CLASSROOM MEETING:
A WINDOW INTO CHILDREN’S CULTURES

DISSERTATION

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By

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study examines classroom meetings within a progressive education classroom. Specifically the study takes place in an Informal first and second grade multi-age classroom that reflects the democratic ideals of progressive education. Informed by sociocultural theory, the researcher focuses on how the cultures of the classroom are co-constructed and reflected through the interactions of its participants. The everyday patterns of action and interaction establish the school and peer cultures distinct to the Informal classroom. The researcher used multiple methods of data collection to provide a lens for viewing each of these worlds. The methods include: daily audio recordings and participant observation notes, weekly collections of artifacts, quarterly grounded surveys, and small group interviews as needed. Distinctive in its progressive pedagogy, the teacher as an agent of school culture presents the norms and rituals that must be learned in order to be an Informal student. The school culture further reflects the teacher’s focal concerns as a progressive educator: a democratic education with an integration of the curriculum. While the teacher presents these norms, the students contribute their own input and ultimately daily life in negotiated as a co-construction. Tracer units, such as the ritual of sharing, reveal the social construction of classroom action and discourse as the children create a distinct social history reflecting
the common experiences they share with one another. Rituals also unveil the focal concerns that emerge with the construction of a peer culture. Fulfilling the role of a participant-observer, the researcher observes how a school culture event makes room for the peer culture to intersect creating opportunities for emergent literacy and for authentically assessing students’ social development. Ultimately, these intersections provide a place for relationships to develop and for the foundation of a classroom community to be co-constructed. Together, the children and the teacher of the classroom become keepers of the history, geography, and culture of the classroom community. Classroom meetings are more than just simple events; they are complex and culturally connected, offering its participants a potential of possibilities, including the chance to be part of something bigger than oneself.
Dedicated
in memory of my father
and
in honor of my mother
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There are many individuals that I need to thank for I could not have made this journey alone. I want to thank my parents whom from a very young age instilled within us the value of higher education. Although my father is no longer physically with us, he is always in my presence. I am grateful for being blessed with such a loving mother who has taught me that strong faith prevails through all of life’s encounters. I want to thank Brian and Tasha for the love and support you could only ask for from a brother and sister. And to the love of my life, Ed, who has only known me in my role as a teacher-researcher. I thank you for your ever enduring patience and encouragement. There were many times throughout this journey that you served as my inspiration.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Becoming a student means learning the complex social and communicative interactions that are distinctive in classroom environments. In order to participate successfully, children learn to identify, interpret, predict, and produce the characteristics of the specific events of their particular classroom. Children come to school challenged with the task of participating within a complex social organization. Unlike life at home, when children come to school they face living with a large group of peers with a unique set of norms, routines, and behavioral demands. There are social norms and expectations which children must know and understand. The child’s position within the classroom is socially and culturally constructed. Children become peers and students as they negotiate with each other and their teacher a structure for participating in the roles, rights, obligations, intentions, and actions that occur within the classroom (Fernie, Davis, Kantor, & McMurray, 1993).

Children’s early classroom experiences are critical to their appropriation of their roles as students. This study examines how six, seven, and eight year old children learn to become Informal students in a progressive education classroom. Still surviving in the realm of public school systems, progressive education evolved from the progressive movement that began in America during the late 19th century. The inspiration and
leadership of the movement was the great American educational philosopher John Dewey. Progressive educators believe that education must be based on experiences that involve input from the child. Progressive education fosters a reorganization of classroom practice and curriculum. There is a focus on the needs and interests of the individual student. Progressive schools avoid the regimentation that characterizes most schools by having children learn in “Informal” settings. An authoritarian approach is replaced by a more democratic mode and the ultimate goal, in John Dewey's terms, is for the classroom to be an “embryonic community” that provides a model for the democratic larger society.

In our efforts to replicate the democratic ideals of our society, progressive educators strive to support children's understanding of how to become a citizen of a democratic classroom community. Daily, progressive educators hold classroom meetings with their students. From an outsider’s perspective it may appear as a mundane event that occurs daily within the classroom. From this viewpoint, it is a simple activity that reflects the reading of a morning message, a review of the daily schedule, the sharing of calendar, the announcing of news, and children taking turns sharing. However, situated in a progressive pedagogy this event is more than just sharing, more than just teaching calendar, and more than just a greeting written on the board. These meetings provide opportunities for discussion, negotiation, sharing, and reflection. Of the many events that occur within a school day, whole group activities have the potential to provide social and conversational processes that are essential for democratic interactions. Classroom meetings represent a school culture oriented toward citizenship as Dewey imagined it, as well as provide opportunities for children to build shared experiences, constructing a shared reality of a peer culture. From a research perspective then, classroom meetings
have the potential to reveal the complex cultural systems imbedded within dynamic structures of classroom life. It is a microcosm of life together in a classroom. This study investigates the critical role of the morning meeting in a progressive, first and second grade classroom as a place where young students learn what it means to be a citizen/student in such a setting. It also explores the peer interests of children at this event and how their interests and those of the teacher intersect and mesh.

The study is grounded in Fred Erickson’s (1986) interpretivist perspective. Influenced by the work of sociocultural theorist Lev Vygotsky (1978), educational ethnographers like Corsaro (2005), Dyson (1997), Kantor & Fernie (2003), Gallas (1994), Green & Harker (1982), and Paley (1984) attempt to understand the meanings of different types of contexts, viewed as group cultures, as they study classroom life in early-childhood and elementary schools. Educational researchers view schools as social settings and classrooms as group cultures where life is patterned as the culture is co-constructed over time by its members’ interactions with each other and reactions to each other (Kantor & Fernie, 2003). In this study, I investigate the daily life of the classroom and its participants as I attempt to understand the locally constructed meanings of the interactions at the classroom event of morning meetings. Of particular interests to myself as a teacher-researcher are Dewey’s (1938) contributions to progressive education and Vygotsky’s (1978) beliefs about the role of culture.

*Progressive Education*

During most of the twentieth century, the term "progressive education" was used to describe ideas and practices that aimed to make schools more effective agents of a democratic society. Although there are numerous differences of style and emphasis
among progressive educators, we share the conviction that democracy means active participation by all citizens in social, political, and economic decisions that will affect our lives. The term "progressive" arose from a period (roughly 1890-1920) during which many Americans took a more careful look at the political and social effects of vast concentrations of corporate power and private wealth.

John Dewey (1916), in particular, saw that with the decline of local community life and small scale enterprise, young people were losing valuable opportunities to learn the values of democratic participation, and he concluded that education would need to make up for this loss. In his Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, where he worked between 1896 and 1904, Dewey tested ideas he shared with leading school reformers such as Francis W. Parker and Ella Flagg Young. During these years, other experimental schools were established around the country, and in 1919 the Progressive Education Association was founded.

Led by Dewey, progressive educators opposed a growing national movement that sought to separate academic education for the few and narrow vocational training for the masses. During the 1920s, when education turned increasingly to "scientific" techniques, such as intelligence testing and cost-benefit management, progressive educators insisted on the importance of the emotional, artistic, and creative aspects of human development. At the start of the Depression, a group of politically oriented progressive educators, led by George Counts, dared schools to "build a new social order" and published a provocative journal called The Social Frontier to advance their "reconstructionist" critique of laissez faire capitalism. At Teachers College, Columbia University, William H. Kilpatrick and other students of Dewey taught the principles of progressive education
to thousands of teachers and school leaders, and in the middle part of the century, books such as Dewey's *Experience and Education* (1938), Boyd Bode's *Progressive Education at the Crossroads* (1938), and Carlton Washburne's *What is Progressive Education?* (1952) among others, continued to provide progressive critique of conventional assumptions about teaching, learning, and schooling. A major research endeavor, the "eight-year study," demonstrated that students from progressive high schools were capable, adaptable learners and excelled even in the finest universities. Nevertheless, in the 1950s, during a time of cold war anxiety and cultural conservatism, progressive education was widely repudiated, and it disintegrated as an identifiable movement.

In the years since, however, various groups of educators have rediscovered the ideas of Dewey and his associates, and revised them to address the changing needs of schools, children, and society. “Open classrooms”, “schools without walls”, “cooperative learning”, multiage approaches, whole language, the social curriculum, experiential education, the Piaget approach, and numerous forms of alternative schools all have important philosophical roots in progressive education. John Goodlad's (1988) notion of "nongraded" schools, Theodore Sizer's (1989) network of "essential" schools, Elliott Wigginton's (1986) Foxfire project, and Deborah Meier's (2000) student-centered Central Park East schools are some well known examples of progressive reforms in public education. In the 1960s, critics like Paul Goodman and George Dennison took Dewey's ideas in a more radical direction, helping give rise to the free school movement. In recent years, activist educators in inner cities have advocated greater equity, justice, diversity and other democratic values through the publication *Rethinking Schools* (1986).

Today, scholars, educators, and activists (Jervix & Montag, 1991; Röhrs &
Volker, 1995; Semel & Sadovnik, 1999) are rediscovering Dewey's work and exploring
its relevance to a "postmodern" age, an age of global capitalism and breathtaking cultural
change. We are finding that although Dewey wrote a century ago, his insights into
democratic culture and meaningful education suggest hopeful alternatives to the regime
of standardization and mechanization that more than ever dominate our schools. Much of
the literature on progressive education is found through universities that support the
progressive pedagogy in their teacher education programs (e.g. Columbia University,
University of Wisconsin, University of Vermont). Most of the research on progressive
education, past and present (Bourne, 1916; Semel, 1992), highlights schools that have
successfully initiated progressive philosophical ideals. This study, therefore, is unique in
its efforts to examine a particular event, classroom meetings, within a particular
pedagogy, progressive education. Furthermore, this study specifically investigates how
children learn the roles of becoming an Informal student.

Sociocultural Theory

During the past two decades, there has been a growing interest among
developmental, educational, and cognitive psychologists in the relationship between
cognition and culture. Worldwide, psychologists are beginning to concentrate on building
a solid understanding of the conceptions of the Soviet sociohistorical school of thought.
Since the 1980s, an extensive, more in-depth picture of the work of Soviet psychologist
Lev Vygotsky (1978) has emerged. This approach is known as the sociocultural
perspective. Dissatisfaction with positivism, an “erosion” of support among
developmentalists for Piagetian theory, cynicism for the conditions of the study of
artificial intelligence, desolation of the division of psychology, and the investigation of
alternative approaches to social learning theory all contribute to the increasing popularity of sociocultural theory (Cole, 1996). The extraordinary interest in the sociohistorical work of Vygotsky has captivated the attention of teacher-researchers, including myself, as I situate my study within a sociocultural framework.

Of particular focus are Vygotsky’s beliefs about the role of culture. Vygotsky believed that society provides children with goals and structured methods to achieve them. Moll (1992) asserts that according to Vygotsky “in meeting culture, the natural line of development is restructured and reorganized.” In his book Mind in Society, Vygotsky (1978) identified the relationship between the individual and the society as a dialectical process. He theorized that the essence of human behavior resides in its mediation of tools and signs. Tools are externally oriented; aimed at mastering and triumphing over nature, and signs are used to restructure meaning. As a result, this new meaning brings changes to the society. From Vygotsky’s perspective, societies create tools and sign systems, such as systems of language, writing, and numbers.

In connection to children’s development and the influence on learning, Vygotsky (1978) viewed teaching as the means through which development is advanced. He believed there are no “universal stages” of development. Vygotsky believed that if one were to change the tools of thinking accessible to a child then the child’s mind would have a different structure. According to Vygotskian theory, language plays a significant role in the organization of higher psychological functions. He viewed language as a universal cultural tool that is used in many different contexts to solve a variety of problems.

The central focus of Vygotsky’s work was on the “social origins and cultural
bases of individual development” (Moll, 1990, p. 1). Vygotsky’s understanding of how the individual child learns to think is represented through a process of internalizing external and social activities to make them part of one’s own mental structures (Sutherland, 1992). He contended that children develop higher psychological processes through their “enculturation” of the experiences and practices of their society. Vygotsky placed much less emphasis on biological inheritance and a greater focus on culture. As children become socialized into their culture they learn to understand things that are common elements of their social experiences. Vygotsky (1978) argued that all cognitive functions are products of social interactions.

Influenced by the work of Vygotsky (1978), many sociocultural researchers take an ethnographic perspective on classroom life. The key concept underlying the sociocultural approach is the notion that a group of individuals in prolonged interaction within a specific setting will construct a patterned way of living together. Sociocultural researchers view this patterned way of being as the culture of the group. From this perspective, the culture forms as its participants work together to develop shared expectations, language, and behavior patterns (Kantor & Fernie, 2003).

This study expands upon the work of other sociocultural researchers who have participated in ethnographic studies to examine specific aspects of classroom culture. Researcher Judith Green (Green & Harker, 1982) unveiled the nature of language processes in school settings, William Corsaro (2003, 2005) developed a model of the social construction of childhood based on his ethnographic studies of children’s peer cultures, and Ann Dyson (1997) revealed how the social worlds of classroom life represent the interests of the children as expressed through children’s action and writing.
Teachers, Karen Galls (1994) and Vivian Paley (1984), have examined aspects of classroom culture, including children’s sharing and storytelling, to develop an understanding for how children construct meaning of their worlds.

In their studies of how children learn the roles of becoming a student, Rebecca Kantor and Dave Fernie (2003) have investigated how preschool children participate in the formation of a school culture. With their colleagues, these researchers discovered how the school culture event of circle time, or in my case, classroom meeting, offers many instances for children to co-construct a peer culture. Kantor and Fernie recognized that these two cultures may provide wider possibilities when they intersect. My study builds on the work of sociocultural researchers as I investigate within my primary classroom how classroom meetings provide a window for making children's cultures visible.

An Ethnographic Perspective

This study is an ethnography, where the event of a classroom meeting, embedded within the culture of an Informal classroom, was given meaning in relation to the particular culture formed by the children as they learned to become Informal students. Consequently, classroom meetings were examined within the context of classroom life. In order to reveal the patterned life of the classroom and the processes through which the life was socially constructed by the children, I engaged in a 27 week study of the classroom and served the role as the participant observer. In my efforts to gain an insider’s perspective on the children and to construct meaning of the complex dynamic nature of our classroom meetings, I used multiple data sources including field notes, small group interviews, grounded surveys, audio and video recordings, and artifacts.
Situated in an ethnographic perspective, my findings unfolded through an inductive process (Gumperz, 1986). My initial interpretations guided further data collection as I refined my developing theoretical analyses. Therefore, the collection and analysis of data was a recurring process. Guided by the work of Erickson (1986), I used analytical strategies to identify emerging themes that reflected patterns within my data. These patterns evolved into theoretical assertions as I used key quotes, narrative vignettes, data reports, and interpretive commentary to demonstrate my findings.

As a participant-observer in my own classroom, my research serves as a “reflector” illuminating my own habitual teaching practices (Kantor & Fernie, 2003). It is a resource for me, challenging my pedagogical beliefs as a progressive educator and sociocultural researcher. Today, I face the tension that exists between my own pedagogical beliefs and the mandates that have been placed on America’s public school systems. For the first time in history, the school districts within each state are operating under a hegemonic federal government.

Today, each state is required to have academic content standards to identify “what every child should learn and know” at each grade level. As I examine the Ohio Content Standards for kindergarten through grade three, I am dismayed by the lack of content standards addressing children’s social and linguistic development. As the state strives to create content standards for every subject area, including technology, there is one strand within the Language Arts Content Standards that addresses children’s communication skills (Ohio Department of Education, 2006). Underneath this strand, there are only five benchmarks addressing oral and visual communication for kindergarten through second grade (ODE, 2006). Time is one of a teacher’s most precious commodities. And yet, the
federal and state governments fail to provide a social curriculum. Thus, classroom meetings are not perceived as instructional events.

From a sociocultural perspective, classroom meetings are more than instructional events. The critical events that take place during these meetings do not unfold from a scripted lesson or a topic planned by the teacher. These meetings reflect the dynamics of the classroom culture, the pedagogy of the teacher, and the teacher’s image of the child. The teacher serves the role as a facilitator and participant of the conversation and events that emerge. As a sociocultural researcher and progressive educator, I explore in this study how classroom meetings provide a foundation for establishing classroom culture. The links between my theoretical perspectives as both a teacher and a researcher helped shape the formation of the question that I investigate within this study: How do classroom meetings provide a window into children’s cultures? In order to address this question, the following sub-questions are explored: (1) How is the classroom event of a meeting representative of the school culture? (2) How is the classroom event of a meeting representative of children’s peer culture? (3) How does a classroom meeting provide space for the school culture and peer culture to intersect? (4) What are the educational possibilities that evolve from the intersection of these childhood cultures? (5) What role do classroom meetings have with children's academic and social development? (6) How does the teacher's pedagogy support the use of classroom meetings as a vehicle for making children's culture visible?
Studies of children’s social development were absent from the field of sociology just several decades ago (Ambert, 1986). Today however, there are an increasing number of studies, as well as journal articles and texts that address theoretical assumptions and offer new findings related to the sociological study of children. One may question why there is a sudden resurgence of interest in childhood. Sociologists’ interest in other subordinate groups, including minority groups and women, has drawn attention to the lives of children. The work of feminists and minority scholars brought forth attention to the neglect of children (Corsaro, 2005). Furthermore, Barrie Thorne (1987) contends that in some ideological constructions “women are closely and unreflectively tied with children… womanhood has been equated with motherhood in a mixing of identities that simply does not occur for men and fatherhood” (p. 96). Moreover, alternative theories about the sociology of childhood are a result of the rise of constructivist and interpretivist perspectives in sociology (Corsaro & Miller, 1992).

These perspectives offer assumptions that are socially constructed rather than simply accepted as biological. Therefore, childhood is viewed as a social construction. These perspectives argue that both children and adults are active, creative social agents in
the social construction of childhood and in the interpretative reproduction of their shared culture. A review of these theoretical constructs provides insight into my context and point of view. They gave me a place to stand and a place to reflect as my research unfolded.

The school plays a pivotal role in contemporary childhood and learning to be a successful student is a huge part of that experience. Understanding and producing the behaviors that count as successful in a classroom are just as important as learning the three Rs: arithmetic, reading, and writing. All classrooms are culturally constructed as specific places located in particular communities and larger cultural contexts. As such, studies across various classrooms allow us to examine different questions. Examples of these studies range from questions of how literacy is constructed and situated in classroom culture (Dyson, 1997; Cochran-Smith, 1984; Miller, 2003), how gender is constructed in particular classrooms (Davies, 1993, MacNaughton, 2001; McMurray, 1992), and how children become students in classrooms (Fernie et al., 1993; Kantor, Elgas, & Fernie, 1993). This study is focused on becoming a student as part of childhood, too, however, in particular, the study focuses on becoming a student in a progressive classroom where the emphasis is on becoming a citizen in a democratic society; a concern for sociologists as well as educators.

Before examining the construction of children’s cultures, this section first provides a review of the traditional theories of socialization and child development. After analyzing the basic assumptions within these theories, I present a new conceptualized theoretical approach to childhood. Following an investigation of how this new perspective extends the work of Piaget (1952) and Vygotsky (1978), this section
addresses children’s interpretative reproductions. It offers an explanation for how the process of interpretive reproduction enables children to become a part of an adult culture, contributing to its reproduction and extension through the negotiations that take place with adults.

This literature review addresses how becoming a student is part of childhood socialization and becoming a member of a democratic society represents the ideals of progressive education. An introduction to the history of progressive education as a pedagogy for democracy is examined as I address the relevant work of progressive reformers. Progressive educators are united by common philosophical beliefs (Appendix A) which reflect the teaching practices that occur daily within an Informal classroom. Therefore, children within a progressive education program learn how not only how to become students, but Informal students, living among a democratic community of learners. The socially constructed culture of the classroom reflects the pedagogy of the progressive movement and the teacher structures events that support the children’s understanding of what it means to successfully participate as Informal students.

In response to the demands of an Informal classroom, young children become young students. In this section I will review the research of early childhood educators (Fernie, Kantor, Klein, Meyer, & Elgas, 1988) as well as elementary school educators (Green & Harker, 1982) as they collaboratively investigated how the student fulfills a role that is congruent with the nature of the school, the curriculum, and the daily events that occur within the classroom. In any classroom children construct and interpret their roles as students. Fernie et al. (1988) define the school culture and offer insight into the process of children becoming students.
A review of the literature about the development of the school culture unveils the peer culture as an essential aspect of childhood socialization and an equally relevant domain of the classroom culture. Sociologist William Corsaro (1985) studied children’s play patterns and friendship, and his ethnographic participant observations provided him with the opportunity to witness peers sharing in social activities patterned around a “common set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, concerns, and attitudes” (p. 171). Corsaro identified these relationships as peer cultures. I review Corsaro’s work, beginning with an in-depth look at peer culture from a child’s perspective. Peer cultures provide children with a sense of “we-ness” (Eglas, 2003) and group identity, however, children still argue, fight, push, and kick. Verbal conflicts are common among peer cultures. I also examine the disputes, conflicts, and social differentiation that commonly appear within these peer relationships.

Although Corsaro introduced the concept of children’s relationships as peer cultures, there are many other researchers that have studied how children’s play and friendship development leads to the formation of childhood cultures. This literature review also takes a closer look at the work of these researchers and the contributions they have made to the rediscovery of childhood. Reflecting upon all that has been learned about children’s cultures, I conclude this section with an investigation of the implications this research has for classrooms and the teaching and learning that takes place within them.
Theories of Socialization

The theoretical work on socialization, which is defined as the adaptation and internalization of society, has influenced most of the perspectives on children and childhood. Traditional theories of the sociology of childhood view children as “consumers” of the adult culture (Corsaro, 2005). The child is viewed as a social product with childhood serving as a means to becoming an adult (Fernie et. al., 1988). The socialization process is proposed through two separate models: the deterministic model and the constructivist model.

In the deterministic model, the child plays a passive role. The child is thought to be taken over by society and “trained” to become a competent contributing member. Two approaches have evolved from this model: the functionalist and the reproductive. The functionalist envisioned order and balance, emphasizing the “training” of children to “fit” into that order. On the other hand, the reproductive model concentrated on conflicts and inequalities in society, with those from higher social-classes having an upper hand over the disadvantaged (Corsaro, 2005). Both the functionalist and reproductive models offer limited perspectives about the role of the child. Moreover, both approaches overlook the fact that children do not simply internalize their societies. In contrast, the constructivist model identifies the child as an active agent in the socialization process.

Two of the most dominant developmental psychologists representing the constructivist approach are Jean Piaget (1952) and Lev Vygotsky (1978). Piaget’s studies of children and their development had a major influence on the image of the child in developmental psychology (Corsaro, 2005). Piaget believed that children, as young as newborn infants, interpret, organize, and use information from their environments to
construct meaning of their physical and social worlds. Piaget is widely known for identifying developmental stages that mark children’s growth and development.

Similar to Piaget, Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the child’s active role in human development however he believed that children’s social development was a direct result of their collective actions in society. Thus, Vygotsky viewed human development as primarily collective, whereas Piaget viewed it as primarily individualistic. Piaget focused on nature and the cognitive processes, whereas Vygotsky concentrated on cultural events and activities that lead to the appropriation, internalization, and reproduction of culture and society. Important to this process is a child’s language. According to Vygotsky, language both encodes culture and is a tool for participating in culture. Vygotsky argued that children use language to reproduce a culture that has been created by societies over the course of history and changes with cultural development.

*The sociocultural perspective.* Sociocultural theorists, influenced by the work of theorists like Vygotsky (1978), have expanded the constructivist theory to include the significance of social construction (Fernie et al., 1988). These researchers use the process of interpretive analysis to examine issues related to children’s play, friendship, and social relations (Corsaro, 1985; Kantor et al., 1993). As they attempt to understand the meanings of different types of contexts, they contend that the child enters a world of preexisting sign-meaning relationships involving interactive processes (Rizzo, Corsaro, & Bates, 1992). They view these worlds as cultures (Kantor et al.).

Sociocultural researchers conduct investigations across different contexts. For example, Barbara Rogoff (1996) has emphasized that children be studied on three planes of analysis: the community, the interpersonal, and the individual (intrapersonal). Rogoff
stresses the importance of analyzing these planes collectively, rather than in isolation. Extensions of the constructivist approach offer new emphasis on collective actions in social context as an essential element of children’s development.

From a sociological perspective, socialization is not simply adaptation and internalization. It is also a process of appropriation, reinvention, and reproduction. A key element in this view of socialization is the value placed upon collective, communal activity, “how children negotiate, share, and create culture with adults and each other” (Corsaro, 2005, p. 18). Corsaro offers his own issues with the term socialization. He contends that it has an “individualistic and forward-looking connotation” (p. 18). Corsaro provides a new way to define the socialization of childhood: interpretative reproduction. Interpretative implies the innovative and creative aspects of children’s participation in society and reproduction holds onto the notion that children are actively contributing to cultural production and changes within their society. Moreover, reproduction represents the limits placed upon children by the existing social structure. Corsaro’s theory has two important concepts: the significance of language and cultural routines as well as the reproductive nature of children’s relationships within their culture.

Language has an important role in children’s participation within their culture both as a symbol and as a tool for creating social and psychological realities. Another key aspect of interpretive reproduction is children’s participation in cultural routines. Routines provide children with a shared understanding of belonging to a social group. The predictable nature of routines is empowering. Cultural routines provide a framework for the production, display, and interpretation of a wide range of sociocultural knowledge. Cultural routines offer children a foundation for dealing with ambiguities and
the unexpected, while remaining with comfort from the confines of everyday life
(Corsaro, 1992).

Unlike many of the theories of child development that take on a linear view of the
developmental process, interpretative reproduction views children’s membership in their
culture as reproductive. According to Corsaro (2005), children do not just imitate or
internalize the world around them. Children try hard to make sense of their culture and to
be a participant within it. As they attempt to interpret the adult world, children come to
collectively produce their own cultures.

Corsaro (2005) notes that childhood cultures are not preexisting structures that
children encounter or confront. Instead they are innovative, creative, and collective.
Furthermore, these cultures are not stages that each child passes through. Children
produce and participate in them. These productions are rooted in the web of life
experiences weaved by children with others throughout their entire lives. A child’s
cultural experiences remain a part of his or her life history as an active participant in a
specific culture. Therefore, individual development is part of a collective series of
childhood cultures that contribute to the reproduction of the adult society. Just like each
spider web differs in the number of radii and spirals, the number of institutional fields
and the diversity of groups varies across cultures and subcultures over history.

Educational institutions have a large impact on the construction of childhood
cultures. In the United States, nearly 13 million preschoolers spend substantial amounts
of time in an early childhood program (Children’s Defense Fund, 2000). And if a child
experiences only a half-day childcare setting as a three or four year old, the child will
have spent over 2,000 hours in an educational institution before entering kindergarten
Furthermore, there are over 94,000 elementary and secondary schools in the United States serving children ages five through fourteen (U. S. Department of Education, 2001-02). An education setting represents one of the only places where large groups of children interact on a daily basis. Moreover, these students are often together with a group of children for more than one year. Thus, the students have an opportunity to build a classroom community, their own social world that encompasses the cultures of childhood. In the Informal classroom, the children must learn how to become members of a democratic community where each child’s voice is heard. Progressive education influences the teacher’s pedagogical beliefs and his or her perceptual images of the child. A reflection on the history of the progressive movement portrays its purpose; the cultures constructed in a classroom will contribute to the reproduction of the democracy our society was once founded upon.

*Influence of Progressive Education*

My philosophy as a teacher reflects the work of the progressive movement and the interpretations of sociocultural theorists like Vygotsky and Dewey. During the early 1900s, a political reformation, known as the Progressive Movement, swept the nation (Semel, 1992). By the turn of the century, there was such a gap in the socioeconomic status that life seemed problematic to many Americans. The progressive reformers insisted upon government regulation of the industry and commerce, government regulation and conservation of the country's national resources, and national, state, and local levels of government that would be responsive to the welfare of its citizens rather than to the welfare of corporations. Leading social reformers, such as American philosopher John Dewey, turned to the schools, for a means of preserving and promoting
democracy within a new social order (Semel).

In his texts, My Pedagogic Creed (1959), The School and Society (1956), and The Child and the Curriculum (1956), Dewey advocated for a reconfiguration of schools to be more like communities. Furthermore, he argued for a curriculum that would consider the child's interest and developmental level. According to Dewey, school was "that form of community life in which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of race, and to use the powers for social ends" (Dworkin, 1959).

In January of 1896, Dewey opened the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago as an experimental program to implement his ideas about education: learning occurs through experiences, educative experiences drive future learning, and education is an exercise of democracy. At the end of World War I, progressive schools began to emerge throughout the country. Before the 1920s progressive reformers focused their efforts on public education. Then during the 1920s many progressive educators began to focus on innovative independent schools that catered particularly to middle class children. Although many historians tend to group these schools together, each one has a distinct philosophy and practice according to its particular vision and the vision of its founder. Caroline Pratt, for example, founded the City and Country, a school that emphasizes self-expression and growth through play. Additional examples include The Walden School, founded by Margaret Naumberg, The Lincoln School, founded by Abraham Flexner, the Francis W. Parker School, founded by Colonel Francis W. Parker, and The Dalton School, founded by Helen Parkhurst (Semel, 1992).

Progressive education dominated educational thinking for so much of the 20th
century that by the mid 1940s it was no longer referred to as progressive education but as “modern education” or the “new educational practice” (Ravitch, 1983). Nevertheless, it is an all but impossible task to provide a “capsule definition of progressive education” (Cremin, 1961). This is due to the numerous contradictory strands. The rise of progressive education was a product of discontent with traditional education. Dewey (1938) stated,

If one attempts to formulate the philosophy of education implicit in the practices of new education, we may, I think, discover certain common principles amid the variety of progressive schools now existing. To impose from above is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity; to learning from texts and teachers, learning through experience; to acquisition of isolated skills and techniques by drill, is opposed acquisition of them as means of attaining ends which make direct vital appeal; to preparation for a more or less remote future is opposed making the most of the opportunities of present life; to static aims and materials is opposed acquaintance with a changing world (p. 19-20).

Throughout the middle of the twentieth century, educational researchers, beyond Dewey (Bode, 1938; Pratt, 1948; Washburne, 1952), continued to provide a progressive pedagogy that critiqued the traditional assumptions about teaching and learning. The conservatism that emerged from the anxiety of the cold war, however, nearly dissipated this movement. Then in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, different groups of educators reclaimed Dewey’s ideas and refined them to address the demands of schools, children, and our democratic society.

Entering its third century, interpretations of Dewey have collected dozens of counterfeits and thousands of copycats. Still, aspects of his philosophy of education remain a strong influence in American schools. Innovative educational trends, such as open classrooms and integrated curriculum all stemmed from the progressive movement.
Educational researchers (Goodlad, 1988; Sizer, 1989; Wigginton, 1986; Meier, 2000) have initiated projects and organizations that advocate progressive practices in today’s classrooms. For example, Ted Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools was launched in 1984 to restructure schools from the inside, beginning with a pedagogy that reflects the ideals of the progressive movement. Currently, the “innovative” progressive schools established by educational scholars and activists (Jervix & Montag, 1991; Meier, 2000; Semel, 1992) are exposing a rediscovery of Dewey’s work and applying his ideals to a postmodern world of cultural changes. During a time when standardization is at its peak in a country founded upon the democracy Dewey spoke of nearly a century ago, there is hope in finding alternative schools, like the Informal Program in which I teach, where establishing a democratic classroom community is just as important as learning the ABCs.

The Informal Alternative Program in which this study is situated, was established in 1972, and is unique in that it is one of very few progressive programs still surviving within a public school district. Although the terminology for alternative practices was often used interchangeably, the label Informal education was more common in the British school setting than it was in American classrooms. Informal education grew out of the a set of educational practices in the 1960s and early 1970s known in different settings as open education, integrated day, the Informal classroom, and the British infant school model. All of these practices reflected the work of the progressive movement and the interpretations of sociocultural theorists. Informal education shares a strong commitment to the child as an able, competent learner, a commitment to classroom environments as democratic communities that should be richly provisioned and responsive to children’s
needs and interests, and a commitment to direct engagement and experience as the foundation for children’s learning.

As a progressive educator, I strive daily to co-construct with the children of my classroom a democratic community where each child feels s/he has responsibility in his or her learning. As a progressive educator, I must teach children how to become Informal students. Therefore, the Informal students in my classroom contribute to the co-construction of a school culture that reflects the pedagogical beliefs of progressive education. As children in my class create the cultures of their worlds, they must respond as students to the culture of the Informal classroom.

School Culture

In order to be successful in school, children must interpret much about the school and its demands, as well as fulfill the role of a student. The students’ role encompasses appropriate behavior, knowledge, and expectations that guide their participation in the academic and social life of the classroom (Fernie et al., 1988). The role of the student is communicated in subtle ways. For example, the structure of the physical environment and the use of a curriculum contribute to the expectations of the school setting. The process of learning how to be a student in the classroom and in the school is part of childhood socialization (McMurray-Schwarz, 2003).

The traditional view of socialization is that children are socialized into society through schooling. Children are viewed as passive, social products of education institutions. The school’s purpose is the transmission of the larger culture (McMurray-Schwarz, 2003). Thus, teachers view the student as a passive receiver of information. Paulo Freire (1970) defined this as the banking concept of education characterized by
dominating powers rather than freedom. This traditional view portrayed children as consumers rather than producers of knowledge.

In contrast to the traditional view, the sociocultural perspective considers schools as social settings and classrooms as group cultures where children construct and conduct daily life. From a sociocultural framework, children are socialized to schooling (Corsaro, 1988; McMurray-Schwarz, 2003). Classrooms are social systems created through the interactions of the children and teachers. Children become students as they negotiate their roles, rights, obligations, intentions, and actions with their teachers. The daily “dialogue of action and interaction” (Spindler & Spindler, 1987) cumulatively builds the structure of the classroom life (Fernie et al., 1988). Becoming a student is an active process, both cognitively and behaviorally. It is the means for having a successful classroom experience.

Fernie et al. (1988) define the school culture as “a common set of activities or routines, values, concerns and attitudes constructed and communicated about and in a particular school setting by the classroom participants” (p. 137). Although the term preschool is used interchangeably with nursery school and day care center and implies a non-school status, children enrolled within preschools meet the first adults they will call teacher, their first curricular activities, their first daily schedule to follow, and a large group of peers. Therefore, preschools are not an experience prior to school. Instead, preschool is a real school and usually is the first school for many young children. Young children become young students who must respond to the demands of schooling. For instance, children’s communication skills and interaction skills must be expanded to negotiate play and friendship in small and large group situations. Impulse controls, such
as turn-taking and turn-waiting must also be developed. As children become socialized to the education setting, they take on the role of a student.

Fernie et al. (1988) contend that school cultures are “ubiquitous” (p. 137), for every classroom has a school culture. Spodek’s (1973) research supports this notion. His research revealed that all educational settings are unnatural or artificial. Classrooms have a school culture because of the demands of structuring a group setting and the broad mission common to educational institutions. School cultures are created by the participants within each classroom. This is made evident when two classrooms have the same administration, instructional materials, and parental pressures, yet have two distinct orientations. Unique to the school at which I teach, the Informal Alternative Program is housed in the same building of a traditional school. Therefore, parents have choice in the program for their child. By spending time in classrooms, parents become familiar with the differences in the school cultures. The actions and interactions of the children and teachers are entwined making each school culture distinct. In the Informal classrooms there is an emphasis on the Ten Foundational Principles (Appendix A) as the teacher and children co-construct a democratic classroom community. In contrast to the school culture where activities, events, routines, and concerns are impacted by the teacher, the peer culture is dominated by the presence of the students.

*Peer Culture*

Children neither imitate nor directly appropriate the adult world. The creation of a peer culture is both creative and unique. It is a world that is distinct from, and at times oppositional to, the adult world. Children alter information from the adult world in order to meet their own needs. Most of the research on peer relations and culture has
emphasized both the positive and negative outcomes of peer relationships for individual
development. This work originated in a functionalist or cognitive view of culture. Today
researchers are attempting to break away from this tradition. More recent studies
approach children’s culture as interpretive, concentrating not only on shared values but
also on public, collective, and performative aspects of social life (Goffman, 1974).

Corsaro (2005) defines peers as a “cohort or group of children who spend time
together on an everyday basis” (p. 109). A peer culture is “a stable set of activities or
routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction
with peers” (p. 110). In an educational setting, the peer culture is constructed by the
participants in particular classrooms. The creation of cultural routines and participation
within them supports children’s emerging memberships into both their peer cultures and
adult worlds. Although children may actively participate in the cultural routines of adults,
they frequently take on subordinate roles and are exposed to much more cultural
knowledge than they can begin to process or understand. Important aspects of peer
cultures emerge as a result of children’s attempts to make meaning of or offer resistance
to the adult world. Children’s activities with their peers are just as important as they are
with adults.

Peer cultures are influenced by symbolic aspects of the child’s world. William
Griswold (1994) defines childhood symbolic culture as “various representations or
expressive symbols of children’s beliefs, concerns, and values” (p. 3). According to
Griswold, the three main sources of childhood symbolic culture are: children’s media,
children’s literature, and mythical figures and legends. Information from these three
sources is usually mediated by adults in the cultural routines of families. As children
produce and participate in peer culture, they quickly appropriate, use, and transform symbolic culture.

Corsaro (2005) notes that most of the studies examining the content of television programming are critical of the violence, lack of educational value, and sexism found on the screen. However, there is little known about how children negotiate with parents what television programming they will watch or how they communicate what they have viewed on television. More recent studies have viewed children as active consumers of the media (Paley, 2004).

A large part of the symbolic culture that children bring with them to their peer cultures revolves around cultural myths and legends. Most popular are mythical figures such as Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, and the Easter Bunny. These mythical figures are introduced to children by their parents and often are a part of deeply cherished rituals. Subroutines enhance the meanings of these familial rituals. As a result, when children come together as part of a peer culture their joy and wonder surrounding these mythical figures is amplified (Corsaro, 2005).

The material culture encompasses all of the material objects (clothing, books, crayons, paper, paints, etc…) valued by children within their peer culture. Most of the research related to children’s material culture focuses solely on toys. These quantitative studies are conducted by psychologists and are designed to test hypotheses examining the effects of toys on children’s individual development. For example, there is a great deal of research that exists on the effects of war toys on aggressive behavior. Very few of these studies investigate parent-child interactions over the use of toys (Corsaro, 2005).

