mr. Bell’s teacher-student interactions nurtured a safe, caring climate that valued his students and supported their holistic development; in turn the students
supported and cared for each other.

Analysis of the findings from this case study support the conclusion that Mr. Bell was a caring educator whose beliefs and democratic practices provided a firm foundation for his teaching pedagogy which nurtured and sustained the social-emotional climate of his classroom. According to Greene (1995) authentic face to face encounters help the community of the classroom take shape. This genuine, intentional sensitivity to the needs of his students led to a depth of understanding about the students’ capabilities that went beyond academic skills that were evaluated by tests. This sensitivity to the social-emotional climate influenced all interactions in the classroom; initiating social responsibility, fostering peer support, and creating relationships that were respectful, and caring. These intentional and authentic teacher-student interactions provided a positive social-emotional climate in Mr. Bell’s kindergarten classroom.

**Administrative Dissension: The Third Strand**

The first two strands, student responsibility and sensitivity to the needs of his students, emerged from Mr. Bell’s interactions with his students. The third strand, administrative dissension, arose from a conflict in beliefs with the colleagues in his school and the school psychologist. This section of the chapter examines the conflicts Mr. Bell had with the teaching and professional staff. There appeared to be a conflict with his pedagogical practices, theoretical beliefs, and the need for critical reflection. My findings indicate Mr. Bell had a different theoretical perspective than most teachers in his building. I begin by examining the differences in teaching practices, and then move to conflicting beliefs. I finish by exploring the lack of critical reflection which Mr. Bell felt
was essential to his professional growth as an educator and his need to actively teach from a different pedagogical perspective

**A conflict of teaching practices.** Through the implementation of democratic practices, Mr. Bell chose to teach in a constructivist manner that valued his students as individuals, a pedagogy that supported the social-emotional development of the classroom climate. Students were engaged and learning in a naturalistic setting that allowed for interests to unfold and be incorporated into the daily interactions and learning in the classroom. Students were active participants in their own learning.

Providing freedom and flexibility in the classroom supports a democratic environment, but also creates a conflict with fellow staff members who follow traditional structures driven by time, consistency, and academic testing. Van Manen (1991) wrote about the conflict between freedom and control and the tension it creates. Classrooms based on control follow a systematic organization based on rules and expectations. Classroom associated with freedom provide choice, independence and autonomy. Embedding democratic principles into his teaching, Mr. Bell provided a climate of freedom which allowed for conversation, flexibility and negotiation as a central part of learning.

Mr. Bell reportedly experienced tension as he strived to implement an emergent curriculum in a setting where most teachers used traditional teaching practices. The choices and freedoms he provided his students appeared to be misinterpreted as a “lack of control” by others in the building. Mr. Bell reported that others did not appear to understand his beliefs, need for critical reflection, or interactions where the needs of the
students came first and lessons were related to lived experiences of the students. His sensitivity to the social-emotional climate of his classroom also created tension for Mr. Bell as he taught more than the expected academic standards. Other staff members did not seem to understand the empathy or equity that Mr. Bell strived towards with his students.

Equity at the kindergarten level offers a beginning look at social justice where opportunities to respect diversity are provided. In Mr. Bell’s classroom, everyone had the right to be treated fairly and in return students needed to understand how to extend that same right to others. Treating everyone the same does not necessarily provide equal opportunities—needs vary and as a result teacher-student interactions should vary as well. Diversity of learning styles needs to be respected and integrated into a teacher’s classroom pedagogy. Students need opportunities to understand and contribute to their own learning as well as the learning of others.

From Mr. Bell’s point of view the driving force behind the district’s policies and interventions were the standardized test scores. This deficit model used by the administration focused on what students could not do and prescribed intervention. While the tests may provide some academic information, according to Mr. Bell, it did not provide a complete picture of what the student knew. Mr. Bell focused on what they could do and he valued their voices and thoughts. Believing that his relationships and interactions with students impacted their view of themselves, Mr. Bell had high expectations for his students, viewing them as capable individuals.
Having a democratic classroom offered an alternative to the standard academic structure of many current classrooms. Mr. Bell integrated his teacher-directed activities with student initiated ideas based on his observations and understandings of the needs of his students. With the implementation of democratic practices the student was valued and lived experiences were shared; creativity, conversation and collaboration were invited. This knowledge then provided the foundation for the teacher to initiate learning opportunities that emerged from students’ own lived experiences.

These emergent lessons were initiated by the student and then scaffolded by the teacher, allowing required standards to be integrated with the interests of the students. Instead of learning isolated bits of information, understanding was facilitated by linking content to the real experiences of the students, something that was meaningful and applicable to their daily lives such as writing books of making cards for a friend. Students became active participants as they developed, practiced, and applied these integrated academic and social skills. These real life applications took the required skills and incorporated them into a meaningful activity that scaffolded the students’ educational skills while at the same time fulfilling an important social responsibility of caring for another person or sharing an important event in a student’s life.

According to Henderson and Kesson (2004) educational experiences should be created jointly by the student and the teacher allowing a fulfillment of self where teachers encourage “students to use their intellectual powers in generative and generous ways” (p. 11). Conversation, negotiation, and collaboration were part of this learning process and understanding was extended through interaction with both the teacher and peers. The
reciprocal exchange of language generated ideas and extended students’ understanding, providing alternative solutions they may not have thought of on their own. Implementing an emergent curriculum was based on the theory of constructivism where people learn in a social context. Bandura (1977), Dewey (1938), and Vygotsky (1978) remind us that people do not work as social isolates but learn collectively, influenced by cultural beliefs, context, and interactions with others. These interactive relationships extend a young student’s understanding of the many experiences he or she encounters on a daily basis.

Providing choices allowed for freedom of exploration and a way for students to learn in a manner that best met their individual needs. Through the use of democratic practices and an emergent curriculum, Mr. Bell differentiated his teaching and interactions in a way that provided opportunities for all of his students to learn at a level that was meaningful to them as young students. The integration of democratic practices in his classroom was closely tied to his beliefs in constructivism, and a priority to meet the needs of his students.

**Conflict of beliefs.** Beliefs are often based on the morals and values of the individual. In addition to his theoretical beliefs based in constructivism, it appeared Mr. Bell was also aware of social justice and equity as key issues. These foundational beliefs were intertwined and modeled throughout his teacher-student interactions. As the researcher I believe these beliefs were also underpinnings of Mr. Bell’s sensitivity to the needs of his students.

Mr. Bell’s beliefs were foundational to the democratic practices that involved the students in their own process of learning; sharing classroom decisions, focusing on their
needs as emerging scholars, and becoming socially responsible. Mr. Bell wanted students to make choices and act in a respectful manner because it was the right thing to do. He wanted his students to develop intrinsic motivation, to learn for the sake of learning and to enjoy it. These beliefs stemmed from a constructivist theory which valued the interests and experiences of his students which were the foundation for an emergent teaching process. This pedagogy allowed Mr. Bell to co-construct the curriculum with the students in order to meet their needs instead of expecting his students to conform to what had been standardized based on adult expectations.

During my research, a major source of contention for Mr. Bell was his interactions with the intervention specialists. Data indicated that Mr. Bell’s belief in the strengths of his students influenced his interactions that reportedly did not conform to the expectations of other staff members or the intervention specialists. He had a different approach based on a different perspective; a perspective that he believed was supported by current theory and research, and taken from a constructivist perspective; one that embraced a love of wisdom (Henderson & Kesson, 2004), critical reflection, and the needs of his students.

His overall distrust for the intervention process appeared to surface in our conversations as he self-reported conflicts between his perspective and those of the intervention team about how best to support the needs of individual students. Based on my observations and conversations, this perceived lack of valuing the student created frustration and anger for Mr. Bell. For Mr. Bell the intervention process was not a process that was supportive of the needs of his students; individually or collectively. He
disagreed with their behaviorist procedures and was even more frustrated with their lack of theory to support their decisions about intervention. He wanted others to take the time to truly know who the students were and be aware of what they had to offer. Mr. Bell valued his students as unique individuals and it appeared he wanted others to do the same.

Even with the conflict and frustration Mr. Bell reported, he was not willing to give up his beliefs of what was most important to him—the needs of the student. As the researcher I believe Mr. Bell was protective of his students and he expected others to treat them with the same care and respect that he did. He reported that he did not mind disagreeing but it appeared he wanted the administrators to be willing to discuss the issue, to consider different perspectives, to support their work with research and theory, and to consider what was best for the student. Mr. Bell reported he had to be his own advocate for his beliefs and what he did in the classroom. His theoretical perspective and critically reflective stance were foundational to his interactions with his students and to authentically meeting their needs.

**Critical reflection.** In addition to the conflict of practices and beliefs, there appeared to be little if any collaboration between Mr. Bell and the other teachers in his building. Teachers and administrators outside his classroom had difficulty understanding the equity that Mr. Bell strived for with his students. While observations indicated that Mr. Bell was caring and nurturing, he also said he was comfortable being the “outsider” in his building. He was independent in his teaching and thinking and was not concerned with school wide expectations of conforming to certain school policies and practices that
he felt were not respectful or supportive of his students. He felt he had a solid pedagogy based on theory and research that validated his democratic practices, constructivist beliefs, and critical reflective stance.

When Mr. Bell disagreed and wanted to discuss various issues, he reported that other staff members labeled him as argumentative or unprofessional. Mr. Bell reported that he would have welcomed conversations that explored their differences. Mr. Bell described critical conversations as beneficial in understanding others’ viewpoints. However, critical reflection with colleagues at his current building reportedly did not exist, resulting in little if any collaboration for Mr. Bell.

Brookfield (1995) described critically reflective teachers as having a wider perspective and a well-grounded rational for their practice which explains “why one does what one does in the way that one does it” (p. 16). According to Brookfield, these reflective teachers had an organized vision, and prioritized what aspects of their work were really important. These teachers also took seriously their own learning and practice, something Mr. Bell did as well. For Mr. Bell, his priorities focused on the needs of his students and the social-emotional climate of his classroom.