Studies completed by historians and marketing researchers have provided key
insight on children’s material culture. Both historians and marketing researchers have discovered that as children develop as individuals, they collectively and creatively appropriate, use, and infuse toys with meanings, both within their families and their peer cultures (Corsaro, 2005). These findings offer a link to the notion of interpretive reproduction. Historically, two new attitudes toward toys emerged in the 1870s that impacted children’s material culture. First, children developed a desire to acquire toys for their own sake, giving rise to material possessions indicating the status of the owner. Secondly, toys began to define the identity of the child and the childhood culture. Market researchers, relying on more qualitative methods such as informal interviews or focus groups, have discovered material objects that are important attributes of children’s peer cultures. Although children are appealed by the toys least favored by adults (due to their desire to challenge the power of adults), Seiter (1993) notes that in contemporary American society, it is the mother who primarily makes the decisions about the symbolic and material aspects that influence peer culture.

Peer cultures are conceptualized as subcultures of the larger society. Through their interactions with older siblings, children first are introduced to specific local cultures within their families. Children participate and contribute to more general local peer cultures for the first time when they transition from their families to external communities (Corsaro, 2005). Some of these initial peer cultures form in neighborhoods. As the number of children in the United States attending early child care programs continues to rise, these early childhood settings have a significant role in fostering opportunities for networks of local peer cultures. Most of the recent research on peer cultures involves environments like preschools, playgrounds, primary classrooms, and
organized sports. These studies have focused on the processes, concerns, values, and routines of peer cultures. Several common themes consistently have emerged throughout the research (Corsaro, 2003).

Two of the most salient themes that constantly appear in children’s peer cultures are their persistent attempts to gain control of their lives and their desire to share that sense of control with one another (Corsaro, 2003). These themes are demonstrated by the ways in which children’s routines are related to their concerns with physical size. During social interaction, children constantly are looking up to the adults who have power and authority. They begin to value “growing up” and “getting bigger” (Corsaro, 2003, 2005). Corsaro notes that children view size as the one characteristic that separates them from adults. This is clearly evident in early childhood settings where children routinely play on areas where they are “bigger.” Whether it is on climbing structures or in play houses, children routinely climb to the top levels where they can look down to see others, specifically adults. Eglas (2003) adds that children attempt to gain this control through the establishment of a collective identity. In chapter four I present several ways in which the children of my classroom displayed these emerging themes.

In his research, Corsaro (2005) identified several play routines that initially developed and became more intricate over the course of the year. These established routines provide children with a sense of control over their environment as well as authority over their teachers. Corsaro (1985, 2003, 2005) states that play routines demonstrate an essential aspect of peer cultures: doing things together. The nonverbal coordinated actions of toddlers are extended by preschoolers to include highly sophisticated verbal interactions. Gaining access to play groups, sustaining interaction,
and making friends are all challenging tasks of young children. It is especially tough because children protect their shared space, objects, and ongoing play from the entry of others (Corsaro, 2005). Corsaro identified this as the “protection of interactive space” (p. 140). With the potential to easily be distracted, children have a desire to maintain control over shared activities. They want to continue sharing what they have already established within the peer group. On the other hand, the excluded children want to be a part of the shared activities.

Children’s peer cultures are not only composed of language and behavioral routines, but they also have shared rituals. Rituals are “collective activities” that involve “patterned, repetitive, and cooperative expressions of shared values and concerns of childhood” (Corsaro, 2005, p. 145). Rituals may involve “stylized performances” distinct to the peer culture and rooted in the social exchanges of their world (Katriel, 1987). Rituals connect children with one another (Peterson, 1992). More than just talk, a ritual is a symbolic act that gives expression to meaning, both ordinary and sacred. Rituals provide children with both order and meaning. They can be used to strengthen the ties of the group. A classroom may have individual and/or community rituals. Peterson (1992) defines individual rituals as “…predictable, personal acts we perform in the process of creating an internal order or desired disposition” (p. 23). This can be as simple as sitting in the same place each morning for classroom meeting. Community rituals, as those shared by the peer culture, are observed through children’s celebration, play, conversation, and dialogue. These rituals are formed by both the peer and school culture.

Peer cultures are not always peaceful. Children argue, fight, push, kick, and even bite. Even though physical aggression is rare, verbal conflicts and disputes are common
characteristics of children’s peer cultures. Ironically, these conflicts often increase the cohesion of and commitment to the identity of the peer culture. Verbal debates and arguments strengthen interpersonal alliances and organize social groupings (Goodwin, 1990). Corsaro and Miller (1992) define a dispute as:

> general disagreements in interaction which are displayed by occurrence of some sort of opposition to an antecedent event. We do not view the antecedent event as part of the dispute per se but rather its source. Therefore, disputes begin with oppositions and end with either clear settlements, physical movement of dispute participants from the interactive scene, or a shift away from the disputed event to a new topic or activity (p. 8).

In his study of middle-class American first-graders, Rizzo (1989) found that most of the disputes involved the organization and maintenance of their activities and had little or anything to do with friendship. In the instances that did involve friendship, disputes occurred when adult-like expectations of friendship were violated. Furthermore, Rizzo observed that those friends in dispute rarely requested adult intervention, thus demonstrating that their knowledge of friendship includes the concept that friends must work out their own differences. Furthermore, the first-graders he worked with exhibited their understanding that friends are allowed greater flexibility in their actions than those who are not their friends.

Differentiation in peer relationships begins in early childhood and increases as children transition to preadolescence. The social differentiation in children’s peer cultures can be contributed to gender, race, and status. Children as young as three years of age show preference for play with children of the same sex (Maccoby, 1999). Researchers like Vivian Paley (1984) have identified distinct play themes of boys and girls. Similar to the conflicts in peer cultures, comparative research shows that children of diverse
cultures differ in their construction of gender concepts and behaviors (Corsaro, 2005; Goodwin, 1990, 2003).

Race, much more complex than gender, is constructed through children’s language and their interactions with each other (Holmes, 1995). Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) found that young children use race to structure their play, to include and exclude children, and to control peer interactions. Unlike Holmes (1995) who contends that racial categories are fixed and unconditional, Van Ausdale and Feagin (2001) concluded that ideas of race are more flexible and fluid. Although adults often misunderstand or underestimate children’s understanding and use of racial attitudes, young children observe and experience racial discourse and behavior, and use this knowledge in their everyday lives (Corsaro 2005; Corsaro & Fingerson, 2003; Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2001).

A differentiation in status leads to the formation of subgroups and social positions within subgroups of peers. This competitive dynamic is most common in kindergarten and the early elementary grades. This differentiation is highly complex, for children’s personality and behavior influence their social success and status, however children must also be able to read and contribute to the wider cultural patterns of the group. Children use a variety of interpersonal and communicative skills to understand, access, and contribute to the group’s cultural knowledge (Kantor, Elgas, et. al., 1993). Furthermore, these social positions are often fluid and constantly change (Corsaro, 2005; Goodwin, 1990). Some researchers (Berentzen, 1984; Best, 1983) have identified status differentiation based on gender. Others (Paley, 1992) have observed the emergence of higher-status or core groups. Within a sociocultural framework, I reveal how children
take on differing layers of social positions that reflect the status of various members of
the group.

Broadening Perspectives

Beyond the work heavily influenced by Corsaro (2003; 2005), there are many
early childhood researchers (Bloome & Egar-Robertson, 1993; Dyson, 1997; Kantor &
Fernie, 2003; Gallas, 1994; Paley, 1984), who have studied children’s cultural positions.
One aspect common throughout the work of these researchers is the use of Bahktin’s
(1981, 1986) dialogic theory as a key conceptual tool for understanding children’s
cultures.

Too often, children’s language development is viewed as a linear progression and
implies the perspective of a universal child who develops “normally” (Dyson, 1995).
Bahktin (1981) examined literary works in which heroes’ movement throughout a story
evolved into a movement through the time and spaces of their everyday lives. In the
contemporary novel he examined, Bahktin found that the heroes were not located on a
singular pathway. Instead, they were on a complex landscape. The landscape organizes
social space through the use of the characters’ voices. Although organized, the landscape
of voices is dynamic. Characters in novels, like children in school, move through time
and space by appropriating for themselves available words and genres (Dyson, 2003).
The relationships that form between the self and social landscape, between individual
intention and available textual materials are evident in children’s language. Over the
course of a school year, children’s language development does not move in a linear path.
Instead, it negotiates an expanding social landscape as they encounter new
communication practices.
Opposing the linearity of the path of literacy development, Dyson (1997, 2003) views this development from inside the child’s culture out toward the demands of the school. Children’s cultural resources play a critical role in their literacy development and too often, children’s cultural worlds are forgotten in place of the developmental path that provides educators only a narrow window from which to peer. Bahktin (1981, 1986) explained that when individuals look around in a diverse world, they each experience their own perspective and own place in the world in dialogue with others. According to this view, learning to use language involves learning to interact with others in the context of the school. School has a central role in the formation of childhood cultures. It is the school that brings children together and provides them with common experiences for establishing connections with one another. Dyson views the “official” context of the school as the time when events are organized and governed by the teacher. It is through the child’s imagined worlds, both inside and outside of the school, that there is a true representation of the social world. The children’s stories reflect their cultural story lines and about human development.

Dyson (1997) refers to children’s culture as the “unofficial peer world.” She specifically defines this world as

the children’s understanding about human actions and relations, about the nature of power and love… (p. 16)… In the unofficial world of childhood – whether enacted in the cracks of the official curriculum through exchanged glances, asides, and the occasional snack, or in the more open expanse of the playground - children declare themselves as members of the society of children (p. 29).

Dyson (2003) characterizes the unofficial world of peers as a functioning lively social
unit that suggests a membership and sense of belonging through mutual understanding and reciprocity. These peers share a cultural landscape and similar communication skills. Furthermore, Dyson identifies the unofficial grounds as the property outside the school composing of the playground and the official grounds as the classroom, full of desks, blackboards, books, paper, and tools. Dyson emphasizes that although the physical setting of the official grounds may be different, the unofficial world does not disappear. Dyson contends that the unofficial world of the peer culture is reworked, quieter in volume, more constrained in movement, and if possible, disperses into the official world. The unofficial world brings to the official world new intentions

Through her classroom observations, Dyson recognized that that the interplay or intersection of the peer and school culture support the children’s deliberate manipulation of textual material to compose words and symbols so that they may assert, resist, or rework their social relationships. For instance, a free writing period, composed of children’s writing actions that are organized and guided by both the official and unofficial world, portrayed children’s negotiated identities as students and as peers (Dyson, 2003).

The study of children’s intertextuality reveals how children’s social interactions create and reflect the cultural ideology of a classroom. Intertextuality is defined as the “juxtaposition of different texts” (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993). Recent approaches to intertextuality have been found in literary studies, where intertextuality is located primarily in text, social semiotic perspectives, where intertextuality is located in language and educational studies, and where intertextuality has been identified in students as readers and writers (Bloome & Egan-Robertson). Although there is an abundance of
literary scholarship and some linguistic scholarship using the term intertextuality, the number of classroom-based studies employing this term is limited. The research on intertextuality in regard to classroom reading and writing has offered understanding for how written texts build on each other, how definitions of comprehension and composition are being redefined, how relationships between reading and writing are being identified, and how there are factors influencing students’ use of intertextuality as a cognitive resource for reading and writing (Bloome & Egan-Robertson).

Differing from recent approaches to the study of intertextuality, Bloome and Egan-Robertson (1993) view intertextuality as a social construction found within the social interactions individuals have with one another. I will use this perspective as I investigate how classroom meetings support the formation of intertextual relationships. Intertextuality is a social and cultural process that involves how people act and react to one another. Unlike the cognitive views of intertextuality, Bloome and Egan-Robertson view social interactions as a linguistic process. Derived from the work of Bahktin (1981; 1986) and Gumperz (1986), these researchers view language as a social activity that is inseparable from the social actions and reactions of which it is involved. Through language, social relationships develop, social acts are constructed and conducted, and social groups are formed. Language is social in that a language act is a response to other acts and any act of language is inherently dialogic. By taking the view that there is a material basis to language, the study of cultural processes requires description and documentation of the material nature of the events.

Text can be a line of words, a conversational or written structure (i.e. sharing time), a genre of written language (i.e. journal writing), or a genre of social activities (i.e.
recess). According to Bakhtin (1981; 1986) no text, whether it is conversational or written, exists in isolation. Individuals interact with one another and construct intertextual relationships through their actions and reactions with each other. Intertextuality is not established without a relationship that is proposed, recognized, and acknowledged. Furthermore, there must be social significance to it (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993). The meanings constructed through intertextuality are defined as intertextual substance and the ways in which these meanings are constructed are called intertextual processes.

Building on the work of Bruner (1986), Wells (1986), and Bakhtin (1981, 1986), researcher Karen Gallas (1994) has focused on the role of narrative language as a tool of social construction. Gallas defines narrative as a “complex of signs and texts” that makes children’s thinking visible (p. xiii). Narrative language includes all forms of expression, expanding beyond traditional definitions to include pictures, notes, conversations, and other means for communicating one’s life stories. Gallas views children’s narratives as a vehicle for which “children have a place where seminal experiences, which occur both in and out of school, move from silent expression into speech” (p. xiv).

Through her study of children’s language and specifically, sharing time, Gallas (1994) characterizes the classroom culture as a “rich historical background” that connects through a “growing body of common experiences and shared accounts” that the class often refers to as they interact with one another. According to Gallas, events that are not part of the “formal school day” foster a stronger classroom community. Paying close attention to the many ways language is used increases communication skills as well as one’s self-consciousness. Educators must acknowledge the different discourses that
children must acquire in order to be successful in school. Gallas specifically identifies not only the disciplinary discourses, but also that of the playground and classroom. She defines the classroom discourse as “special words, themes, and references that reflect the interests, ethics, and common experiences of that class” (p. 15).

Gallas (1994) identified the children’s “semantic history” and “sociocentric speech” as distinct traits of a classroom culture. Furthermore, Gallas parallels Paley’s (2004) metaphorically image of storytellers as culture builders. As members of the school culture, these children depend on the participation of their audience in the formation of a new group reality.

As a teacher-researcher Gallas (1994) identified connections between children’s talk about science and the arts. In both learning contexts, children seemed to have the natural ability to think about difficult ideas, using metaphorical and analogic language. The children’s thinking was embedded within long narratives of stories. Gallas discovered the significance of providing children with expanded opportunities for expressive action. Through their talk, paint, dance, writing, building, or studying, children were able to reconstruct ideas presented in the curriculum in ways that provided them connections. Through the arts, teachers and children are able to build understanding for how school concepts relate to the child’s everyday life. This overlap represents the intersection of the school and peer culture, defined by Fernie and Kantor (2003) as educational possibilities.

Teaching and learning are embedded in the world outside the school, and the children bring different parts of that world with them…In the classroom, all of our worlds are joined; new discourses are created and different ways of knowing the world are spawned (Gallas, 1992, p. 159).

*Classroom Culture*
The school and peer cultures are complex and their components are entwined. Through their ethnographic study, Fernie et al. (1988) developed a view of the classroom culture as a “differentiated social world composed of two intersecting and overlapping realms of group culture” (Kantor & Fernie, 2003, p. 211). In accordance with Corsaro’s definition of peer culture and their own conception of school culture, Kantor and Fernie became interested in how these two cultures related to one another, a concept they defined as intersections. Classroom observations provided them with the insight that “the school culture and the peer culture spheres of the classroom were not separate domains of activity” (p. 212). These fields often converged and intersected in meaningful ways. Whether it was peer culture play or school culture events, through their negotiations, the teachers and the children co-constructed the everyday life of the classroom. The intersection of these cultures represents how teachers and children negotiate their classroom experiences. It is a balance of respecting the children’s peer culture while at the same time, respecting the dynamics and expectations of the school culture.

The notion of two spheres of life co-existing and overlapping as participants create a space to live together is a constant reminder that a child’s first school experiences involves constructing both of these worlds. The peer culture involves the development of social play levels (Christie, Johnsen, & Peckover, 1988), patterns of friendship development (Howes, 1983), and a new life amongst a group of peers. School culture introduces new group formats, the learning of academic skills, and the organizational demands of the education institution. As teachers and students face the challenge of creating a classroom culture that supports both the peer world and the school setting, supportive practices initiated by teachers reveal how this knowledge impacts
teaching and learning.

According to Kantor and Fernie (2003), “every aspect of classroom life is a matter of social construction” (p. 208). At times, the teacher has the lead role in the co-construction of the classroom culture. Other times the events of the classroom are shaped by the interests and contributions of the children. Every new event, procedure, or format introduced by the school is not accomplished without first being co-constructed by all participants. Kantor and Fernie contend that “a shared understanding of classroom culture provides the structure of classroom life” (p. 210). Viewing classrooms as dynamic, patterned cultures provides a new framework for understanding the dynamics of its structure and its group. This new understanding significantly impacts a classroom’s teaching and learning.

Developing a conscious awareness of children’s peer culture changes how educators view children, their play, play groups, use of objects, and relationships with one another as well as adults. In the center of a child’s complex social world is the phenomenon of play. From a peer-culture perspective, teachers are encouraged to make modifications regarding children’s social play and its role in the classroom. Teachers must be able to live with the peer culture and support its interests, concerns, and values. They must be willing to negotiate reasonable solutions between the peer and school cultures by working with the peer culture, rather than ignoring it or suppressing it. Understanding its significance rationalizes a positive reaction to peer-culture play in the classroom. For instance, teachers may change their feelings about pretend play when they learn that superhero play offers children a format for working through developmental issues as well as provides a collective social identity (Eglas, 2003).
Corsaro (2003) emphasizes how important it is to appreciate the complexity, joy, and wonder of kids’ peer cultures as well as their participation within these domains. He cautions educators not to over institutionalize childhood by filling children’s lives with too many structured, formal activities. Kids need the freedom to be kids. Furthermore, children need more time and attention. Daily, children need time for routine activities, spontaneous play, and conversation. In response to their peer cultures, teachers need to be more reactive to their interests and more spontaneous in their interactions with them. Teachers that respect the peer culture within their classroom empower the children by validating their constructed meanings and supporting negotiated parameters surrounding their play interests. Early childhood classrooms that emphasize play and child-initiated activity have strong peer cultures that are easy to identify. Furthermore, new events evolving from the school culture are more successful when preceded by discussion and negotiation of what the new event requires (Kantor and Fernie, 2003).

A teacher has a great influence on the social structure and dynamics of the school culture. More specifically, the ways in which teachers exercise their leadership greatly affects the quality of interaction between children and between teachers and children. The techniques a teachers uses to maintain authority reflect the teacher’s style. A teacher’s classroom management philosophy subtly communicates the social values most prized by the teacher. Furthermore, the expectations for classroom behavior are conveyed through the teacher’s limits and rules. Teachers that have an awareness of the dynamic interpretation of social competence are more informed and actively assist children who lack the interactive skills and social knowledge necessary to interpret, negotiate, and read social cues during activities that take place across the classroom culture (Corsaro, 1985).
Most novice teachers enter the educational field with a solid foundation of child development theory. This knowledge has direct implications for teaching and learning. For instance, Piaget’s (1952) stage theory helps teachers know what to expect and how to react to children at different stages of development. Furthermore, Kohlberg’s (1984) theory of moral development provides teachers with insight for interpreting children’s thoughts, actions, and interactions. Awareness of how children construct and reconstruct knowledge has been useful for planning curriculum and designing environments that support children’s experiences.

Although traditional developmental research provides teachers with valuable information, social growth in classroom life can be forgotten. Thus, it is important to recognize the limitations of traditional child development knowledge. Traditional theories assume that developmental growth can be described as a series of distinct, hierarchical, and sequential stages, with the goal of developing into a mature adult. Children’s growth, however, does not always occur in a linear fashion. Small, contextualized moments of growth are not matched to global stage theories. Thus, little value is placed upon the significance of children’s social worlds. Additionally, traditional theories assume that development occurs within the individual. Despite genetic and social influences, the focus is on the individual, and what counts as development is narrowly defined in adult terms.

According to Kantor and Fernie (2003), growth in educational institutions is best understood when individual and group growth is considered together. It is apparent that group life, rather than individual life, is at the center of social culture of the classroom. The progress of a classroom should not be measured by the total of individual growth.
Instead, classroom culture represents the group’s social construction as the teachers and students unite to create a community of learners. An important aspect of this social constructivist approach is the teacher’s facilitation of children’s development within the group. Teachers provide individuals with the support they need to become a group. The teacher uses conversation as a tool to help children gain awareness of one another, their responsibilities to the group, and their individual right. Group development is reflected through the change in the nature of social action (Kantor & Fernie).

The sociological perspectives of childhood as well as the social construction of children’s cultures have great implications on developmental theories. If development is a social construction and developmental theories present a limited interpretation of the child, then the image of the child is a continuous construction of social and cultural contexts that is difficult to capture. Different perspectives must be negotiated and socially reconstructed in order to have a more accurate portrait of the child. The many wonderful stories documented by Vivian Paley (1984, 1992, 2004) throughout her years as a kindergarten teacher at the Dewey Lab School in Chicago demonstrate how theories place limits on fully understanding the child. The ideas within her stories are not of pre-rational, pre-scientific thinking. Instead, her documentation represents the wisdom of child philosophers. According to Gareth Matthews (1994), the philosophical thinking in children is often left out of “images of the child” created from the theories of developmental psychologists (p. 12).

In his text, Language Shock: The Culture of Conversation, Michael Agar (1994) addresses the relationship between language, culture, and identity. Agar contends that imagining different worlds entails “a kind of courage” from within oneself. When an
individual is exposed to information and specific details that do not represent what was expected, and those details challenge that individual’s sense of self, then it can be difficult to open up to new possibilities. However, when one has the courage to open up, that individual accepts change. Agar believes that “the old ‘self’”, the one in your heart and mind and soul, mutates as it comes into relationships with others. “…The self stretches to comprehend them all” (p. 28).

In order for children to exhibit this kind of courage, it must be modeled for them by their teachers. Teachers of courage are those who are not afraid of children’s worlds. These teachers are interested in hearing children’s ideas and their concerns. Whether a young child or an experienced teacher, those with such courage are awarded with a life of “becoming,” rather than simply “being” (Agar, 1994). These brave individuals participate in a continual process of reinventing and rewriting one’s world. Paley (1990) contends that “the classroom that does not create its own legends has not traveled beneath the surface to where the living takes place” (p. 5).

It is this courage that will provide children with an educational experience beyond meeting academic standards and passing standardized tests. The words that Loris Malaguzzi chose for his poem, The Hundred Languages of Children (Appendix B), alert me as an educator of the many voices, languages, and abilities of children. As I reflect upon the social and political hurdles that face the teaching and learning process, Malaguzzi’s poem challenges me to foster the creation of these childhood cultures. From the teacher’s image of the child to the relationships that are encouraged between peers, the foundational principles of the Informal Alternative Program in which I teach support the establishment of democratic classrooms that socially construct classroom cultures.
As a teacher-researcher I am examining these cultures more closely as I strive to find the educational possibilities that exist within them.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Inspired by my own experiences as a progressive educator, my observations as a teacher-researcher in Reggio Emilia, Italy, and the new knowledge I gained as a scholar at the university, the purpose of this study is to investigate the role(s) the classroom event called morning meeting has on the learning of the student role and the construction of the school and peer cultures of the classroom. Included within this methodology chapter are the theoretical perspectives that frame the approaches taken in this study, the research questions that guided the study, a description of the research site and its participants, a discussion of research methods and procedures for data collection, analysis, and interpretation, as well as a reflection of my roles as the teacher-researcher.

The Interpretivist Tradition

This dissertation is an ethnography situated in what Erickson (1986) describes as the interpretive tradition. Making the childhood cultures visible in the context of the classroom requires flexibility. According to Erickson (1986) the use of "...interpretive methods while acting as a participant-observer are most appropriate" when wanting to learn more about a social setting, the individual's meaning behind his or her actions that occur within the social setting, and the structure of these events in relation to patterns of
Interpretivists envision multiple realities that are locally and specifically constructed. These realities are constructed through human interactions. Interpretivists use language as a tool to understand situations from others' perspectives. There are many meanings that are discovered through dialogic discourse. In order to understand a particular social action (i.e. friendship, sharing), the inquirer must grasp the meanings that make up that action. To find meaning within an action, or to claim understanding of what an action means, requires specific interpretations of what the "actors" are doing (Schwandt, 2000). There is a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the researched supporting the dynamic of genuine participation toward the continuous understanding of deeper meanings (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). The participants assist in structuring the inquiry through collaborative experiences, such as interviews, observations, and grounded surveys.

Of the many ordinary events that occur within a school day, whole group activities have gained the attention of interpretivist researchers. Early childhood researchers find the field of interpretative research appealing because of its focus on making meaning out of the daily lives of young children (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). From an interpretivist point of view, social action is inherently meaningful. Thus, in order to understand a particular social action, the researcher must grasp the meanings that constitute that action (Schwandt, 2000). The context is interpreted within the historical, social and cultural structures that underlie the social order (Carr & Kemmis, 1983).
Research Questions

Early childhood researchers (Corsaro, 1985, 2003, 2005; Dyson, 1997, 2003; Fernie, et al., 1988; Gallas, 1994; Graue & Walsh, 1998; Kantor et al., 1989; Paley, 1984, 1992, 2004) have applied Erickson's view of interpretivism by studying the context of classroom life in preschools and elementary schools. In relation to my study, researchers have revealed the implicit social and conversational processes that occur simultaneously during group events in kindergarten and first grade (Kantor et al., 1989). Additional research has examined the experiences of preschool children as they learned how to participate in their first encounters with circle time (Kantor et al.). These researchers discovered that circle time may not only be viewed through the lens of the school culture, but also provides many opportunities for children to build shared experiences and to construct a shared reality as a peer culture. The researchers concluded that this double lens may present a larger picture of children's experiences when these two cultures intersect. In effort to clarify these propositions and build on the work of these researchers, the purpose of this study was to investigate within a primary classroom how classroom meetings serve as a vehicle for making children's cultures visible. The central question that guided this study was:

How does morning meeting provide a window into children's cultures?

As I addressed this question, I explored the following sub-related questions:

1. How is the classroom event of a meeting representative of the school culture?

2. How is the classroom event of a meeting representative of children's peer culture?

3. How does a classroom meeting provide space for the school culture and the peer culture to intersect?
4. What are the "educational possibilities" that evolve from the intersection of these childhood cultures?

5. What role do classroom meetings have with children's academic and social development?

6. In what ways do classroom meetings support the larger pedagogical goals of a progressive education classroom?

The field of interpretive research investigates human action and seeks to understand the patterns within these actions. The paradigm's key feature is its central research interest of the researcher unveiling human meaning in the social world (Erickson, 1986). Matching the characteristics of interpretive research, my investigation of a daily event that potentially exposes the cultures of the classroom offers others a look "inside" at the complexity of interactions that occur in what may appear as a simple daily activity. It is a study of "everyday practical reasoning" (Schwandt, 1997, p. 44). This field attracts researchers like me who are concerned with examining elements of the ordinary conduct of life (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). It is the study of children in their context. Graue and Walsh (1998) define the context as "...a culturally and historically situated place and time, a specific here and now" (p. 9). It is the world as realized through interaction and the most immediate frame of reference for the mutually engaged. Wentworth (in Cole, 1996) defines it as a unit of culture. Before identifying the historical, social, and political aspects of the local contexts, I must situate myself within this study.

**Situating the Researcher**

The context of the study extends beyond the children, classroom, and school. I also must consider the conditions that I have brought to this study: my personal history,
my theoretical perspectives on teaching and learning and the topic of classroom meetings, and the methodological choices I have made about my role within the study. Graue and Walsh (1998) remind us, "theory is the context within which researchers work" (p. 24). They speak of theory metaphorically as a map or guide.

My interest in further examining the social construction of children's cultures emerged from my own experiences as a first and second grade multiage teacher in the Informal Alternative Program. Eight years ago when I entered Ohio State's Master of Education program, I was fortunate to complete my year-long internship in an alternative education program. Under the leadership of a master Informal teacher, I tried to absorb as much knowledge as I could about the work of Lev Vygotsky (1978) and John Dewey (1938) and their contributions to the tenets of progressive education. Although I was excited when the program offered me my first teaching position, what thrilled me the most was my new identity as a progressive educator and the impact it had on my views of teaching and learning.

Vygotsky (1978) was a pioneer of Marxism, a philosopher, literary critic, sociologist, and renowned figure of Soviet psychology. However, before fulfilling any of these roles he was both a student and a teacher. The profound relationship existing between each of these professions is reflected in an essential element of his theory: higher mental functions are developed during children's enculturation. At the time of birth individuals become human through the internalization of their culture. According to Vygotsky, formal education was an essential tool of enculturation. He believed school was "the best laboratory of human psychology" (Blanck, 1990). According to Moll (1990), Vygotsky regarded education "not only as central to cognitive development but as
The traditional view of socialization is that children are socialized into society through schooling. Children are passive, social products of educational institutions. The school's purpose is the transmission of the larger culture (McMurray-Schwarz, 2003). Paulo Freire (1970) defined this as the “banking” concept of education. In contrast to this traditional view, the sociocultural perspective considers the significance of social construction (Fernie et al., 1988). By using the process of interpretive analysis, researchers examine issues related to children's play, friendship, and social relations (Corsaro, 1985; Elgas et al., 1988; Kantor, et al., 1993). Sociocultural researchers attempt to understand the meanings of different types of contexts, viewed as cultures (Kantor et al.). Schools are viewed as social settings and classrooms as group cultures where life is patterned as the culture is co-constructed over time by its members. The researcher systematically examines the daily life of the participants, seeking to understand the locally constructed meanings of peer interactions and classroom events (Kantor et al.).

Sociocultural researchers are attempting to restore the major tenets of sociohistorical theory through their own methodological, theoretical, and psychological interpretations. It is evident throughout teaching and learning environments that Vygotsky's (1978) contributions to the development of sociohistorical theory have evolved from a psychological perspective to a pedagogical practice.

One of those teaching and learning environments is that of the progressive education classroom. I had a theoretical construct of interest with the use of a progressive, interchangeably called Informal, classroom as the sampling site. Influenced
by sociocultural theory, my teaching reflects the progressive pedagogical belief that classrooms reflect democratic communities. Progressive educators view children as producers rather than consumers of knowledge. Each child’s has a voice and makes responsible decisions about his or her learning. As children learn how to become Informal students they co-construct a classroom community based on the democratic ideals of our society.

America was founded individual rights and freedom. The value we place upon independence, however, threatens our need for community. Community is the tie that binds students and teachers together in special ways, to something more significant than themselves. As an Informal teacher, I value the co-construction of a democratic classroom community. The need for community is universal, for having a sense of belonging, of continuity, of being connected to others and to ideas as well as values that make our lives meaningful are shared by each of us within the classroom. As humans, we respond to both rational and cultural connections between us and our wants, and between us and our work. Rational connections emphasize the “I” and are manifested in the individuals quest for satisfaction of our own self-interests. In contrast, cultural connections are embedded in the norms, customs, and mores that tie us to others. It is the cultural connections established within a classroom that bond the teacher with the students into a classroom community. An analysis of contemporary needs theory as well as our own anthropological history as a human species demonstrates why the potential for becoming a “we” is stronger than remaining an “I”. As an educator, I want to teach children citizenship and to help them become caring adults. The key aspects of a classroom community are the standards, values, and commitments that the teacher and
students co-construct in order to live together. The context of the Informal classroom serves as an "information-rich" case for in-depth study (Patton, 1990).

The Informal Alternative Program in the community in which this study took place, was established in 1972. It is unique in that it is one of very few progressive programs still surviving within a public school district. For 34 years, parents of children attending public schools in this suburb have been given choice between progressive and traditional education. Supported by an elected Board of Education and a strong, cohesive group of parents, in 1997 the program adopted the Ten Foundational Principles of Progressive Education (Appendix A). These ten principles are the pedagogical beliefs that progressive educators within the district strive to live out daily in their classrooms.

A reflection upon the essential elements of the Ten Foundational Principles of the Informal Alternative Program provides direct connections between these progressive ideals and the sociocultural beliefs of both Vygotsky and Dewey. Although I have included all ten principles of the program in Appendix A, I would like to emphasize key points that I believe represent the views of sociocultural theorists, signify the essence of creating classroom cultures, and lay the theoretical framework for this study.

The sixth principle of the Informal program is to: *Raise social consciousness by encouraging children to examine and confront complex issues within society.* Consistently across grade levels, Informal teachers support children's understanding of what it means to be a part of a classroom community. Each class holds daily classroom meetings. These meetings, sometimes conducted several times throughout a day, provide the children with the opportunity to co-construct their learning experiences. It is one time during the school day that encourages children to be social. Furthermore, it serves as a
means for establishing a strong classroom culture. It is a time for discussion, negotiation, sharing, and reflection. It is a space where children feel safe to have their voice heard and where the class develops a group identity.

The fourth principle is: *Use time and space in a flexible manner to maximize student opportunities for in-depth inquiry.* Space flexibility is represented through classrooms that are designed to offer children multiple areas in which to work. Through a combination of carpet meeting areas and various table arrangements, children and teachers select different spaces to meet different needs throughout the day. Furthermore, the program values the opportunity to use time in flexible ways. Although the teachers create an organizational framework for meeting the needs of a typical day, the planned schedule is adapted on a daily basis to meet the unique needs of each class of children. If a group discussion is generating strong interest and involvement from the class as a whole, the teacher will extend the discussion beyond the planned time. Teachers' decisions about time allocations, therefore, are based upon their ongoing observations of children's interests and the working patterns that are exhibited during the course of a day.

The overarching educational commitment is to engage children in constructive and purposeful intellectual tasks. Informal teachers know that this kind of sustained involvement requires continuities in a school day and the flexibility to respond to children and the tasks before them. Vivian Paley (1984, 1992, 2004), educational researcher and kindergarten teacher at the Chicago Lab School, emphasizes the value of time when providing children with the opportunity to play. She states, "Good play and the sort of talk that follows take time and deep thought. There are no shortcuts" (2004, p. 22).
The tenth principle of the Informal Alternative Program states that teachers view our school as a center for teaching and learning for all ages and we are students of our teaching. As a student of my own teaching, it is important that I reflect upon the theoretical beliefs that drive my teaching practices. This principle framed my last research question as I asked myself how does my pedagogy support the use of classroom meetings as a vehicle for making visible the intersections of the peer and school cultures.

These principles reflect the teaching and learning that occurs within Informal classrooms and provides connections to the work of educators half way around the world in the city of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Loris Malaguzzi, founding philosopher of the pre-primary schools of Reggio Emilia once said, "Education is an act of complex interaction, many of which only take place if the space also participates" (personal communication, Lella Gandini, March 3, 2004). The schools of Reggio not only view their environment as a third teacher, but also utilize space to support children's relationships. The teachers of Reggio organize space around human experiences. They believe these spaces support children with their capabilities to dialogue in the language of society and culture. Equally important is their perspective about time. Time is not set by a clock. Children's own sense of time and own personal rhythms are considered in planning activities and projects (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002; Fu, Stremmel, & Hill, 2002).

My initial exposure to the municipal pre-primary schools of Reggio Emilia was in 2000 when I observed “The Hundred Languages of Children” exhibit. Photographs along with detailed representations of children’s work adorned the large panels that provided interpretive commentary explaining the processes of the children’s learning. I marveled not only at the artwork completed by young children, but also at the complexities
involved in the Reggio approach to teaching and learning. The exhibit that first introduced me to Reggio served as an inspiration four years later when I went there to see for myself a pedagogy that reflected my beliefs as a progressive educator.

Inspired by my pedagogical beliefs about teaching and learning and my observations as a teacher-researcher in Reggio, I examined within my own classroom how morning meeting influences the creation of classroom cultures. My efforts to bridge theories about teaching and learning with my daily teaching practice represent the origin of my research interests and the impact my perspectives had on this study as a teacher researcher. In the following section I will outline the methods I used throughout my study.

Methods

Given the research objectives, I applied an ethnographic methodology to my data collection and analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Erickson, 1986; Spradley, 1980). Ethnographic methodology alternatively can be called qualitative, participant observational, case study, phenomenological constructivist, or interpretivism (Erickson, 1986). This study represents interpretive research situated within an ethnographic perspective.

Ethnographic research design. Rooted deeply in anthropology as well as sociology, ethnography is very prevalent in sociolinguistic and educational fields of interpretive research (Chilcott, 1987). Ethnography literally means, "writing about people" (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Traditionally, ethnography is defined as "the discovery and comprehensive description of the culture of a group of people" (p. 369). Ethnography can be viewed as a "methodology" or as a "portrait of a culture" (Chilcott,
1987, p. 199). Not only is ethnography a research process, but it can also be a research perspective. It is an orienting theory, methodology, and product (Zaharlick & Green, 1991; Kantor & Fernie, 2003). I engaged in a 27 week ethnographic study of the cultural event of a classroom meeting that occurred daily within my first and second grade classroom. Furthermore, I examined the subcultures that existed within the classroom culture and specifically their visibility during this event. Johnson and Christensen define a subculture as "...a culture that is embedded within a larger culture" (p. 371).

Reflecting the characteristics of ethnography this study portrays a holistic perspective. Throughout my analysis I deconstructed the event of a classroom meeting to show how it is more than a simple activity that involves reading a morning message, making announcements, and sharing objects. This event is transparent in that it enables one to see the two spheres of classroom cultures and the places at which these two spheres intersect. From a holistic perspective, the activities that take place during a classroom meeting represent complex cultural systems. The study focused on how these systems, identified as two separate cultures, overlap to create intersections. The rich holistic descriptions presented in chapter four show how the children interact during classroom meetings and how these two cultures can be represented during one classroom event.

In addition to being holistic, the study is sensitive to context. Within my analysis, I give considerable attention to the dynamics of the classroom. Goodwin and Goodwin (1996) note how the "...context is crucial for fully understanding behavior and social events" (p. 110). The study explored the daily events that took place within the classroom. It did not alter or interfere with classroom life. As a participant-observer, I
had to consider not only the context of the classroom, but also my situated context as the
teacher-researcher, the historical, political, and social context of our program, the
classroom's multi-age setting, and the community members returning for a second year.

The study represented an inductive research design. As I reflected upon my
methods for data analysis it became more apparent that I was quite flexible in the design
of this ethnographic study. The design did not take shape until after the fieldwork
unfolded. Much like the progressive approach to the teaching of the curriculum, the steps
of design within this study were emergent. My earliest plans served as starting points as
I became involved in an ongoing attempt to place specific events and my understandings
of these events, into a fuller, more meaningful context. In the next section of this chapter
I will identify the sample and site of this study before revealing the detailed procedures
used in data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Research site. The study took place in a first and second grade multi-age
classroom at a large elementary school in an affluent suburb of the Midwest. The school
serves kindergarten through fifth grade and is unique in its housing of two instructional
programs: Contemporary and the Informal Alternative. The staff consisted of one
principal, one assistant principal, one educational intervention specialists, 34 teachers,
eight intervention specialists, two gifted teachers, and six educational aides. There were
two part time nurses, two media specialists, a technology assistant, a school counselor,
and a school psychologist on call. Visual art, music, and physical education were taught
by specialized teachers. The principal was in her fifth year at the building.