Mr. Bell’s interactions incorporated democratic practices and were what he identified as “pro-active” in meeting the needs of all his students. Mr. Bell defined proactive as focusing on the needs of the student as a first step. He explained “reactive” was usually the adult response, based on the needs of the adult after a problem occurred (October 29, 2008). Mr. Bell considered the behaviorist approach as reactive because the student was either rewarded or punished based on rules established by the adult.
student did not meet the adult’s expectations for appropriate or acceptable behavior there
was some consequence or loss of privilege. “Teachers want the child to fit their
environment instead of creating an environment that fits the child” (Mr. Bell,
Conversation, October 31, 2008).

Identifying himself as a critically reflective teacher Mr. Bell was intentional and
authentic about what and how he interacted. Critical reflection provides teachers an
opportunity to examine, evaluate and modify their teaching practices. Teachers need to
believe in what they are doing and be able to explain why; both as to how it impacts their
students and as to how it impacts them as a professional educator. According to Hill et
al. (2005) frameworks for dynamic teaching can draw from a combination of theories
that facilitate meaningful learning interactions however there needs to be an
understanding of the theory that is behind the practice.

Mr. Bell’s theoretical foundations in constructivism supported the integration of
democratic principles with his sensitivity to his students’ needs and strongly influenced
his teaching. He was a provocateur among his colleagues as he modeled alternative
possibilities for pedagogical interaction and reflection. With critical reflection,
Brookfield (2005) stated, “We become more aware of the issues of power and control in
our classrooms . . . And we start to think more deliberately about the creation of
democratic classrooms” (p. 39). According to Brookfield, Mr. Bell was one who raised
“institutionally awkward and professionally inconvenient questions about the correct
forms or purposes of teaching” (p. xiv). Later Brookfield added, “being anchored in
values of justice, fairness and compassion, critical reflection finds its political
representation in the democratic process” (pp. 26-27). For Mr. Bell, critical reflection was needed along the journey in an effort to observe, interpret, and adjust interactions to support the needs of the students. He reported that few if any of the other staff members were interested in taking the time to understand new theories and practice or to be critically reflective about their work with students. Mr. Bell may have lacked the support and critical conversation of his peers at his school, but he did have colleagues from the local university with whom he could discuss his integration of theory into his teaching practices.

As professionals, teachers need the opportunity to communicate and collaborate with their own peers in an effort to understand and share the knowledge they bring to their educational practices. These critical conversations provide insight and help others understand that there are multiple ways to interact with students and still incorporate the required course of study. According to Aoki (2005) and Freire (1972), critical reflection is a combination of thought and practice that guides our actions, a combination of knowing and application. Critical reflection provides opportunities for teachers to collaborate and communicate, to discuss differences in an effort to help each other improve their interactions with students. The goal is not for everyone to teach in the same manner, but for understanding that teaching can be implemented from various perspectives.

Based on my conversations with Mr. Bell about his perceived challenges with his own peers and administration, it became clear that there needs to be communication throughout the levels of teaching and administration. According to Mr. Bell, the school
psychologist and intervention specialists need to make an effort to understand what the teachers are doing in the classroom and to remember that today’s young students have different, individual needs that must be integrated into the classroom. In turn, teachers have the responsibility to understand and know the theory that informs their practice and be critically reflective of their work in the classroom.

Teaching from a critically reflective lens, Mr. Bell reported that he asked questions of his peers in order to provoke them into thinking about alternative ways of interacting with the students. Through his self perception of being an “outsider” Mr. Bell appeared to like the role of a provocateur; one who encouraged others to critically think about what they were doing and how their interactions affected the students with whom they were academically engaged with on a daily basis. I believe he wanted his peers to think about their interactions and to think for themselves, to continue to grow and learn as teachers, to be aware of new knowledge, and to value their own professional knowledge. I believe that he wanted his peers to critically reflect on their own teacher-student interactions and carefully consider what they were teaching and why.

**Synthesis of Thematic Strands within the Democratic Practices**

Conclusions drawn from this research show that Mr. Bell went beyond the traditional teacher-directed approach of focusing on academics and successfully supported the social-emotional climate of his classroom through democratic practices which met the needs of his students and nurtured a sense of student responsibility and empathy. In this last section of the chapter I bring together the three strands that emerged from my findings. The thematic strands that emerged from this study: student
responsibility, sensitivity to the needs of the students, and administrative dissension, were tightly intertwined, each impacting the other throughout the five months of my research.

Two of the three strands, student responsibility and sensitivity to the needs of his students, appear to be tightly intertwined making it difficult to pull apart any individual component that impacted Mr. Bell’s teaching. Instead, it is a collection of interactions and theory that produce the pedagogical artistry that Mr. Bell implemented in his kindergarten classroom; a pedagogy that implemented democratic practices and nurtured the holistic development of his students. The third strand, administrative dissension, appears to be influenced by his belief and use of democratic principles as an alternative theoretical perspective that goes beyond “traditional” teaching practices. As I conclude this chapter, I briefly visit the concept of democracy and examine its link to Mr. Bell’s interactions and beliefs. It is this concept of democracy that appears to be foundational to Mr. Bell’s interactions, beliefs and the findings of this study.

**Democratic Principles**

Democracy is commonly defined as a form of equity and respect for individuals within a community. In a democratic society the interests of the people are promoted with the goal of practicing social equity. Democratic practices encompass “the principles of freedom, equality, and justice, as well as regard for human rights” (Greene, 1995, p. 157). These same concepts applied to the kindergarten classroom of Mr. Bell. In the process of observing interactions that developed a positive social-emotional climate in the classroom, democratic principals were found to be an integral part of Mr. Bell’s intentional and authentic teacher-student interactions that helped to develop responsibility
among his students, leading to a classroom climate that was equitable, and caring.

Driving the integration of these practices was a belief system Mr. Bell had developed through his own lived experiences and a deep commitment to understanding the theory and research behind his pedagogy.

Mr. Bell reminds us that it is important for teachers to intentionally know and understand our students and their needs. “It’s more about them [the students] than us [the teachers] . . . and the goals need to be about them” (Conversation, December, 19, 2008). The needs and well-being of our students should be our priority. Knowing the student and creating a positive rapport allows the teacher to have a greater understanding of the needs of each student socially, emotionally and academically. Through this modeling of sensitivity and care for his students, they in turn learn to care for and take responsibility for each other as well as the classroom.

Teacher-student interactions in the classroom also have repercussions as to whether or not a child successfully negotiates the educational challenges he encounters daily (Pianta, 1999). Mr. Bell consistently engaged students in ways that clearly took into consideration the emotional and cognitive elements that Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) emphasized as critical to the learning environment. Emotion, cognition, decision making, and social functioning are all intertwined as a starting point for new thinking on the role of emotion in education (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). Students’ social-emotional lives needed to be appreciated as a critical force in learning; in Mr. Bell’s class this took priority.
Democratic Theorists

Various curriculum theorists also influenced his beliefs as he focused on how best to meet the needs of his students in a democratic manner. Mr. Bell’s belief in a constructivist theory allowed integration of both emergent and direct teaching as he promoted student interaction and responsibility that was supported by the work of John Dewey at the beginning of the 20th century and the work of Henderson and Kesson (2004) in the 21st century. Constructivism incorporates cultural context, language, and social interaction as a way to scaffold learning based on prior experiences.

Dewey (1902, 1915, 1930/1984) felt strongly that interaction within society was crucial to developing a mature individuality where one could accept the constantly changing world. Students were to learn subject matter in a social setting that was supported by democratic living. Dewey also focused on how the individual could interact in a socially responsible manner. Dewey (1930/1984) wrote, “The particular interactions that compose a human society include the give and take of participation, of a sharing that increases, that expands and deepens the capacity and significance of the interacting factors” (p. 42). These characteristics of democratic living could also be applied to the teaching scaffolded in Mr. Bell’s classroom. Learning to listen, taking turns, and interacting in a respectful manner was facilitated through many of Mr. Bell’s interactions.

Extending this perspective, Henderson and Kesson (2004) initiated the concept of “Curriculum Wisdom” as an effort to intertwine practicality, imagination, and critical insights that are based on informed moral values. “Curriculum Wisdom” encourages the
use and respect of multiple perspectives as educators engage in critical reflection, inquiry and conversation where all voices are heard.

The interactions initiated by Mr. Bell were also supported by his personal and professional understanding of Henderson and Gornik’s (2007) 3S-Understanding. 3S Understanding uses democratic practices to integrate the individual student (self), the social interactions, and the subject matter in meaningful ways. This process requires critical reflection and motivation to incorporate a decision-making process that focuses on “the relationship between program design, instructional planning, teaching, evaluating, and organizational life” (p. iv). Problem solving and artistry in teaching (Eisner, 2002) are also part of the process. Mr. Bell chose to focus on the individual student and how he or she interacted with other students; woven into that process was the required academic content. Findings suggest that for Mr. Bell, education needs to help students understand who they are and the contribution they can make.

According to Henderson and Kesson (2004) democratic education also has a much deeper purpose; “It is a process, a way of living, a habit of mind” (p. 209). Mr. Bell implemented these democratic ideals in his teacher-student interactions and explained in our conversations that integrating this ideology with the needs of the student, social interaction, and subject matter (Henderson & Gornik, 2007) were the philosophical underpinnings of his work with his students.

**Summary**

Conclusions drawn from this 5-month study identify the importance of this kindergarten teacher’s interactions, beliefs, and democratic practices which nurtured and
sustained a positive social-emotional climate. Mr. Bell’s depth of knowledge and critical reflective stance along with his intentional sensitivity to the needs of his students, fostered student responsibility through shared decisions within the classroom, and nurtured an environment that promoted responsibility for themselves as students; their learning, their classmates, and the classroom as a community.

My research suggests that Mr. Bell’s teacher-student interactions embedded with democratic practices provided a sophisticated pedagogy that valued his students. When examining the depth of his teaching and the beliefs behind his interactions, it was incredibly rich in valuing the student as a unique, intelligent individual based on a strong sense of democratic principles, critical reflection, and a love of wisdom (Henderson & Kesson, 2004). He was passionate about his teaching, and the welfare of his students was his priority.

Mr. Bell purposefully created a climate that welcomed his students, made them feel safe and comfortable, scaffolded meaningful experiences, and valued them for who they were. He chose to interact in a democratic manner because it allowed his students freedom to think for themselves, to make choices, be aware of different perspectives, support their peers, and problem solve respectfully. All of these interactions nurtured and sustained a classroom that facilitated meaningful experiences through the use of democratic practices and an emergent curriculum which highlighted students’ strengths and was supportive of individuals’ needs, socially as well as academically.

This intentional choice of being responsive to the needs of his students led Mr. Bell to implement a pedagogy that went beyond the traditional teaching of academic
skills. He implemented a pedagogical artistry that explored multiple perspectives and intertwined his interactions with theory. He was willing to raise his voice as an advocate for educational practices that go against the grain of traditional teaching practices. With a critical theoretical perspective and a strong emphasis on the social-emotional climate, Mr. Bell created a viable learning environment by incorporating democratic practices that supported the holistic development of his students; valuing them as unique, caring, and intelligent individuals.
CHAPTER V
IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

I begin this chapter with a brief review of my findings that emerged from this five month case study that examined: How and why did the teacher establish and sustain a classroom climate that nurtured the social-emotional lives of students? Following this summary I focus on three areas that I gleaned from my research as critical for teachers to implement in their classrooms: initiating an environment of care that goes beyond the academics, practicing a deliberate pedagogical artistry, and incorporating critical reflection. Mr. Bell’s interactions and beliefs were complexly intertwined as he incorporated all three of these components in his kindergarten classroom. Although these areas of care, artistry, and reflection may clash with the traditional teacher-directed lessons that focus on academic standards, based on my research, I argue that these areas are essential for providing a holistic environment for learning; one that nurtures the social-emotional as well as academic climate of any classroom; a pedagogy that teaches critical thinking and is anchored in a safe learning environment. After exploring the above-mentioned areas, I examine implications followed by research possibilities in the field of teacher education with preservice teachers and with teachers currently in the field.

My findings verify that integrating teaching practices that focus on the holistic needs of the students will nurture the development of caring students who in turn support their peers and learn to think about alternative perspectives. Providing experiences that promote equity and empathy lays a foundation for students to become good citizens who
are aware of multiple perspectives, know how to respectfully disagree, and can work with others to find solutions. Society needs individuals who can think, create, collaborate, and generate new ideas and directions. In the classrooms, we need teachers who create an environment that scaffolds these qualities so students learn how to be socially responsible citizens who care. This type of teacher will focus on the social-emotional climate and in turn support the holistic development of students; holistic being inclusive of the social-emotional as well as the academic and intellectual capabilities of the student. Mr. Bell modeled this integration through his teacher-student interactions that were embedded with democratic practices. It was this type of interaction that answered my research question of how he created a positive social emotional climate in his classroom. Mr. Bell’s theoretical perspective, beliefs about young children, and critical reflection were the underpinnings of these interactions as he strived to provide a democratic environment that supported the social-emotional climate of his classroom.

**An Overview of the Findings**

By conducting a 5-month case study I examined how and why Mr. Bell was able to implement and nurture a caring classroom community. Mr. Bell was beginning his ninth year as a kindergarten teacher in a suburban school district but viewed himself as an “outsider” because he viewed his teaching as coming from a different theoretical perspective than others in his school, a perspective that was based on constructivist theory and the need for critical examination and reflection of his own teaching practices. The relationship between Mr. Bell’s beliefs and classroom interactions were tightly intertwined making it challenging to pull apart and isolate the individual aspects of his
teaching that influenced the social-emotional climate of his classroom. The complexity and depth of his pedagogy that made his teaching so valuable were also the same components that created a self-reported dissension between him and the other teachers and administrators in his school and district. He chose to teach in a manner that he sincerely and unequivocally believed best served his students. Using his depth of knowledge and a constructivist perspective, Mr. Bell veered away from traditional teacher-directed practices. My research validated that Mr. Bell taught against the grain of traditional methods in that his approach provided a uniquely critical reflective stance.

Through the use of classroom observations, interviews, conversations, and classroom artifacts, my research identified democratic practices as foundational to Mr. Bell’s teacher-student interactions. These interactions were supported by his beliefs that these values were important for students to learn and incorporate into their daily lives. Findings show that Mr. Bell involved his students in democratic practices which included: valuing the student’s voice, sharing power and control, encouraging problem solving, promoting respectful interactions and peer support, and viewing the student as a capable individual. It is this type of interactive relationship that becomes an integral part of the classroom, supporting a positive social-emotional climate.

These democratic practices were incorporated into a constructivist-based pedagogy where lessons emerged from student interests and experiences when possible. This emergent curriculum provided opportunities for each student to grow as a unique student at their own level of comfort and understanding. Mr. Bell utilized his sensitivity to the needs of his students to initiate and co-construct activities which appeared to
support both social and academic development. My research identified these processes as foundational for nurturing and sustaining communication, compromise, collaboration, and an awareness of others.

Through these practices Mr. Bell focused on the strengths of his students. However, although Mr. Bell focused on the strengths and what his students could do, he reported that his school and the district appeared to focus on test scores and what the students could not do. It was this conflict of how best to meet the needs of the students along with a different theoretical perspective and teaching methodology that created the administrative dissension that emerged as one of the three findings.

In the next section of this paper I examine meaningful teaching that deviates from a teacher-directed, academic-based curriculum. It is a curriculum that integrates a teacher’s interactions and beliefs in an effort to create positive relationships that support the social-emotional climate of the classroom. I examine the social-emotional competency of the student, relationships, and the need for a climate of care and how these vary from current educational expectations. Then I examine pedagogical artistry that focuses on the needs of the student. Finally I look at the teacher as provocateur and the importance of critical reflection and the depth of knowledge that can emerge from understanding multiple theoretical perspectives. It is these three components—a climate of care, a deliberate pedagogical artistry, and critical reflection—that support teaching beyond the academics. This approach I feel provides a highly effective learning environment that holistically address the needs of our young population in today’s
classrooms. Although my research was focused was kindergarten, I believe these same
components can be implemented in any grade.

Meaningful Teaching

In today’s classrooms, we need teachers to guide students toward innovation and
creativity, not conformity and sameness. We need students who can think for themselves
and evaluate the impact of their ideas and actions. Teachers should be encouraging
critical thinking and the consideration of multiple perspectives at all levels of teaching.

Students bring many strengths to the classroom. Yet, the current educational
system does not appear to value those that are “smart” or “successful” in other ways.
Neill (1962) defined success as, “The ability to work joyfully and to live positively” (p.
41), a definition that would fit with Mr. Bell’s perspective on teaching. My research
showed that when emotions and freedom were respected, then respect, responsibility and
empathy followed. Mr. Bell’s interactions showed there could be freedom in the
classroom that valued students and supported a holistic learning climate. It was a
collaborative process that promoted learning and a sense of autonomy as he scaffolded
new understanding based on the prior experiences of his students.

Cochran-Smith (1991) wrote about teaching “against the grain” which is similar
in that her message encourages teachers to become activists and to consider themselves
“agents for change.” She explored teaching and pre-service teacher education from a
social justice perspective including the ecological impact of many other areas of society
and the need for educational reform. These teachers go beyond traditional teaching
practices and teach more than the required academic skills. In Mr. Bell’s case it is the
importance of creating and nurturing a positive social-emotional climate for his students; a climate that nurtured student responsibility, equity and empathy; a climate that integrated democratic practices, and the needs of his students into meaningful, holistic, learning experiences.

As I continue in this chapter I focus on the teacher interactions and beliefs that support a different artistic pedagogy that holistically applies learning in the context of the elementary classroom. Integrating a sensitivity to the needs of the student, being aware of multiple perspectives, understanding a variety of theoretical perspectives and being willing to critically reflect on ones’ impact in the classroom as a teacher, creates a deliberate, complex, pedagogical artistry that benefits all students in the classroom. I begin by looking at the importance of creating a caring environment, one that supports the social-emotional competency of young students and establishes positive teacher-student relationships built on trust and understanding.

**Teacher Interactions and Beliefs**

Students’ experiences and relationships vary prior to entering the public school system. They come from different backgrounds and different experiences. As a result students enter kindergarten with different levels of social competence and emotional maturity and it is the teacher’s responsibility to interact in a manner that supports each student as a unique individual. Caring adults can teach positive emotional behavior and help buffer peer challenges for those students that are highly emotional (Denham, 2006). When a student is able to regulate his or her emotions he or she becomes more socially
appropriate in expressing emotion. Appropriate social skills lead to friendships and positive interactions with peers and adults.

Students bring many different issues with them into the classroom each morning. How teachers handle the issues students bring to class may affect how open the students will be to learning during the day. When students have a teacher who cares, a teacher who is aware, that teacher can provide a positive outlet or expression for feelings and emotions. To promote emotional competence teachers should validate emotions and try to create conversations about causes, consequences, and what is appropriate in different circumstances (Denham, 2006). Conversations about feelings help coach students about expressing and regulating their own responses. This very process was evident in Mr. Bell’s class meetings. As examined in Chapter 4, class meetings provided a safe forum for students to initiate conversations and express feelings and needs from their own perspective. Building this type of positive rapport in the classroom opens lines of communication, providing a climate where students feel safe, comfortable, secure and accepted. Establishing this type of positive social-emotional climate in the classroom should be a continuing priority through all grade levels.