According to the 2005-2006 School Report Card from the Ohio Department of
Education, the average daily student enrollment during the 2005-2006 school year was
568 children. Only 5.2% of students within the school had disabilities. According to the state report card, 94.2% of third, fourth, and fifth grade students were above proficient level for reading and 92.3% were above proficient level for math. The attendance rate for the school year was 96.4%. The graduation rate for the school district was 99.6%. Ethnically, 97.7% of the school population was White. Furthermore, 97% of the teaching staff that school year was female and of the 34 total teachers, there was only one African-American teacher. The homogenous population of the school reflects the population in the surrounding community.

Looking beyond the walls of the school and into the surrounding neighborhoods provides further information about the research site. According to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau, the zip code encompassing the school’s families (in addition to one other elementary school) had a total population of 29,609. 94.1% of that population was White, 3.2% Asian, and 1.2% Hispanic. English was the first language for 92% of the population. There were 12,310 households and 33.5% of those were families with children under the age of 18 years. Only 7.9% of households were single-parent. The average family size was 2.99.

Over 36% of the population of individuals 25 years and older had a bachelor's degree and over 25% had a graduate or professional degree. Therefore, over half of these residents successfully attended an institution of higher education. Within the population of individuals 16 years and older, 70.6% were in the labor force. The number of individuals not in the labor force was 29.4%, thus there were so few unemployed that the percentage equaled zero. The most common occupation for this community was management and professional. Sales and office occupations were the second highest.
The median household income in 2000 was $66,171. I would like to point out that 42% of the population made more than $75,000. More specifically, 5.5% of the population earned $200,000 or more. These figures explain why only 1.9% of the population of families was below poverty level. Fifteen percent of the house values within the zip code had values greater than $300,000. Nearly 80% of the houses in this community were owned where as the other 20% was rented.

One might ask how this information impacts the school and this study. From a business perspective, the 2004-2005 state report card notes that the average expenditure per pupil in 2003-2004 was $10,691 which was $ 2,256 higher than the state average for all elementary schools. Having available resources creates opportunities for student learning. With over 50% of the residents over the age of 25 years successfully completing a degree of higher education, the community is committed to its schools. Furthermore, parents and community members are open to share their experiences with the children. Education is a family value. Attendance and discipline at the elementary level rarely develop as major issues within the school. Also, nearly 30% of the population over 16 years of age was not in the work force, enabling greater flexibility with parental involvement. As a classroom teacher, I have parent volunteers daily. Consistency in the volunteer schedule enables classroom teachers to provide parents with opportunities to assist with one-on-one intervention and small group instruction, fulfilling a significant role as co-educators. The research participants resemble the affluent, homogeneous community found within the school's neighborhoods.

The classroom is one of four rooms in a building disconnected from the main school. Identified as a pod, the school has four of these buildings that house all first and
second grade classrooms. Within my pod, there are two other first and second grade informal classrooms as well as a visual art room. There are two entrances to the classroom. At the center of the pod is a water fountain, storage closet, custodian closet, and boy's as well as girl's restrooms. The classroom resembles a square and two of its four walls contain windows that bring a lot of natural light in to the room. Classroom meetings were held in a section of the room that is carpeted and took place at the front of the room, between the two entrances. Meeting places in all three classrooms were defined by open spaces on the carpet.

Research participants. The research participants included 22 students from August 23, 2005 through December 21, 2005 and 23 students from January 4 through March 31, 2006. I fulfilled the role as the teacher-researcher and from December 12, 2005 through March 31, 2006 an Ohio State student intern joined our classroom. The university student did not begin student teaching until the month of April. Of the twenty-three students in the class, fourteen were second graders and nine were first graders. There were nine girls and fourteen boys. Two of the girls were first graders and seven of the girls were second graders. The ratio of first to second grade boys was even, for there were seven at each grade level. Since this was a multi-age classroom, 11 of the 14 second graders were members of the classroom last year as first graders.

Selection of site and participants. A "purposeful sampling" approach (Patton, 1990) guided my selection of the research site and its participants. As the participant-observer, it was apparent that I would select my own classroom as an "information-rich" case for in-depth study. As Patton (1990) explains, "Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of
the research, thus the term purposeful sampling" (p. 169).

Considering the purpose of my study, I used both "intensity sampling" and "theory-based construct sampling" to support the use of my classroom as the research site (Patton, 1990). The classroom is not unusual, however, it is part of an alternative program, which reflects the work of the progressive movement and the interpretations of sociocultural theorists. Informal education shares a strong commitment to the image of the child as a decision-maker, responsible for his or her learning, a commitment to establishing democratic classroom communities with settings that are responsive to children's needs and interests, and a commitment to direct engagement and authentic experiences as the foundation for children's learning. The theoretical construct of interest within this sampling was that my views as a teacher represent the views of sociocultural theorists and signify the essence of creating classroom cultures.

Ethnographers tend to select their site based on its naturalistic orientation (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). Whatever is being researched, in this case the children within a classroom, is studied in its most natural state. As the teacher-researcher, I studied the culture as it existed and evolved over the course of the year. Consistently across grade levels, Informal teachers support children's understanding of what it means to be a part of a classroom community. Each class holds daily classroom meetings. These meetings, sometimes conducted several times throughout a day, provide the children with the opportunity to co-construct their learning experiences. It is a time during the school day that encourages children to be social. Furthermore, it serves as a means for establishing the group. It is a time for discussing issues, negotiating curriculum interests, sharing objects and stories, and reflecting upon our learning
experiences. It is a space where children feel safe to have their voices heard and where the class develops a group identity. Therefore, I chose for the research to be conducted in this type of learning environment. The pedagogical beliefs that drive my teaching practice supported the construction of my research questions and guided me in my role as a teacher-researcher.

The children of the classroom ranged from six to eight years of age. The participants included the first and second grade students that were assigned to my classroom for the 2005-2006 school year. Student placement was conducted in a professional manner, with educators working together to construct the best possible educational experience for each student. Student placement is confidential until placement letters are mailed to parents the second week of August. The class list remained confidential until the school year began. I collaborated with other school personnel to construct each Informal primary classroom. We attempted to balance each class, taking into consideration each child's: age, gender, academic abilities, parental support, relationships, and behaviors. Thus, the whole context of the child influenced the selection of the research participants. The 11 children returning from first grade had established a local context within the classroom the previous year and heavily impacted the process as well.

University personnel assigned the intern that joined our classroom midway into the second quarter of the school year. He fulfilled the role of an observer, as he completed his assignments for his licensure program. By the end of the third quarter, he was teaching small group lessons as well as our daily first grade math lesson. Occasionally he led classroom meetings during the third quarter, however did not begin
his student teaching until after I stopped data collection.

All individuals within the class, including the student intern, were eligible to participate within the study. Therefore, the selection process occurred during student placement. Parents of the participants received a letter explaining the research study along with a consent form for them to sign as well as an assent script for them to read to their child. The consent letter provided a place for parents to give permission for me to audio and video record their children. A similar consent form was provided to the student teacher.

Data Collection

As a methodology, ethnography is viewed as interactive research (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993). Therefore, it includes a considerable amount of interaction between the subjects and the researcher. As the researcher, I used a flexible design to collect the data. Each child was assigned a pseudo name for the purpose of this study so that their names and identities would remain confidential. Adults were assigned a first initial. Visual methods included photographs and video clips. Additional documentation was obtained from written texts. I made copies of children's journal writing, letters, and self-reflections. Daily I audio recorded each classroom meeting as well kept a notebook for field notes. Informal group interviews provided me with the opportunity to gain additional insight within a small group setting.

Often conceptualized as descriptive anthropology, an ethnographer has an in-depth, prolonged involvement in the culture (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996; Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The ethnographic perspective supported my need to spend a long period of time in the field. Data collection occurred during the hours of the school day,
Monday through Friday, 8:10 am to 2:50 pm. Data collection began on the first day of school, Tuesday, August 23, 2005 and stopped with the end of the third quarter on Friday, March 31, 2006. Twenty-seven weeks provided the time I needed to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of morning meetings, the construction and patterns of the school and peer cultures, and the visible intersections made between them. My prolonged observations offered me a new perspective on what daily life is like for the children within my classroom. In the next several sections I will outline the multiple sources of data collection used throughout this study: participant-observation, descriptive data, collections of artifacts and documents, and informal small group interviews.

**Participant-Observation: Uncovering the culture.** Participant-observation "characterizes most ethnographic research and is crucial to effective fieldwork" (Fetterman, 1998, p. 34). Ethnography is a valuable method for studying the social development of young children because many of their interactions are created and shared in the present moment and cannot be obtained easily through other research methods. As the participant-observer I had the opportunity to observe from a different perspective how the children construct the cultures of the classroom. The ethnography provided me with the chance to take a closer look at how morning meetings impact the building of these classroom cultures. As a teacher, I am constantly observing and documenting the growth and behavior of the children in my classroom, however, the role as the researcher expanded my observations to include how dimensions of the school and peer cultures emerge during classroom meetings.

Reflective of ethnography, I had a direct and personal means for collecting data. As the participant-observer, I was the primary instrument for data collection. Much of
the data I collected originated from personal observations and my field notes. Even the informal interviews were a direct source of relevant information. This left me in a powerful role as the teacher-researcher. I not only made decisions about the use of time, the structure of our daily meetings, and the direction of our emergent curriculum, but I also had to decide what data to record, how to best to record it, when to record it and to what extent. My position within the classroom was not only that of the teacher. I had to consider my position as the researcher, driven by my theoretical beliefs and the needs of my participants.

The construction of my role as a teacher-researcher was an ongoing process. The needs of the children changed over time as the conditions within our classroom changed. Therefore, my position and role was carefully negotiated with the children (Graue and Walsh, 1998). Being sensitive to the context of the study meant that I had to consider the child's perspective (Graue & Walsh, 1998). Context sensitivity was portrayed through the relationships I established with each child. On November 14th when Maria asked me during our morning meeting why I had forgotten to write my name on the sharing schedule, I realized that I had gained "insider status" and had earned the trust of the group (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996).

As an eighth year student of my own teaching, I was cautious about placing myself in the role of an “insider.” At times I purposely chose to position myself as the researcher rather than the teacher as I strived to remain trustworthy to the children. On the first day of school I explained why I was using a digital recorder and the sixth day, when George inquired about it, several of the second graders attempted to explain to George that it "was for Miss Eirich's research!" I proceeded to show the class how the
recorder worked. By the second quarter when I wanted the children to read orally for their portfolios, I taught each child how to operate the recorder. Including the recorder within the culture of the community that was forming created a slight shift in their view of it. They developed an understanding for how it could be used as a tool and for the first time, they had the opportunity to listen to how their voices sounded as they played back their oral readings.

Likewise, when I began to informally interview small groups, I had my questions written in my pocketsize fieldwork notebook. The children became curious about what I kept in this notebook. I openly shared it with them, showed them my notes and explained how I had formed the questions I was about to ask them. When they saw their pseudo names written next to the questions, they found joy and humor in the fact that they actually had two names in our classroom, not just one.

Fulfilling the role of the participant-observer presented many challenges as I learned how to walk the line between being a teacher and a researcher. My prolonged engagement in the study offered opportunities for me to explore new theoretical positions as they emerged. I was aware of how my own biases, knowledge base, teaching experience, pedagogical beliefs, and theoretical constructs would impact what I selected as data.

*Descriptive data.* An ethnographic perspective provides theory grounded closely in data (Kantor & Fernie, 2003). Much of the data I collected was in the form of field notes, constructed from written descriptions, audio recordings, and video clips. My field notes explained descriptive events of the: who, what, when, where, why, and how that occurred daily during classroom meetings.
At the beginning of school year in August and September my written descriptions were quite general. I was trying to capture everything that took place during a classroom meeting. In mid-September I began to observe patterns in children's sharing about their weekends. It was than that I realized my observations and notes would change as the research progressed. By October, my narratives were more focused as they provided "thick descriptions" (Denzin, 1989) of patterns that I had observed during daily meetings.

According to Denzin (1989),

Thick description...does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick descriptions, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard (p. 83).

In the middle of the first quarter I began searching for a way to make sense of my notes. I knew that they were "fat" with data, however grasping how to organize the rich descriptions without "stripping" them of their context provided a challenge. With the support of my adviser, I created three separate notebooks: one for observational notes of who was talking, another for topics of conversation, and a third, for my methodological and theoretical interpretations. Therefore, each day I would organize my observations in three separate places. This provided me with the opportunity to chart patterns in children's talk as well as observe interests in changing topics. Supplementing my observations, my interpretive comments included my reflections of methods, analysis, ethical conflicts, frames of mind, or needs for clarification. These comments represented my initial efforts to construct meaning out of the data and to offer my earliest interpretations of it.
In the third quarter I began to reorganize my observations on a new one-page template. Following a running head annotation (i.e. date, time, students present) I provided observational notes from the "jottings" (Bernard, 1988) in my field notebook and from listening to the audio recordings. Below this summarized paragraph I created a column of "Who's Talking?" and the topic(s) of these interactions. If it was a Friday or Monday, I made a specific column for weekend sharing and listed the children according to their position on the circle. This enabled me to examine patterns based on what they had to say and where they were sitting within the circle. At the bottom of the page I continued to provide interpretive comments. At this point I began to note selective transcriptions by marking the time from the recording and providing a brief synopsis of how the data may be relevant to other findings.

I would like to note that as much as I used audio as well as some visual recordings to support my observations as the participant-observer, the audio and visual recordings themselves, not the transcripts are the data. The process of transcribing includes analysis at some level (Psathas & Anderson, 1990). My use of Maclure and Walker's (2000) transcription conventions shows that we cannot assume that transcriptions are "transparent", for the text is not a "hard reality" of the actual interaction captured on the recorder (Psathas & Anderson, 1990). Conventions represent the paralinguistic and nonverbal information that the researcher decides whether to include in the transcription. This warrants my discussion of transcription as an analysis of interpretation in my data analysis section.

Informal group interviews. A second type of interactive data collection I used was informal small group interviews. Researchers Eder and Fingerson (2002) insist that
group interviews are one of the strongest methods used to investigate children's own
interpretations of their lives. Group interviews provide a means for reducing the power
imbalance that exist between my role as the teacher-researcher and the children's role as
the students. The power difference is reduced even further when interviews are
conducted in a natural context, like the classroom.

With such a large class size, I organized some of the children into small focus
groups to provide a more in-depth understanding of the children's perspectives. I
established criteria for the selecting children for a specific focus group: (1) each child's
personality (2) each child's gender (3) each child's relationships within the classroom (4)
each child's grade level (5) each child's age. As I began to form groups, I realized within
the first several weeks of school that many of these groups would emerge from patterns
within my data. For example, by the middle of the first quarter I knew that I needed to
interview Anthony and George about their submissive position within the group.
Therefore, a sixth element, relevance of the interview questions, became a factor in the
formation of each focus group.

Focus groups were flexible and contained no more than six children. Each
interview was audio recorded to provide me with the opportunity to observe nonverbal
language during the interview process. The interviews were then transcribed and my
observations of the children's nonverbal cues were added to the notes. McMillan and
Schumacher (1993) define these as "interview elaborations" that include "...self-
reflections on his or her role and rapport, interviewee's reactions, additional information,
and extensions of interview meanings" (in Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996, p. 136). These
interviews not only provided relevant responses to questions that emerged in my field
notes but also emerged from children's responses on grounded surveys.

**Documentation and artifacts.** Unlike observations and interviews, gathering information from a variety of sources is not interactive. Documents provide both historical and contextual dimensions to observations and interviews. They enrich what one may see and hear by supporting, expanding, and challenging portrayals and perceptions. My understanding of a phenomenon grew as I made use of documents and artifacts that were part of the children’s lives.

I collected documentation in both visual and written form. The collection of photographs and video clips provided a visual approach, opening up the opportunity for intersections between human existence and visual perception. Visual approaches supported my efforts to capture the social life of the classroom. Daily I kept the digital camera on the back of the sharing chair. Weekly I would transfer pictures from my memory card onto a file on my computer titled Research. It wasn't until the third quarter that I was able to begin creating categories for my collection of photographs. Each photo was identified by the event or the child's pseudo name. Categories were identified as patterns emerged from within the school and peer cultures. The use of photographs served as a visual narrative (Harper, 2000) that strengthened the written one and elicited cultural information that might have gone unnoticed in the busy life of the classroom. Unlike the photographs, I only chose to use audiovisual recordings one time each quarter. I used these recordings to enhance my classroom observations and field notes. The videos served as tool to document the nonverbal complexities of children's language and social interactions.

Further documentation was obtained in the form of written texts. Guba and
Lincoln (2000) define this form of documentation as "mute evidence" and emphasize the essence of interpreting these materials, for they withhold important meanings of lived cultures. These forms of written texts included children's journal writing, their written letters, and their self-reflections.

Fulfilling the role of both the teacher and the researcher provided access to all of the children's written texts. As a class, the children typically wrote in their journals on Mondays and Fridays after they had shared about their weekends in our morning meeting. As the year progressed and the children gained more responsibility with their learning, different writing choices, including journal writing and the writing of letters, were marked on various days during writing workshop. As a teacher, I met with every child once every other week to conference about his or her writing skills. At this time, together we would read through the journal entries. This provided insight into my role as the researcher. When I began to notice patterns between what children shared in group and what they expressed in their writing, I recorded in my field notes these connections and looked for them again when I had my next conference with that child.

To foster relationships within the classroom, at the beginning of the school year I had the children create a message box. Each four by six inch box with the child's name and picture hung next to the others' on a wall near the door. Beside the message boxes I kept plain paper, letter paper, and envelopes. Whenever letter writing was marked as a choice for writing workshop, children could write letters or messages to one another. Making copies of these letters provided valuable insight into patterns of friendship and the constructs of the peer culture. Although their messages were expressed in written language, these letters still provided peers with another avenue to socialize with their
friends.

Another form of written text that I collected was the children's weekly self-reflections. These reflections established a means for me to conduct grounded surveys about classroom meetings. The surveys that I developed were grounded in the themes that emerged from my observations each quarter and some of my informal small group interviews. As I attempted to design the surveys, I realized that our "Weekly Reflections" could possibly serve the purpose of a survey. Every Friday the children completed a reflection about a specific topic at school. I chose to use this format because I knew that it would be familiar to the children and I wanted them to feel comfortable with what I was asking them to complete. Following the routines of our other weekly reflections, I gave the surveys to the entire class. As I struggled over the questions I wanted in the survey I realized how valuable it would be for me to reexamine my field notes. Once I drafted the survey questions, I approached my colleagues and asked them to review each question. Although I did not ask a child to read through the questions, I still felt as if I was completing a member check, for I wanted to gain another individual’s perspective. I asked my colleagues to clarify that the questions were developmentally appropriate and that the wording for each statement communicated my intended question. Together, we slightly modified some questions and revised the drafted surveys.

My initial concerns with giving the survey originated from my thoughts about using surveys to collect data. First and foremost, from past experiences with weekly reflections, I have observed children responding according to how they felt in that moment. For example, if the reflection stated, "I like voting in classroom meetings" and the child did not like the last decision made when we voted, then his or her feelings were
reflected in the response. Thus, I was not sure if this survey would provide me with accurate information or a "true reading" of the data. However, I realized that one way for me to gather substantial data would be to encourage the children to talk about their responses to each statement. Furthermore, I was able to use this discussion to draft additional questions for the next survey. Although the group completed these self-reflections on a weekly basis, I used them as grounded surveys focused on classroom meetings one time each quarter.

Each of the artifacts I collected from the children contributed to my effort to disclose "...information about the behaviors, experiences, beliefs, knowledge, values, and perceptions" of individuals in order to more fully understand the cultures of classroom life (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996, p. 136). The grounded surveys showed how much there is a shift from the impact of the school culture on the structure of classroom meetings at the beginning of the year to the interests of the peer culture in the middle of the year. The letters provided insight into the social dynamics of the classroom as well as the themes and norms of the peer culture. The children’s journal writing unveiled how social interactions impact children's language and literacy development.

Data Analysis

Ongoing analysis occurred throughout all phases of the data collection process. Although documented in this section in a linear fashion, the collection and analysis of the data was a recurring process. Zaharick and Green (1991) explain, "Analysis of data begins immediately. The ethnographer refines the initial question as the unfolding patterns of everyday life become visible through observations and initial data analysis" (p.219-220). Therefore my initial question: How do classroom meetings serve as a
window into children's cultures? established the framework that I would be investigating an event that occurs within the classroom and the cultures that are present during this event. Although researchers (Kantor et al., 1988) have examined circle time in preschools, there was little research on the impact of classroom meetings at the elementary level (Kriete, 2002). My second and third questions specifically addressed the presence of two classroom cultures, the school culture and the peer culture. These questions reflected the work of early childhood researchers (Corsaro, 1985; Dyson, 1997; Fernie et al., 1988) as they attempted to unveil childhood cultures. Again, however, this study investigated an elementary classroom where as previous work emerged from early childhood settings.

The final three questions called for an investigation of the relationships between the event of a classroom meeting, these childhood cultures, the Informal pedagogy, and student achievement. It was these questions that guided me to an inductive analysis process identified by qualitative researchers as "grounded theory" (Glaser & Straus, 1967). By becoming familiarized with the theory, I was able to make deeper implications about the role of classroom meetings and provide a more refined analysis. In my efforts to understand the experiences of the children during classroom meetings, the analytic strategies of grounded theory guided my discoveries of new understandings for the meanings of the two cultures and the complexities involved in this classroom event.

*Grounded theory*. Grounded theory methods provide systematic inductive guidelines for collecting and analyzing data that evolve into theoretical frameworks. When defining the criteria for evaluating grounded theory, Glaser’s (1978) states that "...any existing concept must earn its way into the analysis..."(Charmaz, 2000, p. 511).
Glaser contends that the purpose of grounded theory methods is to generate theory rather than to just verify it (Charmaz, 2000). Therefore, my understandings about childhood cultures and the event of a classroom meeting had to be reworked and refined in order to evolve as a theoretical category worthy of explaining the data. I used initial interpretations to further my data collection and to reform and refine my developing theoretical analyses. The process of interpretation clarified "the multiple meanings of an event, object, experience, or text" (Denzin, 1994, p. 504). This process consisted of "taking apart and putting together" the data corpus through the use of multiple methods.

This theory is emergent and has roots in constructivism. I must note that all along my journey in collecting and analyzing data these methods were flexible, for I used them as strategies rather than as procedures. These analytical strategies supported my efforts to provide a systematic analysis and refinement of emerging patterns and themes within the data.

I used the following analytical strategies in a concurrent process in which the steps of the process informed one another in ways that were not sequential (Graue & Walsh, 1988). Through a systematic inductive analysis of the data, I was able to identify emerging themes or categories that reflected patterns within my data. These emerging themes or categories led to the formation of "theorized explanations" (Graue & Walsh) or "assertions" (Erickson, 1986). The analytical strategies I used throughout this process included: (1) an extensive recurring reading of my data collection (2) the coding of emerging categories or themes (3) an exploration of codes through memo writing (4) the use of theoretical sampling to refine categories or themes (5) the development of assertions.
The process of carefully reading through my data corpus supported my efforts to become "grounded" in my data. The process involved reading and re-reading my field notes, cataloguing and reviewing audio recordings, in addition to reading, examining, and re-examining the content of documents and artifacts that I had collected from the classroom. I began this process by transforming my "jottings" into field notes as I created two columns, one for observations and the other for interpretations. This eventually changed when I began using three pocket-sized notebooks for identifying who spoke, the topics that emerged, and the methodological and interpretive comments I had formed. A final step I used to familiarize myself with the data was the formation of a one-page template that provided a summary of the classroom meeting, a list ordering who spoke, a column of topics, a description of the representations of the peer culture, school culture and their intersections, a description of the representations of progressive pedagogy, and finally my own interpretive comments.

The process of reviewing my audio recordings further "grounded" me in my data. As I made choices about what to record, what to transcribe, and how to represent the recording in text, I began to view transcriptions as more than a source of data collection. Even with conventions, transcriptions have become a research method of interpretation (Lapadat & Lindsey, 1999). Denzin (1995) explains that transcripts are "cultural texts that represent experience…Every attempt to re-present results in another original creation" (in Lapadat & Lindsey, 1999, p. 76). Each new retelling is somewhat less than the original because certain elements of talk are lost and the original voices, intentions, and interpretations cannot be recovered. At the same time, however, each retelling is more because the researcher constructs, organizes, and interprets what is heard for textual
representation. The extensive, re-reading of data prepared me for coding, as themes began to emerge and categories formed.

Graue and Walsh (1998) define coding as "labeling themes that are represented by chunks of data" (p. 163). As I extensively read my data, my interpretations shaped the formation of emergent codes. More important than the codes themselves were the theoretical ideas I was trying to communicate from the data. Coding helped me form new perspectives about my data.

Although most of my codes emerged from the patterns that I found in my field notes or transcriptions, there are several that originated from my literature review. Codes representing the school culture, peer culture, and their intersections were derived from my literature review. Two additional categories I created were topics and talking. As I coded for the topics discussed during classroom meetings I was not only observing those topics that repeated but also those that offered breaks in the patterns. By focusing on who was speaking, I was able to reveal the social dynamics of the classroom. I eventually was able to break these categories down further within elements of the school and peer cultures. For example, topics during sharing emerged as focal concerns of the peer culture. Patterns of who spoke and who remained silent enabled me to identify social positions within the peer culture. I also discovered that just as important as who was speaking was the connections of their topics. This led to my investigation of how the sharing of common experiences supports children's efforts to converse with one another.

Therefore, coding provided me a means for data reduction. It helped me put together my interpretations and made my data more manageable. The categories that emerged within this framework were multi-layered, enabling me to make connections
between a category and its subcategories. These were interpretive acts that supported the interpretive framework of this study.

Memos provided me with the opportunity to extend my understanding and build new perspectives about my codes. Used by many qualitative researchers (Charmaz, 2000) memoing helps

…in linking analytic interpretation with empirical reality. We bring raw data right into our memos so that we maintain those connections and examine them directly. Raw data from different sources provide the grist for making precise comparisons, fleshing out ideas, analyzing properties of categories, and seeing patterns (p. 517).

I recorded my memos on different colors of Post-Its. Memos were posted throughout my field notes and served as markers of particular thoughts I had about specific codes. I attempted to color-code my Post-Its so that I could keep my memos organized. These memos reflected the connections and distinctions I made as I began to construct my own understanding.

I do not want to act as if this study examined the potential of possibilities present with the use of theoretical sampling however, my efforts to refine my emerging categories convince me that it is worthy of discussion. As I began to define emerging categories and the subcategories within them, I found myself going back to the classroom and searching for data that would "shed light" on the theoretical constructs that had emerged. For example, when I began to observe children becoming upset when others shared their experiences at birthday parties, I knew that I needed to bring this concern to the entire group. Therefore, in the grounded survey I created for the second quarter I asked about the appropriateness of sharing stories about attending birthday parties.

Seeking further clarification, I used the results from the grounded survey to create a small
focus group for an informal interview that provided additional insight.

Many of the small group informal interviews I conducted represented theoretical sampling. When I observed patterns of children fulfilling submissive social positions within group, I chose to interview these children to seek further understanding about why they often passed during our sharing about our weekends. When there was a high response on a grounded survey asking if the children felt comfortable enough to express their feelings during classroom meetings, I wanted to meet with these children to further investigate why they felt this way and how their thoughts could possibly demonstrate how the strength of a classroom community is unveiled during classroom meetings.

Thus, theoretical sampling provided me with the opportunity to compare data with data. My efforts to use this method are recognized through my attempts to revisit the field to gain more insight about when, how, and to what extent, a category was relevant and useful.

One of the basic tasks of data analysis is the inductive construction of assertions. This requires an extensive search of the data corpus. After reviewing my field notes, audio recordings, video recordings, and other documentation, I had to establish evidentiary warrant for each of my assertions. Empirical assertions are one of the nine essential elements of a data report, as identified by Erickson (1986). These elements, including narrative vignettes, key quotes, data reports, interpretive commentary, and theoretical discussion all provide the reader with the opportunity to situate oneself in the context that is described, to assess a full range of evidence on which the author's interpretive analysis is based, and to consider the author's perspective. Erickson asserts that by providing access to these elements, a reader can "function as a co-analyst of the
case reported” (p. 145).

The assertions that I present in chapter four represent my recurring collecting and analyzing of the data. These assertions are presented through narrative vignettes, key quotes found within my transcriptions of audio recordings, the use of data reports to display frequencies found within the data over the 27 week period, and my own interpretive commentary. Each of these elements support my efforts to provide the reader the opportunity to experience the classroom event of a morning meeting, to survey the evidence on which my interpretations are "grounded," and to consider the theoretical framework of my perspective throughout the course of the study (Erickson, 1986).

The two main goals of a data report are to make clear to the reader what is meant by the different assertions and to display the evidentiary warrant of these assertions. Clarification is achieved through what Erickson (1986) defines as "particular description." Reflecting the core of fieldwork research, particular description within this study includes the narrative vignettes and the direct quotes that I used from classroom interactions and informal interviews. Both of these elements clarify in detail the patterns of perspective found within the assertions. For example, when examining the implications of the intersections of the peer and school cultures on children's social development I shared the story of Claire bringing her pet guinea pig to school. Selective transcriptions of the 17 minutes she spent sharing demonstrate how sharing impacts children's social growth. Many of the vignettes also include samples of documentation that further support the assertion. For example, when investigating how sharing during classroom meetings provides for intersections of the school and peer cultures, I include photographs of certain children sharing and documentation of journal writing that reflects
how these intersections support academic development.

The goal of providing evidentiary warrant for the assertions is also accomplished by "general descriptions.” General descriptions reflect a synopsis of patterns in the basic unit of analysis. A general description can provide the generalizability of patterns illustrated in a particular description. After presenting a specific example (through a vignette or transcription), I must also show the reader the typicality or atypicality of that instance. Within this study I use frequency tables to display the breadth of evidence that warrants an assertion. For example, rather than just sharing vignettes and transcriptions of children voting during classroom meetings, I provide a table displaying the 24 times we voted throughout the 27 week study and the topics that evoked this democratic action. Furthermore, in looking at how learning to be an Informal student supports curriculum integration, I provide a flow chart mapping our study of the moon, stars, day and night, as well as bed time stories. This study began with an investigation of the harvest moon in October of 2005 and lasted through our pajama party in February of 2006.

Erickson (1986) defines three types of interpretive commentary: interpretation before and after particular description, theoretical discussion outlining the overall significance to the patterns identified within the assertion, and a reflection by the researcher of changes that occurred in his or her perspectives as the study unfolded. Interpretative commentary helps the reader understand the meaning of the researcher's interpretations. It provides the reader with information left out of a narrative vignette or key quote that is critical in order for the reader to share in the researcher's interpretations. For example, without sharing Claire's personal history and her speech and language delays, the reader may not be able to understand the significance of her 17 minutes of
sharing. Without providing a discussion about the relevance the data offers to the patterns found within the assertion, readers may get lost in details that are not interpreted. This commentary has relevance for me as well, as it portrays my efforts as an analyst as well as a reporter of data. The analytical strategies I used to provide an analysis of the assertions that emerged from my data also supported my efforts to establish credibility throughout the study.

Establishing Validity

The motive of this research study was one of inquiry, rather than internal and external validity (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). Representative of an ethnographic study, variables are not germane. Instead I was interested in describing the cultures of the classroom and learning what it is like to be a member of the group from the children's perspectives. I was not attempting to identify cause-and-effect relationships or generalizability. I wanted to document "particularistic" findings (Johnson & Christensen, 2004) within the life of a specific classroom with a specific group of children.

Documentation played an essential role in the research process. It was my goal to document the shared attitudes, values, norms, practices, and patterns of interaction, perspectives, and language of the classroom. At any given time within a classroom, the teacher and the child will form different perceptions about what has happened. Threats of validity are not typically present in the daily life of a classroom. Usually, the relationship between the teacher and student is one of authority. In a democratic classroom the teacher makes an attempt to involve the students by making them responsible for their learning. In either case, validity is not an issue. By focusing on the interactions that existed within this particular classroom with this particular group of
children and by offering my interpretations of how a classroom event can unveil the complexity of cultures present within the classroom and the implications for teaching and learning, lead me closer to what Lincoln and Guba (2000), as well as other qualitative researchers (Graue & Walsh, 1998) define as an ethical relationship. It is critical that "...the way in which we know is most assuredly tied up with both what we know and our relationships with those we study" (p. 182).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify a list of criteria for establishing validity within a study. Credibility, applicability, dependability, and confirmability are considered critical evaluators of data reports that are constructed in a particular context and told in a particular way. The credibility of my findings is based on what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call "trustworthiness."

**Trustworthiness.** Trustworthiness was established through activities within the field that decreased threats to the credibility of the study. I used a variety of strategies to strengthen the credibility of this study. These strategies include: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, negative case analysis, triangulation, referential adequacy, member checks, and peer debriefing. These strategies working together also reduced researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Often conceptualized as descriptive anthropology, I participated in an in-depth, prolonged involvement in the culture (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996; Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The ethnographic perspective supported my need to spend a long period of time in the field. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of classroom meetings, the construction of the school culture, the patterns of the peer culture, and the visible intersections made between them, the fieldwork continued over 27
weeks of the school year. Prolonged observations provided me with a new perspective of what daily life is like for the children in my classroom. Furthermore, it provided me the opportunity to observe changes that occur due to maturation. It was critical that I understand normative behavior for the given context, age, and developmental stage of the children in my classroom. Therefore, the children's behavior in the spring differed greatly from their behaviors observed when school first began in the fall.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that "...if prolonged engagement provides scope, persistent observation provides depth" (p. 304). Persistent observation was supported by daily audio recordings of classroom meetings, daily recordings of field notes, quarterly grounded surveys, as well as informal group interviews. Trustworthiness is threatened when there is a limited data collection. In their discussion about the essence of observation, Graue and Walsh (1998) state that observing "...is about beginning with the noticeable, that which the casual observer sees, and then going beyond that to which you weren't noticing, that which the casual observer misses" (p. 104). Erickson (1986) identifies that the goal of observation is to record the "concrete particulars" of everyday life. Therefore it was critical that I not only record my observations on a daily basis, but also that these observations be detailed descriptions of what the children say and do.

Negative case analysis offered strength to the study because it provided for disconfirming evidence. Erickson (1986) identifies "inadequate disconfirming evidence" as one of the five major types of problems that emerge at the stage of data analysis. Thus, negative case analysis enabled me to assure the reader that I had examined evidence beyond what supported my assumptions. I used negative case analysis when I examined a classroom meeting in which I dominated the discussion. I used this particular
meeting to identify why this occurred, how it impacted the children's roles, and how it affected the presence of the school and peer cultures. I also used negative case analysis when I discovered the dominance of objects reflecting personal achievements. Although this reflected Erikson's (1963) Stages of Development, very seldom would children verbalize their academic achievements. In chapter five I acknowledge the need for further investigation. In each instance, I examined a rare situation that did not support my developing assertions. However, by acknowledging these incidents, I was able to extend my own thinking and refine my assumptions.

Referential adequacy is the data that exists beyond the results. Qualitative researchers describe referential adequacy as "context rich, holistic materials that provide background meaning to support data analysis, interpretations, and audits" (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 139). By using audio and visual recordings as well as documented materials, like photographs and student's writing samples, the data I have collected represents referential adequacy. I was able to "test" my findings and interpretations against the artifacts that I gathered throughout my data collection.

In my efforts to take into account all of the complexities involved in the study I used member checks. A crucial technique for establishing credibility, these "checks" enabled me to have the children confirm the data. I specifically used grounded surveys, known as weekly reflections, and small group interviews as tools for member checks. By cross-checking my assumptions, I was able to strengthen the credibility of my assertions.

Another tool I used in my efforts to establish credibility was peer debriefing. For one week during the month of December and beginning on a daily basis following winter break, I had a student intern from The Ohio State University Master of Education
Program. The intern spent a week in December observing the daily life of the classroom and fulfilling coursework assignments addressing the context of the environment. He continued to observe throughout the entire second quarter. His observations provided me with additional insight about the daily interactions that occurred during classroom meetings. As the participant-observer, it was difficult to record detailed observations as they occurred because I had to also fulfill the role of the teacher. The intern and I openly shared our observations with one another and his insight would frequently fill the gaps I had found in my field notes. During the third quarter, the intern began taking more of an active role as the teacher and led several of our classroom meetings. Cautious of changes in the children's behaviors due to the shift in our roles, I had several opportunities to immerse myself in observation as he led the classroom meetings.

The structure of the school also supported my efforts to use peer debriefing. My classroom is one of four rooms located in an annex building detached from the main school building. In the annex, which we refer to as a pod, are all three Informal first and second grade teachers. Therefore, our proximity enhances our efforts to collaborate. On a daily basis, we communicated about the children within our classrooms and collaborated to plan integrated studies. On a daily basis, we regrouped our children in order to teach the math curriculum by grade level. At times, we mixed our children to encourage the development of new social relationships as they worked in different groups on special projects. Exchanging children fostered peer debriefing, especially as I identified emerging patterns within the peer culture, including children’s different social positions.

The practice of triangulation has a pivotal role in the credibility, dependability,
and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the data. Denzin (1978) identified three different types of triangulation: data triangulation, investigator triangulation, and methodological triangulation. Although I was not able to use other investigators, this study represents the use of multiple data sources and methods.

Different methods of data collection were used throughout this study on a daily basis. Observations, audio recordings, visual recordings, grounded surveys, small group interviews, and a collection of documentation that included photographs and children's work, were all used to generate the data corpus. These multiple sources of data supported my efforts to examine the many ways of understanding the children's interactions. Graue and Walsh (1998) state that "being there" in the field is not enough

...it is a big world out there, and the little parts of it chosen for study are extremely multifaceted and complex. Getting to understand them requires that one look carefully at them in many ways. Watching and taking notes is important, but there is more to life, even life as a researcher (p. 103).

Even the mundane event of a classroom meeting has the potential to portray the complexities involved in classroom interactions. It was through the practice of triangulation that I was able to establish a study of these complexities.