Teaching social skills is necessary to help our students interact in a positive manner with one another and to understand the importance of supporting their peers. My research identifies the importance of supporting the social-emotional climate of the classroom as it provides a solid foundation for learning. Watson and Ecken (2003) wrote, “We expect our elementary and middle school students to have mastered these skills before they reach our classrooms. In fact, many of the problems we solve daily are not
related to academics but to our students' undeveloped social skills” (p. 56). Not being able to interact in a socially appropriate manner affects the ability to build relationships, and may limit educational opportunities for individuals as well as the whole class (Pianta, 1999). As explained in Chapter 4, Mr. Bell’s goal was to provide opportunities for his students to interact in a positive manner with their peers and with him as the teacher. Being aware and sensitive to the needs of these students allows the teacher to provide interactions to support the development of these necessary skills; skills that lead to success in the classroom; skills that can be scaffolded by providing opportunities for conversation, discussion, and decision making in a safe environment.

As shown through my research in Mr. Bell’s classroom, his attention to the social-emotional climate of the classroom provided an environment that emphasized student responsibility and empathy. With these components in place, there were few if any behavioral challenges that interrupted learning activities. When a student effectively can control his or her emotions and interact in an appropriate manner that is responsible and respectful, then learning will be much easier for all involved. In Mr. Bell’s classroom challenges with behavior decreased as my research progressed through the five months, allowing for more time on task as the school year progressed. My analysis showed that Mr. Bell’s extra attention and time to foster this social-emotional competency at the beginning of the year appeared to provide benefits later in the school year as indicated by my study.

This intentional time taken at the beginning of the year and each morning provided valuable information about his students which Mr. Bell used as he planned
meaningful activities; activities that would engage his young students. Observing their
play and social interactions at the beginning of the year provided information about
individual personalities and how the students interacted with their peers as well as their
personal interests. This natural observation provided Mr. Bell with the knowledge about
each student’s strengths as well as needs; helpful information when grouping students.
Time taken to greet and talk to his students each morning provided insight as to the
emotional state of each student and events that may have impacted their lives the night
before; events that might be incorporated into their morning literacy activity. One such
example from my research was the stories students wrote one Monday morning following
a weekend of destructive weather. This sensitivity to the needs of his students provided
the foundation for Mr. Bell’s teacher-student interactions as he nurtured trusting and
respectful relationships with each of his students. My research indicates that this
intentional time spent at the beginning of the school year and at the beginning of each day
provided a learning environment with fewer disruptions during the day which led to more
time on task as students engaged with academic activities.

**Relationships and a Climate of Care**

Relationships are complex and many school systems expect children to have
mastered the appropriate social skills before they enter the kindergarten classroom.
Watson and Ecken (2003) wrote that society tends to view student failure to self-regulate
feelings and “behave” as evidence of purposeful disrespect. For some students changing
their understanding of the nature of relationships and teaching social-emotional skills is
necessary to help students interact in a positive manner with one another (Pianta, 1999;
Watson & Ecken, 2003). When teachers such as Mr. Bell intentionally focus on knowing their students, it creates an understanding and a personal connection that allows the teacher to have empathy and to modify what they do and how they teach in order to support the needs of the students.

Watson and Ecken (2003) remind us, “If we want our students to trust that we care for them, then we need to display our affection without demanding that they behave or perform in certain ways in return” (p. 30). Caring for students must be genuine and unconditional. Jerome (1959) noted that the acceptance of the pupil by the teacher was fundamental and that the right kind of relationship in the classroom could make teachers more effective and pupils better able to develop their potential. This was one of the top priorities for Mr. Bell, to unconditionally accept and care for his students based on their needs. Teachers have the power to positively or negatively impact a student’s view of education (as well as relationships) based on how they interact with their students. When teachers know their students and are sensitive to their needs, teachers can provide the support and guidance needed for each student to become a positive, contributing member of the classroom.

Building relationships based on trust and understanding provides students with a sense of emotional safety, knowing that the teacher has their best interest in mind and will support them in any situation. This unconditional presence of the teacher provides a sense of availability, a sense that someone cares. Within this ‘ethic of care’ (Noddings, 2005), the relationship is based on a reciprocity of caring for each other. The response to each individual varies based on need. It is not a “one size fits all” formula, but an
authentic awareness and intentional sensitivity to the lives of each student that was clearly demonstrated by Mr. Bell through his interactions with his students.

It is important for teachers to know their students. Taking time to interact with students lets the students know they are valued. Knowing that they as students are valued builds a sense of trust with the teacher and creates positive relationships. In Mr. Bell’s words, “They will if they can” (conversation, December 19, 2008). Through the use of class meetings Mr. Bell provided a place for this very type of interaction. Class meetings created opportunities for interaction that valued students’ feelings, interests, and voices. Taking time to talk with students and more importantly listen to students provides a way to make connections with students and establish a sense of trust as relationships develop. Mr. Bell’s class meetings provided opportunities for conversation and a sense of belonging. It was a gathering that set the tone for the day. As the teacher, he provided a sense of availability and a sense of care.

This environment of empathy and understanding, of caring and nurturing, of learning to value the unique differences of classmates develops from intentionally focusing on the social-emotional climate of the classroom. Being able to interact in a socially appropriate manner includes building reciprocal relationships and developing communication skills that allow for the exchange of ideas as well as the ability to understand and appreciate diverse perspectives. Empathy, as I define it, is the ability to understand and care about others, is modeled and encouraged during Mr. Bell’s class meetings as well as through the use of democratic practices. Nurturing conversation, negotiation, awareness of one’s actions and interactions, and supporting one’s classmates
creates a climate that supports the social-emotional lives of students. It was an intentional act in the case of Mr. Bell.

**Deliberate Pedagogical Artistry**

Content taught by the teacher depends on the theoretical framework in which he or she operates, what he or she believes about how people learn, and what students need to learn. This conscious link between philosophical beliefs and teaching practice is essential to anyone who would be an educator and not a mere technician (Wirsing, 1972). This conscious link was clearly evident in the case of Mr. Bell as he created a pedagogy that was deliberately focused on particular theoretical beliefs. Wirsing situated her work in secondary education; however, she believed the connection between beliefs and practice was applicable to any level of teaching. My research with Mr. Bell at the kindergarten level showed this to be true.

Pedagogy refers to how one teaches. Although some believe teaching is a science, others believe teaching is an art. As mentioned in the first chapter of this dissertation, the early years of education set the foundation for future success in all facets of life; academically as well as socially (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Denham, 2006; Nelson, 1999; Shore, 1997). It is the teacher who has the opportunity and responsibility to develop a classroom climate that fosters meaningful experiences which support students’ social, emotional, and academic development (Pianta & Walsh, 1996; Zull, 2002).

For some a pedagogical artistry is as individual as the students in one’s classroom. For Mr. Bell, teaching was a creative art that encouraged a curriculum based on experience and the realization that the student is an important participant in the learning
process; a co-creator. This perspective illustrates the definition of pedagogy as written by Aoki (2005), a meaning that fits Mr. Bell’s pedagogical intent. Pedagogy means, in the original Greek sense, leading children. Teaching is truly pedagogic if the leading grows out of this care that inevitably is filled with the good of care. Teaching, then, is a tactful leading that knows and follows the pedagogic good in a caring situation. (p. 191)

According to Aoki, “Good teachers are more than they do; they are the teaching” (p. 196). It is teaching in such a manner that it humanizes the learner with multiple ways of knowing and opportunities for critical reflection.

Eisner (2002) who initially wrote about teaching as an art suggests that judgment, critical thinking, meaningful literacy, collaboration, and service be taught in the classroom “to enable youngsters to learn how to invent themselves—to learn how to create their own minds” (p. 10). Use of the inquiry process and democratic practices in a constructivist classroom, such as Mr. Bell’s, allows for the “art of teaching” to emerge since the teacher has the ability to use his or her professional knowledge and creativity in developing learning experiences based on the student’s interests and curiosities about the world around them. The teacher in turn supports this process of exploration while at the same time linking the required standards and content knowledge into the designed activities; it is a co-constructed curriculum, a joint adventure in learning, a democratic process where power in the classroom is shared.

This alternative perspective of teaching provides the foundation for teacher-student interactions that go beyond pre-planned, objective-based lessons or scripted texts.
Teaching from a critically reflective and constructivist theoretical perspective provides an opportunity for improvisation which allows for the creativity of teaching to emerge (Aoki, 2005). Eisner (2002) warned, “We teach what we teach largely out of habit, and in the process neglect areas of study that could prove to be exceedingly useful to students” (p. 103). What teachers teach, how they teach, and why they teach are all complex components of one’s pedagogy. Teachers need to understand how important their role is when interacting with students and that they need to be deliberate and reflective about their interactions in the classroom. Teachers also need to know not all learning can be quantitatively or statistically identified; not everything a child learns can be written into a measurable objective. What teachers teach and what students learn may be very different.

Implementing democratic practices, such as in Mr. Bell’s class, was a different way of applying one’s teaching, a different way of interacting with one’s students. Incorporating democratic practices takes flexibility and the willingness to give up some of the control and structure that many teachers rely on in their classrooms. It allows for the reciprocity of relationships and the emergence of mutual reflection, a coming together for the sake of learning. It is a way that values student contributions to the classroom and supports the social-emotional climate. With the use of democratic practices, the student’s self-awareness, the student’s connection to society, and the student’s connection to the subject matter are intertwined and identified by Henderson and Gornik (2007) as providing a 3S Understanding: an understanding of the student, the social context, and the subject matter. This theoretical perspective as explained in Chapter 4 provides a
naturalistic way to intertwine teaching and democratic practices to nurture and sustain the social-emotional climate of the classroom and to continually improve education for all students. This 3S understanding (Henderson & Gornik, 2007) was shared by Mr. Bell as one of his theoretical underpinnings.

Teachers need to strive for a greater depth in their understanding of their students as well as the teaching profession. Teachers need to have a depth of knowledge beyond the content that they teach. They need to know and understand their students as well as the theoretical perspectives that support their actions. Eisner (2002) reminded educators that “teaching is an art guided by educational values, personal needs, and by a variety of beliefs or generalizations that the teacher holds to be true” (p. 154). My research indicated that Mr. Bell was willing to explore new ways to be an effective educator, to integrate practices that supported the social-emotional climate of his classrooms.

Teachers are needed who value their students, and invite their students to make contributions to the classroom. Our classrooms need teachers who are willing to take the time to deliberately develop a pedagogical artistry that values young students. Teachers need to question and reflect upon changes that make their teaching more meaningful to their students and provide opportunities for them to think critically about their impact on students.

Teaching from this holistic perspective expands the role of the teacher and often goes against the grain of traditional teaching practices that focus primarily on academic skills. Utilizing a holistic, caring pedagogy comes from a different theoretical perspective, one that does not appear to be well understood by those that view teaching
through an academic-based lens. This difference in perspective creates challenges for teachers who choose to teach against traditional teaching practices. Yet it is a pedagogy that supports the needs of the students in our classroom, socially and emotionally as well as academically. It is a pedagogy that requires a depth of knowledge in both content and theory. It is a pedagogy that incorporates a critical reflective stance in order to develop meaningful interactions with one’s students.

**Teacher as Provocateur—Encouraging Critical Reflection**

Part of embracing an artistic pedagogy includes being a teacher who provokes questions; bringing important issues to the forefront of educational experiences. Although it may create some dissension among those of traditional values and perspectives, presenting multiple perspectives and theories from which one teaches can be seen as a critically reflective process that suggests the need to look closely at what teachers do in the classroom and their interactions with students. Are teachers truly teaching students to be knowledgeable individuals or are they unknowingly creating a generation of individuals who are compliant and unable to think for themselves because they have never had the opportunity to make their own decisions and experience the cause and effect of their interactions?

As professionals, teachers also need the opportunity to communicate and collaborate with their own peers in an effort to understand and share the knowledge they bring to their educational practices. Critical conversations need to be held with other staff members in order to provide insight into one’s pedagogy and to help others understand that there are multiple ways to interact with students and still incorporate the
course of study. Being critically reflective is important so teachers can discuss practices and differences in an effort to help each other improve their interactions with students, and even generate new awareness and possibilities of improving teacher interactions with students. According to Mr. Bell these critical conversations were not welcomed in his building.

This process requires teachers to become a cohesive group that is respectful of multiple perspectives, similar to building a positive social-emotional climate with one’s students. The goal is not for everyone to teach in the same manner, but for understanding teaching from various perspectives. Professional growth comes from collaboration and conversation and even respectful disagreement. If teachers do not question and critically evaluate their practices, their growth as educators will be limited. It is a process that needs to be encouraged in order for teachers to be aware of other educational perspectives and to extend their own professional knowledge.

Critical reflection raises questions that may go against traditional, teacher-directed practices, and critical reflection takes time. In the case of Mr. Bell, he was a constructivist teacher with democratic principles. In my conversations with Mr. Bell, he raised many questions about the various teaching practices that he has encountered. He reported that many teachers are happy letting someone else tell them how to teach. They are compliant and follow the traditional practices they learned, or policies that are blindly handed down. As noted in Chapter 4, Mr. Bell voiced his opinion that teachers who disagree, or teach with a different theoretical perspective were labeled “unprofessional”
or “bad” teachers because they do not follow the status quo. But are those that teach from a critical perspective truly the ones that are the unknown leaders of their profession?

Throughout my research Mr. Bell was passionate about extending his own professionalism as he sought new theories and research and examined his own teaching practices in an effort to continually improve his impact on the students in his classrooms regardless of how others perceived his teaching abilities. He sought out colleagues at the local university in his thirst for “wisdom” (Henderson & Kesson, 2004) and improving his interactions with his students. He was not afraid of embracing and implementing theoretical perspectives that he believed identified him as the “outsider.” In the case of Mr. Bell this difference of perspective provided an opportunity to intentionally incorporate the voices and needs of his students in his pedagogy and in his school.

**Researcher’s Interpretations**

Our classrooms need teachers who artistically blend their beliefs and interactions in a complex “dance” that provides a holistic application of learning grounded in human experiences. My research concludes that teachers need to be intentional, passionate, engaging, purposeful and reflective; this complexity of teaching goes beyond the academics and the traditional teacher-directed methods used by many teachers. The social-emotional needs of students needs to become a focal point of teaching; teaching that values students. As demonstrated by Mr. Bell, teaching should be a pedagogy full of passion, sensitivity and understanding that strives to meet the needs of students. Through these interactions, teachers can teach more than the basic academic skills; they can teach critical thinking, respect, responsibility, collaboration, and empathy.
With the current focus on academic accountability, standardized test scores seem to be used as the guiding factor in whether or not our students are achieving; however I believe this limits the educational pursuits of the classroom. The push to master subject content mitigates the many other facets of teaching the whole child, including valuable attributes such as empathy, equity and fairness, a sense of social responsibility, and even the opportunity to think critically and consider multiple perspectives and/or explore multiple ways to learn a new concept. Combining teacher pedagogy with interactions that value the knowledge students bring to the school provides a holistic climate for learning; a climate that supports the social-emotional lives as well as the academic lives of the students in the classroom.

**Teacher Pedagogy**

A teacher’s pedagogy is a blend of practice and theory that is intertwined with curriculum as it supports the implementation of educational experiences. This pedagogy is as individual as the teacher; mixing strengths and needs, understanding and curiosity; incorporating theory and research into meaningful classroom interactions that provide authentic learning opportunities. A teacher’s educational background and exposure to multiple theories and educational perspectives along with personal experiences impacts the beliefs of the teacher, which in turn influences the interactions between teachers and student. As my research shows, Mr. Bells’ teacher preparation, his student teaching placement, and his continuing education supports the types of interactions which he implemented in his kindergarten classroom.
In Mr. Bell’s case having the freedom to implement the strategies he felt best supported his students came with the responsibility to support his teacher interactions with a sound theoretical foundation and current research. Based on Mr. Bell’s practices I conclude that teachers need a solid understanding of their discipline and why they teach in the manner that they teach. It is important for teachers to define their educational beliefs and draw on this theoretical foundation and knowledge of child development to guide their classroom practices and interactions. Teachers do not need to pick one particular theoretical perspective but should blend the practices they feel best meets the needs of their students.

Teachers need to understand they do have choices as to how they interact with their students; choices based on different theoretical perspectives that will provide them to the foundation to teach beyond the basic standards and to nurture the social-emotional climate of their classroom. In my case study, Mr. Bell’s interactions validated the ability to incorporate both the social-emotional needs of his students as well as the required academic standards. As the needs of the students change and so should the teaching practices in the classroom. Teachers need to be life long learners. Continuing to read and examine current research, activities Mr. Bell engaged in throughout my research, provides knowledgeable about multiple ways to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms.

Based on my research, I believe teachers need to become their own researchers and continually assess their interactions with students. Teachers need to purposefully and thoughtfully consider their interactions with students. Teachers need to take time to
reflect on their work and make sure their interactions have the desired impact creating a process that integrates values, aesthetics, justice and meaning as part of a teacher’s curricular decisions. Critically reflective teachers, such as Mr. Bell, question their work and strive to continually improve their professional knowledge and teaching practices with the best interests of their students being their foundational guide as they provide meaningful learning experiences for all students in their care.

**Teacher -Student Engagement in the Classroom**

In the classrooms, teachers work with the minds and lives of young students, none of which are exactly the same. As illustrated with several students in Mr. Bell’s classroom, teachers work with very unique and highly specialized “raw materials” where each one requires a particular interaction to produce the best possible results. No formula can be offered that impacts every student in the exact same way; yet teachers need to be astutely aware of the possibilities and provide a variety of opportunities so that each individual may grow to the best of his or her own ability. In the primary schools a majority of classrooms appear to be teacher-directed. My research focuses on an alternative form of teaching that implements democratic practices and supports the social-emotional climate of the classroom.

**Teacher-directed classes.** In a traditional teacher-directed classroom, the teacher holds the majority of the power and control of the classroom in her hands. Students appear to be passive learners and in most cases conform to the expectations of the teacher and/or the school. It is the teacher who guides the class in determining the rules and
setting up the daily routine. It is the teacher who plans the activities and provides the opportunities based on her own interpretation of what is important.

In many traditional teacher-directed classrooms, it appears that the focus is on teaching the academic standards and preparing students for passing the tests. In some schools the teacher uses a scripted curriculum which dictates what students will learn and when they will learn it. Lessons come from the text or from the standards, but rarely from the students. It appears students are told what to think and how to think in order to pass the tests. Students are complacent and have little input into the process. Most students easily conform to these expectations never questioning the purpose or the benefit; however those students that do question or do not conform to these preset expectations appear to be labeled as a “behavior problems”.

Democratic-based classes. Teaching from a democratic perspective values the student as well as the subject matter. This deliberate pedagogical intent as demonstrated by Mr. Bell requires a collaborative interaction between the teacher and the student. It is a blend of teacher directed and student initiated activities. It is a blend of interactions that I believe support both the social-emotional climate as well as the academic climate. It is a process that integrates the ideas of the students and the knowledge of the teacher through a series of reciprocal conversations that scaffold problem solving, social interaction, and learning.

One important vehicle for this process is that of the class meeting where the voices of the students are listened to and respected as valuable input for learning interactions. Mr. Bell validated this point as he invited students to share their activities
from the weekend; activities that then became the focus for writing books later in the morning. While the teacher is the leader of the classroom, the teacher shares control of the classroom by engaging the students in discussions and decisions on an authentic level; a level that is sensitive to their lived experiences and needs. It is also an opportunity for students to learn how to care for one another, how to listen and support each other when assistance is needed by another student. These actions were validated during my case study when Mr. Bell invited students to listen to how their friends were feeling, or take a friend with them as they went to the office, or be extra gentle with a peer who was having a difficult morning because he was not feeling well. Scaffolded by the teacher, students learn to assist and care for each other as well as themselves. When responsibility and empathy are shared by all the members of the class, there are fewer behavioral challenges and teacher interruptions which provides more “time on task” for academic lessons.