There are several other issues I had to confront that offered a threat to the trustworthiness of this study. These issues included voice, reflexivity, and researcher bias. Issues of who is being heard and who is being silenced evolve around voice. Identifying the issue and enacting methods to examine it increase the credibility of the study. As the researcher, I had to resolve the challenge of presenting myself while representing the children as I wrote about their encounters. Reflecting my pedagogical beliefs as a progressive educator, my methodology enabled the child's voice to be heard.
The transcriptions, journal writings, and images of objects shared all depict my efforts to interpret the children's interactions as they portrayed the construction of the school and peer cultures.

In order for my own voice to be credible, I had to be reflexive and critically examine my own role as a researcher in a context that reflects my theoretical perspectives. This issue can be identified through researcher bias. In their discussion on subjectivity, Graue and Walsh (1998) state

...whatever the researcher discovers about her own personal biases and personal relationships to those with whom she is working, she must also locate herself in the theoretical connections of her field to achieve what Strauss (1987, p. 12) calls 'informed theoretical sensitivity' (p. 126).

Bias is introduced into the data when one's own attitudes and beliefs surface in the field. It is not to say that I could ever free myself of my attitudes and beliefs. My own experiences, knowledge, and theoretical perspectives limit my ability to find "the truth."

In my efforts to establish my identity as a progressive educator, I must acknowledge how this impacts my role as a researcher and the specific context of an Informal classroom. Researcher bias tends to result from selective observation and selective recording of information. By audio recording every morning meeting, I tried to reduce the threat of being selective. Furthermore, a key strategy I used to support my understanding of researcher bias was reflexivity. By actively engaging in critical self-reflection of my own potential biases and predispositions, I was able to become more aware of my personal perspectives and I was able to monitor and control these biases. It is my best hope that my discussion surrounding the many voices found within the study will support my
efforts to make trustworthy the findings that I will now discuss.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Becoming an Informal Student, a Peer and a Citizen

The purpose of this study was to investigate within a primary classroom how classroom meetings can make children’s cultures visible. The central question that guided this study was: How do classroom meetings provide a window into children’s cultures? The findings are divided into three sections: the school culture, the peer culture, and the intersections that exist within them. Within each section, I investigate my sub-questions: (1) How is the classroom event of a meeting representative of the school culture and create a context for children to appropriate the student role within the school culture? (2) How is the classroom event of a meeting representative of the peer culture? (3) How does a classroom meeting provide space for the school culture and peer culture to intersect? (4) What are the educational possibilities that evolve from the intersection of these childhood cultures? (5) What role do classroom meetings have with the children’s academic and social development? (6) In what ways do classroom meetings support the larger pedagogical goals of a progressive education classroom?

As I create a lens for viewing how the distinct cultures are constructed within a classroom I have used many transcriptions, descriptions, photographs, charts, and tables.
to provide a clearer view into each of these worlds. I have adapted and used Maclure and Walker’s (2000) transcription method (Figure 4.1) for all of the transcriptions within this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>()</th>
<th>spoken, not audible</th>
<th>wh:::y</th>
<th>prolonged sound</th>
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<td>my description</td>
<td>why</td>
<td>emphasis</td>
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<td>[]</td>
<td>speaker overlaps</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>louder sound</td>
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<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>interrogative tone</td>
<td>ha ha</td>
<td>laughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3.0)</td>
<td>pause in seconds</td>
<td>(h) we</td>
<td>talk with laughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>()</td>
<td>small pause</td>
<td>^ no way</td>
<td>rising tone</td>
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</tbody>
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Figure 4.1: Transcription conventions (Malcure and Walker, 2000).

From a sociocultural framework, classrooms are social systems created through the interactions of the children and teachers and the children with each other. Children become students as they negotiate their roles, rights, obligations, intentions, and actions with their teachers. Becoming a student is an active process, both cognitively and behaviorally. It is the means for having a successful classroom experience (Corsaro, 1988; McMurray-Schwarz, 2003).

Through their own ethnographic studies, early childhood researchers (Fernie & Kantor, 2003; Goodenough, 1971; Green & Harker, 1982) have examined various elements of what Fernie et al. (1988) define as the school culture. Young children become young students who must respond to the demands of schooling. For instance, children’s communication skills and interaction skills must be expanded to negotiate play
and friendship in small and large group situations. Impulse controls, such as turn-taking and turn-waiting must also be developed. As children become socialized to the education setting, they appropriate the role of a student.

As a progressive educator teaching in an alternative program, I wanted to further investigate the elements of school culture as they are localized within the particular context of an Informal classroom. This study provides the opportunity for me to reveal how classroom meetings situated within an Informal pedagogy construct and reflect elements of the school culture. The school culture of this classroom, unique in its progressive ideals, represents the roles, norms, and rituals that must be learned in order to be an Informal student. The school culture further represents my own focal concerns as a progressive educator. Together, the detailed elements of these categories represent the school culture of an Informal classroom.

Intuitively, I have always felt that the classroom event called morning meeting plays a pivotal role in the Informal Pedagogy. In order to be successful in school, children must interpret much about the school and its demands, as well as experience the role of a student. The students’ role encompasses appropriate behavior, knowledge, and expectations that guide their participation in the academic and social life of the classroom (Fernie et al., 1988). The role of the student is communicated in subtle ways. In addition, morning meeting reflects the Deweyian notion of democratic living as the group experience puts demands on individuals within the class. In this sense, the morning meeting is also a vehicle for the democratic education that Dewey and progressive educators envision.
In the sections below morning meeting is examined and interpreted from the ethnographic perspective of classrooms as cultures. Spradley (1980) proposes a set of elements that are common across groups that construct culture as they interact over time: norms and expectations, roles and responsibilities, events, rituals and routines, a discourse/language system, and focal concerns and cultural themes. The particulars of each of these elements of course are constructed locally and hold local meanings. I used these categories of culture as my orienting theory and searched for evidence of the particular meanings that were constructed, shared, produced and reproduced by the members of this classroom. Below, these particulars are described.

Norms and Expectations

Through their ethnographic work in classrooms, Green and Harker (1982) have conceptualized teaching and learning as a communicative process. This framework shifts the focus of research from psychological variables to sociolinguistic variables related to the communicative participation of the individuals involved in the teaching and learning process. Children must learn the social norms for participation through the development of communicative competence.

The event of a classroom meeting exemplifies the construction of the school culture and also contains a set of norms and expectations of its own. These meetings are a requirement. Children do not have the opportunity to decide whether to attend one of these meetings. This truly reflects the demands of group organization, which makes life at school differ from life at home. Furthermore, it is not a social function organized by the children. Instead it is introduced to them as a school expectation that will occur daily throughout the school year.
Although the teacher may establish and communicate the norms and expectations that support the philosophical beliefs of progressive educators (Appendix A), these norms are negotiated and appropriated by the children throughout the school year. Classrooms are complex environments and children must develop the competencies of the school culture in order to successfully participate in distinctive classroom events, like the classroom meeting.

Teacher lore holds that it is critical that time is allotted for establishing the expectations and norms of the school culture within the first few weeks of the school year. The need to explicitly teach the norms decreases with time and norms and expectations shift over time as the children learn how to fulfill the role of Informal students and exert their own interests. Transcriptions from the first two days of school provide insight into how the teacher establishes these routines.

8.23
Me: First of all, welcome to our first morning meeting. We will normally have morning meeting, if you look at the clock right now it’s about 8:50, we will normally have morning meeting around this time so tomorrow morning when you come in there will be something for you to do before morning meeting begins. But I want to welcome you to our first morning meeting and thank you for sitting in a circle. (2.0)

Me: Thank you for sharing. You know what I love is that everyone I called on shared with a nice strong voice and I love that everyone else was listening...

8.24
Me: First of all I want to welcome everybody back! (2.0) Let’s make sure we have room on our circle for everyone. Eliot, can you take a scootch back so someone can sit between you and Seth or on the other side of you and Aaron. Somebody can sit by Carly. Anthony, Mike, and Jason, can you take one scootch back then maybe Ed can sit over there by you? Or maybe over here by Carly and Abby? Ricky needs a spot. Ed, how about over here by Carly and Abby? Okay? Or would you like to sit here in front of me?
First, I want to welcome everyone back. (3.0) You know, I was really impressed with the friends that came in this morning and read the morning message. I had some friends that said ‘Well, Miss Eirich, I can’t read that!’ and that’s okay if there’s some words that trick you ( ) but there will be some words that become familiar to you because I like to write repeated patterns. If you look at today’s message(4.0) Good morning friends!

Today is Wednesday, August 24th. Thanks for a great first day!

Today we will make more bubble discoveries. (3.0) ^ I want to thank everyone for following the directions that I wrote on the board and for being such responsible students.

((Eliot begins pounding on the bookshelf.))

Me: Eliot, that’s kind of hurting my ears. Please take your hands off that, I know it’s kind of tempting. (2.0) Thank you!

The Informal teacher views herself as a facilitator and participant. Although a norm may be established so that this event can become familiar to the children, there is no set format. These norms, established over and over again during the first weeks of school, establish directions for a group activity and require the teacher to set boundaries. Limits, set early on by the teacher, help in the creation of classroom rules. Social skills, intertwined with cognitive growth, must be modeled, experienced, practiced, extended, and refined and classroom meetings provide a forum in which all of this happens.

The social demands for successful group participation are exhibited when children attempt to access group discussion. Students are challenged when they attempt to gain access to the teacher or the group during a discussion that occurs at times other than their designated turn to talk. Green and Harker (1982) identify these attempts as “bids” for access. To gain a turn, the student must decide when, about what, and to whom they can talk. The child must read the demands and rules governing the participation as well as select an appropriate communicative behavior. The social norms
governing participation are constructed as part of the everyday interactions that occur within the classroom. They are products of social interactions.

One particular student, Ricky, had a very difficult time with accessing group discussion. On September 9th Ricky interrupted me six times, Lucy who was sharing the “Telling Tool Box” five times, and ten times during our sharing about our weekends. He had a total of 21 verbal interruptions in 19 minutes. It was the 13th day of school so I had modeled many times the norms and expectations as well as used posit reinforcement strategies to help the children understand what is expected of them as they fulfill the role of an Informal student. Figure 4.2 shows each of his unsuccessful “bids” for access to group discussion. When Ricky interrupted me, I chose to ignore him. However, when he interrupted the other students I used a variety of strategies to intervene.

Although many of Ricky’s unsuccessful bids may have been connections that he made to the common experiences he shared with his peers, Ricky had to learn when it was appropriate to share these connections. When there are 24 individuals it is only fair that I set boundaries. I finally sent Ricky out of group because my strategies were no longer effective. I had to let him know, as well as the entire group, that it was not okay to interrupt this many times. It was a signal to me that it was time for us to discuss, as a group, the behavior we expect from one another within our classroom community.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Student Interruption</th>
<th>Teacher Redirection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1:20</td>
<td>You mean 9 dash 9 dash 06?</td>
<td>(Ignore)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:20</td>
<td>What’s volunteer mean?</td>
<td>Thank you for asking but you are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:50</td>
<td>Morning recess?</td>
<td>(Ignore)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:16</td>
<td>Is that Pac Man? (referring to object on the easel)</td>
<td>Nonverbal cue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:30</td>
<td>Pipe cleaners won’t work!</td>
<td>(Ignore)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:11</td>
<td>Ha…ha…ha…</td>
<td>Nonverbal cue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:34</td>
<td>Is that made of yarn?</td>
<td>Please don’t interrupt the sharer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:50</td>
<td>Throw him up in the air!</td>
<td>Sh…sh…sh…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:28</td>
<td>‘And it’s real!</td>
<td>(Ignore)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:32</td>
<td>Lincoln Park? Whose that?</td>
<td>Ricky…please don’t interrupt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:50</td>
<td>Why can’t we listen to it?</td>
<td>Nonverbal cue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:17</td>
<td>My dad weighs a thousand pounds!</td>
<td>(Ignore)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:21</td>
<td>Yes he does!</td>
<td>Ricky!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:44</td>
<td>I know for sure he does!</td>
<td>Sh…sh…sh…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00</td>
<td>All picks are not plastic.</td>
<td>(Ignore)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:11</td>
<td>If they use foam, they die! (break)</td>
<td>I’m hearing Evan, thank you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14:30</td>
<td>Oh, you’re going to see Peter?</td>
<td>(Ignore)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15:04</td>
<td>Amanda who?</td>
<td>Ricky!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15:30</td>
<td>You’re going to St. Agatha?</td>
<td>This is Faith’s turn to share.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do you have to be in the same clothes as everybody else?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17:06</td>
<td>Do you know Peter?</td>
<td>(Ignore)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18:20</td>
<td>I’m going to church…(I redirect him.)</td>
<td>Thank you for listening to George.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18:50</td>
<td>With Peter?</td>
<td>(Ignore)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19:10</td>
<td>Ha…ha…ha…</td>
<td>Told to leave the meeting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.2: Ricky’s unsuccessful bids for access to group discussion during morning meeting on September 9, 2005.
Unsuccessful bidding attempts guided the formation of classroom norms and expectations. Norms count more than rules and children learn self-control because it is embedded within the community’s norm structure. Informal teachers do not view teaching as the transmission of knowledge. Therefore, the norms of the school culture had to be co-constructed by me and the students. It is much more empowering for children when the norms and expectations are co-constructed. At the beginning of our classroom meeting on September 14\textsuperscript{th} I read aloud the book, \textit{Lizzie’s Dos and Don’ts}. It is a story about a school-aged girl who gets in trouble by her parents. Unique to the story is how the author chose to lay out the book, with all of the don’ts at the beginning and all of the dos at the end. I decided to just read the story and provide the children with time to brainstorm with a partner a t-chart of dos and don’ts for our classroom. Figure 4.3 is the work of Ricky and his partner Evan.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
\hline
9-13-06 & \\
\hline
\textbf{Dos} & \textbf{Don’ts} \\
\hline
do nice things & don’t hit \\
do listen & don’t shout out \\
do walk & don’t run \\
do pay attention & don’t play with toys \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\begin{center}
Figure 4.3: List of Dos and Don’ts created by Ricky and Evan.
\end{center}
We regrouped and each pair shared several of their ideas. During our next classroom meeting we drafted our own dos and don’ts for the classroom. This was a negotiated process. Each pair read their list and we decided as a class which ideas should go on our chart of Dos and Don’ts. Our final list of Dos and Don’ts hung across from the easel, visible to everyone sitting in a classroom meeting (Figure 4.4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dos</th>
<th>Don’ts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>do nice things for others</td>
<td>don’t hit or push</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do listen with your whole body</td>
<td>don’t play with things in group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do sit up</td>
<td>don’t lay down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do ask to get drinks</td>
<td>don’t leave group without permission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do raise your hand</td>
<td>don’t interrupt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do wait to be called upon</td>
<td>don’t shout out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do talk with an inside voice</td>
<td>don’t yell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do leave toys in your locker</td>
<td>don’t bring toys to group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do look at the person talking</td>
<td>don’t put your head down</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.4: Final list of Dos and Don’ts generated by the entire class.

On October 26th I recorded the following reflection in my field notes.

Both Owen and Ricky are very verbal today. Their impulsivity is reflected through their frequent interruptions. I’m beginning to realize that Owen interrupts just as much as Ricky, however his interruptions are more like interjections. They are usually on topic, make sense, contribute to the group’s discussion, and occur after someone has spoken. Therefore, Owen has learned how to engage in social interactions with his peers. These interjections are tolerable because they represent beginning dialogue. He is sincere and often his comments are very dear.
Moments like this make you realize the demands I have placed upon these children.

Learning the roles and expectations of the Informal classroom is a negotiated process. A formal statement of speech-event structure not only strengthens our understanding of the event but also demonstrates our “communicative competence” (Cazden, 1988). This competence defines what a member of the group knows in order to successfully participate (Cazden). Learning how to listen to one another and when to speak in turn are demands placed upon the children as they participate in classroom meetings. According to Cazden, children’s communicative competence develops gradually over time. Children learn to speak within the structure established by the teacher. For example, Owen, a second year student in my classroom, has learned how to successfully participate in group conversations. Ricky, however, is a young first grader trying to figure out how he can share the personal connections he has with his peers. Ricky has the linguistic and cognitive skills to participate, but he has not learned the social. The lists of Dos and Don’ts served as a reference for redirection. Furthermore, the list was created by the children, demonstrating how progressive educators involve the children in constructing the norms and expectations of the classroom, and how the Informal classroom respects the voice of the child. The words in this list are those of the children, providing a more meaningful learning experience.

One of the ten foundational principles of the Informal Alternative Program is: to value ongoing reflection and self-evaluation by children and adults. As a progressive educator I constantly ask the children to reflect upon their learning experiences. Classroom meetings are no different. As I modeled the norms and expectations for our classroom meetings and the students experienced and practiced these norms, they were
responsible for evaluating their own efforts. Quarterly, the students completed a self-reflection specifically related to classroom meetings. The reflection from the first quarter reflects the dominance of the school culture in establishing classroom expectations.

Figure 4.5: Weekly Reflection from September 29, 2005.

The second Weekly Reflection (Figure 4.6) evolved from the interviews I conducted with two small focus groups: one of first graders and one of second graders. Topics that emerged from these interviews included: time of meeting, number of times we meet, sharing schedule, review of the day, calendar, weekend sharing, fairness, sitting in a circle, the appropriateness of certain topics, and feelings. From these topics I generated the ten questions. The second Weekly Reflection demonstrates the
developmental growth of the group. The reflection for the second quarter focuses less on norms and expectations and more on the influence of the children’s interests. These two reflections exhibit the shift from the dominance of the school culture at the beginning of the year to the influence of the peer culture as the year progresses.

![Image: My Weekly Reflection]

**My Weekly Reflection**

Name ___________________________  

| 1. | I like sitting in a circle for classroom meetings. | ☺ | ☺ | ☺ |
| 2. | It is important to have a classroom meeting every day. | ☺ | ☺ | ☺ |
| 3. | I like sharing about our weekends on Fridays and Mondays. | ☺ | ☺ | ☺ |
| 4. | I like that we have a sharing schedule for classroom meetings. | ☺ | ☺ | ☺ |
| 5. | It is important to share calendar during classroom meetings. | ☺ | ☺ | ☺ |
| 6. | It is important to review the daily schedule during classroom meetings. | ☺ | ☺ | ☺ |
| 7. | Some topics, like birthday parties, should not be talked about during a classroom meeting. | ☺ | ☺ | ☺ |
| 8. | I feel comfortable enough to share how I am feeling during classroom meetings. | ☺ | ☺ | ☺ |
| 9. | I like to participate during classroom meetings. | ☺ | ☺ | ☺ |
| 10. | If I was a teacher, I would have classroom meetings. | ☺ | ☺ | ☺ |

Figure 4.6: Weekly Reflection from January 20, 2006

**Rituals**

As the group learned the norms and expectations of the classroom, rituals began to develop. An integral part of classroom life, a ritual is a symbolic act that demonstrates one’s connections to a group (Peterson, 1992). According to Peterson, rituals provide teachers with order and meaning. They strengthen the ties of the group as the class
begins to form its community. Differing from norms and routines, rituals can be practiced by the individual or by the entire community. In both cases, they have a centering effect. Two of the rituals established within the first week of school in the Informal classroom are sitting in a circle and sharing.

*Sitting in a circle.* For the first 14 days of school, after greeting everyone, I would begin morning meeting by thanking the children for making good seating choices. At that point, I was less concerned about who everyone was sitting next to, and more concerned about the structure of the circle. Did everyone have room? Was the group in the shape of a circle? The circle provides the opportunity for everyone to be seen and for everyone to be heard. Each year I rearrange the classroom differently, so structurally, I needed to reassure myself that I had provided enough space in the front of the classroom for us to form all of our bodies into one circle. Thus far, it had been too early in the school year for me to determine who was capable of sitting next to each other in the circle. September 13th was the first day that I began to address this issue:

Me: Okay, can we form a nice circle? Look to the left and look to the right and ask yourself, am I making a good seating choice? I like where I see Seth sitting. Seth and Ed can you take three scootches back? Chase, can you take a scootch back? George, can you do me a favor and sit over here? Thank you! Come on over friends (4.0)^ Claire, are you looking for a spot? I see a nice spot here next to Lucy? Aaron, if that’s going to be a distraction for you, go ahead and move away from it. Push it back and then you can move back a little bit. I am going to look for David and Ricky to take a scootch back please. Thank you! Abby, can you take a scootch back and then Carly can sit next to you on the circle?

As I had done previously, I praised students that I saw making good seating choices and asked the class to be responsible enough to determine whether they could be
respectful where they had chosen to sit. However by the third week, I was able to recognize that several students needed my support and guidance. I purposely moved Seth, Ed, and Chase back away from each other. I asked George to move to the other side of the circle away from Ricky, and knowing that Claire was a model student, I prompted her to sit with Lucy. Aaron, playing with the knobs on the chart stand, needed his distraction removed from within his reach. David, as well as Ricky, was sitting too close to one another, bubbles waiting to burst. I asked Abby to move back only to provide room for Carly who was waiting anxiously, looking for a spot.

This was not our last discussion about seating choices. Throughout the entire year, on a daily basis, at the beginning of each meeting, I thanked those who were making good seating choices. It would have been very easy for me to have just assigned seats, however as an Informal teacher, I strive to guide child choice and decision-making, a Deweyian notion often demonstrated within democratic classrooms. This is one minor decision made throughout a child’s day, yet still teaches respect and responsibility. Whether it was stealing each other’s spots, sitting slouched against a bookshelf or wall, or the temptation of sitting next to a best friend, making a good seating choice had to be learned by these six, seven, and eight year old children.

As relationships developed and friendships formed, sitting in a circle remained a norm of the school culture, however each child’s seating arrangement emerged as a focal concern of the peer culture. Later in this chapter I will address the restraints placed upon the peer culture by the school culture. One of these restraints is the configuration of the circle. The circle only permits a child to sit with a friend on his or her left or right. There is no one sitting in front of or behind the child. Furthermore, the structure of the circle
enables everyone to make eye contact with one another. Nonverbal cues, including the glances amongst eyes, are easily visible by everyone in the circle. The circle is a ritual symbolizing the unity of the classroom community. It offers a sense of belonging, an identity with a group. Everyone is included within the circle and the events that take place while sitting in this configuration form a rich historical background. The experiences that occur are unique to the children living them, and together, the students create a collection of shared history that distinguishes this classroom community from any other. Aligned with Paley’s (1990) vision of storytellers as “culture builders,” the sharing that took place while sitting in a circle reflected another ritual of this group.

Sharing. The participation structure of sharing time involves the teacher calling on children to speak, sharers coming in front of the group, and the sharing of a narrative followed by the teacher’s comments. The structure may vary from classroom to classroom depending on whether other children are invited to comment or ask questions and if there are limitations on topics or routines. Therefore, sharing is a true speech event with consistent routines for participation established by the participants within each classroom. This ritual is of special interests to early childhood researchers for several reasons: it may be the only time children are given time to construct their own oral texts, it may be the only time children are able to share out of school experiences, and it is of interests for its production of narratives of personal experience (Cazden, 1988).

The most common pattern of classroom discourse in most traditional classrooms is teacher initiation, student response, and teacher evaluation (IRE) (Cazden, 1988). Most analyses of classroom discourse are analyses of this one speech event. Informal classrooms, however, value the social interactions that take place amongst children.
Therefore, different patterns of teacher-student interaction do occur and these small changes have considerable cognitive and social significance. Just like the norms of the classroom, the rituals of sharing are established as participants model successful communicative competence (Cazden).

On the very first day of school I modeled my sharing of our class “Telling Tool Box.” This tool box served as a metaphor in our first attempts of establishing a classroom community. In the tool box, I brought personal items from home: my favorite cookbook, my scarlet and gray pom-pom, a postcard from last summer, and photographs of my family and pets. I modeled an introduction of myself by sharing each item. I talked about why I chose to bring it and how it represents me. At the end of my share, I asked if anyone had questions or comments. By “thinking aloud,” I explained that I would call on two boys and two girls because I wanted to be a fair person. At the end of my sharing, I chose a child’s name and passed the empty tool box on for the next day’s sharing. The sharing of objects that were familiar to the child established our ritual of classroom sharing.

8.23
Me: …And I want to share with you that today for morning meeting I am going to share with you the Telling Tool Box( ) That will be our item that goes home with somebody new this evening and somebody will get to take that home with them and then they will get to share tomorrow. I’m going to ask that if you have a question while I’m sharing that you could wait until the very end and raise your hand. I am going to call on one boy and one girl just to be fair. So think about your questions.

Me: So in the tool box for to:::day…
Mike: [A flower?
Eliot: What’s that?]
Me: ^Oh, thanks for listening. Whenever it’s your time to share, you want everyone to be respectful of you.
For the next 22 days, children took turns sharing items they had brought in the Telling Tool Box. For some children this was an easier task because they were sharing familiar, concrete objects. However, for other children, like Aaron, his nervousness was reflected through his silly behavior. With my support, he successfully shared his objects.

8.29
Me: I’m going to have Aaron sit in the chair with a real strong voice and Rees, you may want to turn around so you can see better? (5.0)…real strong voice Aaron, okay? (Aaron nods…(5.0))
Aaron: (h) This afternoon you can touch the trophy…)
Me: ^Okay…can you use first grade voice and tell us what that is? Real strong voice because it’s hard for us to hear back hear, okay?”
Aaron: Okay, well, I got this from Indian Guides because we were doing a paper airplane contest from this tower at the bottom and I got farthest distance in the whole entire Scioto longhouse.”
Ricky: [No, someone else did, they got it!]
Aaron: NO, not uh!
Ricky: [They got it all the way down.]
Me: Um, I believe this is Aaron’s share…Thank you Ricky!
Aaron: (That was probably a different tribe.)
Me: Okay, thank you for sharing!
((There is a long pause as he shuffles through the tool box determining what to share next.))
Me: I love that everyone’s being such great listeners!
((As he shuffles items around in the tool box; Aaron begins to make silly noises.))
Me: Okay, try not to be silly because we’re all just waiting patiently. Tell us what it is...
Aaron: (h) It’s a bionical.
Me: What is it? I don’t know what that is? What’s that mean?
Aaron: It’s a name for a toy. And this is its helmet.
Me: Tell us why you chose to bring that in the Telling Tool Box.
Aaron: ((h) I have a lot of them!)
Me: Aaron, you have a lot of them in your toy box at home?
Aaron: Yeah! I have a big tub of them!
Me: Okay, you can just sit him behind you on the chair, if you want. Now remember, a really strong voice please.
Through my explicit language, I strived to create a high level of respect between the sharer and the listener. Ricky was adamant that Aaron’s paper airplane did not win first place for the entire tribe, however I wanted to make it clear to Ricky that in any circumstance it is rude to interrupt a sharer. Furthermore, specifically with Aaron, I had to prompt his share by providing him questions that elicited a response. His silliness stemmed from him being nervous. Sharing a concrete object is much easier than sharing a story from memory. By asking him questions about the objects, Aaron was able to respond and provide the whole group with more information about his toys and himself as a person. During his transition of sharing one object and then another, I thanked the group for being respectful listeners. Acknowledging children’s efforts to be respectful toward one another is essential when attempting to establish a community of learners. Patterns of positive social interactions helped the class to establish sharing as a ritual.

On the same day of Aaron’s share, I introduced sharing about our weekends. I explained how we would share and then asked several second graders to lead our sharing.

8.29
Me: Something that we normally do on Monday mornings in morning meeting is we allow each one of us to go around and share something about the weekend so we’re going to go ahead and start that today. (2.0) We try to keep it to a one-liner, which means you may have had three or four exciting things that you did this weekend but we’re going to ask that you just share one and that you share just in a sentence. (2.0) So who would like to start us this morning? (5.0) How about a second grader whom has done this before and can model it for us? Seth will start then Anthony and then Carly?

Seth: Um ( ) I went to the Titanic exhibit at COSi.
Me: So you saw the Titanic exhibit?
Seth: Yeah!
Ricky: [Oh cool! I saw that, too!]
Me: Anthony?
Anthony: Um, I, um, went to a pool party.
Me: Carly?
Carly: I saw *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

For the first several Mondays of the year, I provided support throughout this sharing. In the transcription above, after each child shared a sentence, I called upon the next sharer. I wanted to help the children establish understanding of knowing when the next person should begin speaking. Often within the school culture, children learn to raise their hands in order to be called upon. During this specific event within the classroom meeting, the children are learning to take turns at speaking. In learning how to become an Informal student, children must gain the cultural knowledge necessary to be a successful participant. This could not be learned, however, without addressing the interruptions that occur when someone interjects with a comment, question, or their own personal connection.

8.25
Me: Raise your hand, ( ) please no comments,( ) raise your hand if you brought a tool from home. (2.0) Okay, thank you!”
Ricky: [I forgot!]
Me: Oh, thanks for not shouting out!
((Maria is sharing the Telling Tool Box.))
Me: ^Oh Maria, please don’t start until everyone has their eyes on you. Let’s be respectful of the sharer please.
(10.0) ((Maria waits and then proceeds to get out her first item from the tool box.))
Ricky: [HAAH!]
Me: (Sh, sh, sh, sh…thanks for being respectful.)
Maria: This is my locket from the beach and I picked it up and kept it. I found it in Florida.
Ricky: [Did you have to dig?]
Me: Oh, I love how we’re going to raise our hands for questions at the end. Thank you.]
((Maria proceeds to share stones she has collected.))
Ricky: [WHOA! It looks like sand. Was that one hard to find? Was it in the sand?]
Me: (Ricky, you need to raise your hand. It is rude to shout out like that!)
(Maria proceeds to respond to his question as she moves on to her next item and Ricky interjects again.)

Ricky: [Are they crayons?]
Me: (They are melted crayons.)
(Maria shares several photographs.)

Maria: This is a picture of our favorite gingerbread house. This is mine and (h) I ate the whole thing by myself.

Ricky: [HAH! You ate the whole thing?]
((Ricky is ignored by Maria and everyone else sitting around him.))

Maria: This is a picture of our favorite gingerbread house. This is mine and (h) I ate the whole thing by myself.

Ricky: [Standing on a gorilla?]
Me: (It’s the statue of a gorilla.)

Maria: This is a picture of me playing with my friend from last year. And this is a CD I brought. I would like to play it today. My favorite song is number nine. And this is my special bunny that my neighbor gave me ( ) at Easter. And you can you put this outfit around her neck or waist as a dress. And that’s it, do you have any questions?
Me: Wow! Look at those nice hands! Do you want to call on a friend that’s being patient?”

Similar to figure 4.2, this transcription reveals Ricky’s attempts to participate within the group discussion. His contributions are overshadowed by perceptions of his communication as interruptions. I used several techniques to redirect him in my own effort to “scaffold” (Cazden, 1988) his communicative competence. In order for Ricky to achieve socially competent behavior, he needs to develop an awareness of the cultural patterns of the group as they are being constructed. These social strategies are context-specific and contain the cultural knowledge of the group. Rituals are patterns of behavior, therefore, sharing involves interactions that become patterned and frame the expectations of the group.

Cultural Roles in the Classroom: The Role of the Inquirer
The event of a classroom meeting has a significant impact on the Informal pedagogy because it supports the child’s role as an inquirer. The fourth foundational principle of the Informal Program is to: *Use time and space in a flexible manner to maximize student opportunities for in-depth inquiry.* Space flexibility is represented throughout classrooms that are designed to offer children multiple areas in which to work. Through a combination of carpet meeting areas and various table arrangements, children and teachers select different spaces to meet different needs throughout the day. Furthermore, the program values the opportunity to use time in flexible ways. Although the teachers create an organizational framework for meeting the needs of a typical day, the planned schedule is adapted on a daily basis to meet the unique needs of each class of children. If a group discussion is generating strong interest and involvement from the class as a whole, the teacher will extend the discussion beyond the planned time. Teachers’ decisions about time allocations, therefore, are based upon their ongoing observations of children’s interests and the working patterns that are exhibited during the course of a day.

The overarching educational commitment is to engage children in constructive and purposeful intellectual tasks. Informal teachers know that this kind of sustained involvement requires continuities in a school day and the flexibility to respond to children and the tasks before them. Vivian Paley (1984, 1992, 2004), educational researcher and kindergarten teacher at the Chicago Lab School, emphasizes the value of time when providing children with the opportunity to play. She states, “Good play and the sort of talk that follows take time and deep thought. There are no shortcuts” (2004, p. 22). The talk that follows play often involves in-depth inquiry.
Although the word inquiry has many definitions, most often it is referred to in regards to questioning. Acts of inquiry, however, are more than just questions. According to children’s researcher Judith Lindfors (1999), an inquiry is a “language act in which one attempts to elicit another’s help in going beyond his or her own present understanding (p. ix).” People explore their worlds through various means. One of those means is the intentional engagement of another individual to assist with their own attempts to create understanding. Children’s acts of inquiry provide a “window into their thinking” and enable us to have a glimpse of what they are making sense of and how they are doing it. These acts of inquiry support the development of a child’s understanding in addition to how they use others to help them understand (Lindfors).

On the first day of school at our very first morning meeting, I explicitly shared with the children the norms and expectations of a classroom meeting. After I modeled for the children the sharing of our Telling Tool Box, I informed the children that I was going to call upon them for questions or comments. After the first two students shared personal connections they had with the objects, I attempted to clarify the difference between a personal connection and a question.

Me: Thank you for sharing that. Does anyone have a **question**, rather than a **comment**?

((I call upon Owen whom proceeds to share about a picture that his dad has from Holland of his uncle.))

Me: So you were making a connection to your family. Does anyone have a **question** about what I shared? I heard two great comments, but does anyone have a **question**? Eliot, do you have a question?”

Evan: (10.0) Why did you were those things around your neck? (referring to my tassels from my college graduation)

((After providing a response to Evan’s question, I praise him.))

Me: ^Great question Eliot!
Eliot’s long pause indicates the effort it takes for a child to formulate a question. It is a difficult task, yet from the beginning of the year, I wanted to teach the children the differences between their personal connections and inquiries in regards to what was shared. During the second quarter, the need for understanding these differences still existed. On December 14th during morning meeting Carly shared a scrapbook that she had made at home.

Tiffany: Um, I got a scrapbook in Disney World and I’m going to bring it in on my share day. And the picture on the front kind of goes away and them comes back.

Me: Does anyone have a question for Carly?

Ed: I like um…your pictures!

Me: Oh, but a question may begin with who, what, when, where, or why, or it is a statement that requires a response. I like your compliment, that’s nice, but a question is different. Does someone have a question for Carly?”

((Carly proceeds to call upon Maria and Aaron who both asks information-seeking questions.))

Maria: What’s your sister’s name?

Aaron: Where did you get your scrapbook?

On a Monday morning during that same quarter, Mike shared a picture of a model NASA space shuttle he visited on his weekend trip to Alabama. After sharing the picture, Mike asked the group if anyone had questions or comments.

Ricky: Is it at NASA?

((Mike continues to explain that he saw it in Tennessee.))

Aaron: Was it like, in, like, in where the Tennessee Titans are?

((Mike explains that he was driving through Tennessee.))

Lucy: I’ve been to Tennessee before, too. Did you see, were you at, did you see the NASA place?

((Mike responds that he’s unsure where it was or it was at NASA.))

Me: Does anyone have a question for Mike? Let’s just take questions instead of comments?

((Mike calls upon George who explains how he took a picture of a rocket that looks similar to the one Max brought in when he was in San Diego.))
Me: So you’re making a connection. Okay, that was a comment. Does anyone have a question? Rees, do you have a question?
Rees: Yeah…did you see any astronauts?
Mike: No.
Me: That was a great question! Claire, do you have a question?
Claire: Yeah, I used to see that when I was there.
Me: Okay, that’s a comment. Does anyone have a question? Evan?
Evan: What did it have on the uh, side of the rocket? ((Mike attempts to explain that it was just a rocket but it was really big and in the air so hard to see what was on the sides.))
Maria: Can I do a comment?
Faith: I have a comment, too!

Both girls knew that Mike was finished taking questions, however they wanted to share personal connections they had made with his picture. Their statements represented their beginning understanding of the differences between these connections and an information-seeking question that poses a response.

Using the language of the classroom: Interrogative questions. Classroom meetings provide a forum for in-depth inquiry. Most inquiry is not exhibited through interrogatives. “Inquiry is as much as a social act as it is an intellectual one” (Lindfors, p. 2, 1999). An interrogative does not seek further understanding from another individual. Instead, it is a skill that practices the use of who, what, when, where, and why. An interrogative is a specific type of sentence or grammatical structure; however an inquiry is an utterance within a conversation. Inquiry acts are those language acts that have a purpose of engaging another individual in one’s attempt to understand. The purpose of the text in which an inquiry is embedded is to understand something, reflect on something, and to figure something out with the help of one or more other individuals. According to Lindfors, there are two types of inquiry: information-seeking and wondering. Neither of these types of inquiries suggests that an inquiry must be in
question form. These two types of inquiries do not announce themselves with question words.

Information-seeking utterances include clarifications, justifications, explanations, and confirmations. A key aspect of these utterances is that they work toward the goal of understanding. The utterances have a goal of discovering what one wants to know. The information gathered from the speaker is integrated and connected to a larger piece of knowledge. Although many utterances are expressed in question form, we cannot confuse these utterances with interrogative sentences. Often, speakers use interrogatives to do information-seeking work. But it is the work being done and not the form being used to do it that distinguishes an utterance as information-seeking. There is closure once the work is done.

September 15th was our first class field trip. We were going with the other first and second grade classrooms to an apple orchard. Below is an excerpt of our morning meeting, exhibiting interrogative questions that do not represent further understanding from another person.

Seth: What kind of bus are we taking?
Anthony: What’s the thermometer for?
Eliot: Why is the timer on?
Maria: Um…are we going to go back to the apple orchard in October?
Chase: Can we bring our backpacks on the bus? What if we get bored on the bus and we have a Game Boy in our backpack?
George: What if my nametag keeps falling off?
Seth: How many classes are going on to be on the buses?

As listed here, these are sentences, not utterances, for they are not occurring in a real conversation. And even if they were part of a group conversation, they still are not considered inquiry utterances because they are not seeking a partner’s help in
understanding anything. Inquiry emerges when children are engaged in classroom discussions that have captivated their interests and stirred their curiosity. Canonical interrogative forms do underlie information-seeking acts of inquiry, therefore, the second type of inquiry, acts of wondering, often go unnoticed for they are difficult to hear (Lindfors, 1999).

Information-seeking acts have a goal of completion where as wondering utterances attempt to maintain an open discourse. Acts of wondering entertain the possibilities that exist and have a goal of engagement in the process. These acts encourage reflection and interpretation where certainties do not exist. Lindfors (1999) makes a clear distinction. “A wondering utterance says to the partner, ‘Consider the possibility;’ an information-seeking utterance says, ‘Tell me X’” (p. 41).