My research Validates the need for teachers to adjust their interactions to meet the needs of the students, differentiating interactions as necessary through a variety of learning activities linked to students’ experiences and needs. It is a process that incorporates critical reflection and a sensitivity of the needs of the students which is essential to nurturing the social-emotional climate of the classroom. It is a pedagogy that incorporates the social-emotional lives of students as an important, integrated component of learning, a component that appears to be missing from many traditional (standards based), teacher-directed practices.
Scaffolded by the teacher, students become active participants in classroom discussions and decisions. Teachers (such as Mr. Bell) engage students in the process of thinking about their choices; encouraging questions along with higher levels of thinking and awareness. By actively involving the learner in the process, students learn to evaluate the situation and become responsible participants through the use of democratic practices which incorporate critical thinking and problem solving. This process was demonstrated when Mr. Bell discussed the conversion of classroom guidelines into “rights and responsibilities” of his classroom. There was a lengthy discussion as to what this meant and how it applied to various situations the students had recently encountered. This places the power of learning into the hands of the learner which in turn nurtures social-emotional competency and autonomy. As a result of this process, I believe the students in Mr. Bell’s class had a sense of ownership since they were responsible for how their classroom functioned.

Planning. Conclusions drawn from my research in Mr. Bell’s kindergarten class indicates that teachers need to provide educational engagement where the teacher and students are partners in the learning process. Tentative plans may be designed by the teacher, but if the student initiates a topic that creates interest in learning, there is no reason the teacher can not abandon those plans and take the lesson in a different direction. Teachers need to be willing to change direction, to let go of their traditional structure and plans and allow students ideas and experiences to guide the educational interactions. It would be a combination of student initiated and teacher directed lessons; opportunities where students initiate the learning process and then are guided by
knowledgeable teachers who know how to scaffold the learning to the next level while incorporating the required academic standards. Based on Mr. Bell’s beliefs in constructivist practice, learning should be a reciprocal relationship where both parties would learn from the process; a collaborative effort that capitalizes on prior knowledge, lived experiences and engages the strengths and needs of each individual student.

Based on my research, I believe these personalized experiences extend student learning because the students can be engaged in the learning process of discovering new information as it relates to their prior knowledge and their own individual level of understanding. This perspective towards learning values the student and creates a sense of trust that what they bring to the classroom matters. It is a perspective that values the individual. It is a pedagogy that focuses on the holistic needs of the students instead of the standardized needs of the school system.

Valuing the student. This case study shows that students need to be valued for who they are. Validated by Mr. Bell’s teacher-student interactions, the interpersonal relationship between teacher and student is an important aspect of the classroom climate. Students need teachers who care, teachers who are willing to take the time to build relationships. It is important that teachers go beyond the academic skills and teach in a way that supports the development of the whole student, socially as well as academically. As demonstrated by Mr. Bell, this requires teachers to understand the social-emotional lives of the students, their interests, and their lived experiences, in order to build relationships that nurture a supportive learning climate.
Teachers need to find ways to work with their students in a manner that values the experiences the students bring to the classroom. Instead of focusing on the deficits of the student the teacher needs to focus on what the student has to offer; what strengths does the student bring to the class. Mr. Bell allowed students to adjust to new situations (social as well as academic) at their own rate of comfort. This non-confrontational attitude created a positive social-emotional climate where few if any behavior issues escalated into major confrontations. Patience and understanding on the part of Mr. Bell illustrated the need to know the limits of his students and how best to help them through challenging situations. I believe that this depth of knowledge about students can then be creatively incorporated into meaningful activities that are engaging for students, based on their prior knowledge, and built on their interests and needs so that a positive social-emotional climate supports the acquisition of academic skills.

I believe it is also the responsibility of the teacher to find ways to share these strengths and take student learning to the next level of understanding. When a teacher is aware and sensitive to the needs of the student, then these students have a better chance of being successful in the classroom. This acceptance by the teacher creates a sense of trust, an important relationship for the student. Mr. Bell’s acceptance of Jared validates this point. I believe when students know they matter and that they are accepted for who they are, they are willing to put forth their best effort in the classroom. As Mr. Bell believed, “they will if they can”.

Education is not a “one size fits all.” It needs to be differentiated to support all students and their individual strengths. Engaging in conversation, learning to listen to
other’s perspectives, taking responsibility to help solve problems engages students in democratic practices that encourage higher levels of thinking. Based on Mr. Bell's beliefs and practices examined in my research, I conclude that teachers can scaffold social-emotional competency by incorporating conversations and the discussion of multiple perspectives which creates an awareness of what others are thinking. By providing students with the opportunities to engage in appropriate social and emotional interactions, they gain competency in their own skills leading to a sense of autonomy.

My research validates that teaching is a complex process. With all the challenges in the educational system, I believe it is important to value the student and to support their social-emotional competency and autonomy. Teachers need to go beyond the academics and understand the needs of the student in order to create a learning climate that is meaningful and engaging. Time spent on nurturing the social-emotional climate of the classroom will provide a solid foundation for students as they progress through their educational experiences. Mr. Bell took the first month of the school year to observe his students in an effort to get to know them on a more personal level and spent more time helping them to understand one another through conversations and problem solving. My research validated this process as beneficial due to the fact that as my research continued, this group of students developed into a community of learners who supported each other, and where behavioral challenges and interruptions became minimal if they existed at all. Learning to respectfully solve problems, learning to value diverse views, learning how to be responsible and empathetic will provide life long skills that can be used in any classroom and in any career.
If teachers want students to excel in the 21st century, then I believe teachers need to be willing to teach from a holistic perspective. Society is in need of problem solvers and innovative thinkers. Society will need students who want to learn for the sake of learning because it provides them opportunities to contribute to society as caring and respectful individuals. Society will need students who are critically reflective and can interact with others in meaningful and productive ways. Conclusions drawn from my research indicate that teachers need to be willing to consider multiple perspectives and to shift to new educational practices that support a holistic learning environment, one that values students’ experiences and is sensitive to their needs socially, emotionally as well as academically.

Combining the multiple and complex components of teaching, I now turn to the implications for practice. I look at teacher education for preservice teachers as well as professional development for in-service teachers. I examine the need for a pedagogy that is well supported, along with communication and the willingness of teachers to speak up as professionals and make their knowledge known.

**Implications for Practice**

Society has changed and so have the needs of students. Many social issues now become part of the challenge that teachers must deal with each year including the need to care. Social, cultural, and economic issues that may not have been identified 20 or 30 years ago now have an impact on the field of education as teachers strive to educate all students to a level of excellence. With this diversity, teachers must vary their teaching practices and interactions within the classroom. Teacher education programs need to
provide opportunities to study multiple theoretical perspectives and research that supports teaching through a holistic lens.

Focusing on the social-emotional climate needs to be a part of every teacher’s interactions. Teachers need to know content standards in all disciplines but also have a responsibility to know and understand the needs of the students as well as how they learn. For those individuals studying to become teachers, this knowledge about supporting the social-emotional climate through the use of democratic practices can be facilitated through course experiences. For those that are currently teaching, professional development can be scaffolded that allows current teachers to slowly implement these practices into their daily routines.

Teacher Education: Pre-Service Teachers

Education programs that are preparing future teachers need to go beyond the academic content. Integrating philosophies that support the social-emotional needs of students will provide opportunities for pre-service students to create a holistic learning climate. In higher education, undergraduate programs need to make sure students are exposed to multiple theoretical perspectives from which they may teach and encourage students to develop a personal and professional set of beliefs that will sustain a well-supported philosophy and pedagogy that values their students.

Learning how to integrate content, standards, and student interests is an important step in implementing a constructivist practice. Preservice teachers need to have a thorough knowledge of the content standards in their field. However, students also need to be knowledgeable of the theory and research that supports and adds depth to their
understanding about meaningful teacher interactions. Findings from this particular case study with Mr. Bell identified meaningful interactions that were supported by democratic practices which were embedded in an emergent, constructivist-based curriculum. It is this knowledge of how democratic practices support the social-emotional classroom climate that should be incorporated into pre-service teaching; highlighting the need for a caring climate that supports learning, student responsibility, and empathy.

Encouraging pre-service students in the field of education to develop a foundational teaching philosophy or a pedagogical artistry that includes critical reflection would create an awareness of diverse theoretical perspectives and an awareness of the complexity of teaching. Studying the theorists and examining practices such as those based on constructivism provides a depth of knowledge that should be part of teacher education programs. Teaching critical reflection should also be part of every teacher education program so that preservice teachers learn how to evaluate their beliefs and interactions as well as the impact they have on their students. This skill of critically reflecting on a continuous basis provides for growth and change as they become first year teachers, role models for their students, and life long learners.

Examining and exploring different theoretical perspectives provides a wealth of knowledge from which to make decisions as to how one will teach. In addition to a depth and breath of knowledge students also need field experiences where they can observe and work with experienced teachers who teach beyond the academics, who use their professional knowledge and wisdom to implement good teaching practices that support the development of the whole student. Providing students with these types of field
experiences would allow preservice teachers to see the implementation of alternative teaching practices supporting the development of their own pedagogical artistry. Without a professional development school that is partnered with the university, the challenge may be finding teachers who skillfully conduct a classroom that incorporates constructivist principles with a social-emotional climate that supports the needs of the students beyond the expectations of academic competency. While these constructivist practices encouraged by the teacher education program are usually implemented by pre-service teachers during student teaching, once they have their own classroom it is difficult to continue the trend, especially if these new teachers find themselves teaching in a setting that is focused on traditional practices such as what Mr. Bell encountered.