Throughout our classroom meetings, the ritual of sharing served as a catalyst for the development of the students acts of inquiry. Inquiry emerged when children became engaged in classroom discussions that captivated their interests and stirred their curiosity. Classroom meetings provided the space for us as a group to construct these discussions. The Informal pedagogy supports making time for these discussions as teachers listen to the individual interests of children and witness Bakhtin’s (1986) dialogic vision of language. Inquiry acts are social acts and the school culture of an Informal classroom fosters these forms of expression.

When Maria chose to share her baby cousin on her sharing day, Ricky posed several information-seeking questions about the toddler’s interest in our digital recorder. The other students attempted to provide a response to Ricky that would satisfy his inquiry.
Ricky: Why was she trying to grab the recorder? What was she going to do with the recorder? What would she do Maggie with the recorder? Throw it?

George: [Actually little babies like how shiny they are…
Owen: Sometimes babies…they like to put things in their mouths…
George: My sister get something and every time she falls asleep my mom tries to take it from her and she just screams her head off!]

At the beginning of January, Claire asked permission to bring her guinea pig on her sharing day. She began with a silly voice, briefly shared a few facts, and ended with “…and THAT’S ALL I KNOW!” Meanwhile, the room was silent, all eyes were on the living creature she was holding and there were hands in the air everywhere. As hands shot up in the air, Claire began to call upon her classmates for questions and/or comments.

Seth: [Which pet store?
Lucy: Did you get her at Pet Supplies Plus?
Zach: I used to have two guinea pigs but I gave them away about a month ago…and my dog’s middle name is Daisy.
Anthony: That’s not a question!
Ed: Will she have babies or no?]
Claire: She doesn’t have any babies.
Ed: But will she have babies at once, maybe?
Claire: I don’t know…
Jason: [You have to be married to have babies.]
Ed: OH! (Now I get it!)
Hope: How big was she when she got her?
((Claire responds by explaining that she had another guinea pig before Daisy but she had a bad paw and died so that’s when she got Daisy.))
Ricky: (You like her better?)
Jason: How long have you had her?
Claire: Um…I don’t know, for a thousand years…I can’t remember!
Owen: Did you bury the other one that died? How old were you? When you buried her?
Claire: How old was I when I buried her? Not when she died, I don’t know!

Throughout the two transcriptions, children are participating in acts of inquiry that
are both information-seeking and wondering. The dialogue represents collaborative inquiry. Acts of inquiry require response and the active participation of another is encouraged through exploratory discourse. Informal classrooms support emergent inquiry as children are encouraged to participate together with others in the forum of classroom meetings. The Informal classroom is a social place, a place where interactions are valued, not simply tolerated. Modeling for children that we are all a learning resource for one another establishes a classroom community that values shared understanding. Creating democratic classroom communities that are safe and trusting, that value the connections children make with one another, and that have high expectations for active listening provide the context to support children’s inquiry.

Establishing language routines: Morning message. I used morning message during classroom meeting to encourage inquiry. I view it is my role as the teacher to extend children’s thinking beyond the interrogative to the use of inquiry that involves wondering (Lindfors, 1999). Throughout the year, different messages stimulated group discussion involving inquiry. On Election Day in November the morning message read:

*Good morning friends! Today is Tuesday, November 8, 2005 or 11-08-05. It is a short day because our school day ends at 11:05. It is also Election Day. Why is it important to vote?*

Throughout our conversation, the following inquiry emerged:

George: Um…yesterday I saw on the TV, that it has, it has issues from one, two three, four, and it says no, no, no, no…and it says issue one – no, issue two – no, issue three – no, and issue four - no…but before I saw issue one – yes, issue two – yes, issue three – yes, issue four – yes.

Abby: But how do you know what issue one is?

Ricky: How do they (the poll) know when they (the voter) raise their hand?

Lucy: I’ve seen one of those issue things…and it said vote yes on issue 12 to stop smoking. Actually didn’t they forbid that already and
make it a law?

It was clear to me that George was confused that some people are telling everyone to vote no on all of these issues whereas others are saying vote yes. This led us into a brief discussion about being informed as a voter. Abby’s question demonstrated how she needed further clarification about what an issue is, and how you become informed as a voter. Ricky’s frame of reference for voting is the voting that we do in our classroom. When we vote in our classroom, we close our eyes and raise our hands. Ricky is trying to understand how the poll records a voter’s decision if they are raising their hands. I attempt to explain that it is on paper and done privately in a booth. Lucy’s question was information-seeking as she tried to understand why an issue was on the ballot when it was already in effect.

On the morning of December 6, Aaron led us through the reading of the morning message:

*Good morning! Today is Tuesday, December 6, 2005 or 12-5-06. Happy St. Nicholas Day, the celebration of Santa. Today we are going to read and learn more about this celebration!*

After I shared some facts about Saint Nicholas, the following inquiry emerged:

Aaron: ((referring to a saint)) It’s someone, that is, like, special, and can never die, like St. Nicholas because he has to deliver presents to the children...because, um...well, it’s because, um, some saints can fly and stuff…”

Jason: Like, um, I think, they, like, um, they have to be a Christian, and Saints, like...oh, jeese, how do I explain it?

Owen: To be a saint is someone who gives out stuff.

Drew: [Like the Easter Bunny?]

((I proceed to share the legend of St. Nicholas giving gold to a poor man’s three daughters who were about to be married and that today is Santa’s birthday. I explain the traditions that take place in Europe on St. Nicholas Day.))

Ricky: [How did you go and end up living at the North Pole?]

Owen: So if he’s at cities he would be seen, but if he’s up there, no one
These discussions engage children in dialogue that supports their inquiry. Their questions may be interrogative, but they request more than a simple response. These questions represent children’s curiosity and their inner-most thinking. The discussions that take place within an Informal classroom originate from inquiry. Differentiated from conversations, chats, or stories, discussions are issue focused. The purpose is to hear as many ideas as possible regarding the topic with the expectation that one utterance will lead to another, resulting in deeper thinking. Lindfors (1999) states that discussions should: examine the human condition, bring more happiness to more children within the classroom, bring out individual points of views, and help gain knowledge or interesting ideas from one another. Progressive educators believe that children have a right to have their voices heard. Giving voice to children’s ideas encourages children to participate together in acts of inquiry. This participation occurs often during classroom meetings when morning messages end with inquiry.

*Classroom Discourse: The Changing Role of Children’s Language*

The study of classroom discourse is the study of that classroom’s communication system. Traditionally the most common method for analyzing classroom discourse has been to categorize teacher questions on a cognitive scale. Although this method may be heuristically useful for teachers, its challenges make it imprecise for research (Cazden, 1988). When cognition is viewed as having its origin in social interactions, teachers view
discourse as a scaffold. An analysis of social interactions demonstrates how children learn to self-regulate their talk following several months of modeling by the teacher.

The work of socioculturalist Lev Vygotsky (1978) and leading progressive reformer John Dewey (1938) demonstrates an overlap in the relevance each theorist places upon children’s self-regulation, as defined by Vygotsky, or social control, as defined by Dewey. In Vygotsky’s developmental theory (Moll, 1992), a child achieves self-regulatory capacities by actively manipulating the environment with the use of signs. This active manipulation of the environment leads ultimately to control of the child’s own behavior. The developmental progression for gaining self-regulation is a social process, one that begins as an interpersonal process and becomes internalized as an intrapsychological function. One of the essential elements of development is the increasing ability of children to control and direct their own behavior, a mastery made possible by the development of new psychological forms and functions and by the use of signs in tools in this process. This supports Vygotsky’s theory that, at one point, children begin to use language not only to communicate but also to guide, plan, and monitor their activity.

Vygotsky’s (1978) notion of self-regulation connects to Dewey’s (1938) idea that one can have social control without a violation of freedom. Dewey used the example of children’s games. He stated that all games have rules and that these rules are standardized, however as long as the game goes on smoothly, the players do not feel that they are submitting to external imposition, but that they are playing the game. It is not the will or desire of one person that establishes order, but the moving spirit of the whole group. Although the control is social, individuals are parts of a community. Dewey used
this example to create an analogy between the game and the role of the teacher within the classroom. He stated “the primary source of social control resides in the very nature of the work done as a social enterprise in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute and to which all feel a responsibility” (p.56). Although each theorist use the terms to support a different aspect of learning, what is significant is that they both believe children are capable of reaching this internalized order. Vygotsky found it particularly relevant for the development of language while Dewey found it essential for establishing the overall learning environment.

In an Informal classroom, group meetings demonstrate how the level of children’s discourse shifts throughout the year from being disconnected and more individualized to more self-initiated and communal. An analysis of children’s talk demonstrates the independence children gain over the course of the year as they learn how to self-regulate their social interactions. Following this analysis, I suggest the potential cognitive benefits of the discourse that takes place amongst peers.

At the end of September Faith shared the Telling Tool Box. Inside the tool box Faith included her collection of seashells, sand dollars, shark teeth, a favorite stuffed animal, her Phantom hat, and a Disney project. While sharing about her love for the Phantom of the Opera, Faith warned the group that the show is an “adult movie” and proceeded to explain what violence means.

Faith: Some of you may not know what I’m about to share because it’s a grown-up movie. I like *Phantom of the Opera*. I can sing every word in it. It’s like a play, and there’s like a chandelier and there’s this guy that’s disformed… ((She really means deformed.))

Ricky: [What’s that mean?]

Faith: His face is all yucky.

Ricky: [You mean the mask is yucky?]

Faith: No, his whole face is disformed so he wears the mask to hide his
face…and um, there is two parts to it…and there is lots of singing and dancing. And some people might be scared of it because they have really, really loud music. The chandelier breaks into millions of pieces. There’s a lot of violence.

Ricky: [What’s violence?]
Faith: It means that they kill people but it’s okay, it’s just a show.

Furthermore, one morning in mid-October we had a group discussion about the harvest moon. Children were sharing their theories about the moon and its orange glow. As I posed additional questions, Owen raised his hand, and then remarked, “Come back because this is not about the moon.” I praised Owen for knowing when it is appropriate to talk about a topic. Meanwhile, Aaron interjected, “I can’t hear Owen because other kids are talking!”

Just within this small moment, there are two distinct examples of children’s self-direction. I was impressed that Owen was able to recognize the appropriate manner in which to enter a conversation. It is obvious that he can read as well as contribute to the cultural knowledge of the group. Furthermore, I chose to thank him aloud in front of the group to reinforce this notion for everyone else. Children do not come to school with all of the social skills they need to be successful in society. They construct and develop their social skills during classroom meetings. The context of the Informal classroom provides opportunities for children to initiate self-control. Aaron was able to identify why he could not hear Owen, and furthermore, he was engaged enough in the discussion to speak up and express his frustrations. He was concerned that he may miss what Owen was about to share and he articulated to others his desire for them to control their talking.

We had been observing the moon for nearly ten days when Ricky entered the room one morning anxious and excited to share his new space book. Finally during
morning meeting I provided him with the opportunity to share the book. As he began to share, everyone shifted to their knees so that they could see. George spoke out, “Raise your hand if you want to see!” After Ricky finished sharing his book, Tiffany informed the group about calendar. Ricky shouted out, “I can’t hear you!” and Evan asked her about having the correct amount of straws and money for the number of days we had been in school.

Again, just within a few verbal exchanges the children are supporting one another as they become responsible members of a classroom community. As a second grader, Evan supported Tiffany’s understanding of how to do calendar: assisting her with the adding of money and the positioning of straws for place value. Reflecting on Dewey’s (1916) vision of schools, Dewey was concerned that the institutions of the industrial society were destroying the communal basis of individual and group life. For Dewey, communication was an essential element of community and the industrial age was bringing about a Great Society that was not a community. In Dewey’s terms communication was the process of sharing an experience until it became a “common possession”. It was equivalent to participation, commonness, and the representation of shared beliefs. Communication provided the means for a democratic way of life. Dewey called for the transformation of the Great Society into a Great Community - a united nation with one culture; a great public of common understanding and knowledge – established by liberating communication and educating the public.

After lunch on that same day we regrouped for a brief afternoon meeting. Ricky immediately jumped up because I had told him that I would read aloud part of his book. He immediately took control of the conversation, asking his peers to vote on the topic
they would like me to read aloud. He stood by me the entire time, wanting to hold the book himself, flipping to the different sections as the students voted on their favorite. He counted the hands and announced the winner. I then read aloud the Saturn pages. As I was reading, Ricky interjected with facts he remembered from previous readings. He also self-corrected me when I was reading fact number five. Owen asked Ricky a question about going inside of the planet and Ricky provided an adequate response.

Ricky’s actions depicted how much he had grown as a student. Ricky modeled what I would do in our democratic classroom. He wanted to give choice so he informed his peers of their choices, asked them to vote, and counted their preferences. I view this experience as one child’s growth in becoming a more responsible learner and in understanding what it means to be an Informal student. He had developed cultural knowledge and not only successfully participated, but participated as the leader of the discussion.

On Monday mornings I routinely shared goals that I had developed for us to accomplish over the course of the week. One of those goals during the week of November 14th was the annual book fair. During announcements, Carly explained to the first graders more about the book fair and then Eliot, Aaron, Owen, Jason, and Carly all asked me questions about our browsing and buying times. Carly anxiously expressed her concern that her parents as well as other parents did not know about the book fair. I then explained that maybe we should write a letter home to our parents explaining that the book fair would be at our school for the next two weeks. Carly and her friend Rees volunteered to write the letter. The girls wrote the letter during writing workshop and approached an aide to copy it for them at recess. Later that afternoon, Carly and Rees
placed a copy of their letter in each child’s mailbox.

In many cases, during group meetings, children support one another as they learn more about the roles they are expected to fulfill as Informal students. Classroom meetings provide opportunities for valuable discussions about our classroom community. Whether the topic emerges from my own observations as the teacher, another adult’s insight, or that which is shared by the children, each of these conversations has a purpose of strengthening children’s self-direction.

On another morning in November our classroom meeting began as I addressed the issue of “stealing” spots during group. I had observed several incidents amongst the first grade boys where some of them were taking each other’s seats as they were trying to get settled on the perimeter of the circle for our classroom meetings. When Ricky got up to put away his stuffed animal, George immediately moved over to take his place. Ricky returned frustrated with George. Zach intervened, recommending that Ricky come sit by him. Ricky is only six years old, George is seven, and Zach has recently turned eight. This situation exemplifies the benefits of structuring Informal classrooms to have multi-age settings, where children of different age groups can learn together from one another. Just like Owen, Zach spent two years in my classroom. Although the dynamics of the group had changed, Zach entered second grade with knowledge of the cultural patterns existing within the school culture.

During the entire month of December Owen counted down the 18 days until his big sister flew home for the holiday break. When she was finally home all he could do to withhold his excitement was to bring her along with him to school. We met for morning meeting and Faith led us through the morning message. After I reviewed the daily
schedule, Aaron asked about the Christmas party, Ricky asked about Secret Santa presents, and Maria asked when we are going to go around and introduce ourselves to Owen’s sister. Owen introduced his sister before the rest of us shared with her a little more about ourselves. During this meeting, I was curious to observe how the students reacted to the visitor who was joining our group. Maria instantly felt the need for us to introduce ourselves. Owen thoroughly introduced her to us before each of us introduced ourselves. This is one of the many social situations that occur during a classroom meeting that not only teaches a child about being an Informal student, but also prepares the child to be a competent member of our society.

Dewey (1938) claimed that the prominent source of social control within the “new schools” resides in the work that has been completed as a social enterprise to which all individuals can contribute and feel responsible. In the classroom, democracy looks like students engaged in communal projects. The teacher exercises authority as a representative of the interests of the group as a whole. Generally, Dewey believes that the group will stay in control because of the social pressures of the group’s dynamics. With planning and organization, most discipline problems will be alleviated. Planning should be flexible enough to permit free play for individuality of experience, and firm enough to give direction. Therefore, education is viewed as a social process where interaction with others is essential (Dewey, 1958).

Social construction of conversation. Educational ethnographers Green and Harker (1982) conducted a microanalysis of the demands for participation and learning across classroom settings. Viewing teaching and learning as a communicative process requires an understanding of the nature of face to face behavior. Governed by rules,
Green and Harker state that conversations “…are constructed by people acting on and working with their own messages and behaviors and the messages and behaviors of others to reach communicative goals” (p. 190). They further add that these messages may be both verbal and nonverbal and that context is constructed as part of the process, contributing to the interpretation of its meaning. They note that conversations are not composed of random messages. Instead, messages are connected “…interactionally, socially, semantically, thematically, and pedagogically” (Green & Harker, p. 190). Conversations are dynamic as members negotiate the language structure, establish context, and construct a shared meaning. By participating in conversations and observing how others share meaning with one another, children are provided the opportunity to gain access to the cultural knowledge of the group, contributing to their overall social competence. In Green and Harker’s study they examined the communicative and social demands placed upon students as well as a comparison of teacher talk between two differing kindergarten classrooms.

My investigation of the dialogue that occurred daily during our classroom meetings focuses on how children construct shared meanings that then form the threads of conversation. Bloome and Egan-Robertson (1993) identify three types of social interactions that occur within classroom settings: teacher-class interaction, teacher-student interaction, and student-student interaction. I define a verbal exchange to encompass words and/or ideas verbally expressed between peers and adults during classroom meetings. The natural break between one individual’s thoughts and the beginning of another is what I consider a verbal exchange. Bloome and Egan-Robertson (1993) define these exchanges as individual message units. Therefore, each exchange
may include a different amount of words or ideas. Each unit includes a source (i.e. the speaker), a form (question, comment, response), and a function (i.e. requesting, agreeing/disagreeing).

As the participant observer, I first identified interactions of message units that related to one another as associations. Many of the verbal exchanges that occur throughout a classroom meeting may be influenced by the associations made between both the teacher’s and the students’ thoughts. As the researcher, I would like to clarify that I consider an association different from a response. A response answers a question where as an association provides a link between two ideas. Bloome and Egan-Robertson (1993) identify a group of interpersonally related message units (associations) as interactional units. Locating intertextuality requires attention to the context. Therefore, after reviewing all of my data, I found it necessary to divide patterns of interaction into more specific categories (Figure 4.7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher-to-Group</th>
<th>Teacher verbally addressing entire group during classroom meeting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-to-Group Association</td>
<td>Teacher verbally addressing entire group with an association from a previous verbal exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-to-Child</td>
<td>Teacher verbally addressing a specific child during classroom meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-to-Child Association</td>
<td>Teacher verbally addressing a specific child with an association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child’s Verbal Exchange</td>
<td>Child provides a verbal interaction during classroom meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child’s Verbal Exchange with an Association</td>
<td>Child provides a verbal interaction that originated as an association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-Child-Association</td>
<td>Child provides verbal interaction by creating an association with thoughts previously shared by another child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child-Teacher-Association</td>
<td>Child provides verbal interaction by creating an association with thoughts previously shared by the teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Classroom meetings foster children’s interactions with their peers. Many of the thoughts exchanged during these interactions originate from the associations children make with thoughts previously shared by other children. Figure 4.8 demonstrates the number of peer verbal exchanges found throughout one morning meeting. Although I may fulfill the role of the facilitator, the children had nearly 53% of the verbal exchanges within this classroom meeting. Over one third of the children’s 94 verbal exchanges were verbal interactions prompted by associations. Additionally, 87% of these associations were made when children made personal connections with their peers. This chart demonstrates how classroom meetings foster children’s interactions with their peers.

As early as September, I observed how children make connections with their peers. Each Monday and Friday during classroom meeting the group shared about our weekends. On the Tuesday following Labor Day weekend, I shared about going to Lake Erie. Owen, whom had asked us to come back, then shared about his trip to Cedar Point. Maria, whom also requested a come back, shared about going to Cleveland only after George shared about his trip to Cleveland. Already, I was beginning to see patterns between what children shared and the associations they made with their peers. As I observed patterns within the children’s sharing about their weekends, I noticed that the same topics repeated several times throughout the circle.

On September 30th I observed a similar pattern. As everyone shared their weekend plans, four children shared about playing soccer, five children shared about
Indian Guides/Princesses, and twelve students shared about a school sponsored fundraiser
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audio Tape Transcr. No.</th>
<th>Number of Total Verbal Exchanges</th>
<th>Number of Teacher’s Verbal Exchanges</th>
<th>Number of Children’s Verbal Exchanges</th>
<th>Children’s Verbal Exchanges Linked By Association</th>
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<td>177</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>94</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.8: Verbal exchanges from one classroom meeting.
being held on Saturday. Chase, Aaron, and Evan all requested a come back and then all three of the boys repeated one of these three events. When children make connections amongst each other, topics begin to repeat.

Furthermore, associations are more frequent when peers share back-to-back. For example, on September 19th Maria made an announcement about getting her foot stuck in her bike. Zach interjected, “I have a self-connection to Maria!” and he proceeded to share a similar story. During the same classroom meeting, five students shared about playing soccer, two sets of which were shared back-to-back. Furthermore, four students shared about going to grandmas and all four shares occurred during two separate back-to-back instances.

During a morning meeting early in October Maria made an announcement that she would be leaving two weeks from Thursday for her family’s annual Harvest Party in Michigan. I used the strategy of “thinking aloud” and shared my own personal connection that I had with Maria that I, too, was having a harvest party. My share served as a model for the other students. Making a personal connection with another individual provides a common thread for dialogue. The verbal exchanges that may result are threads of conversation. Bloome and Egan-Robertson (1993) identify these threads as interactional units. Identifying interactional units supports the social construction of intertextuality. Teaching children how to engage in these conversations is part of my role as an Informal teacher.

On November 7th I recorded that there were a lot of personal connections being made while other students shared, in addition to, traces of beginning conversation. For example, Abby shared about her body hurting and Owen asked, “Is this the 2nd time?”
Ricky asked Abby a question as well. Aaron, Mike, & Chase, all sitting together, shared the same topic with silliness in their voice. Then Eliot, Jason, and Seth continued to talk about a football game as they attempted to clarify their misunderstandings about the extra point. Ed followed by sharing about the same football game. Seth asked, “What’s his number?” referring to the football player. After Evan shared, Seth asked, “Did they win?” When Maria shared she was sick, Eliot theorized, “oh, because of the sun…” When Lucy shared about the fire alarm in her apt. building, Seth asked if the kids were arrested. Claire’s share closely resembled Rees’ share. George may have remembered his play date because his experience was similar to what Claire and Rees had shared. The personal connections children make with their peers, defined as interactional units, support their attempts to converse with one another. These conversations demonstrate how classroom meetings encourage the social construction of intertextuality. Making time for conversation and encouraging children to be social demonstrates how much I, as an Informal teacher, value supporting children’s social development.

In their educational study, Bloome and Roberston (1993) provide a microanalysis of how intertextuality is socially constructed during a classroom reading lesson. As they describe the intertextual process, Bloome and Egan-Robertson not only identify individual message units and interactional units, but also locate the proposed intertextuality, as well as its recognition and acknowledgement. Intertextual relationships have more than just meaning, there must be a social significance. As the researcher, I used my audio recordings to help distinguish between message units that I identified as associations and interactional units I identified as conversations.

It was during David’s share on September 22nd that I noted our first conversation
within a group meeting originating from children sharing their own associations. Meeting ended with David sharing a book he had created about Cedar Point. The book, with images of rides that David had printed off of the Internet, was a story about his adventures at the amusement park. I asked him to read the book to us, show us his writing, and to explain what had inspired him to write so much about this topic. As David shared his writing, the room was silent and all eyes were fixated upon the pictures he had found to illustrate his story. David also shared an “About the Author” page which he had written about himself. At the end of his share, Lucy and David continued to have their own personal conversation about the ride Max Air. I was struck by the level of vocabulary used by Lucy and David and their ability to remain on one topic through several verbal exchanges. At this point, it became evident to me that a class discussion evolves into conversation when the peer culture is more dominant than the school culture. These children did not need to raise their hands to speak, yet their dialogue depicted a set of verbal exchanges found within a conversation between two people.

On October 10th a similar situation occurred when Lucy ended our weekend sharing by telling us about her shopping spree at Target. Ricky immediately responded with a question about one of her purchases. She offered him a reply. These four lines of dialogue were traces to the beginning of a conversation. Ricky did not feel confined by the boundaries of the school culture. He did not raise his hand and he did not wait for Lucy to call upon him. Furthermore, no one else within the group, including myself as the teacher, interrupted him or Lucy as she replied to his question.

When Carly returned from a short family vacation to New York she was anxious to share her vacation journal. After she finished reading her entries, the entire class
clapped. She called upon Ed and Lucy who both shared personal connections with Carly. Ricky then asked Lucy a question and I intervened to help him understand that he was making a personal connection to Lucy, not the sharer, Carly. Carly then asked Lucy another question regarding her personal connection and Ricky’s question. These last four lines of dialogue provided a trace of how sharing during classroom meetings supports children’s social construction of intertextuality.

Classroom meetings are a forum where children are able to have conversations with one another. On our first day back from winter break, I made the decision to spend time after music sharing about our two week break. It was a routine that was interrupted that morning by our introductions to our new student and I knew that if we waited another day, some of the students’ thoughts may be forgotten. Eighteen of the 23 students shared about their holiday traditions of opening presents with their families. This was truly a special moment because as the children shared, one could sense the excitement they had felt on Christmas morning. When Zach retold what it was like for him when he woke up, it was as if it had just happened. He raised his voice, smiled from ear to ear, and talked quickly, eager to share his excitement with his peers. As Zach shared his story, Abby interjected, sharing in his excitement, retelling how her father made them count down the steps from atop the landing as they got closer and closer to the Christmas tree. The children’s memories came alive as they shared their stories. It was conversation that may never have happened if we did not make the time for it to occur. The cultural event of a classroom meeting fosters intertextual relationships children form with one another.

Conversations emerge as children make connections with one another. On
another day during classroom meeting, three separate times, children had brief conversations about a topic experienced by that small group of children. For example, Carly shared that she and her family went to the Kalahari Indoor Water Park. Owen and Abby immediately interjected asking Carly questions and sharing their own stories from their visit to this park. Furthermore, George shared about going to COSi. Owen and Zach both asked George questions as they were able to relate to his experience because of their own visit to the science museum. Zach and Owen become involved in a third conversation when Lucy shared about her trip to the Newport Aquarium. I noted, like other traces of conversation, this dialogue did not include the entire class, perhaps, because these small groups of peers were discussing a topic that everyone may not have experienced.

Using language to construct conversation, evoked by the sharing of similar experiences, occurred again the first week of December when Zach shared a book he had made at home (Figure 4.9). When it came time for Zach to share, Zach pulled from behind his back a book of pictures he had printed off of the Internet. He explained each picture as Eliot, Owen, and David commented on them. He asked the class questions, like, “Raise your hand if you have been to the Titanic exhibit at COSi.” As Zach shared his picture book, he, not I, facilitated the class discussion. David, Evan, Seth, Eliot, and Owen, all second grade boys, were the participants responding to the pictures.
Figure 4.9: Zach sharing his picture book and facilitating the discussion

They were having conversations, with interruptions accepted and comments shared. Hands were only raised when Zach “officially” asked, “Does anyone have any comments or questions?” Figure 4.10 illustrates how the number of children’s verbal exchanges per meeting continued to increase over the course of the school year. Furthermore, the length of time spent during classroom meetings increased as well. The average number of verbal exchanges per child per meeting nearly doubled from the first quarter to the third quarter.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>5 Day Span Within Quarter</th>
<th>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; Quarter</th>
<th>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; Quarter</th>
<th>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; Quarter</th>
</tr>
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<td>Avg. Length of Meeting</td>
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<td>Avg. # of Children’s Verbal Exchanges per Meeting</td>
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<td>Avg. # of Verbal Exchanges per Child</td>
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My analysis of the intertextual relationships that exist during classroom meetings as children share demonstrates how teachers and students can use intertextuality to define themselves and each other, to support the formation of social relationships, and to strengthen their ability to construct and maintain the use of language within the cultural ideology of classroom interaction. Within these contexts, children are provided the opportunity to practice constructing social events. They have the chance to extend their knowledge about the demands for participation within a conversation. The changes in expectations for participation in these contexts supports children’s communicative competence as they attempt to learn the how, when, and with whom to talk for what purpose (Green & Harker, 1982).

The role of intertextuality is discussed further when I investigate the intersections that exist between the peer and school cultures. The role of the active student within an informal classroom becomes more evident when, as the researcher, I examined a classroom meeting that was nearly 17 minutes in length, yet only three children spoke. Lucy led us through the morning message, Faith asked me about reading a holiday book to the class, and Carly expressed her concern about making a label for her parents’ present.

It was the last day before the winter break and it was an extremely busy morning, filled with tasks that needed to be accomplished before the afternoon holiday party. As I reread my field notes I quickly recognized how much I dominated the conversation.
There were tasks that needed to be completed and I was on a mission during this meeting to explain what had to be accomplished. What evolved from this were very few lines of teacher-to-child dialogue with no child-to-child interactions. The school culture dominated the meeting leaving little room for the peer culture to emerge. There was “no time” for sharing, therefore, only a handful of students spoke and their topics confined them to the boundaries of the school culture. A fourth tenet of the Informal Program is the use of time and space in a flexible manner to maximize student opportunities for in-depth inquiry. On this morning I was not flexible with our time, thus it became apparent that the environment did not support student-initiated conversations.

Fernie et al. (1988) contend that school cultures are “ubiquitous” (p. 137), for every classroom has a school culture. Spodek’s (1973) research supports this notion. His research revealed that all educational settings are unnatural or artificial. Classrooms have a school culture because of the demands of structuring a group setting and the broad mission common to educational institutions (Fernie et al.). School cultures are created by the participants within each classroom. This is made evident in an Informal classroom where the teacher has pedagogical beliefs (Appendix A) that differ from traditional schooling. Therefore, two classrooms within the same school may have the same administration, instructional materials, and parental pressures, yet have two distinct orientations. The school culture is co-constructed through the interaction of the teacher and students. In contrast to the typical elements within a child-dominated peer culture, school culture activities and events, routines, and concerns are impacted by the teachers. As a teacher within the Informal Program I strive to instill within my students the ideals of a democratic community where the child has individual rights and makes responsible
decisions about his or her learning.

*The Democratic Classroom: A Focal Concern*

Dewey (1938) believed it was of utmost importance to integrate democracy into every aspect of education. Most Americans spend a majority of their lives in the public school system, therefore they should be taught in a way that reinforces the democratic ideals by which this country professes to live. Instead of the authoritarian system of an all-knowing teacher and obedient pupils, a progressive educational system allows students say in what they are learning. Dewey reminds us that democracy isn’t passed down through generations; rather, it must be worked for constantly through education.

*Guiding child choice and decision making*, the ninth foundational principle of the Informal program, supports Dewey’s democratic ideals. According to Dewey (1938), the power of decision making lies in experiencing the consequences of the decision. This theoretical belief is put into practice during classroom meetings. Informal teachers recognize the important role of adult decisions for children along with the importance of children developing increasing control over their learning. During classroom meetings, many decisions are negotiated, voted upon, and involve thoughtful discussions as the teachers strive to create a democratic community of learners within their classrooms.

*Negotiation among diverse interests*. It was the second day of school. I explicitly introduced the routine of the morning message, as well as reviewed the daily schedule. As a class, the children negotiated where they would like to meet to be picked up for music after the lunch recess. As an Informal educator, I truly believe that children have the right to have a voice within the classroom. Students need to feel empowered in order to feel responsible for their learning. As teachers, we must listen and hear the voices of
I purposefully did not tell the children where we would meet without discussion because I wanted to have the children’s input. As an Informal teacher, I view myself as a mediator, supporting the children as they learn how to negotiate decisions. The children are the ones that are playing on the playground, therefore, they are the ones that know our best options. These moments require flexibility, both from the student and the teacher.

The following day during morning meeting I explained to the children that one of their classmates, Ed, had suffered a concussion. I attempted to explain the injuries and the students immediately began to share ideas for what they could do to comfort their classmate. I then asked the class (6:29) if they would be willing to put their summer memory project on hold for a day to make cards for Ed. It was not necessary to take a vote, for it was unanimous that everyone agreed with the change in our daily schedule.

Negotiation occurred again when there became a need for a sharing schedule. On September 29th during morning meeting I asked the students for input on establishing a routine for sharing (10:10). Rees immediately suggested that we vote. I explained to
Rees that if we do decide to vote, we need to first hear ideas that we may decide to vote upon. Maria offered the idea that everyone shares on Friday. Abby suggested signing up for sharing days, most similar to our routine from last year. Evan thought we should draw popsicle sticks and Eliot offered the idea of writing it down. Chase then posed the question, “What if you don’t have anything to share?” Owen interjected, expressing frustration that his idea was too difficult for anyone to understand, while Carly attempted to explain a routine she remembered from preschool. David suggested going alphabetically down our name chart and Jason offered the idea of drawing names from a basket. Rather than hurrying our discussion, I informed the group that I would like for them to think about all of the ideas they have heard so that we may make a decision the next time we meet. I marked in my field notes that this was one of our very first open-ended discussions during a classroom meeting.

These discussions represent democracy within schools. In this last example the issue of having 22 students share on a weekly basis was decided by not just the teacher, but the entire classroom community. There are three aspects to Dewey’s (1916) philosophy of democracy: democracy as the protection of popular interests; democracy as social inquiry; and democracy as the expression of individuality. Dewey viewed democracy as a form of social inquiry because he believed discussion was the best way to deal with the conflict of interests within a community. “The method of democracy – in as far as it is that of organized intelligence – is to bring these conflicts out into the open where their special claims can be discussed and judged in the light of more inclusive interests than are represented by either of them separately” (Dewey, 1991, p 56). Democratic societies are thought of as seeking to attain desirable goals, arguing over how
to do so, as well as arguing over what a desirable goal is. In other words, democratic politics is not simply a channel through which we can assert our interests (as it is for the first argument), but a forum or mode of activity in which we can arrive at a conception of what our interests are. In the Informal classroom, morning meetings serve as a forum for these discussions as we collectively negotiate our interests and in the following example, our social conflicts.

It was mid-October and Anthony came in from lunch recess extremely upset because an aide had made him throw the walnuts that he had collected into the trash can located outside on the playground. I rephrased Anthony’s thoughts so that I could have a clearer understanding of his feelings. Evan and Owen interjected, and attempted to explain that the third, fourth, and fifth graders were having a war with the walnuts. They defended Anthony, explaining that he was not part of the war. George interjected, expressing how he was nearly hit in the head with a walnut. Owen added, “I saw Anthony do all of this hard work and now I feel bad for him…it’s not fair!” I, in turn, asked the class how they think I should handle the situation. Jason explained that Anthony was never planning to throw the walnuts, just collect them. Owen stated that he didn’t think Anthony should miss his recess because of this incident. I interject, “Are you going to miss a recess?” Anthony responded, “Yes, I did, because they (the aides on duty) wasted my time!” Faith provided a role play of how she thought the aides should have handled the situation. I assured Anthony that I would speak to the aides about reaching a negotiation so that he may possibly be able to keep his walnuts.

Child choice and decision making reminds us of the history of the Progressive Movement: to find a resolution to the troubles of society through the practice of the
schools. Dewey advocated for a reconfiguration of the schools to be more like
democratic communities. This discussion depicts my attempts to create a democracy
within the classroom. I wanted Anthony to know that within this democratic classroom
he has rights. Furthermore, I wanted him and his peers to know that their voices should
and would be heard. Evan and Owen’s defense of Anthony reflected the strength of the
peer culture and their understanding of what is right versus wrong in a democratic
system. The actions of the aides depicted the clash between what progressive educators
attempt to achieve and the harsh reality of traditional schooling.

\textit{Voting.} According to Dewey (1916), democracy involves the expression of
interests on the part of voters; the vote helps to protect individuals from putative experts
about where the interests of people lie. A class of experts will inevitably slide into a class
whose interests diverge from those of the rest and becomes a committee of oligarchs.
Voting involves a consultation or discussion which concerns the social needs of the issue
at hand. Dewey stresses the importance of discussion, consultation, persuasion and
debate in democratic decision-making. These processes extend and deepen the
participants’ awareness of the problems under discussion, and help to inform the
“authoritarian” of social needs.

Election Day serves as an authentic opportunity for group discussions about the
process of voting. At the end of the morning message on that day I posed the question,
“Why is it important to vote?” and “What’s an election?” Children began to offer their
ideas: David shared about picking a president, Seth suggested city council, Faith offered
the position of mayor, and Aaron briefly mentioned judges. I interjected to explain that
we often vote on issues rather than to just select individuals for office. After a brief
discussion about who is allowed to vote, I then rephrased my original question, “So why is it important to vote?” Aaron responded, “So that there can be changes.” Zach offered that it’s necessary to vote in a new person and Evan added that maybe some do not want that new person. Faith explained that you vote for who and what you want. I then explained that voting is a right and it is a chance to have your opinion heard. Perplexed, George shared that he saw a sign that said vote no. I explained why it is important to be informed and why it is a private event. Owen shared a personal connection that his sister is now old enough to vote. Ricky innocently asked, “How do they (the registers) know when someone raises their hands?” I then explained that although we vote by raising our hands, adults vote by punching ballots or entering their votes on computers. Lucy ended our discussion by sharing that she saw flyers asking people to vote on certain things.

Election Day always provides the opportunity to discuss what progressive educators strongly believe about our government and our schools – the representation of democracy. This was a powerful conversation in which we discussed the process of voting, voting requirements, the meaning of democracy, in addition to the impact of political campaigns. Ultimately, the connection we can make in a progressive classroom is demonstrated through Ricky’s question. His inquiry exhibits his attempt to understand the voting process. It reflects the voting that goes on in our classroom and his attempt to apply his understanding of it to a much wider audience…that of Election Day.

Dewey contended that full liberation of an individual's potentialities can only be achieved in a democratic social order, one in which social conflicts are treated as the subject of social inquiry (Dworkin, 1959). Dewey's argument that the experimental character of democracy renders it desirable should not merely be interpreted
instrumentally. He is not only saying that democracy allows a clearer view of social problems and how to address them, but he is also suggesting that individuality can only be properly expressed if the individual participates in democratic practices, since social inquiry is a constitutive part of the individual good. Informal classrooms embrace Dewey’s vision. Progressive educators value the rights of the individual and the social inquiry that emerges when they work together with children to resolve social conflicts. The norms and expectations of the school culture constructed during classroom meetings reflect a progressive pedagogy. Learning to become an Informal student involves understanding how to resolve social issues.