As preservice teachers become first year teachers they will need to have the courage and wisdom to speak up and validate the importance of their work. Therefore it will be important that teacher education programs provide opportunities to develop a solid understanding of their philosophy on teaching and how to best implement it in the classroom and still meet academic standards of the districts where they will be employed. Teacher education programs also need to provide the opportunities to engage in critical reflection such that they can respectfully question and explain their interactions as they teach beyond the academics in an effort to best support the holistic needs of their students.

**Professional Development: In-Service Teachers**

For those currently in the classroom, the importance of the social-emotional climate of the classroom needs to be highlighted as an important aspect of teaching. The
importance of current theory and research needs to be shared and discussed with an eye
towards critical reflection of how and why they teach in the manner they have chosen. I
believe encouraging teachers in the classroom to talk with their teaching colleagues
(including the principal) about their practices and what changes they would like to make
would be a valuable way to begin critical conversations and generate new possibilities.
Depending on their undergraduate education, and even graduate education, some teachers
may not be aware of the current theories and research.

Open minds and critical conversations are an important first step towards
improving one’s teaching practices and changing the climate in the classroom. Creating
awareness could be accomplished through monthly round tables, or lunch bunch sessions.
This type of conversation may also be initiated by having a book group that focuses on a
particular text with follow up discussion and implementation. Teachers may find that
many of them share the same concerns and challenges. They may also generate new
initiatives through these conversations as they begin to explore and question their own
teaching beliefs and practices. These conversations I believe would be important in
building a cohesive staff, one that is willing to work together for the benefit of the
students, one that is willing to accept differences in teaching practices.

**Communicating the Knowledge of Teachers**

I believe teachers need to be encouraged to speak up and share their knowledge
about what they do. Teaching as a profession is misunderstood by many. The amount of
work and time from those that are truly passionate about their work is unknown to many
outside the field of education; and in the case of Mr. Bell, within the teaching field. Yet
even when teachers do disagree with practices they are asked to implement, many choose to conform to the status quo and remain quiet. Teachers need to have choices, and more importantly teachers need to have a voice, one that is listened to and valued.

I believe teachers do have the knowledge to create a classroom environment that supports their students, but many constraints, both real and perceived, limit their capacity to interact in a manner that fully supports the whole child. The creative art of teaching for many appears to have been lost in the myriad of standardized testing and the strict adherence to test scores and the need for districts to reach academic excellence. This appears to translate into teaching to the test for many teachers.

There are teachers in classrooms who do care and who do provide multiple opportunities for their students to grow and develop in a variety of ways. There are teachers who put in countless hours to create an education that is supportive of their students’ needs. Yet it appears that some struggle against a system that does not view them as “professionals.” It appears that some school systems do not value the education or knowledge teachers bring to the classroom. Textbooks provide scripted lessons or developmentally appropriate worksheets and activities that do not require a 4-year degree to implement. It may be easier, but the interaction with students is depersonalized with a “one size fits all” mentality. In my opinion, based on my research that revealed the challenges Mr. Bell encountered with the dissension among his staff, quantity and standardization of factual material seems to be overruling quality and meaningful interaction. Teachers need to take these texts and mold the lessons in a manner that
benefits the diversity and individuality of their students. The content needs to be integrated into meaningful experiences and not isolated bits of knowledge.

Teaching needs to go beyond presenting the basic academic content. Teachers need to know their students and support the social-emotional climate of the classroom. It is this knowledge of understanding young students that needs to be brought to the surface and used as a guide for teacher-student interactions. As previously mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, most problems (reported by teachers) stem from behavioral issues linked to social-emotional competency and not academic needs (Watson & Ecken, 2003). It also bears repeating Pianta (1999), who reminds us that not being able to interact in a socially appropriate manner affects the ability to build relationships, and may limit educational opportunities.

It is the theory and critical thinking that goes into the teaching profession that needs to be brought to the forefront and utilized in teaching practices. It is the knowledge of how and why teachers teach that is important. Mr. Bell did not base his teaching practices on any one set way or “system” but incorporated his professional knowledge and his understanding of the content into his teacher-student interactions which supported the whole child. Fortunately he had a principal that allowed him freedom to teach in a manner that nurtured his students and supported his personal and professional understanding about how children learn, although he was not sure she really understood what he did and why.
Communication Beyond the Classroom

In order to value the work teachers do, communication needs to extend beyond the classroom. Critical conversations need to occur within school staffs and with administration. There needs to be an understanding about what best meets the needs of students, and sometimes that means differentiating teaching. Standards do have a place in education, and it is good that teachers are accountable for what they do in their classroom, but there also needs to be recognition that there are multiple ways to implement those standards and to educate students.

Findings from my research demonstrate that there are different ways to teach and interact with students and still educate students according to the required standards. It needs to be understood and communicated that not every student learns in the same way, and not all teachers need to teach in the same manner. What should be identified as common ground is whether or not those teaching in the classrooms are meeting the needs of the students, noting that different students have different needs and progress at different levels. Are teachers expecting students to conform to set standards, or can teachers negotiate and modify what and how they teach so that the students learn in a manner that is meaningful to them? It should be the goal of teachers to have a lasting impact on students’ willingness to be life-long learners, learners who contribute to society in respectful and responsible ways.

These multiple perspectives about teaching need to be conveyed to those in and beyond the classroom. Teachers and administrators both need to understand that there are multiple perspectives and multiple teaching methods that support student learning.
Teachers need to talk with each other as well as with the administrators to identify what really does meet the needs of their students. Just as with students in the classroom, communication and collaboration between educators and administrators would provide opportunities to respectfully listen and understand the diverse perspectives involved in the field of education. Intentional conversation and critical reflection may at least lead to understanding and the acceptance of different perspectives, and eventually to collaboration that would provide meaningful and engaging support for a holistic learning environment throughout a building or district. Those students who sit in our classroom are unique individuals who need to be valued beyond their academic capabilities. Why shouldn’t a variety of teaching perspectives that are inclusive of the social-emotional needs of our students be valued as well?

**Implications for Research**

This research is a study of relationships, pedagogy, and beliefs. While this case study was limited to one kindergarten classroom, it still offered valuable insights into the needs for both pre-service teacher education programs and professional development for in-service teachers. I would like to extend this research beyond one classroom and explore the beliefs and practices of others in the field of education, including preservice students, novice teachers, and more experienced teachers. I would also like to examine the educational beliefs of administrators and see how those compare to practicing teachers. I would focus specifically on beliefs as they pertain to creating relationships, and supporting the social-emotional climate in the classroom. I am interested in uncovering the real and perceived challenges that teachers in the classroom feel are
imposed on them by district and state standards. Are the limitations self-imposed or do they truly extend from policies that come from upper level administrators and policy makers? I would also like to see how time in the classroom influences preservice teacher beliefs.

It is these multiple perspectives of pre-service teachers, practicing teachers, and administrators that I would like to examine in my continued research. Eisner (2002) wrote, “Changes in the teacher’s ideology may be among the important changes that can be made in the field of education” (p. 83).

Many research possibilities emerged upon completion of this case study. As can be seen by the extensive short- and long-term research ideas, the questions that led me to study Mr. Bell continue to intrigue me. What can I learn from the following ideas for short-term and long-term research studies that will improve the lives of children in the classrooms, early childhood teacher education programs, in-service teachers, and ongoing professional development? Following is a research agenda that I hope addresses these very questions.

**Short-term Research Possibilities**

Currently as a teacher educator, I am interested in creating a program that provides many opportunities for pre-service teachers to explore and develop a professional philosophy and pedagogy. How does their thinking about teaching change from when they first enter their college experience until they graduate? What are their beliefs about education and how do they change over the course of their studies? Are there specific courses that influence their thinking about appropriate teacher interactions
and the opportunities to support a holistic learning environment? I am contemplating a set of short answer questions and possibly a survey that could be taken at the beginning of their course work and then again at the end of their advanced studies in early childhood education to help answer these questions. To help answer these questions, I would also collect copies of the pre-service students’ writing assignments from various courses that focus on their educational philosophy. By collecting particular assignments at different time periods of their education I would be able to compare their beliefs from the beginning of their course work to their beliefs at the completion of their program.

I am also interested in exploring the beliefs of currently practicing classroom teachers in our local community as these professionals will become mentors to the pre-service teachers in our teacher education program. What beliefs do teachers have and do they impact their teaching? Are those beliefs based on theory, research, college course work, or personal experiences and convictions? How do their beliefs compare to the beliefs pre-service teachers are learning in their course work? Will the beliefs of the mentor teacher influence the pre-service teacher or vice versa? In exploring the impact of pre-service teachers on mentors at the preschool level, Kroeger and Pech (2009) noted that conversations that allowed for the reciprocity of knowledge and ideas between the mentor and pre-service teacher provided opportunities for both individuals to expand their professional understanding of young children. These conversations were particularly influential when it came to changing the social-emotional climate of the classroom.
I am wondering if the same reciprocal process will carry into the primary level where standardization and statistical assessment is becoming the influential force behind teacher interactions and instruction. It is important that the preservice teachers have mentors who think deliberately about his or her role as an educator, who consider the holistic process of learning. Cochran-Smith (2001) noted that the collaboration between preservice teachers and mentor teachers is vital to public education in a democratic society, particularly in response to standardization that is requiring scripted lessons where teachers are learning to “teach by number” (p. 4).

It will be important to find teachers who are willing to teach against the grain (Cochran-Smith, 2001) in an effort to support the pre-service teachers of our teacher education program who focus on the holistic learning needs of the students in their care. Our teacher education program will need mentor teachers who are willing to critically reflect on their beliefs and their teaching practices in order to provide the best possible learning environment for students. As reported in my findings, Mr. Bell perceived himself as an “outsider” because he reportedly did not have peers who shared the same theoretical beliefs or passion for critical reflection.

Cochran-Smith’s research (1991) with middle school teachers in urban schools identified the need for discussion between student teachers and mentor teachers to teach in such a manner that supports the needs of students and provides social justice, not systematic conformity. It is important to link theory and practice “through a process of self-critical and systematic inquiry about teaching, learning, and schooling” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990, p. 283). It will be important to find mentor teachers whose beliefs
best nurture the philosophies that are underpinnings of the university’s teacher education program.