One morning in early December I noticed that Ricky had become upset with me about his snack. Ricky forgot snack the morning before and became upset when I shared that we were going to eat Carly’s snack and save Ricky’s snack for a day when someone else may forget to bring one. Zach suggested we vote on which snack to eat. I responded by negotiating with Ricky that we could offer his snack as a choice. I knew that if we voted, the person who brought the snack with the least amount of votes would become upset. During snack time, Carly passed out her snack and Ricky offered his as a second choice. We saved all of the leftovers for another day.

Ricky was deeply saddened when I shared my plans to keep his snack for another day. His face had turned beat red, he sunk his head between his legs, and big tears rolled down his cheeks. Zach viewed voting as a way to resolve the problem. From a wider perspective, Dewey believed democracy could resolve the social problems plaguing our nation. As a progressive educator, it is my goal to demonstrate to children how a democracy is more than just voting, for it can provide resolutions to conflicts.
Classroom meetings require a commitment from both the students and the teacher. Implementing the ideals of a democracy takes time and this time must be valued by all members of the community. On one particular morning, our classroom meeting was nearly 40 minutes long. An educator may question how six, seven, and eight year old children can sit and be engaged for that length of time, however it was an important meeting, for we were planning our “Welcome to the World” party in honor of Jason’s new baby brother. The previous day we had brainstormed some things we could do or make in honor of the new baby. I began our meeting by reading aloud Julius the Baby of the World.

Throughout the text I was able to provide the children with opportunities to understand how Jason may be feeling and to affirm for him that it was okay to feel this way. Furthermore, I pointed out different items in the story, like the hanging mobile, and what it means to have a shower for someone who has just had a baby. Twenty minutes into our meeting we set the date for our party, Friday, February 24th. It was just two days away and we had a lot of decisions to make. I reminded the group, “We said we would vote this morning.” and I began reviewing our list of possible ideas: singing lullabies, making dolls or stuffed animals, knitting, making mobiles, creating dream catchers, and designing t-shirts. I explained to the group that Mr. D. and I had planned for us to begin our class book that morning. It was now 9:15 am and the aide came into our room to walk Ricky to reading. Ricky responded, “Why can’t I stay and vote?” I affirmed his feelings and quickly proceeded, “Ricky would like to vote before he leaves…Let’s vote! Are we picking one of these activities or are we going to work in small groups? Let’s vote on that!” After everyone closed their eyes and voted for their
choice, I reminded the group, “Please no cheers, remember, voting is the democratic thing to do!” Jason replied, “Yeah, we know.”

After voting to choose what they wanted to do, Ricky left for reading and the room became noisy as everyone excitedly signed up for the project of their choice. Seven more minutes had gone by and I knew that we were not quite finished with the decision making process. “Raise your hand if you have an idea for our class book.” The ideas included: an ABC book, a 1,2,3 counting book, a birthday book, a zoo book, a story book, and a picture book. “There are six choices, let’s vote for our top two choices, meaning both votes can count for one.” The class voted and the counting book won with 13 votes. After establishing some rules for the pages of the book, each child began sketching his or her page.

Developing a classroom community where children recognize that their voices are being heard truly empowers student learning. The children were anxious to begin their projects and felt ownership over their choices. The event of a classroom meeting demonstrates how an Informal classroom commits the time, space, and place for establishing the democratic ideals of progressive education. Dewey believed that schools should manifest democracy in their own structures and procedures. He understood that democratic education must meet both individual as well as societal needs and objectives. Figure 4.10 illustrates the range of topics throughout the year that invoked voting to occur 24 times amongst the group up through the end of the third quarter.

Conflict resolution. Our schools must teach understanding of difference and goodwill toward others, as these are essential to a democratic society (Dewey, 1958). By teaching peace in schools, we can demonstrate the opposite of force that is taught through
authority methods. Dewey states that, “Instead of uniform and steady growth of
democratic freedom and equality, we have seen the rise of powerful totalitarian states
with thoroughgoing suppression of liberty of belief and expression, outdoing the most
despotic states of previous history” (p. 24). Dewey believes that the road to peace is
paved by an educational system that values democracy and teaches people to participate
in a free society.

Whenever I miss a day of school, the following morning I provide the children
with time during our classroom meeting to reflect upon what they were able to
accomplish with the substitute teacher. One particular morning in September we began
to discuss their 3 Little Pig projects, which they had started with the sub from the
previous day. As our conversation became more in-depth, the children began to talk
about what it means to work in a group. Aspects of being fair, compromising, and
cooperating to make decisions together emerged.
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<tr>
<td>September 8</td>
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<td>Sharing costumes or plans for the weekend</td>
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<td>November 11</td>
<td>Ricky asks students to vote on his topic of interests in his space book</td>
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<td>December 2</td>
<td>Zach suggests we vote on which treat to eat during snack time</td>
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<td>December 6</td>
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<td>Eric Carle read aloud</td>
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<td>Materials for spring break journals</td>
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Figure 4.11: Topics that evoked voting during classroom meetings
Ricky: I wanted to be the wolf and Mike wanted to be the wolf, and he signed up!
Me: Oh, okay, so you know what, maybe next time…what if next time they were to do and Ricky wanted to be the wolf and Mike wanted to be the wolf, how could they decide who gets to be or create the wolf? Who knows a fair way to make a decision like that?

Jason: [Vote?]
Me: Yeah, but there’s only two of them so they really can’t vote, but good idea! (2.0) George?
George: Rock, paper, scissors?
Me: Great! What else could I do besides rock, paper, scissors? (2.0) Lucy?
Lucy: Work together?
Me: Work together, which can sometimes can be hard if there are only two of you. (3.0) Faith?”
Faith: You could, like, put your two names in a hat and pull them out?
Me: You could put your two names in a hat or here in the popsicle basket. (2.0) Could you flip a dice? Roll a coin? (2.0) These are all fair ways to help you decide.
Maria: [How they could decide it, like, like, they could take turns drawing it together?
Faith: Well, what I did, when were doing our sketches, Owen was having trouble so he asked me to do the third little pig’s face so I did the pig’s face and then he did the pig’s body, so we sort of worked together.]
Me: That was really nice! Great!
Ricky: [Maybe me and Mike could do that!]

Ricky’s frustrations provided the entire class with the opportunity to learn more about group development. What does it mean to work in a group and negotiate amongst each other? These are key components of a democratic classroom, yet we cannot forget that children must learn how to achieve them. Children do not come to school knowing how to fulfill the role of an Informal student. The school culture is constructed during classroom meetings and becoming a citizen of a democratic community reflects a focal concern of progressive education. Furthermore, the approach for teaching the curriculum
reflects a focal concern of the teacher.

_Curriculum Integration: A Focal Concern for the Teacher_

Vygotsky (1978) provided the theoretical framework for the practice of curriculum integration. The student is invited to join with the teacher in making sense out of their lived experiences. Teachers plan learning experiences that address both student concerns and major social issues. Children are “active agents” in the learning process rejects the “banking concept” of education being a teacher-centered didactic process. Furthermore, Dewey believed that in order for an experience to be educative, it must have the potential to lead to future experiences. He saw it as the role of the teacher to know the subject matter well enough to be able to design experiences that will lead students to the content. Reflecting back to the last key points made about using time and space in a flexible manner, it is Dewey (1938) who stated “The planning must be flexible enough to permit free play for individuality of experience and yet firm enough to give direction towards continuous development of power” (p.58). Thus, by reading through the key principles of the Informal Alternative Program and reflecting upon the prominent themes of sociocultural theorists like Dewey and Vygotsky, overlapping ideas begin to emerge.

The Informal Program’s philosophy on curriculum integration is found within the second foundational principle: _Integrate thematic units of study and foster authentic learning opportunities_. Most public progressive alternative schools have a curriculum established by their school district. This is true for the Informal Program as well. However, being held to a common standard need not necessarily imply standardization.
Historically, the philosophical perspectives and classroom practices of progressive alternative schools have approached the curriculum in many educationally interesting ways. In 1996, the progressive educators of my school district developed an Informal Curriculum Triangle (Appendix C) to help parents and visitors better understand teaching and learning in the alternative classrooms.

In the Informal Program, the teachers strongly believe that one’s philosophical beliefs are the foundation for which the practice unfolds. There must be meaning and belief behind the practice. At the turn of the twentieth century curriculum integration emerged in literature on teaching and learning. L. Thomas Hopkins book, *Integration: It’s Meaning and Application and Interaction: The Democratic Process* reflected the efforts of progressive educators during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s (Beane, 1997).

When curriculum integration resurfaced in the 1980s, many of the progressive ideas were redefined to align with the more conservative traditions of school and society. Curriculum integration is more than a connection of school subjects or the creation of thematic units from school subjects. “Prepackaged” thematic units represent a multi-disciplinary approach. This twenty-first century version has reduced integration “…to the matter of correlating content and skill from various subject areas around some theme (Beane, p.7). Since the early 1920s, progressive educators have viewed curriculum integration as a curriculum design that enhances the possibilities for personal and social integration through the organization of curriculum around interests and issues, collaboratively identified by the teachers and students. There are no subject-area boundaries. Curriculum integration involves four major aspects: the integration of experiences, social integration, the integration of knowledge, and the integration as a
Curriculum design. Curriculum integration supports young children’s learning as they easily integrate the knowledge into their schemes of meaning and carry them forward.

*Literature.* Literature serves as a tool for integrating academic and social development. Early childhood educators read aloud picture books that provide students with personal connections to beautifully written and illustrated stories. These connections support children’s construction of meaning. “The more meaningful, the more deeply or elaboratively processed, the more situated in context, and the more rooted in cultural, background, metacognitive, and personal knowledge an event is, the more readily it is understood, learned, and remembered” (Iran-Nejad, McKeachie, & Berliner, 1990, p. 511).

We had only spent two days together in August when I received the call from Ed’s mother that his fall from the monkey bars had resulted in a head concussion. At this point I knew very little about the child’s injuries. When I arrived at school for our third day together, I listened to a message informing me that Ed had a fever and was being kept for observation. I wanted to use this authentic learning opportunity to demonstrate to the children how and why we should show compassion toward Ed. As the teacher, I faced an ethical issue: How do I inform the children whom are competent learners, about Ed’s injury while at the same time, ease their concerns about what has happened to him? I chose to read aloud the book *Curious George Goes to the Hospital* so that I could provide the children with the opportunity to make text-to-self connections about going to the hospital, feel compassion for Ed just like George’s owner felt for him, and recognize that we could do something that may brighten the child’s spirits. The children then brainstormed ideas for their personalized get well cards.
The book served as a tool for supporting the children’s social development. The children’s connections provided them with the knowledge they needed to understand what was happening to Ed as well as how he could possibly be feeling. Reflecting the values of the Informal classroom, the story demonstrated for the students how they could be caring citizens within their community.

As we continue to learn more about our self and one another, each year I ask the children to create a self-portrait representing their own perception of themselves. I usually introduce this project near the beginning of the year so that I may introduce the use of different art media for drawing and coloring the portraits. Before the children begin to sketch themselves, I encourage them to spend time looking at their facial features. We draw on mirrors to develop an understanding that everyone does not have a round head and we use the overhead projector to observe each other’s silhouettes. This year after the children had sketched their self-portraits I chose to read aloud the book*

*Elmer.* At the end of the read aloud I posed several questions.

9.7.05
Me: Isn’t that a neat story? Now I have a question, do you think I read you this story because when you go to color your face, or your head, or your neck on your self-portrait I want you to color yourself patchwork like Elmer?
Class: (h) NO!
Me: [Why did I read this story? Who can tell us why I chose to read this story?]
Lucy: Because you wanted us to think about what color we would do our bodies.
Eliot: [You could use more than one color.]
Me: Well yes, you could use more than one color. ( ) Well if you were to think about us being elephants like Elmer and his friends, we’re all kind of white in here, right? Someone from another country, like Africa, would say to us, well all of you are white. But are we really all white?
Class: NO!
Me: The reason I wanted to share that book was because each one of us
in here has a different skin color. Each one of us in here has
grandmothers and grandfathers that came here from somewhere,
whether your part Indian, I am German, part Irish…

Eliot: [You mean like my grandparents, being from a different state?]
Me: Well, I actually mean from a different country, your origin…so
someone may say to me that all of the children in this class are
white and I would say not really, we all have our own skin color.
We know that George’s family is from China, Rees, where is your
father from?
Rees: India.
Me: Rees has some Indian in her and I don’t mean Indian as in Native
Americans, I mean the country of India.”
Faith: [My grandparents are from Ireland.]
Me: So Faith’s skin is a little bit fairer than some of other friends’ skin
in this room. So before we start coloring, I want you think about
and really take a look at your skin color and ask yourself, how am I
going to find a tool in here that is going to best represent who I
am? (2.0) And another reason I chose to read this book is because I
want everyone to feel to proud of who you are. I would never
want anyone to feel uncomfortable whether it’s the way you look,
your skin color, or the way you talk. Everyone is their own person
and that’s what makes us unique!

I dismissed with directions for coloring the skin of their self-portraits. During this lesson,
the arts were integrated with literature. The book served as an essential tool for a class
discussion on our skin color. The creation of our self-portraits taught each of us more
about one another.

Classroom meetings provide the setting for a read aloud because the children are
gathered as a whole group and the structure of the setting encourages classroom dialogue.
On the first day back from winter break we welcomed two new friends to our classroom:
our student teacher, Mr. D. and a new second grade student, Hope. Hope had attended
kindergarten at our building, however her family moved to Scotland last year. Morning
meeting began as everyone sang a few of our favorite songs. I gave a special welcome to
our new friends and attempted to explain some of our morning routines and rituals. After
wishing everyone a happy new year, I introduced Hope. We then went around the circle
and introduced ourselves. I read aloud the book *The Brand New Kid*. Throughout the
read aloud we stopped to discuss the meaning of the words: bore, strudel, and accent. As
I finished the story, I challenged the children to think about how they could be a good
friend to Hope.

I shared with my student teacher my concern that the first day back following a
two-week break could be a bit overwhelming for some of the children. We had two new
friends joining our classroom community so I wanted to select a read aloud that captured
the theme of how to treat a new member of the classroom community. This book
addressed her Scottish accent as well as how she may be feeling not having known
anyone for over a year. The literature also provided a means for integrating children’s
vocabulary development with their social development.

*Threads of curriculum.* Informal teachers view the significant purposes of
schools in a democratic society are to provide shared educational experiences for young
people. These shared experiences support children’s construction of meaning. The
following set of data outlines how one strand of curriculum can be integrated throughout
all of the other disciplines. Classroom meetings not only support the integration of the
major academic disciplines, but also provide an avenue for the development of the social
curriculum. What follows are the traces of integration found throughout our study of the
moon.

Traces of our Moon Study:

((It was the 36th day of school and after reading through the
morning message I began a discussion about the harvest moon that
will appear in the sky the following night.))

Me: What does it mean that we are going to have a harvest moon?”
Seth: [Is it always October 17\textsuperscript{th}?]
Abby: Does it mean its full?
Aaron: I think it will be half and then full...you know how it keeps getting bigger.]
Me: You know what I love about what Seth, Abby, and Aaron are doing ( ) they are making predictions. Does anyone else have a prediction about the harvest moon? (3.0)
George: Um, like, um...like only a little bit of the moon, then half, then full, then half, then a little bit again.
Me: So what I hear you sharing are the phases of the moon?
George: Um, Miss Eirich, also half full, full, half full, is kind of like counting up by 5s...
Jason: [Maybe like it starts out half, then the moon turns, then it, then it, the sky gets like lighter and darker to see the whole thing.
Ricky: Its really, the other half is just dark.
Carly : Well I saw an orange moon before. It was really big and up front.]
Me: Do you think it’s the same moon we always see or do you think it’s a different one?
Carly: Um, I don’t think it was really the normal moon because it was really big.
Me: I have a question for the group, do you think the same moon could be different sizes and different colors or do you think there are different moons?
Jason: Different moons because different countries have different numbers of moons.
George: (Actually, it’s the same because the Earth sometimes gets farther from it.)
Anthony: Last night there was a Halloween moon. There was full moon and then stuff that...
Owen: [Can I make a prediction? What I think it is is that one half of the moon is black and the other side is white.
Chase: Maybe, like, the tiny half is um, dark, and the other tiny half is white, and the other side is white, and the then the other tiny side is dark.
Aaron: I know um how, I think that, I know how it’s going to be. First it will be a small half and like, every hour, will until it’s a full moon.]

As our conversation came to an end, Eliot asked, “Do we have science today?” I felt great about the discussion during morning meeting. Students were asking questions, pondering over their own predictions, rationalizing their personal theories, and gaining
“momentum” for an in-depth study of the moon. This classroom discussion served as
the catalyst as we embarked on our journey to the moon.

11.1.05
After greeting everyone in morning meeting, I read aloud *Walk on the Moon*. This is a great picture book that asks the reader on each page, “Are you the next one to walk on the moon?” Following the read aloud, I reminded the students that tomorrow afternoon they could come with their families to a viewing of a 3-D movie titled *Magnificent Desolation: Walking to the Moon 3D*. Both Ricky and George expressed their concern that their moms may need directions to the IMAX movie theater (see Appendix D).

11.7
Morning meeting began as I greeted everyone and read through the morning message: *Welcome back! Today is Monday, November 7, 2006 or 11-7-05. We are so lucky to have such warm weather! Did you observe the moon this weekend?* We briefly discussed our Indian Summer and I called upon Mike to share his observation of the moon.

Me: Raise your hand if you saw the moon this weekend….What did you see Mike?
Mike: A crescent moon.
Chase: [ saw it, too.]
Me: Can someone share with us what time they observed the moon?
(2.0) David?
David: I observed it…I think it was 6:57.
Me: Okay, so was it dark?
David: Yeah, it was kind of dark.
Me: Did anyone observe it when it wasn’t dark?
Faith: I did!
Me: What was it like for you, Faith?
Faith: It was in the late afternoon.
Me: Yep, I saw it at 5:05 and it was blue sky and I looked outside the skylight at the cabin and it was a crescent.
Owen: [I couldn’t’ see it on Monday, I mean on Sunday because my sister had to bring me to baby sit somebody and I didn’t get to see it.]
Me: Okay, well I want to thank my friends for keeping up on their logs. Guess what’s going to happen as the crescent gets bigger?
Evan: A quarter?
Me: That’s right – we call this phase the first quarter.

11.9
During our morning meeting Jason asks about using the telescope Evan has brought to share with the class. This sparked a conversation about our moon
observations.

Jason: Um, are we, um, going to do the telescope today?
Me: Yes, but it’s really hard for us…we can look at it and look through it but it’s really hard to see anything because it’s not night time. You would really have to have it at your house at night.
Owen: [Yesterday I found this huge telescope and that thing that you could look through was that big, at my house, and um, it was turning out small and then it came bigger, and it stands up, but it really didn’t have the stand up thing, so it fell on me. I opened the place where I had my snowboarding places, and um, (h) it just fell on me, and now it’s on my garage. Well, not on my garage, in it.]
Me: Was anyone able to see the moon last night?
Class: NO!
Me: I couldn’t either. I just wrote cloudy.
Ed: [No, it was like half of a moon.]
Me: Almost first quarter?
Ed: No, it was like half.
Me: [Which would be called the first quarter.]
Ed: Oh, ^yeah!

11.16
After reading through the daily schedule and the morning message, I typically ask the class if anyone has an announcement.

Mike: Yesterday night was a full moon.
Eliot: [I didn’t. I tried to see it yesterday but I didn’t.
Evan: Uh, last night there was a full moon with a ring around it.
Ricky: It was kind of foggy, so…my mom did my moon for me!]

11:30
During our classroom meeting I read aloud one of our awesome author books, *Tillie and the Wall*, written by Leo Lionni. As I was reading aloud the story we came upon a page illustrated with the moon.

Me: Who can tell us what kind of moon this is?
Jason: Waxing crescent.
Me: Tomorrow when you bring in your moon observations…if yours isn’t all the way filled out that’s okay, just bring in what you have done, we are going to do a project with the moon phases.

12.1
Morning meeting begins with all of us singing, “Up in the Pumpkin Patch.” I call upon Tiffany to lead us as we all read through the morning message: *Good morning! Today is Thursday, December 1, 2005 or 12-1-05. Only 25 days until Christmas! Do you have your moon calendar?*
Ricky: [Oh! I forgot it!]
Faith: I lost it!
Eliot: I don’t know where mine is!
David: I know where mine is!]
((I continue on by reviewing the daily schedule.))
Me: After recess we are going to talk about our moon calendars, talk about the moon, and um start to talk more about the solar system in general and the stars. So we’re going to shift our focus, it’s still going to be about space…instead of narrowing our focus and putting our lens on the moon, we are going to talk more about stars and the rest of the solar system, including the planets. Okay, so we’ll start that today and do more of that tomorrow and on Monday.

((Following a brief discussion about our portfolios, I begin to discuss our weekly goals, including our moon project.))

Me: This afternoon we’re going to talk more about our space study. We’re going to put on display in our classroom the phases of the moon. There are eight phases I would like us to do: the new moon, crescent, first quarter, gibbous…we’ll talk about what a gibbous moon looks like…full moon, another waxing, gibbous, and then new again.

George: [Are you sure it’s waxing because I think after the full moon it’s waning.]
Me: Waxing and waning?
George: But, I think only the start of it is waxing.”
Me: Right, and then its’ waning.
George: (Yeah, that’s right!)
Evan: [Last night, Parker, he tested me, because he is studying space in class, too, and he tested me and I got every answer right]

Although these “traces” of curriculum integration are brief, each reflects how integration of the curriculum emerges throughout all aspects of classroom life, including the cultural event of the classroom meeting. Figure 4.12 provides a flow chart of how the investigation of the moon sparked other studies to emerge, weaving the children’s interests with the first and second grade district and state curriculum. The tools for curriculum integration expand beyond the literature, for the children themselves; their
questions, theories, and conversations also weave the curriculum together. “Schools in a democracy cannot stand still, cannot be satisfied and complacent with what has been accomplished, but must be willing to undertake… reorganization of studies, methods of teaching, administration, relation of pupils and teachers, community life…(Dewey, 1958, p. 48).” An integrated curriculum provides meaningfulness to children’s learning by combining different curricula into a unified whole. Social development supports an integrated curriculum (Beane, 1997). It is the common thread that ties the entire curriculum together.

As a progressive educator it is relevant that I spend several weeks at the beginning of the school year focusing on supporting the children’s understanding of the norms, rituals, roles, and responsibilities of the being an Informal student. As the Informal student learns self-regulated behaviors, I strive to create a democratic classroom with an integrated curriculum where the child becomes an inquirer. My focus directly reflects the pedagogy of Informal teachers. The children, however, have different concerns and interests. Together, they create a shared identity relevant to them, known as the peer culture.
Following our monthly Friday Newsbreak, where parents “buddy read” the newspaper with the children, I pose a question about harvest moon, discussed in the Metro section of The Columbus Dispatch.

What does it mean that we are going to have a harvest moon?
Seth, Abby, Aarron

Does anyone else have a prediction about the harvest moon?
George, Jason, Ricky, Carly

Do you think it’s the same moon we always see or do you think it’s a different one? Do you think the same moon could be different sizes and different colors or do you think there are different moons?
Carly, Jason, George, Anthony, Owen, Chase, Aaron

Students share their observations of the harvest moon.

Teacher reads aloud Walk on the Moon and introduces Monthly Moon Observation Calendar

17 of 22 students attend IMAX showing of Magnificent Desolation: Walking on the Moon 3D

Morning message asks: Did you observe the moon this weekend?

Teacher reads aloud Leo Lionni book Tillie and the Wall
Figure 4.12 continued

Science/Literature/Arts

12.1
Teacher reads aloud *The Moon Book* and initiates phases of the moon project
12.2; 12.5
Students complete phases of the moon project
12.5; 12.6
Teacher joins 15 students and their families at Perkins Observatory for presentation and telescope viewing of the moon and Mars
12.7

Family Night

12.2; 12.5
Students complete phases of the moon project
12.5; 12.6
Teacher joins 15 students and their families at Perkins Observatory for presentation and telescope viewing of the moon and Mars

Arts

12.7
Students use landscaping tarp to create giant star dome for the entire class to sit in
12.7; 12.8; 12.9; 12.12; 12.13
Students’ interests shift from moon to stars; Students begin to research constellations
12.12; 12.13

Emerging Interests

Students work in partners and research a constellation – sketching it inside a shoebox and poking its stars
12.14

Arts

Students work together with teacher to poke constellations in the star dome
1.4; 1.5; 1.6
Questions we have about stars… Wishes: What is a wish? What’s a shooting star?
Students work in partners to research questions they have about stars.
1.9; 1.10; 1.11

Social Sciences

1.13; 1.17; 1.18; 1.19; 1.20; 1.23; 1.24
My Place in Space pages provide curriculum links to mapping – Street, City, State, and Country Maps
1.30; 1.31

Emerging Interests

Day vs. Night
AM vs. PM; Clocks
Comparison Charts
2.1; 2.2; 2.3; 2.6; 2.7; 2.8; 2.9
Bedtime stories; Letters from our stuffed animals
Native American Legends about dream catchers; creation of our own dream catchers
1.10; 2.11
PJ Party with stuffed animals; Family Open House
Peer Culture: A Social Construction of Group Identity

*How is the classroom event of a meeting representative of children’s peer culture?* Classroom meetings provide a place for children to construct a peer culture and for this peer culture to be made visible. The cultural event of a classroom meeting serves as a window for viewing the children’s peer culture. The twenty-three students in my classroom spent nearly thirty-six weeks together, seven hours each day. An analysis of the peer interactions that occurred during classroom meetings demonstrates the construction of the peer culture.

Children neither imitate nor directly appropriate the adult world. The creation of a peer culture is both creative and unique. It is a world that is distinct from, and at times oppositional to, the adult world. Children alter information from the adult world in order to meet their own needs. Corsaro (2005) defines peers as a “cohort or group of children who spend time together on an everyday basis” (p. 109). In an educational setting, the peer culture is constructed by the participants in a particular classroom. The creation of cultural routines and participation within them supports children’s emerging memberships into both their peer cultures and adult worlds.

Peer cultures are conceptualized as subcultures of the larger society. Through their interactions with older siblings, children are introduced to specific local cultures within their families. Children participate and contribute to more general local peer cultures for the first time when they transition from their families to external communities (Corsaro, 2005). Although some initial peer cultures form in neighborhoods, as the number of children in the United States attending early child care programs continues to rise, these early childhood settings have a significant role in
fostering opportunities for networks of local peer cultures. Peer cultures emerge from social settings that make up children’s worlds. Intense social interactions within the Informal classroom provide the setting for a peer culture to develop and flourish.

Classroom meetings provide a place for intense social interactions. As the teacher, I bring the children to meet on the carpet in a circle each morning to model, practice, and experience the roles of an Informal student, but the students have a different agenda. They are there to be social. The active participation during these meetings encourages peers to interact with one another. The peer culture is constructed and reflected through central themes: the use of language, the impact of focal concerns, and the roles and relationships that gradually develop.

*Emerging Themes*

Two themes that consistently surface when children begin to construct a peer culture are their concerns for gaining control over adult authority and their concern for maximizing social participation. The concepts of gaining control and sharing are essential to children’s production of and participation in their peer culture. There are several ways the children in my classroom demonstrated their attempts to gain control of their lives and their social participation.

Sociologist Erving Goffman (1961) first introduced the concept of “secondary adjustment” (Corsaro, 2003, p. 140). Young children use legitimate resources in devious ways to avoid rules, and at the same time, achieve the needs and wants of the group. Secondary adjustments provide individuals or groups with the opportunity to stand apart from the expectations of their social institutions, like the school culture. Goffman’s work discloses how children conceptualize and adapt to the conventional rules and procedures
of their school environments.

Daily, following the morning message during our classroom meetings, I usually asked the class if anyone had an announcement. I had noticed that there was an exceptional number of students (four) sharing about their bodily injuries on Friday, September 30th. When we returned on Monday, the pattern continued. Chase, Abby, and Carly all shared about their injuries. Owen interrupted Carly, “I have a question for Carly…” however, Owen really proceeded to share a story of an injury he had similar to her injury. Following his injury report, Faith and David added two more. Eight minutes and 58 seconds into the meeting, I made the following announcement:

10.3
Me: I’m sure we will all be respectful of each other’s personal bubbles. I am going to ask that if you have personal bubble announcement, that you, just ( ) that you know that I am making that announcement for you right now…Zach, do you have different type of announcement?”

Zach: No, I have a personal bubble announcement…it will be quick. At my grandmas I was going down the stairs and I was walking and I did this, and I tripped, and I banged my hip, and it really hurt.

Me: Aaron?

Aaron: Well, um, yesterday when I was playing soccer, um, a kid tripped me, um, I fell really hard on my ankle, um, and it hurt bad, and it really still hurts.

By being quick, Zach felt that it was okay for him to share, too. Since Zach had shared, Aaron felt he had “permission” as well. The following week the announcements about personal injuries continued: On Wednesday, October 12th Faith and Zach both shared, on Thursday, October 13th Ricky, Eliot, Owen, Faith, Zach, and Evan all gave an injury report, and on Friday, October 14th, six additional students shared in addition to four more after I had established the rule that there would be no more sharing about injuries to our bodies.
Me: Any announcements? We’ll start with Evan…
((Evan and Owen proceed to share about their arm and head injuries.))
Me: I can tell that it’s bruised isn’t it? ( ) Okay, you know what I see on our lists of dos and don’ts ( ) it says ‘do respect other people’s space’ so if you have an announcement about something on your body, you do not have to share that with us because we will be respectful of you, okay?
Me: Aaron?
Aaron: Um, please be careful of my middle finger because when I woke up my finger was asleep.
Ricky: [And please be careful of this finger because it went all the way back yesterday and it hurts right here.]
Me: Claire?
Claire: Um, please be careful of my leg because I was playing soccer in my backyard and my sister accidentally kicked me.
Me: Does anybody have an announcement not about their body?
Eliot: It’s um, it’s um, well, last night at Sylvan I was playing a game and I dived for the ball and someone got hurt.

Children’s understanding of the adult’s rules and their common resistance to these rules develop as stable elements of a peer culture. Secondary adjustments have more than one purpose in children’s peer cultures. They sometimes are an extension or elaboration of legitimate behavior with an intention to meet personal goals, defined by Goffman (1961) as “working the system” (p. 146). In this case, all four of these children wanted to share their stories. Eliot, specifically, ‘worked the system’ because he began with an event before sharing his injury.

Sharing became the intention of several other children that used secondary adjustments in order to have more social participation in group. On Monday, January 9th
Faith asked me if she could share her violin even though her sharing day wasn’t until Friday. She had brought it to school to share with the music teacher and provided a rationale for why she should share it with us.

Faith: Can I share my violin now?
Me: Um, yeah, today is your sharing day, right?
Faith: No…it isn’t.
Me: Oh it’s not…when’s your sharing day?
Faith: Not until Friday…next Friday.
Me: You mean this Friday. You could bring it in then.
Faith: No, I can’t. My mom says I can’t.
Me: So are you planning on sharing it during music today?
Faith: Yeah.
Me: Well if you’re going to share in Music today then I think that it will be okay because everyone will be there and will have heard it. Let’s wait until the end of the day and see how much you have had a chance to share.

Faith: But I want to share the parts of a violin in music and then play it in here for the class.
Me: I think you can do both during music. I will email the Mrs. G. to see if it’s okay. Okay?

Furthermore, when the children shared about their weekends some students found it a challenge to share only one sentence. Early on in the year I noticed that several students needed more time to think through what s/he wanted to share. At that point, I provided the option of either passing or coming back. A come back meant that the child shared once everyone else had their turn as we moved around the entire circle. Mid-year I realized that several children were not only sharing, but also asking for us to come back to them.

1.17
Eliot: [Oh, I forgot something…]
((Ricky proceeds to share ignoring Eliot’s comment.))
Me: I know that a lot of friends want to come back and share
extra thoughts but if we could wait and do that during snack time.

Eliot: N:::o! ^But this is a funny come back.

Beyond secondary adjustments, the themes of the peer culture emerged through role play. Socio-dramatic role play occurs when children collaboratively create pretend activities that are directly related to experiences within their real lives. According to Corsaro, (2003), children use role play to imitate adult models in order to address their own concerns about issues in their own lives. This type of play surfaced in the fall when Jason had to deal with his aunt’s boyfriend’s deployment to Iraq.

On September 6th Jason shared the Telling Tool Box during our morning meeting. He chose to bring his army figurines.

9.6
Jason: And here’s my army men with their aircraft. My aunt’s boyfriend is going to Iraq. He left yesterday and, yeah, he’s in New York right now. It takes a long time to get there. (3.0) Does anyone have any questions or comments? Evan?
Evan: My grandpa went to Iraq.
Jason: Did he come back?
Evan: Oh, yeah!

Jason’s question to Evan exhibits his fear that his aunt’s boyfriend may never return.

Little did Evan or Jason know that Evan’s grandfather actually fought in World War II.

Evan’s words offered comfort to Jason. Jason continued to demonstrate this type of play at Halloween when he chose to dress as an Army Mine Finder.

10.27 ((Each child is sharing a clue about their Halloween costumes.))
Jason: There’s a lot of us up in heaven.
Me: And there’s a lot of them on the ground.
Faith: And there’s a lot of them in I-raq.
Jason: You mean E-raq?

Jason’s clue, revealing his costume choice for our Halloween party, reflects his
beliefs that soldiers die when they go to battle. I felt obligated to make the comment that many were on the ground to help him understand that many soldiers survive the war. The idea of dressing up as an individual that he was most worried about provided Jason with the opportunity to grasp and control his own social representations of this threatening agent of death and the dangerous event of a war.

Role of Language

Bahktin’s (1981, 1986) dialogic theory is a key conceptual tool for understanding children’s cultures. Too often, written language development is reduced to a list of skills or a sequence of stages. Over the course of a school year it became apparent that children’s language development does not move in a linear path. Instead, it negotiates an expanding social landscape as they encounter new communication practices. Bahktin (1981) contends that “a model of language…is nothing unless it can help us to approach the overlooked richness, complexity, and power of the most intimate and ordinary exchanges” (p. 34). Language is interactive, for Bahktin points out that with each utterance, the audience, or classroom will “embrace, understand, and sense the speaker’s speech plan or will” (p. 77).

On a daily basis during each classroom meeting children shared. It may have been the posing of a question, a response to a question that I had posed, a response to the question of a peer, the sharing of a personal connection, or the sharing of a new thought, idea, object, etc…On Mondays and Fridays each of us shared about our weekends. Throughout the course of this study, the children shared about their weekend plans or what they had done over the weekend 38 times. I have critically analyzed the children’s sharing about their weekend on Monday, September 12th. Just in this one meeting, the
children’s sharing demonstrated how language is used by the peer culture to seek further understanding, to show empathy toward one another, and to make personal connections through storytelling.

**Seeking Further Understanding**

9.12
Aaron:  Um…I went to um, this thing.
Owen:  [What’s that thing?]
Aaron:  Well there’s a bungee cord thing and a gladiator fight and um…
Ricky:  [Oh, was there lots of roller coasters?]
Aaron:  No, not really…
Ricky:  [Oh, then I don’t know…did you go flying?]
Aaron:  No, it was boring…I didn’t do the bungee cord and I couldn’t fight the gladiator so there wasn’t much to do there. ((In the same meeting, Jason shared about going to a field hockey game.))
Jason:  Uh, I went to my babysitter’s field hockey game.
Ricky:  [What’s field hockey?]
Owen:  How do you play field hockey?
Jason:  Oh, it’s complicated…like if they blow the whistle, you start playing again, like one second after. Oh, there’s this one thing, like what they do, like if there’s a penalty or something, um, they like, the other team, like the team has a goalie with like, weird nets, and um, some, um, feelers out there, and they get in the goal, and the other team puts their sticks down and they hit the ball and there’s um, Ohio State players or that same team’s players right here, and they can, like score!

**Showing Empathy**

9.12
David:  We might get rid of my snake. And I don’t want to say why because it kind of makes me sad. ((The sharing continues around the circle.))
Ricky:  This is really sad. My dog is almost going to die. I just know it.
David:  [I know exactly how he feels!]

Carly:  Well I only have a connection about something…well, there’s one connection I want to say then I will say something to make him feel better. My brother’s hamster
is about to die, too. And he might get another one so you might get another dog, too.

Ricky: My mom isn’t going to let me.
Lucy: My dog Razor got hit by a bus so maybe they could room together in dog heaven.
Jason: [How old is it?]
Ricky: 108 in dog years!
Aaron: My dog is 11 and in dog years he is really old.
Maria: Um, well, my cat Skittles my mom found Skittles on the side of the road, and it was a girl, one day I was in preschool and one day my mom was picking me up from preschool and um, right when she was going out the door she thought she was getting bringing out the dog and she ran out and got hit by a car. And when I got home from preschool I asked my mom, ‘Mom, where’s skittles?’ and I would ask her that everyday when I got home from preschool. She was only one.

Making Personal Connections

9.12
Chase: Um… I had a garage sale and um, I played football with my dad, and then I was riding my bike, I was riding too fast that my bike broke and I fell into the grass. So now my bike’s broke.
Ed: This is like Chase’s. I was riding my bike on the street. And, um, my, my mom said to come inside and I accidentally left my bike on the road.
Me: Did it get ran over?
Ed: Yes. And then the moment I went outside I didn’t even see it. No, the wheel, the car stopped at, like, Tremont, and then I ran and said, ‘No, my bike!’ It was broken. Both of the wheels were off and it was in to pieces.
Owen: [I have a question for you. When I left my bike on my driveway and my mom was pulling in. When I came outside, it was gone. The pedal was off. And, when um, I was at my grandma’s I put my bike behind the wheel and she crushed it.]
Ed: And I got, like, two more bikes, and they got ran over, so this is my last bike. It almost got ran over, but it didn’t.

Furthermore, at the beginning of the year, the children negotiated a sharing schedule. One to three children had the opportunity to share each day. For the first 22
days of school, the children took turns sharing the Telling Tool Box. Inside the tool box were items they had brought from home. Once everyone had shared the Telling Tool Box, the children had more freedom in what they chose to share. Figure 4.13 illustrates the dominance of the peer culture at the beginning of the school year. When provided the opportunity to share during the first nine weeks of school, the children always chose to share an object from home. Although the school culture began to impact children’s sharing during the second quarter, it is evident that throughout all three quarters children mostly shared objects from home.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Shares Each Quarter</th>
<th>First</th>
<th>Second</th>
<th>Third</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objects from home</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objects from school</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.13: Objects shared in the Telling Tool Box

This table shows how children use sharing as an opportunity to construct the peer culture. These objects included items such as: stuffed animals, video games, sports equipment, Tamagotchis, and dolls. Of the objects shared from school, each one still exhibited the interests of the peer culture. Sixty percent of these objects were toys either
made at school or obtained as a prize from the school. Although the techniques of sharing may be influenced by the school culture, what is shared by the child is a direct presentation of his or her culture. Gallas (1994) characterizes the peer culture as a “rich historical background” connected through the common experiences and shared accounts of the children as they interact with one another.