In examining experienced teachers’ beliefs, I would continue with my line of inquiry that examines relationships, and focus on current teachers’ awareness and beliefs about the social-emotional climate of their classrooms. I would utilize short essay responses with a series of small group conversations and see if I could find common strands that run through their experiences and perceptions. What guides their teaching practices? What are the teachers’ perceptions about the social-emotional climate in the classrooms? What changes would they make if there were no limitations (real or perceived) or high-stakes expectations? What have they learned as teachers; how have they learned it and how has it impacted their own interactions in the classroom? Are there previous beliefs that have been unconsciously squelched due to the current focus on standardization?

Based on teacher responses, professional development could be initiated to help facilitate professional reflection and collaboration in an effort to incorporate practices of critical reflection that would support positive teacher-student interactions that in turn would support the social-emotional climate of the classroom. This would be an ongoing process and not just a one time seminar. I would also use this information to identify appropriate field sites where pre-service teachers will hopefully have the opportunity to witness and experience the incorporation of a curriculum that is based on the needs of the students, and that supports of the social-emotional climate of the classroom.
Second, taking my research beyond the classroom, I would like to explore and study the relationships that occur within a school district. What are the interactions between administrators and teachers and how do their beliefs differ? What are the perceived and real limitations that teachers feel are imposed on their teaching? What are the differences in expectations and how can they work together to support the students in their school system so that all the needs of the students are met? I would like to use this study to open the lines of communication, to help facilitate understanding of the diverse perspectives within a school district and provide an opportunity for the “artistry of teaching” (Eisner, 2002) to emerge along with professional collaboration. I would like to find a way to empower teachers, to encourage them to speak up, to bring their knowledge to the forefront of their educational practices.

**Long-term Research Possibilities**

As a teacher educator, I would like to follow our graduates and track their ability to implement a constructivist-based pedagogy. What was most beneficial in the preservice education? Does our teacher education program really have an impact on their teaching in the classroom? I would like to examine how their beliefs change over time as they transition to the role of novice teacher and eventually the experienced teacher. What happens to their teaching practices their first year in the field and over time? Are they able to teach beyond the academics? What happens when they find themselves in an environment of traditional teaching practices and they are the “outsider” teaching against the grain? How do they maintain or improve their professional knowledge? What
challenges occur over time and what changes do they see as they gain more experience in the classroom?

I would like to follow our teachers as they continue teaching to see if they are able to build relationships and influence the social-emotional climate of a classroom. Are they able to implement democratic practices and critical reflection in a manner that continuously nurtures and sustains holistic teaching practices? Is there a “better” way to teach or are there multiple ways to facilitate learning that supports the social-emotional aspects of a student’s life? A long-term study would identify if constructivism and the use of democratic principles at the primary level impacts a student’s academic success over a period of time. Questions I would like to explore include: Does utilizing democratic practices and an emergent curriculum make a difference? How is student behavior affected? What, if any, are the limitations in the primary classroom that prevent teachers from using a constructivist pedagogy that is embedded with democratic practices? Can this process be carried from year to year and teacher to teacher? What is the impact on students socially as well as academically and does it have a lasting affect?

I believe understanding the social-emotional needs of students and building relationships are a key element in education. This sensitivity impacts the interactions in a classroom. Understanding, collaborating, and problem solving with others provides an avenue for constructing new learning in a variety of contexts, both between peers in a classroom and between colleagues in a district. Knowing the strengths of one’s students as well as one’s colleagues can help a teacher interact in a manner that is supportive socially as well as academically. Nurturing positive teacher-student interactions provides
a solid foundation for a student’s continued success as he or she continues in the process of becoming a contributing member of society. Collaborating with colleagues allows teachers to also become life-long learners in the pursuit of improving education for all students in their care.

**Conclusion**

Teaching is a complex process and as society changes, so should teaching. This study has shown that teachers need to know that supporting the social-emotional lives of students through the use of democratic practices has many benefits. Integrating an awareness of self, social responsibility, collaboration, problem solving, and subject matter in meaningful ways, creates a classroom that is caring and supportive. It also provides a foundation for building relationships and academic engagement. Nurturing and supporting the social-emotional climate at the preschool level is expected; it is not necessarily expected at the primary level. Yet I feel it is critical for teachers to know and understand the needs of their students no matter what the grade level and no matter what the teaching practice.

Our young students are complex and intelligent thinkers. In a democratic classroom, individuals are valued for what they have to offer and who they are as unique individuals. Mr. Bell’s sensitivity to his students, interest in developing social responsibility in his class, and beliefs in democratic practices provided a solid foundation for his interactions that nurture and sustain positive interactions with his students. In turn, students develop both personal and social responsibility that was evident through their caring and respectful interactions in the classroom.
Teaching is challenging with many demands being made of teachers. Many issues from society find their way into the classroom through the lives of students, and teachers now have to interact with those issues. Teachers need to be sensitive to the social-emotional lives of their students as part of the everyday process of teaching. Teaching needs to become an integrated process; a deliberate pedagogy that provides meaningful experiences that take into consideration the students’ prior knowledge, and links concepts to practical application; practices that support the social-emotional climate of the classroom by building responsibility and empathy. This desired result can be accomplished through the use of democratic practices in the classroom and a teacher who is sensitive to the needs of his students.

Students need meaningful opportunities to become innovative thinkers who can negotiate differences and creatively pursue alternative solutions. Providing a classroom environment that values these traits and works to support the unique talents of individuals provides a learning climate that allows students to contribute to their own learning as well as others in meaningful ways. Teacher-student interactions that support the social-emotional climate of a classroom develop young students who become responsible and caring citizens—citizens who understand equity and empathy.
APPENDIX A

DEMOGRAPHICS
## Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community*</th>
<th>School**</th>
<th>Classroom**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Laurel Hills <em>(pseudonym)</em></td>
<td>Mountain Springs <em>(pseudonym)</em></td>
<td>AM Kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White—94.6%</td>
<td>White—377</td>
<td>White—17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200 boys, 177 girls</td>
<td>8 boys, 9 girls</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black—1.5%</td>
<td>Black—7</td>
<td>Black—2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 boys, 2 girls</td>
<td>1 boy, 1 girl</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian—1.9%</td>
<td>Asian—11</td>
<td>Asian—1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 boys, 4 girls</td>
<td>1 boy, 0 girls</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic—4</td>
<td>Hispanic—1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 boys, 2 girls</td>
<td>0 boys, 1 girl</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Income</td>
<td>Reduced lunch—15</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$71,770</td>
<td>Free lunch—33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total population</td>
<td>Total students</td>
<td>21 Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32,139</td>
<td>K-4th Grade</td>
<td>10 boys, 11 girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>399</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


# Grade Level Population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade level</th>
<th>Students per grade</th>
<th>Teachers per grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Grade</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Grade</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Grade</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth grade</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education &amp; Support Staff</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialists – music, art, gym, library</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>399</strong></td>
<td><strong>24</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

DISTRICT AND SCHOOL MISSION STATEMENTS
DISTRICT MISSION STATEMENT

The district is committed to teaching all students to the best of their abilities and creating an environment in which its members meet the highest academic standards possible by:

1. Emphasizing real world problem-solving
2. Motivating students to assume positive roles in society
3. Supporting community and parent involvement
4. Modeling lifelong learning
5. Provide a safe, secure and risk-free environment

VISION

To actively engage all learners in meaningful experiences which enable them to acquire the tools necessary to become productive, responsible citizens.

CORE BELIEFS

1. The purpose of schooling is to ensure that each child, regardless of background, learns to think, reason and use his or her mind well.
2. The school district is organized to encourage children to use knowledge to solve problems rather than passively absorb knowledge to be used at some other time.
3. District-level staff supports initiatives from the school buildings that are designed to produce better results for students.
4. Teachers are viewed as leaders: their primary job is to engage students in significant activity that results in learning.
5. One of the most critical jobs of the superintendent is to develop a vision of the future and to initiate action toward that vision.
Pleasant Springs is a learning place where we recognize the uniqueness of each student.

**MISSION:** Our purpose is to focus on the child, and as adults, create a positive learning atmosphere in which we model dignity and respect for others.

**VISION:** We believe that every day, every child will be actively engaged in a nurturing and successful environment and that every adult will be passionately dedicated and inspired to motivate the development of children (as individuals) who will be leaders.

**PURPOSE STATEMENT:**

1) Every child is provided with an opportunity to learn at his or her own level.

2) Every child should feel safe in the school environment.

3) A strong partnership between parents, children, and school personnel should be developed to ensure equal responsibility.

*pseudonym*
APPENDIX C

MR. BELL’S “CUBE” PERSPECTIVE
MR. BELL’S “CUBE” PERSPECTIVE
Be Safe
- Be careful
Be nice
- Don’t bother people
- Listen to other people
- Try to help if someone is hurt or sad
- Try to make others happy
- Make sure you are being helpful
- Work together
- Be polite
- Keep trying
APPENDIX E

RIGHTS & RESPONSIBILITIES OF ROOM TWELVE
Rights of Room 12

1. Every person has the right to be safe.
2. Every person has the right to be treated nicely.
3. Every person has the right to get help when they need it.
Shared Responsibilities of Treating Everyone Nicely

1. Be helpful. Try to help if someone is hurt or upset.
2. Try to make other people happy. Do not be mean.
3. Be polite.
4. Don’t bother people.
5. Be kind. Use kind words and a nice voice.
6. Listen when someone is talking to you.
7. Think about where you are. Be quiet in the library and the hallway. Be as loud as you want on the playground.
REFERENCES


Kyburz-Graber, R. (2004). Does case-study methodology lack rigour? The need for quality criteria for sound case-study research, as illustrated by a recent case in
secondary and higher education. *Environmental Education Research, 10*(1), 53-65.