On November 15th I was out of the classroom for the entire school day. When I returned on November 16th, we spent some time during our classroom meeting reflecting upon the success of the previous day. Following our brief discussion about what they had accomplished, I directed Carly to the sharing chair because, according to our updated sharing schedule, it was her turn to share.

11.16
Carly: This is a zapper I made at my house when Rees came over. And it is taped, and all of the zappers that I make have this tape peeling on them.
Owen: [We made a code!]
Aaron: The whole class did.]
Carly: And ( ) I think I have seven or eight ( ) Does anyone have questions or comments? (2.0) Aaron?
Aaron: How did you make, um ( ) the zapper?
Evan: [Aaron, I can show you.]
Owen: “I know how, too.”
Carly: I just folded it and then I did it again.
Lucy: [I got a zapper too, except I made it at school, and I made one at home, except it’s a lot bigger and it has more buttons than any other zapper I’ve seen.]
Me: A couple more friends you want to call on?
Mrs. F: What do the buttons on your zapper do?
Carly: Um…( ) the top one is the super zap and this is the smaller one. (2.0) Zach?
Zach: I have a zapper too, right here, and did you put the code on it or not?
Carly: I did…it’s right here!
Owen: [cause it’s 1575732815!]
David: [And, um, me, Zach, and Owen, I invented them…and then I got Zach to help me, and then we put Owen in our club, and I don’t even know how I made mine to look thin!]
Carly: Maria?
Maria: Um, my brother helped me to make some zappers last night and since my brother helped me I have about twenty.
Carly: Owen?
Owen: Um, we’re, um, going to be making some more at indoor recess… [if anyone wants us to make them one.
David: Owen: and if it is indoor recess…
Eliot: …HOPEFULLY!]

I had no idea what Carly was about to share, nor had I ever heard of or seen a zapper. The children had created these ‘toys’ the previous day during indoor recess. The dialogue that took place as Carly shared exhibited not only the peer culture, but also the role of imagination and superhero play. Each one of these zappers was identified with a ‘special code’ that provided the passage of power. Carly’s share exemplified what took place each day during morning meeting. Whether the child shared an object from school, an object from home, or a story about an event s/he had experienced, classroom meeting provided a forum for conversation that represented the children’s culture. Unlike the classrooms from when I was a child, where friendship had nothing to do with the business of learning, the event of a classroom meeting encourages talking and sharing. It is a time during the school day that reflects children’s connections with one another. Although it is important to acknowledge the discourses that children must learn to be “successful” in school: science, math, literacy, social studies, and the arts, we cannot forget the discourse developed by the students. This discourse includes the words, themes, and references that reflect the interests and common experiences of the class (Gallas, 1994).

*Roles and Relationships*
Classroom meetings offer opportunities for children to build relationships with one another. As they socially construct meaning together, children begin to take on roles and establish relationships with each other. In order to understand the roles and relationships fulfilled by the children of my classroom, I analyzed the friendship processes as they unfolded within the peer culture. The school culture does not provide room for this perspective.

Friendships. When children enter the more academically oriented structure of an elementary classroom, new social concerns develop. Their motivation for having friends shifts from the goal of having someone to play with, to a variety of goals that include having friends to help them with school work, to provide them with needed materials, and to provide them with the confidence that their work is adequate (Rizzo, 1989). Children in early elementary school see friendships as relationships of one-way assistance. They begin to understand the difference between a current playmate and longtime friend. Peers are viewed in terms of their own needs. These relationships are more stable than ones developed in the preschool years because they depend upon shared knowledge developed over time rather than momentary attraction. Relationships during the early elementary years are based on one another’s preferences and interests. They will continue as long as they serve the needs of both children. These interests are defined as focal concerns (Gumperz, Corsaro, & Streeck, 1985).

Focal concerns. Some children, like Anthony, must find a common interest with another child before engaging in social interaction. I have provided two separate instances demonstrating Anthony’s passion for action heroes.

((As Aaron struggled through his sharing of the Telling Tool Box

8.29

180
he shared a handful of U-gi-oh cards.))

Aaron: This is Zodiac the Forbidden One and this is …something the King of Ghost?
Owen: [I can help you!
Me: What kind of cards are those?
Aaron: U-gi-oh!
Ricky: [Are those your best?]
Aaron: Kind of…I like Zodiac the Forbidden One the best!
((When Aaron called upon his peers for questions or comments, Anthony raised his hand and shared.))
Anthony: You need all five pieces of the Zodiac in order to win!

12.7

((Zach shared a picture book he had created at home. The book contained mostly pictures of the Titanic. Toward the end, he added pages of his interests; a puffer fish, king cobra, WWII ship, sharks, and several Star Wars pictures.))

Zach: Then I went on to the AOL and went on to Star Wars.
Anthony: OH YEAH!
Zach: I kept looking and looking and finally I saw this and it said full size image so I clicked on it and it’s Lego Star Wars.
Anthony: YEAH, COOL!
Zach: And this is, um, a magazine, I think, I’m not for sure, I just wanted to print it to show the class.
((Anthony begins to giggle loudly.))
Zach: “And here’s Star Wars Clone Horse.
Anthony: (h) Oh yeah! (h) Oh yeah! (h) Oh yeah!

Anthony was a very reserved student that fulfilled a submissive social position. He rarely participated during group meetings and his body language consistently indicated his negligence from the group. He often would sit on the edge of our circle with his knees folded up, hands wrapped around his legs, and his head resting face down. I was shocked when I observed him engaged when both of these boys shared. It was then that I realized that Aaron had shared U-gi-oh cards and Zach had shared Star Wars pictures, both representing Anthony’s love for action heroes.

For the first twenty-three days of school, the children took turns sharing the Telling Tool Box. In the tool box were items they had brought from home that they
wanted to share to help us learn more about their interests. Figure 4.14 illustrates the categories of objects shared. Out of the entire class, 60% of the children shared objects related to their past achievements. The two most common of these objects were ribbons and trophies. Furthermore, 47% of the students shared an item demonstrating their interest in sports. These items included swimming goggles, footballs, and baseball cards. All of these items represent material aspects of children’s cultures (Corsaro, 2005). Most of the past research related to children’s material culture focused solely on toys. These studies, however, have shown how children collectively and creatively appropriate, use, and infuse these objects with meaning. These collective actions contribute to the production of the peer culture.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items Shared from the Telling Tool Box</th>
<th>Percent of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action Figures</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievements</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artwork</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewelry</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuffed Animals/Dolls</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.14: Categories of objects shared in the Telling Tool Box

The Friday and Monday classroom meetings in which we designated time to share about our weekends supported the construction of the peer culture as the children shared stories about the events that took place in their lives. These events and experiences reflected the focal concerns of early childhood. Figure 4.15 demonstrates which focal
concerns had the highest percentages during the children’s sharing about their weekends. This table also displays the average number of children that shared each focal concern as they were addressed. It is obvious that sports, birthdays, families, and play arrangements with friends dominated each Friday and Monday meeting.

Furthermore, symbolic aspects of the children’s culture were present. William Griswold (1994) defines the symbolic culture as “various representations or expressive symbols of children’s beliefs, concerns, and values (p. 3). The three dominant sources of children’s symbolic culture are children’s media, literature, and mythical figures or legends.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of Focal Concerns</th>
<th>% of Meetings Category Present</th>
<th>Average # of Children Sharing Each Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birthdays</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleepovers/Playdates</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trips</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holidays</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pets</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toys</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movies</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Events</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Guides/Princesses</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to the Pool</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.15: Presence of children’s focal concerns during classroom meetings

Although information about each of these sources is primarily controlled by adults,
children will appropriate, use, and transform symbolic culture as they produce and participate in peer culture. Anthony’s love of action heroes and the 38% of boys who shared them in the Telling Tool Box is a direct result of the media. Mythical figures, including Santa Claus, influenced the high average of children that had shared about the holidays. The focal concerns that develop within a peer culture are first introduced by parents before they are extended and transformed through interactions with their peers (Corsaro, 2005).

**Relationship restraints.** When children enter early elementary school, opportunities for social contact are much more limited so children often carefully plan their social time. In most classrooms, recess is one of the only times that social interaction is encouraged, therefore, children prearrange their activities and groups. Peer contacts are more deliberate and planned. In just one morning meeting, two separate instances occurred demonstrating how children use classroom meeting to share their preplanned activities.

9.7

Claire: This is uh, a book, my book. I like to read books. I like it when they take it, um, I like it when they take their pets to school.

Eliot: ((whispering to Ricky)) (I could take my pet to school. I would bring my bunny.)

Ricky: ((responds with a whisper)) (I could take Rudy to school. He’s just a little puppy…you could bring a dog in if you had a dog.)

Eliot: (I have a dog.)

Ricky: (I could bring Bailey in to SACC? You want me to?)

((Claire calls upon friends for questions and/or comments.))

Carly: ((responding to Claire)) Um…I’m going to start soccer soon and I don’t know what team I’m on…

Owen: [Hey, um, Carly, you could play with us so you could, like, practice. At lunch recess, me, Evan, Zach, and…

Evan: Connor, too…

Owen: and all these people, we, like find, like, soccer balls and we find people to play so you could probably play with us so you would be good when you play!]
Another constraint present because of the school culture is that children are usually assigned to desk or tables with predetermined work partners. Children will make their best attempts to recreate their play and work groups. Furthermore, they will ‘work the system’ and attempt to sit by close friends whenever the opportunity arises. This occurred during classroom meetings as well. Specific pairs of ‘best friends’ would make every attempt to sit next to one another. Figure 4.16 provides an illustration of the circle formed each morning before we began our classroom meeting. The three pairs of children identified on the circle illustrate not only who they attempted to sit with on a daily basis, but also their placement on the circle (Video Recording, 12.9).

By the first week of November, I had to meet with Zach and David privately at recess to discuss strategies to help them be more respectful during our classroom meetings. At that point, we made a pack that they would no longer sit by one another during any of our meetings.

Figure 4.16: Illustration of children’s seating choices for classroom meetings

Just a few days later, on November 7, I had to remind them of our conversation about
their seating choices. By the end of the third quarter, I met with Faith and Lucy to discuss changing their seating choices. It was too tempting for them to talk, and often, they were given reminders. On two separate occasions throughout the year, Zach and David were even asked to leave group (12.1, 3.6). Figure 4.17 and 4.18 provide images of Lucy and Faith sitting together during classroom meetings.

The children’s peer culture is also reflected through signs of reputational bias. Children of elementary age display reputational bias when they have formed close relationships with their peers. The children form biases in response to the interactions of their closest friends (Ramsey, 1991). Their perceptions can be quite rigid and their behaviors are biased because they cannot integrate conflicting information about their peers.

Figure 4.17: Lucy and Faith

Figure 4.18: Lucy and Faith

During each classroom meeting I asked if anyone wanted to share news or
announcements. On Tuesday, October 18th, Carly announced that her pet rabbit, Anubus, had a broken claw. Empathetic, Owen asked her about the age of her rabbit. I then called upon Claire who shared that her cat was bleeding, followed by Faith who announced that her pet toad had a broken leg. Below is an excerpt from my field notes.

10.18
After Carly shared her sad news that Anubus had an injured claw, both Claire and Faith proceeded to make announcements about their pets that do not seem realistic. Furthermore, when my face expressed a non-verbal look of doubt, Lucy spoke up on behalf of her best friend Faith, "Yeah, it's true, isn't that sad!" I did not even know that Faith had a pet toad and could it really have a broken leg? Why would Lucy defend such an irrational comment? And if neither of these stories were true, why did the girls fabricate them? I chose to intervene before a debate began by asking for no additional announcements about injured pets.

Lucy, a very bright second grader, had not thought rationally about her comment that supported her friend’s announcement. Lucy had a bias toward Faith because she was her best friend. She wanted to believe Faith’s announcement. I saw this bias form amongst pairs of boy friends as well.

Each Wednesday I would ask a volunteer to switch our classroom jobs and announce everyone’s new job. On December 14th, I called upon Ed to announce the new jobs. As he began to read through them, several students crowded around him, leaving their space from the circle and invading his space near the job board. David and Owen began to yell at these students:

12.14

Owen: RICKY! Scoot back!
David: Guys, give him space!
Owen: He needs space! Give him space, George!

The social dynamics of the classroom impact the quality of the children’s social
experiences. Many factors influence the dynamics of each classroom. Although friendships and focal concerns are key aspects of the peer culture, differentiation in peer relations increases dramatically as children move from the early school years to preadolescence (Corsaro, 2005). Social differentiation in the peer culture of a classroom is related primarily to gender and status (Corsaro, 2005; Ramsey, 1991).

Gender differentiation. Gender separation begins with children as young as age three exhibiting preference for play with other children of the same sex and becomes so dramatic in the elementary years that researcher Barrie Thorne (1986) spoke of separate boys’ and girls’ worlds. Researchers from both preschools and elementary schools (Berentzen, 1984; Thorne, 1986; Paley, 1984; Corsaro, 2005) have discovered that children construct their peer cultures around gender contrast. In her study of five to seven year old children, Sigrid Berentzen (1984) found that girls and boys organize activities around different concerns. Furthermore, boys value competition and toughness while girls value relationships and establishing friendships. Vivian Paley’s (1984) study of her own kindergarten classroom affirms Berentzen’s findings. Paley found that both genders are protective of their play and have distinct themes.

In my analysis of our classroom meetings, I found that some of the material objects children choose to share at school represent gender bias. Table 4.19 differentiates by gender the percentage of objects shared in the Telling Tool Box during the first twenty-three days of school. Action figures and stuffed animals had a gender bias.

Thirty-eight percent of boys shared action figures where as none of the girls shared them.
Likewise, 57% of girls shared a stuffed animal whereas none of the boys brought them. Although both boys and girls shared types of jewelry, 44% of girls shared jewelry more than the boys.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of Students</th>
<th>Sports</th>
<th>Action Figures</th>
<th>Achievements</th>
<th>Jewelry</th>
<th>Stuffed Animals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.19: Gender differences in the objects shared in the Telling Tool Box

Thorne (1993) contends, however, that much of the research ignores the similarities found between the two genders. In educational settings girls and boys do play and work together. Although instances of girls and boys playing together by choice are rare, they do occur. Even when themes of sports and action-hero play were planned by the boys and dramatic play was planned by the girls, the fad of the Tamagotchi toy brought both genders together in our classroom. The tracings of conversations about this toy demonstrate how the material culture influences gender differences within the children’s peer culture.

**Tamagotchi Tracings**

11.30
Eliot: [I know what she’s sharing!
Ricky: Me, too!]
Lucy: This is my Tamagotchi that I got at Target, maybe a month ago.
Evan: He turned into a hamster if you want to see him…
Owen: [What the heck!
Zach: What are you guys doing?
Zach: You can see it at recess, you guys You can see at recess, you can see at recess!]
((Bodies are shuffling around on the carpet.))
Zach:  Lucy, Lucy, I got a Tamagotchi right here…((pointing to his pocket)) and he’s a star right now!
Lucy:  Oh yeah, we can still connect them even though they’re different.
Owen:  [No you can’t!]
Lucy:  It’s happened to me!
Zach:  [And David and I played Tamagotchi connection, once.]  
((Lucy calls upon Faith and Aaron for questions and/or comments.))
Faith:  I have a little, tiny Tamagotchi and it’s yellow, and mine is a pumpkin.
Zach:  [No I did, mine was a pumpkin, it used to be a pumpkin!]
Aaron:  I may get a camouflage Tamagotchi from Santa because I like camouflage a lot.
Lucy:  Tamagotchis are really popular!

Three days later, discussions about Tamagotchis occurred three times in Monday’s meeting (10:30, 19:02, 24:30).

12.5
(10:30)
Jason:  Um, I had something, oh yeah, I…I played with my Tamagotchi and it, I think it died, and then it born a boy, and then, it like, after like a couple of hours I came back to check on it and the boy was black but then I saw the guy was white and it was a girl?  It didn’t die!
Seth:  (Oh, you thought it did.)
Jason:  Well it did!  And then an egg popped out as a boy but when I came to check on it in a couple of hours…
Zach:  Did you have a white egg?
Jason:  Well, it born black and then it came white.
David:  That’s still a boy!  That’s a boy!  That’s what mine is!
Me:  Thanks for telling Jason that!
((The next sharer was Zach.))
Zach:  I played with my Tamagotchi and it transformed to this big, ugly glob.  And I have Slot, and one time I went to, um, this one place, and it’s a bet, and I went all the way to 9 points and I went, um, got a circle, circle, and circle two times and I got 9,000,000 points for it.
David:  [(No, you can’t get 9,000,000.)]

(19:02)
George:  I got my Tamagotchi yesterday and it, and it almost died.  I got about 100 points but it was with those circles and stuff.  But the
boy turned black and it was a big ugly blob.

Me: Maybe if we have an indoor recess you guys could have a big Tamagotchi meeting and share with each other what all of this means!

Lucy: [^That’s a great idea!]

(24:30)

Evan: And I got a Tamagotchi for my birthday and then I went and got a Tamagotchi, a big one, so now I have three. One of its names is EWH ((his initials)).

On that Friday, December 9, Jason shared his Tamagotchi. Zach and David informed him that he was hungry. Zach also made a personal connection and Carly offered a compliment. Figure 4.20 shows Lucy with her new Tamagotchi that she received from Evan during our Secret Santa Gift Exchange. Both boys and girls had an interest in this toy. The material culture influenced the peer culture in that children of the opposite sex played together because they had a common interest in the same toy.

Figure 4.20: Lucy showing off her new Tamagotchi

Throughout his research, Corsaro (2005) notes how he observed children that
spoke of and joked about gender in same and mixed sex groups during structured play activities as well as snack time. He noted how children are fascinated by the ideas of marriage in addition to the topic of babies. I specifically remember two instances mid-year that support Corsaro’s research.

It was the first Friday after winter break and Claire had brought her pet guinea pig in to share with the class. After briefly sharing a little about her pet, Claire began to call upon students for questions or comments. Ed asked, “Will she have babies or no?” Claire responded, “She doesn’t have any babies.” Ed then asked, “But will she have babies at once, maybe?” Claire replied, “I don’t know.” Jason interjected, “You have to be married to have babies.” Ed, with a puzzled look, replied, “Oh! Now I get it!

During this episode, Ed displays his desire to learn about how guinea pigs have babies. He knows that she is a girl, and that girls have babies, therefore, he questions why she hasn’t had them, or if she will have them just once. Jason assures Ed that she will not be having babies because she is not married, displaying his understanding from marriage comes before children. Ed, wanting to appear knowledgeable about the subject, acts as if he now understands why the guinea pig will not be having babies.

Once, when sharing about our weekends, Eliot explained, “I went to a wedding. It was very important. We stayed there for 90 minutes. It was hard to do. But we didn’t see them kiss or anything. I got a new comic book. We tried to get some cake but I don’t know what happened to it.” Furthermore he wrote about this in his journal (Figure 4.21). Although these episodes were brief, such discussions amongst peers are significant because it reflects the peer-culture knowledge on what constitutes the proper relationship between a man and a woman and the conception of a child. This knowledge impacts how
children look at their opposite-sex peers, and it encourages them to think about relationships with individuals of the opposite sex as being different than those relationships with individuals of the same sex (Corsaro, 2005).

Figure 4.21: Eliot’s journal entry from January 9, 2006

1/9/06

I went to a wadeing.
I stad ther
90 minite. I got a Comic Book and got a incratoBol Book. Shale and Core Shale got are maryed. They Dontent kiss. I got free sotd ther and chips and minam.

Social status. Traditional approaches for examining children’s social competence is through sociometric measures. These researchers (Asher and Hymel, 1981) use social assessments that involve the children making judgments about their peers. Although different methodologies may be used, each includes the use of classmates to classify how well they like their peers. An underlying assumption to this approach is that social
competence is determined by the individual, his or her assessed status, traits, and behavior.

Observational researchers (McDermott and Church, 1976) investigate the quality of social interactions among peers and use this information to interpret social competence. This approach, known as the social interactional perspective, centers on the skills needed to enter interactions successfully and to participate within them. These studies focus on the individual children and their strategies.

Most of the research conducted on different status groups has concentrated on the traits and behaviors of individual children and the impact this has on the child’s social competence. The dynamics of a classroom, however, play an essential role in children’s behavior within a group setting. From a sociocultural perspective, an interpretive analysis is necessary in order to understand the social relations of the participants in particular settings (Corsaro, 1985; Kantor et al., 1993; Rizzo, 1989). In defining contexts as cultures, sociocultural researchers view social interactions as having cultural meanings. The culture of a group is framed through the ongoing interactions of its participants (Kantor et al.). Therefore, a child’s social positioning is part of the flow of everyday life. Children attain their status through a complicated process that represents each child’s unique social history. Social actions are examined over time as the participants of the group construct cultural knowledge.

Classroom structures within the Informal Alternative Program differ from traditional classrooms because of the emphasis placed upon the relationships between the students, parents, and teachers. First and second graders are placed in multi-age classrooms. Therefore, children spend first and second grade with the same teacher.
Furthermore, in the fall, the group of returning second graders have pre-established relationships with their teacher and their peers. As the dynamics of the group, including the two grade level groupings, begin to develop, cultural routines and rituals are established, as well as common expectations, language, and patterned behaviors (Kantor et al., 1993). The experiences of the individual must be examined in relation to the group’s culture. Understanding the culture of the group is critical to understanding children’s social positions.

Researchers have provided mixed findings on the presence of dominance hierarchies, however they agree that power differentiation does exist amongst peers (Corsaro, 1985). In her research on status groups Ramsey (1991) identified four categories: popular, rejected, neglected, and controversial. Through my interpretive analysis of the power residing amongst the group, I have observed children fulfilling two positions of power: dominance and submission.

Dominance can represent the most popular students or the most controversial. On one hand, power can evoke admiration from peers or it may be viewed as power and aggression. Both popular and controversial students are well-liked within the peer culture. These students know and contribute to the cultural knowledge of the group and apply this knowledge as they successfully participate. Furthermore, these children typically have strong academic and athletic skills. Both may emerge as leaders, however the popular children are more positive and use social skills successfully. Controversial children have a major influence on the social dynamics of the classroom however they have a high activity level, use humor to attract their peers, and often engage in rule-breaking behaviors (Ramsey, 1991).
Although I had a higher number of boys than girls, I still was surprised to discover the most popular students within the classroom were boys. Perhaps the combination of girls within the classroom impacted their social positions. There were two sets of best friends, often exclusive to the other five girls. Three of the other five girls were constantly building access strategies to feel included amongst one of the sets of best friends. The other two were my only first grade girls and both of them developed friendships with peers outside of our classroom. The two boys that I viewed as classroom leaders that were Ed and Evan. Brief snippets of their interactions demonstrate their positive influence.

Early in the school year, Ed fell from the monkey bars and suffered a severe concussion. He missed the next six days of school. On August 30th Chase inquired about his return, “Um, well, what time is Ed coming in?” I responded that he would be arriving sometime mid-morning. I finished my thought by asking if some friends would be willing to stay in with Ed at recess because he was not allowed to run, due to his concussion. Hands shot up in the air and Eliot interjected, “Yeah I will, he was in preschool with me!” Evan added, “Sure, I’ll do it!” Ricky commented, “It will make him feel warm and fuzzy.” Ed, a very socially competent first grader, was missed by his peers and it was only the beginning of the school year. This demonstrates how a well-liked individual can positively impact a classroom community.

On Monday, September 19th Evan announced during morning meeting that his family had purchased four playground balls for our class to keep in our room. He proceeded to lead a discussion about a fair way for the children to distribute the balls each day for morning, lunch, and afternoon recess. Then in the second week of
November Tiffany was responsible for sharing calendar. After she finished Evan raised his hand and asked her, “Are you sure we have 47 straws for the 47th day of school?” Evan knew that Tiffany was not correct. He has a high level of social competence and knew how to approach the situation. Furthermore, he was a compassionate caring peer who was always thought of others. On October 10th when Maria shared the dog she had made at Build-A-Bear as an award for not sucking her thumb, Evan was the first to offer her a compliment for her achievement. When he was absent the second week of January, Eliot asked me on Monday morning, “Do I have to go to Mrs. H’s today without Evan? I really don’t want to!” These examples portray the positive position he had within our classroom and how much others depended upon him.

Other students, like David, provided many instances in which his power within the group dominated others. On Monday, September 19th when it was David’s turn to tell about his weekend, he shared, “I went to my grandma’s, um, I slept over there, and my sister pulled my pants down. I was sleeping and she snuck in and pulled my underwear off.” The group proceeded to giggle and laugh. Zach added, “My sister did it off the diving board once.” The room filled with stronger laughter. David continued to chuckle as other peers shared. I gave him a warning. After eleven more friends had shared, Chase, with silliness in his voice, explained, “When my dad, my mom and dad were sleeping, I snuck into their room and put on my dad’s underwear and he was chasing me around the house.” The laughter was abundant as Maria attempted to share. I quickly attempted to stop the silliness. We came back to Ricky, who had passed earlier, “I snuck into my mom’s room and I really took of her jammies.” As students began to laugh again, I interrupted, “I think we’re being silly now and that’s really inappropriate so I’m
going to say pass for you.” At that point, the room fell silent.

A central tenet of the sociocultural perspective is that social interactions become patterned and those patterns establish the expectations that individuals hold for each other within the group (Kantor et al., 1993). Thus, David’s attempt to gain the attention of his peers again in December became part of the group’s expectations of him. The children were sharing about their weekends and after Rees shared her birthday bear she called upon David for a question or comment: “My sister has that same bear and it has a Halloween shirt, a Christmas shirt, and a 4th of July shirt… and she likes to keep it with no clothes on.” David is a very strong student both academically and socially, yet he finds it amusing to say silly things that will draw laughter from the group.

On several occasions, first graders Mike and Aaron would entertain each other by sharing similar stories about their weekends (9.19, 11.7, 11.11) Throughout their sharing they would be laughing and talking with silly voices. These two often had to move away from each other during classroom meetings. The two boys had developed a close friendship and their behavior was socially encouraged by one another. Again, their interactions became patterned and those patterns framed the expectations they had for one another.

Ricky, the most time-intensive student, was very controversial. He is an only child at home and thrived on having this control at school. He was always worried about his needs, rather than those of his peers and got in trouble on a daily basis for interrupting others during our classroom meetings. He was the first student that I sent out of group (9.9) and was sent to the principal’s office several times throughout the year due to the number of times that he had to leave our meetings. There were two specific occasions
when Ricky became upset because he was no longer in control of the situation. On the sixteenth of November, Ricky got up from our circle after being redirected when he brought his stuffed animal with him for our class meeting. When he returned, George was sitting in his spot. “George, why did you steal my spot? That’s my spot!” I immediately interjected that no one has their name on any spot within our circle. On Friday, December 2nd I reviewed the daily schedule and I noticed that Ricky’s face became extremely red when I announced that we would save Ricky’s snack for tomorrow since he brought it to replenish what he forgot to bring the day before. Ricky buried his head in his lap and began to cry. After several minutes, he finally told me that he was extremely upset with me for not allowing us to have his snack.

Submissive social positions are fulfilled by children that have been either rejected or neglected by their peers. Although past research studies (Ramsey, 1991) have identified two profiles of rejected children: aggressive-rejected and withdrawn rejected, within the peer culture of my classroom I observed only a few children that had withdrawn themselves from the group. Rather than pushing peers away with aggressive behavior, these students had withdrawn as a result from not being liked by their peers. Usually, these students are rejected due to a lack of social competence or they have been identified as being “different” because of attributes such as race, culture, or class (Cazden, 1988; Ramsey).

I identified one first grade boy and one second grade girl as being socially rejected by their peers. Both of these children had traits causing them to differ from the rest of the group. One of these two children struggled with speech and language tasks. Social cues were not instinctual therefore the child demonstrated “contact incompetence,”
not knowing how to respond when others approached her (Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990). The other child, George, is of a different ethnicity than anyone else in the classroom. Our school is 97% White therefore it was quite a transition for George and his peers when he moved here in kindergarten. Although he is a very bright child with a strong academic record, his accent impacts his speech and his language barrier influences his vocabulary. During group, he often asked for the meaning of words and would frequently pass when sharing about our weekends. Figure 4.22 displays the number of times George passed during our shares about our weekends.

Children that feel neglected have little positive or negative impact on the social dynamics of the peer group. They may be considered shy but are not constantly rejected, like their unpopular peers. Neglected children are not disliked, but rather unnoticed. They exhibit very passive behaviors and frequently may be ignored because their presence is not visible compared to other socially active children (Ramsey, 1991). The child neglected most by the peer group was Anthony. Figure 4.22 displays that Anthony passed more than any other child during our shares about the weekends. Anthony passed more than he shared. On the fourth day of school I wrote about Anthony in my field notes:

8.29

*Anthony is exceptionally quiet during group. Often I observe him sitting in the fetal position, head down, knees tucked, eyes and ears tuned out, and disengaged with whatever is happening during the classroom meeting. I was very surprised today when I realized that he was listening to Aaron's share about his U-gi-oh cards. Anthony loves U-gi-oh. This incident demonstrates the power of the peer culture and the role of the children's interests.*
Passers of Weekend Sharing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Sharer</th>
<th>Percentage of Passers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rees</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ricky</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ed</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carly</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chase</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.22: Children’s passing percentages during classroom meetings

I made another note at the beginning of the second quarter.

11.14
Anthony is completely disengaged from group. His body is several scotches away from the rest of the circle, his eyes are in a gaze, and I question how much he is really hearing.

On December 19th I became quite frustrated with Anthony when at the end of our discussion about the changes in our daily schedule, he asked, “There’s no Fun Friday?” I immediately thanked those who were being good listeners and asked Ed to tell Anthony why there was no Fun Friday.

The social positions of the children within a peer culture vary in their stability
(Kantor et al., 1993; Ramsey, 1991). Although children’s personalities and behavior play an essential role in their social competence and status, the complex and locally constructed daily interactions of the group challenges each individual child to contribute to, understand, and access the group’s cultural knowledge. I question next year, when my first graders return to be second graders, the change in their social positions. Beyond the behavior of the individual child, the dynamics of a new group with new cultural patterns poses the possibility for change.

**Norms and Expectations**

When children begin school each August they enter a new culture. They are expected to learn how to participate in classroom meetings, eat snack, go to the bathroom, play outside at recess, and achieve tasks assigned to them. They learn specifically how to use certain areas of the classroom and to follow the rules that govern their behavior. The children participate in rituals, like sitting in a circle, sharing about our weekends, or sharing objects from home. The norms and expectations of the classroom are established between the children and the teacher during the first several weeks of school. Furthermore, these rules have consequences. These consequences hold children accountable for their behaviors. All of these rules are part of the school culture.

Against this canvas children paint their own scenery. As they interact with one another day after day, the children invent their own routines reflecting age-appropriate concerns and their perceptions of the adult world. The peer culture creates a sense of group identity, and embedded within this are norms and expectations.

Rizzo (1989) has identified several of the routines of elementary school-aged children that reflect Erikson’s (1963) stage of Industry versus Inferiority. Children are
most concerned about their mastery of skills, whether it is peer acceptance or academic competence. I discovered that their concerns for schoolwork and friendship are displayed through two individualized norms: fairness and competition.

*Fairness.* Six, seven, and eight year olds are very concerned about everyone treating them fairly. Until we established classroom jobs, I would hear remarks muttered under breaths as I called on volunteers to help with all of our classroom responsibilities. Statements, such as “This is Aaron’s third time to be line leader.” and “Why does Rees get to do calendar twice when I haven’t had a turn yet?” were very common during our classroom meetings. Fairness was also a factor when calling upon peers for questions and/or comments after a share. I frequently would hear Faith say to Owen, “Owen, put your hand down. You are not a girl and it’s a girl’s turn.” On the morning of our first guidance lesson, Evan shared with the group, “Uh, well, in the guidance room, there’s chairs to sit on but you cannot sit on them until you’re in third grade and we still have to wait one more year.” When it came time to decide who would tape the introduction to our Three Little Pigs puppet shows I decided to choose two people that were finished with their projects. As soon as I chose Faith and Owen, Eliot interjected, “He always gets it!”

As a result of our attempts to be fair, many of the issues that emerged were resolved with the children’s ideas. When Mike and Ricky could not figure out a fair way to decide who would design the wolf for their Three Little Pig puppet show, George, Maria, Owen, and Faith offered solutions, which included flipping a coin, rolling a dice, taking turns, and voting (9.13). We spent several class meetings discussing our ideas for the sharing schedule. As each child presented a new method, another child would
comment about how it was unfair. (9.29; 9.30). Chase even posed the questions, “What if you don’t have anything to share? That’s really not fair is it?” Furthermore, when Ricky was upset that we were having Carly’s snack instead of his snack, Zach suggested we vote (12.21).

When children from within the peer culture demonstrate a reputational bias for their friends, fairness is a common issue that is brought up on behalf of the friend’s defense. For example, when Anthony stormed in the room upset that the aides had made him throw away his walnuts because third, fourth, and fifth graders were having a walnut war, Owen shouted, “I saw Anthony do all of this hard work and I feel bad for him…it’s not fair!” (10.14).

Furthermore, ownership plays a role in issues of fairness for children of this age group. On Veteran’s Day we had a school-wide assembly and the children were given the opportunity to honor someone by saying their name and then placing a flag on the school grounds. Everyone one in our class chose to honor someone close to them that was fighting now in Iraq or had fought in a previous war. As we discussed the procedures for the assembly that morning, Evan asked, “When will we get our flags back?” I paused to think about my response and Owen added, “Yeah, when can we take them home?” Evan proceeded to ask me about his flag during the next two morning meetings. He believed it was only fair that if we were each given a flag, then we should get to keep it.

**Competition.** Competition was reflected all throughout the peer culture. Whether it was an organized sport with teams playing against one another or the sharing of an achievement, the children constantly felt the need to out do each other. In the second
week of school, I witnessed this competition emerge as Aaron shared about winning his trophy.

8.29

Aaron: Well…I got this from Indian guides because we were doing a paper airplane contest from the tower at the bottom…”

Ricky: [No, someone else did!]

Aaron: No, I did!…and I got farthest distance in the whole entire Scioto

Ricky: [(No, they got it farther than you!)]

Sixty percent of the students shared a symbol of achievement when they brought the Telling Tool Box to share items from home. Although ribbons and trophies were the two most popular items, other items included a karate belt, swimming certificate, Brownie sash, and Boy Scout badge.

On Friday, September 2nd as I reviewed the schedule Aaron raised his hand to ask, “Where do the advanced kids go to learn?” Taken back by his question, I carefully responded that everyone in our room was advanced, therefore we all learned together. At seven years of age, a child was inquiring about “advanced” kids. This made my heart sink. It made me realize how much these children understand about their academic abilities as well as how concerned they are about their achievement in school.

On a Tuesday in mid-October George brought his Rubix Cube for to share with the class.

George: This is my cube that I got from San Diego because we went there, I think, because there was a party there with candy and cake and this is where I got this. And it’s easy to make one color on one side. And see this…it’s easy to get one of these put together….See?

Owen: [You’ve almost got it all purple George!]

Me: George, do you think it’s possible for you to get each side all one color? It may take you a while, huh?

George: Yeah, it would take some time.

Owen: I could do that in like, twenty seconds!
George proceeded to call upon Zach and Owen. Owen shared a story about another teacher putting one back together in 10 seconds. Lucy shared that her Rubix Cube was impossible to solve. George replied, “Nothing is impossible…Lucy, I will tell you that this one is harder because you have some with colors already together…it has letters, too.” I then proposed that George bring his Rubix Cube to recess so that others may try to solve it. He responded with a challenge, “maybe in one minute, I could show you now…” The children timed George and cheered for him. George got one side purple and then stopped to show it to us. We briefly discussed the challenge of solving the entire cube.

Unlike the school culture that is governed by the teacher’s rules, collective identities within the peer culture create patterns of behavior that create their own norms. These norms represent the expectations of the peer group. The two norms that emerged within our peer culture, fairness and competition, not only represent Erikson’s (1963) stage of development for this age group, but also reflect themes of peer cultures: social participation and gaining control of others. In order for communal sharing to take place, a fair process must be established. Furthermore, fairness keeps other peers from gaining power within the group. Competition directly connects to these two themes because children are constantly competing for social participation and they feel empowered when they have control of others.

An Intersection of Childhood Cultures: The Potential of Possibilities

School is a temporary place. It is only open for seven hours a day and for less than nine months. Yet, day after day, week after week, and month after month, teachers
and students are expected to live together in a space no bigger than one’s living room. This leaves teachers the challenge of creating an environment where students feel they belong and where they want to be. We are social in every aspect of our existence. It is within a group that we come to value who we are and what we are capable of doing. Although classrooms are crowded places, classroom meetings provide the space and place for the culture of the school and the culture of the children to intersect as they are co-constructed.

Through their ethnographic study, Fernie et al. (1988) developed a view of the classroom culture as a “differentiated social world composed of two intersecting and overlapping realms of group culture” (Kantor & Fernie, 2003, p. 211). In accordance with Corsaro’s definition of peer culture and their own conception of school culture, Kantor and Fernie became interested in how these two cultures related to one another, a concept they defined as intersections. Classroom observations provided them with the insight that “the school culture and the peer culture spheres of the classroom were not separate domains of activity” (p. 212). These fields often converged and intersected in meaningful ways. Whether it was peer culture play or school culture events, through their negotiations, the teachers and the children co-constructed the everyday life of the classroom. The intersection of these cultures represents how teachers and children negotiate their classroom experiences. It is a balance of respecting the children’s peer culture while at the same time, respecting the dynamics and expectations of the school culture.

The notion of two spheres of life co-existing and overlapping as participants create a space to live together is a constant reminder that a child’s first school
experiences involves constructing both of these worlds. The peer culture involves the
development of social play levels (Christie et al., 1988), patterns of friendship
development (Howes, 1983), and a new life amongst a group of peers. School culture
introduces new group formats, the learning of academic skills, and the organizational
demands of the education institution. As teachers and students face the challenge of
creating a classroom culture that supports both the peer world and the school setting,
supportive practices initiated by teachers reveal how this knowledge impacts teaching
and learning.

The purpose of this research study was to investigate within a primary classroom
how children’s cultures are constructed and made visible through the event of a
classroom meeting. I have examined how classroom meetings fulfill the metaphor of a
window, offering a view of the construction of childhood cultures. Now I will explore
the educational possibilities that evolve from the intersection of the peer and school
cultures and how these educational possibilities demonstrate the impact of classroom
meetings on children’s academic and social development.

Classroom meetings offer the place where two spheres of the classroom world
often intersect. It is in this event that content threads of interests become visible to the
teacher and the students. Often referred to as the “living” John Dewey, scientist and
philosopher David Hawkins (1974) argued that educators need to help children “uncover”
knowledge through their social experiences, rather than merely “cover” a particular area
in order to quickly move on to something new in the curriculum. The Informal teachers
within the alternative program guide the children as they attempt to “uncover” knowledge
through two major means: one, providing multiple modes for presenting a study to the
children; and two, encouraging and supporting multiple modes of response.

One of the misconceptions about the program is the belief that the teachers do not present a "body of knowledge" to children as part of a study. Although the modes of presentation will be diverse, each study will have concepts and ideas that are presented in thoughtful ways by the teacher. There is even a time and a place for “telling” or more didactic teaching, as long as this kind of instruction is balanced by other entry points in the study and, more importantly, by opportunities for children to act on the teacher-presented knowledge to make it their own.

The broad goal in planning appropriate responses for any study is to create opportunities for children to operate in a constructive mode. When children are encouraged to represent their learning in multiple ways, different learning styles, interests, and developmental needs can be accommodated. Knowledge about a topic is not simply transmitted to children by the teacher. On the contrary, children need opportunities to formulate and construct their own understandings through real experiences, through oral and written language, through mathematical symbols, and through a variety of artistic means.

As Gordon Wells (1986) suggest, knowledge “has to be constructed afresh by each individual knower on the basis of what is already known and by means of strategies developed over the whole of that individual’s life, both outside and inside the classroom.” He further suggest

Teaching can no longer be seen as the imprinting of information to relatively passive recipients and then checking to see that they can correctly reproduce it. Instead, it is more appropriately characterized as a partnership in learning. The tasks of the partners are necessarily different as a result of their differing levels of expertise, but the goal is the same for the student and teacher alike. Without too much exaggeration, it can be described as the guided reinvention of knowledge.
Students must actively participate in forming the purposes of their learning activities. These purposes can be formed through observations of their surroundings, the knowledge of past experiences or others’ advice, and use of judgment. Instead of just learning whatever they want, they formulate plans from their own ideas. Following these steps, the teacher gives suggestions on ways to proceed. Then, students cooperatively plan a way to learn based on things that are intrinsically important to them (Dewey, 1958).

Essential to the Informal Program’s philosophy of teaching is the second principle: *Integrate thematic units of study and foster authentic learning opportunities.* Since our program is embedded within a public school system, we have the same district and state mandates. Sharing the same standards does not insinuate standardization. The Informal Curriculum Triangle (Appendix C) provides a framework for how the teachers within the Informal program approach the curriculum. At the heart of this program is a curriculum that is not only integrated, but also authentic. Speaking before a group of teachers in 1969, David Hawkins characterized authentic curriculum in this way:

> Everyone knows that the best times in teaching have always been the consequences of some little accident that happened to direct attention in some new way, to revitalize an old interest which has died out or to create a brand new interest that you hadn’t had any notion about how to introduce. Suddenly there it is. The bird flies in the window and that’s the miracle you needed (p. 93).

According to Dr. Fredrick Burton, former director of the program and current administrator at one of the district’s alternative schools, the emergent curriculum needs to be thought of as an inside-out process. It begins inside with the interests of the children, adults, or that “bird in the window” opportunity in the environment. How does it connect
to the standards and objectives of the school district? Dr. Burton claims that it not only connects to the curriculum, but goes beyond the curriculum. The emergent curriculum is not driven by a dry scope and sequence chart or by textbooks, characteristic of an outside process. Instead, the unique chemistry and passion of the children and teacher drive it.

*Emergent Curriculum*

The whole group classroom event of a morning meeting supports an emergent curriculum. It is in this space that content threads of interests become visible to both the teacher and the student. The teacher then weaves the district and state curriculum in with the interests of the students.

The sharing that took place each morning during our classroom meeting provided an opportunity for me to learn more about the interests of the peer culture. After negotiating our sharing schedule, on a daily basis, children shared objects from home and/or their life stories. These objects, whether was Rees’ new stuffed animal, Aaron’s new U-Gi-Oh card, or Jason’s signed football helmet, were all defined as artifacts (Corsaro, 2003). The sharing of these artifacts provided a time and place for content threads of interest to become visible. It was the eighth day of school and it was George’s turn to share the Telling Tool Box. One of the objects George chose to share was a flag book he had created in kindergarten. Each page within the book contained an illustration of a flag with the name of the country. Below is an excerpt from George’s share.

9.1

George: This is my flagbook that I got, I made this while I in kindergarten, but I didn’t make it here, because I made it in Cleveland, I just move here. There’s so much flags in here. I can show you a few. This flag is called Antigua. This is a very small country in North America. (3.0) And this flag is Brazil.

Ethan: [Oh, I know Brazil!]

George: What?
Eliot: I know Brazil.
George: It is the biggest country in South America. (2.0)
This flag is Canada.
Ricky: [I saw the Canada flag in real life!
Eliot: Me, too!
George: The Canada flag has a leaf in it….see it?]
Faith: (Uh, huh…)
Eliot: You colored that? Did you color that or was it already colored?
George: I did.
Seth: Wow, that’s good!
((George flipping through his book.))
Ricky: Hey, there’s another Cleveland and Ohio!
George: I just got a flag I want to show you…guess what’s this flag?
Owen: [Ohio!
Eliot: America!]
Me: Oh, let’s not shout out. George, why don’t you call on someone raising their hand.
George: Lucy!
Lucy: Ohio?
George: That’s right!
Ricky: No! No! That’s the baseball flag!
Eliot: It doesn’t look like it.
Me: That’s Ohio. Sh, sh, sh…Friends, this is the United States but that is Ohio. Ohio is the state that we live in and the United States is the country we live in. Does everyone see that up here? So we have two different flags.

The sharing of George’s flag book provided the opportunity for the class to learn more about the Ohio and U.S. flags. The intonation in the children’s inquiry demonstrated their interests in learning more about state and country flags. George’s flag book sparked additional conversations about our national and state maps as well as the purpose of the different symbols found on flags.

At the end of our classroom meeting on Thursday, September 22nd David gently reminded me that it was his sharing day. I quickly found a new seat on the floor, leaving an open invitation for him to sit in the chair. At home David had made a book about Cedar Point. Using his family’s home computer, David had printed off colored pictures
of advertisements containing individuals on some of the amusement park’s rides. He had strategically placed these photographs into a specific order from which he developed a story. At the end of David’s book, he added his own “About the Author” page telling more information about himself.

9.22.05
David: This is my book that I made about Cedar Point and I can share it?
Me: How about one page today?
David: Well, there’s only one page because I still need to finish it. I just started it.
Me: Oh, okay. ((David proceeds to share his story.))
David: This is the picture! ((As David shared his story about Cedar Point, I used his story as a model.))
Me: Show us your story. I would like to see how much you wrote. I am so impressed. This is a writing choice for us in here!
David: I printed these pictures off of the internet… ((David continues to share each page, explaining each ride and answers questions children ask about the ride.))

The children had just started writing their own stories and I wanted them to understand how pictures can serve as a pre-write, providing prompts and cues to the story. I asked him to read it to us, to show us his writing, and to explain what inspired him to write so much about this topic. As our meeting came to an end, Lucy and David continue to have their own conversation about the ride Max Air. Immediately, I was struck by vocabulary level in both Lucy and David’s oral language, and their ability to remain on one topic through several verbal exchanges. I continued to make reference to David’s story when children struggled to develop an idea for their own stories.

12.7.06
Zach: This is a book I made and I printed some it at David’s house and I am going to show you some of the pictures…
Nearly three months later, in early December, Zach shared a book that he had created at David’s house. Zach’s book demonstrated a class interest in shipwrecks, as his book contained different pictures displaying the *Titanic*. I have provided a selective transcription of Zach sharing his book. As he turned to each new page, Zach explained every picture. Eliot, Ricky, and Owen commented on the pictures throughout his share.

Zach: There’s a picture of the Titanic. And David and I found fake pictures of the Titanic. They were like little toys. That was hilarious. And um, um, we found this on AOL. If you seen the, the first movie, you would have saw a person, a dad holding a little girl going like this….and this is them, like, died on the Titanic.

Eliot: Is it the real Titanic? But there still alive, come back from the dead?

Me: Oh no, they are no longer living.

Zach: Yeah, this is it! If you have ever seen the Titanic exhibit, well, raise your hand if you’ve seen the Titanic exhibit…

(( The buzz of children talking increases as Zach raises his voice to talk over everyone.))

Ricky: Where? COSi?

Zach: Well, for these people who have never been to the Titanic exhibit, people who have never been to the Titanic exhibit at COSi…this is a model of it.

Owen: [Yeah and it shows you an iceberg!]

Ann Dyson (1997) refers to these situations as the “official” and “unofficial” peer worlds. Eliot, David, and Owen’s comments represent connected threads of dialogue that evolved into a conversation. Conversations reflect the children’s peer culture because they are bounded less by the school culture. These boys did not raise their hand and wait to be called upon before responding. Instead they spoke in turn, representing their communicative competence. When Zach “officially” asked for comments or questions the school culture became more visible and other children were able to express their personal connections. The interest in Zach’s book exhibits the children’s curiosity of
ships, shipwrecks, and ocean animals. Zach’s sharing sparked the beginning of an interest in non-fiction texts. Several of the second grade boys approached me about completing an independent research project on the Titanic. Our school librarian even commented on the demand in our classroom for books about ship wrecks. Zach and Jason formed a friendship, supported by their mutual interests in ocean life. In the spring the boys completed an independent research study on sharks. They read shark books together and gathered facts that they reported to the class. Whether it was David’s interest in roller coasters or Zach’s interest in the Titanic both of their books that they shared with the class displayed how the school and peer culture overlap.

On December 13th Maria eagerly shared her letter to Santa (Figure 4.23 and Figure 4.24). I was very excited when Maria asked before our meeting if she would have time to share her letter. We had been reading the picture book Dear Santa and her letter provided a great model to the writing of our Santa letters. Following Maria’s share, I used her letter as well as the picture book to model the writing process. I ask each child first to pre-write by creating a list for Santa. We then drafted our letters.
We were approaching the end of the third quarter and each morning after sharing the daily schedule I would ask the children if anyone had an announcement. On this particular morning Hope raised her hand and shared that she would be performing in a play next Wednesday afternoon with her after school enrichment drama class. Immediately, other children began to ask questions: “When is this play?” “Who is in it?” “What is the play called?” “Who is your character?” After we spent a few minutes having Hope answer our questions, I encouraged her to bring her play script to school so that we could help her practice her lines.

The following morning before our classroom meeting, Hope approached me to let me know that she had brought her script to school and questioned whether she should
bring it to our meeting. At that point, I knew it was important that I provide her with the opportunity to rehearse her lines. Furthermore, there was an abundance of interest in the play and I felt that this was another great opportunity for Hope to “recruit” an audience for watching her performance. Before she practiced her lines, I reminded the children that last year our class chose to do a play and the significance of learning your lines. All 22 children wanted to help Hope by fulfilling the role of the other character. I called upon Owen because of the empathy he displayed as he recalled his lead role in the last year’s play. Figure 4.25 shows Owen reading lines from Hope’s play script and Hope reciting her own lines. Following several minutes of reading through the script, we all clapped and encourage Hope for her last few days of practice. The children then expressed their immediate interest in doing a class play to end our study of Eric Carle books. I continued on with our classroom meeting, using that opportunity to read aloud and to focus on my own expression, modeling for the children how Hope used intonation in her voice as she rehearsed her lines.
Emergent Literacy

The reconceptualized view of literacy learning has moved from a traditional literacy perspective to an emergent framework. Halliday (1975) contended that learning language involves “linguistic, cognitive, and social strategies” (Miller, 2003, p. 130). K. Goodman and Goodman (1979) observed that young children use language as a means for making sense of their world. Learning to read and write are socially constructed activities and researchers examining emergent literacy have revealed that young children are active constructors of their literacy knowledge. The sociocultural perspective moves away from cognitive processes and centers on children becoming literate within the cultures of their communities and their schools (Moll, 1990). Literacy meanings are constructed within each of these settings through the “…values, practices, routines, and rituals of the members” (Miller, p. 131). Ethnographic researcher Judith Green and her colleagues (Dixon, Lin, Floriani, & Bradley, 2003) have unveiled how literacy is intertwined in the wider events of daily classroom life.

…In every classroom, teachers and students are constructing particular models of literacy and particular understandings of what is involved in learning how to be literate. That is, as teachers and students construct the norms and expectations and roles and relationships that frame how they will engage in everyday life in classrooms, they are also defining what counts as literacy and literate action in the local events of classroom life (Miller, p. 131).

The perspective that literacy and group life occur together presents a contextualized or “situated” view of literacy for the group and the individuals within the group (Green, Kantor, & Rogers, 1991). Thus, literacy is viewed a part of the flow of everyday life.
As children became members of the school culture, establishing the norms and expectations of classroom life, literacy became interconnected in the social history of the classroom. As children developed friendships in the peer culture, literacy became an important way to deal with issues relevant to their social worlds. Thus, school was not the only way to learn literacy; literacy was a way to learn school. The multiple literacies of our classroom were reflected through its daily life.

The cultural event of classroom meetings provided the opportunity for children to interact amongst peers. These interactions supported the development of children’s communication skills, formation of questions, and connection of thoughts. I have provided several examples of students exhibiting the growth in their ability to communicate and socialize with others.

Two days after the long winter break Claire inquired about bringing in her guinea pig for her sharing day. Without having spoken to Claire’s mom, I was surprised to see Claire arrive that Friday morning carrying her pet carrier. During our classroom meeting, I assisted Claire with getting her guinea pig, named Daisy, out her cage so that she could hold her as she shared her with the class.

1.6.06
Claire: Can I share now? This is my guinea pig and her name is Daisy…And that’s pretty much it, that’s all I know…And she likes to hide…And she likes to chew on paper. (4.0) I don’t know how old she is and I got her at the pet store.
Seth: Which pet store?
Claire: JUST A PET STORE! (h) And that’s all I know!
Claire: London?
Lucy: Did you get her at Pet Supplies Plus?
Claire: I’m not sure…Zach?
Zach: I used to have two guinea pigs but I gave them away about a month ago and my dog’s, and my dog’s middle name is Daisy.

Seth: (mutters) (That’s not a question.)

Me: Claire, have you called on someone or who are calling on next?

Claire: Ed?

Ed: Will she have babies or not?

Claire: What?

Ed: Will she have babies or not?

Claire: She doesn’t have any babies.

Ed: Well, will she have babies once maybe?

Hope: She might, we don’t know that!

Jason: Well, you have to be married to have babies!

Ed: Oh, now I get it!

Me: How about one other friend or two other friends…I don’t know how many you have called on. (5.0)

Claire: Rees?

Rees: I think she’s really cute!

Me: Oh, that’s a nice compliment Rees!

Claire: Hope?

Hope: Well, how big was she when you got her?

Claire: I had one other guinea pig. Her name was Maisy and she died…Well, she had a bad paw and she was laying down and she got sick, we had to bury her so we had to get a new one.

Ricky: Do you like him better?

Claire: It’s a her not a him!

((Owen shares a personal connection to his hamsters.))

Me: How about a couple more questions or comments and then we will draw popsicle sticks to hold her.

Claire: Um, Jason?

Jason: How, how, how long have you had her?

Claire: Uh…I don’t know, like for a thousand years, I don’t know!

Me: Oh (h), you have not had her that long! Was it before you were born or can you not remember?

Claire: (h) I can’t remember!

Owen: [Cause if you had her…did you bury the other one that died? How old were you…

Seth: Did you have to wrap it up in a towel?]

Jason: How old were you when you buried the old one?

Seth: (I hope it was the old one and not the new one.)

Claire: How old when I buried her?

Me: Were you really little, do you remember it?

Claire: No, I don’t know?

At age three, Claire was diagnosed with a mild auditory processing condition.
Claire currently has an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) for speech and language. She is a very emotional child, struggles with oral vocabulary, and has a difficult time understanding the social cues of other children. This share was a real challenge for Claire and she persevered. The reviewed transcript displays there were many questions asked to which she responded. Furthermore, I was just as proud of Jason and Owen who attempted to assist Claire in understanding Jason’s question about how old she was when she got Daisy. At times, her tone was cold yet silly, however, I was proud of her for attempting a reply to each child’s question. Furthermore, I was fascinated by the children’s level of engagement, most especially those with very impulsive behavior.

The ritual of sharing, discussed earlier in this chapter, reveals the school culture as it reflects what I bring to group meetings as a teacher of Informal pedagogy. My interactions with the students served as a “scaffold” (Cazden, 1988). I supported their efforts to gain social competence by modeling what they must learn in order to successfully participate. The objects children chose to share, however, demonstrated what they bring to classroom meetings, their peer culture. Past research (Cazden) on language discourse has focused on the role of the teacher. I have discovered, however, that the intersection of the two cultures provides children with the opportunity to “scaffold” one another. Social interactions amongst peers supports the development of children’s writing skills. More specifically, the intertextuality that occurs during a child’s share serves as a resource to the child as s/he constructs text in written form.

As a child shares his or her connected thoughts during a classroom meeting and others become involved in sharing additional interpersonally related message units, the interactional units that form provide intertextual resources for the child’s writing. Our
morning meetings on Fridays and Mondays differed from the other days because I
provided children with the opportunity to share about their weekend plans and/or
experiences. Children’s use of their verbal language skills supported their efforts to
construct and write complete thoughts.

I have provided an example from Ricky’s journal. This writing sample came
from the beginning of the year when all first graders struggle with writing. It was a
Friday morning in early September and the children had just begun sharing about their
weekend plans. Jason, the second child to share explains:

Jason: Um…after school, at like, I don’t know, like 6:30 tonight I
am going to a birthday party and it’s like, very scary,
because, um my dad might see me, because it’s at Donatos,
right across from our restaurant, and after that, I’m, um,
going to the Golden Bears football game…

(Before Jason can end his sentence, Ricky interjects.)

Ricky: [^Oh! You’re going to see Peter?]

Me: How about Ricky? What’s your plans for the weekend
Ricky? Do you want to tell us what you’re doing tonight?
It sounds similar to Jack’s plans?

Ricky: Yeah! I’m going to the football game.

Me: Who are you going with? Mom and dad?

Ricky: Yeah!

((Ed proceeds to pass and Chase shares that he, too, is
going to the football game.))

Chase: Um…I’m going to the Golden Bear’s football game…

Ricky: [Do you know Peter?]

Chase: ((He has a puzzled, perplexed look on his face as he shakes
his head no.))

Me: I don’t know who Peter is…is he a football player?

Evan: No! He’s my neighbor. He’s Peter. He goes to Burbank.

Me: He’s a student and he’s going to the game?

Ricky: Yeah! And he broke his arm yesterday.

Jason: Peter broke his arm yesterday? I didn’t know that!
Once everyone shared about their weekends, we dismissed from group and the children returned to their tables to write in their journals. Figure 4.26 displays what Ricky wrote during this 15 minute writing session.

The two sentences that Ricky wrote in his journal evolved from the connections he made as Jason and Chase shared about going to the football game. When it was Ricky’s turn to share he had already informed us of his plans to go to the game with Peter, yet he did not mention Peter’s name. While both of the other boys were sharing, Ricky interjected to share that he was going to the game with his friend Peter. All 14 words that Ricky wrote in his journal were shared during our group meeting. At that time, Ricky was a young six year old facing the challenges of maturity and low reading-writing skills. He did not qualify for the reading recovery program, however demanded individual support with writing tasks. Ricky’s strength is his strong verbal language. Ricky’s journal demonstrates that there is a direct connection between the construction of thoughts when a child shares, the child’s interactions with his or her peers, and the child’s literacy development.
The sharing that takes place during classroom meetings does not support just one child’s literacy development. Another first grade boy, Aaron, also struggled as a reader and writer. Aaron had a very strong work ethic, however, his fine motor skills made writing a difficult task. Often he would become frustrated with himself because he could not reread his own writing. In the fall it was common for the students to share about the college football games. Sitting next to his best friend Mike, Aaron was the second child to share his plans for the upcoming weekend.

11.11
Mike: Um, I’m going to Aaron’s house tomorrow to, um, to play.
Aaron: Mike is coming over for the football game and he may bring his Nack Nacks. And that’s all.
Figure 4.27: Aaron’s journal entry from November 11, 2005

 halls 11/11/05
 Mike is
 comeing
 ovr to wos the
 fubogam and Mike
 is breing. His
 nan

Figure 4.27 shows the five lines that Aaron wrote in his journal that morning.

Aaron’s writing directly resembled what he verbally shared during our meeting. Being able to construct his thoughts supported his writing because of the effort he had to give in sounding out words and forming his letters. Therefore, the cultural event of a classroom meeting, where components of the school and peer culture are constructed, demonstrates how children’s own discourse supports each other’s literacy learning.

*Authentic Assessment*

Classroom meetings not only support classrooms academically, but also provide teachers with the opportunity to assess each child’s social development. They provide an alternative authentic assessment of social skills. In the United States the practice of assessment is often thought of as synonymous with testing. Throughout the
last century, assessment in American schools has been dominated by the practice of giving tests to determine whether children know what they were supposed to learn. These tests have taken many forms and are now administered across districts, states, and even the entire nation.

Although there is little standardized testing in American preschools, the accelerated use of standardized tests has reached down to the kindergarten level, impacting decisions concerning whether these young children will be promoted to first grade (Harris & Longstreet, 1990). According to the New York Public Interest Research Group (1989), 75% of New York schools surveyed test their kindergarten students. By the second grade, 93% of their students are tested. Furthermore, there is anecdotal evidence from early-childhood educators that the recent testing conducted within the primary years of schooling has significantly impacted the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten curriculum (Seidel, 2001).

Over the past two decades there has been an explosion of testing in the United States. In the current climate of dissatisfaction with public education, standardized testing has been the operational definition for educational achievement, and raising test scores has been equated with educational improvement. As the United States continues searching for an “answer” to educational reform, the increased demand for accountability has nearly reached its pinnacle.

Many policymakers support a national system of standards and examinations. On January 8, 2002, President George Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (also known as the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act, ESEA) that has a 12-year goal to make every student “proficient” in state reading and math tests. By the end
of this school year each state has to administer annual reading and math tests of its own
design in grades 3-8, and once between grades 9-12 (NEA Today, 2002). According to
the National Commission on Testing and Public Survey (National Commission on
Testing and Public Policy, 1990), each year American elementary and secondary school
students take 127 million standardized tests mandated by states and districts (Harnisch &
Mabry, 1993). Early childhood programs as well as the public schools must prove their
effectiveness to their constituencies. In an effort to meet these demands for
accountability, like Ohio, each state is now required to have academic content standards
identifying “what every child should learn and know” at each grade level. As a result,
students within the state of Ohio are spending more and more of their school year
completing standardized tests.

As I examine the Ohio Content Standards for kindergarten through grade three I
am dismayed by the lack of content standards addressing children’s social and linguistic
development. Time is one of a teacher’s most precious commodities. And yet, the federal
and state governments fail to provide a social curriculum. Thus, classroom meetings are
not perceived as instructional events. However, from a sociocultural perspective,
classroom meetings are more than instructional events. The critical events that take place
during these meetings do not unfold from a scripted lesson or a topic planned by the
teacher. These meetings reflect the dynamics of the school culture, the peer culture, the
pedagogy of the teacher, and the teacher’s image of the child. The teacher serves the role
as a facilitator and participant of the conversation and events that emerge from the
children. Classroom meetings provide the foundation for establishing children’s social
development.
Although the state does not deem social development essential enough to be viewed as one of the disciplinary content standards for elementary students, teachers within the Informal Alternative Program view it so important that it is the first section of the Informal Progress Report. *Community, Compassion, and Civility* intentionally appears on the first page (Figure 4.28) of the Informal Progress Report because research by Howard Gardner at Harvard and Robert Sternberg at Yale clearly demonstrates that the descriptors in this section often are the most important and most overlooked indicators for “successful intelligence.” This intelligence is defined as the kind of intelligence that often “makes or breaks” the effectiveness of adults working in the world. It is a section that is consistent with the ideals of progressive education and representative of the program’s foundational principles (Appendix A). Together, the objectives within this section represent the child’s social competence. Teachers mark each objective with

![Figure 4.28: Page one of the Informal Progress Report](image)
a descriptor (i.e. emerging, developing, achieving, and extending) that is used on the
developmental continuum throughout the progress report. The marks for Community,
Compassion, and Civility are based on teachers’ alternative, authentic assessments.

Objective, standardized, multiple-choice tests have been the dominant mode of
assessment in the United States partially because these tests are efficient, technically
reliable, and correlate positively with other student achievement measures. The serious
cconcerns about the impact and effect of these tests on children have generated a spark of
interest in alternative assessments of student learning (Hanrisch & Mabry, 1993). The
assumption that a single test administered once during a school year can accurately reflect
the breadth and depth of student knowledge is under attack (Harris & Longstreet, 1990).
Among the alternative assessments most widely used are open-ended questions, authentic
assessments, and portfolio collections (Harris & Longstreet). Specifically, authentic
assessment is defined as the “process of observing, recording, and otherwise documenting
the work that children do and how they do it as a basis for educational decisions that
affect those children” (Puckett & Black, 1994, p 22).

Classroom meetings serve as a resource for alternative, authentic assessments.
The most common and accessible tool for teachers is observation. Observations can be
performed in a variety of ways. By counting the frequency of certain behaviors, taking
detailed notes, or listening to audio transcriptions, teachers can begin to reveal patterns in
children’s social development. Figures 4.22, 4.29, and 4.30 display patterns of social
interactions found amongst the children of my classroom.

Each of these charts reveals information about the children’s social patterns.
Figure 4.22 identifies the percentage rate for the number of times each child passed when
we shared about our weekend experiences. Anthony, a second grade boy, passed more than he shared. Furthermore, George, a first grade boy, passed 44% of the time. I find it interesting that of the ten children that passed, only three were girls. It is clear from this chart that the boys within my room passed more the girls. Of the top four passers, Mike and Rees both are very shy and quiet. Just nine days into the school year, I wrote in my field notes about George’s repeated passes.

9.2
I am beginning to see a connection between George having nothing to share and his lack of ideas for his journal. Does he really have nothing to say or does he not feel what he has planned for the weekend is “good enough” to share with the class?

9.9
Check out what George shared about his church...Once again, he faced writer’s block. I am noticing a beginning pattern with him passing during our sharing about the weekend as if he has done absolutely nothing "worthy" to share about or write about in his journal. Is this an influence of our culture on the Chinese culture?

I started drafting interview questions on September 9th and revised my questions as I observed noticeable patterns of passing. On October 17th I recorded Anthony, George, and Mike passing again. I chose to interview Anthony, George, and Rees during the third quarter.

3.10
Me: How do you feel about participating in group meetings?
Rees: I like it!
George: What’s that mean...to participate?
Anthony: Sometimes...it’s okay.
Rees: Well, sometimes I get a little bit nervous.
Me: What are your thoughts about sharing about our weekends?
When we come in on Monday and share about our weekends?
George: Well...I don’t think we should share on Fridays....we don’t even know. Like when we share something on Friday we don’t even know if we’re really going to do it!
Anthony: Yeah, the same as George.
Me: Well, what about on Mondays though…I ask you about Mondays?
George: Yeah, I… pretty like that.
Rees: On Mondays you have already had the weekend and you can tell something you did.
Anthony: It’s okay…I don’t really care.
George: Well, I feel um, hat we shouldn’t share on Friday just on Monday. On Monday we already had our weekend so we know what to share because it, um, already happen.
Anthony: Today, well if today we shared at group I would have been able to say something.
Me: You know that I tape record our meetings everyday and I listen to them when I go home at night and sometimes I notice that you choose to pass and I was wondering if you could tell me why.
Rees: I don’t have any ideas.
Anthony: Well, like, sometimes I relaxed only at home on the weekend.
George: Yeah, because a lot, I don’t really go on vacations or anything, because, very much, very often. Because I like, just go on one vac…, do something one month.

At this point, all three students recognize that they frequently pass during classroom meetings. I have shared with them that I notice it is more of a challenge for them to select a writing topic when they have passed in group. During this next interaction, we discuss the value of one’s thoughts and the significance of having writing ideas in place.

Me: Well, um, something else I wanted to add is that I think it’s important you realize that it doesn’t have to be something special you did, it can just be anything you did…or I would say like I did laundry or I did my homework, or I rode my bike around the block…Sometimes when you pass, do you think it’s harder for you to go back and have a writing idea since you passed in group or…is it easier for you or harder for you when you have passed in group?
George: Harder! Yeah, I just do one thing each month and then I just relax at home…
Me: But could you write about relaxing at home? Of course! How could we, maybe help you think of writing topics? Do we always have to write about our weekends? Could you write about what you ate for breakfast this morning?
((I proceed to model for George how I could write about my breakfast using a lot of supporting details. I end our interview by
sharing it with George.))

Me: Do you see how you could write about all of that? Even though it doesn’t seem like it’s important, it’s important, do you know why? Because it’s your writing and it’s always important – never forget that!

From my small group interview with Anthony, George, and Rees, I discovered that Anthony’s laid back personality contributed to his neglected behavior. Very few things seemed to bother him and he seemed to feel indifferent about sharing. Rees, on the other hand, was very much a pleaser. She was a second grader and this was her second year in this classroom, however, her shy personality still made her feel nervous when sharing in front of the entire group. George, a first grade student of Chinese ethnicity, placed a different value upon what he shared than the rest of his peers. Furthermore, his lack of sharing ideas was carrying over into his journal writing. Our conversation during the interview demonstrates the power of socialization and its impact on children’s academic development.

Figures 4.29 and 4.30 examine the frequency of children’s verbal exchanges over the course of three quarters. I analyzed five classroom meetings from each quarter, identifying each verbal exchange made by every student. The chart in figure 4.29 displays the change of frequency from the first through the third quarter. It is evident that all of the children increased their average number of verbal exchanges from the first through the third quarter. In Figure 4.29 I identify the specific change in frequency for each child from one quarter to the next.

These charts provide me with additional insight about each child. For example, specific children, like Faith, Jason, Owen, and Ricky had dramatic increases in their
number of verbal exchanges, where as others, like Rees, Claire, George, Anthony, and Mike had such a low number of verbal exchanges they had very little to zero change in frequency. The frequencies reveal detailed information about each child’s social needs. I found it most surprising that those children whom were best friends (i.e. Aaron and Mike, Faith and Lucy, David and Zach) had varying levels of change in frequency from the first to the third quarter. For example, Lucy only increased by seven where as Faith increased by fifteen. Furthermore, Zach only increased by two even though David’s frequency increased over the three quarters by eight. Children with the highest change in frequency (Faith, Owen, and Ricky) were the most controversial. Those with the lowest were mostly ignored or even, rejected. All of the information gathered by my observations is essential for supporting these children’s social development. The charts display how children’s social competence is more than a static set of abilities.

Children’s social success and status within the classroom is a complex dynamic process in which the children are active and competent in interpreting their positions, reading social cues, and accessing cultural knowledge throughout the course of the year across different contexts. As George and Anthony positioned themselves in the everyday life of the classroom, a social history of these two children in relation to the group was also constructed. This social history impacted George and Anthony’s experiences as it influenced the expectations the group held for both of these boys. Although observations of the cultural patterns within the group serve as an authentic useful tool for understanding children’s social positions, it is not enough for fostering the individual
Figure 4.29: The frequency of verbal exchanges by each child over a five day duration each quarter.
### Table 4.30: Change in the average of verbal exchanges by each child across all three quarters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child’s Name</th>
<th>Change from 1st to 2nd Quarter</th>
<th>Change from 2nd to 3rd Quarter</th>
<th>Change from 1st to 3rd Quarter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>+ 4</td>
<td>+ 2</td>
<td>+ 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliot</td>
<td>+ 9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>+ 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>+ 2</td>
<td>+ 5</td>
<td>+ 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rees</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>+ 7</td>
<td>+ 8</td>
<td>+ 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>+ 3</td>
<td>+ 6</td>
<td>+ 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>+ 2</td>
<td>+ 6</td>
<td>+ 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>- 1</td>
<td>+ 1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan</td>
<td>+ 2</td>
<td>+ 6</td>
<td>+ 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>+ 3</td>
<td>+ 9</td>
<td>+ 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seth</td>
<td>+ 4</td>
<td>- 1</td>
<td>+ 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>- 3</td>
<td>+ 4</td>
<td>+ 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>- 1</td>
<td>+ 6</td>
<td>+ 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>+ 1</td>
<td>+ 1</td>
<td>+ 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zach</td>
<td>+ 2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>+ 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>+ 4</td>
<td>- 3</td>
<td>+ 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiffany</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>+ 3</td>
<td>+ 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen</td>
<td>+14</td>
<td>+ 1</td>
<td>+ 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ricky</td>
<td>+ 2</td>
<td>+ 15</td>
<td>+ 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carly</td>
<td>+ 1</td>
<td>+ 2</td>
<td>+ 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>+ 3</td>
<td>- 3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Ed and Hope are not included due to number of absences first and second quarter.

Figure 4.30: The change in the average of verbal exchanges by each child across all three quarters
differences found amongst peers. Cazden (1988) reminds us that “…one of the most important influences on all talk is the participants themselves – their expectations about interactions and their perceptions of each other” (p. 67).

Through his efforts to adapt to a new culture, George struggled to understand the cultural knowledge of the group. On the other hand, Anthony chose not to adapt his behavior to “fit” the existing theme of the social context. Anthony’s quiet, laid-back personality kept him from being noticed. At times when the context of the conversation appealed to his interests, he would access the cultural knowledge of the group. As the teacher, I must ask myself how can I construct a democratic community that nurtures the social competence of children like Anthony and George? Whether it was providing time for elements of the peer culture that interests Anthony to emerge or spending several weeks in January learning about the celebration of the Chinese New Year to expose ourselves to George’s culture, the social competence of both children reflect the demands for a social curriculum.

Social Curriculum

Educators know that social skills are not a checklist to be mastered by the end of preschool so that students can enter elementary and focus solely on academics. Instead, social skills are the skills children will continue to acquire and refine throughout their lives. At every age, children deserve to have opportunities to practice and define these skills both individually and as part of a group. Teachers have long known, and researchers are now beginning to confirm, that social skills are not just something to be taught so that children behave well enough to get on with what is deemed “important” according to state and federal mandates. Social skills are intricately entwined with
cognitive growth and intellectual progress. They are essential to academic achievement. Social skills must be modeled, experienced, practiced, extended, and refined in the context of social interaction. Classroom meetings provide a forum for this to happen.

*Social models.* Teachers greatly influence children’s social development by modeling positive social behaviors with their students. A teacher that uses an overall approach of respect and caring will observe the same approach from the students. This will be reflected through the children’s interactions with the teacher and their peers. Not only do children observe and learn specific social skills, they, too, teach these to each other and begin to fulfill the role of social models (Ramsey, 1991).

During the first several weeks of the school year, the school culture dominates the classroom culture as routines are established. Earlier in my discussion on the impact of the school culture, I noted how the norms and expectations of classroom meetings as well as the rituals, which include sitting in a circle and sharing, each represent the influence of the school culture. These routines support the teacher’s efforts to model positive social behaviors. On a daily basis at the beginning of our classroom meetings I would first thank friends for making good seating choices as well as greet everyone. Throughout classroom meetings, I would constantly offer praise to students that were using positive social behaviors. This praise included phrases such as: “Thank you for waiting patiently.” or “I like that everyone’s eyes are on the sharer.” When children impulsively interrupted or interjected their thoughts I often would state, “I am ignoring you because you are interrupting me” or “I am going to look for a hand in the air if you have a comment or a question please.” When I examined children’s inquiry, I discovered the difficult challenge students face as they try to distinguish between a question, comment,
and personal connection. Throughout the year as children called upon their peers when they were finished sharing, children would interchangeably use the words question and comment. Frequently the “comments” shared were personal connections remembered through the telling of one’s own story. Often these connections provided traces of conversation about a similar experience.

The foundation for good social behavior is exhibited in the daily routines as well as other social situations that were discussed during classroom meetings. During our classroom meeting on November 18th we had a discussion about Ohio State playing Michigan and our visit to a third grade room to see their Fairy Tale Museum.

The morning message read:

Good morning friends. Today is Beat Michigan Friday or 11-18-05. This morning we will visit the third grade Fairy Tale Museum. What is a fairy tale?

As I read through the morning message, Ricky interjected:

Ricky: [Beat Michigan Friday? That might have made Maria sad.]
((Maria, dressed head to toe in maize and blue, had professed her love for Michigan and Ricky was concerned that I had just hurt her feelings. I attempt to explain good sportsmanship.))

Me: It’s just kind of like, like, you have to let that go. Like, they’re just being funny because they are rooting for their team. I can’t take that seriously and let that hurt my feelings. But at the same time, you have to have good sportsmanship which means if you are cheering for Ohio State and you see someone wearing Michigan, you don’t want to be the one that walks up and says something mean to them. Okay? We just have to be careful that we don’t hurt each other’s feelings. And if you’re a person that feels your feelings are being hurt, you have to understand that we all must have good sportsmanship.
((Our conversation switches topic as children respond to my question within the morning message, “What is a fairy tale?” I then review my expectations for their behavior.
during our visit to the fairy tale museum.))

Me: When we go to the fairy tale museum, we are only there for 15 minutes and this is what I want to see… I want to see you engaged…with a third grader. And what I mean by that is that you are listening and you are asking questions… So if they give you a presentation and they’re like, ‘I chose to research Cinderella’ and maybe have something on display… I want you to ask them questions like, ‘tell me some more things about Cinderella.’ I don’t want to see anybody being silly because this is not a time for you to be talking to a friend in here. I want you to meet a new friend. I want you to be focused on someone’s presentation, please be respectful when they’re talking and if you have a question, raise your hand and maybe they can answer your question and you will learn some things… Don’t stand and roam or you won’t have time to talk to somebody. Just walk up to someone and say, ‘What’s your project about?’ What would be something polite to say to someone when you leave?

Rees: Thank you for showing us around.
Claire: Good-bye!
Evan: It’s nice seeing you!
Owen: Nice pictures that you drew.
Zach: It was nice meeting you!
Faith: I had a lot of fun!
Me: ^Great ideas! I know that all of you will be very polite!

These were two heavily discussed topics just within one classroom meeting. As a teacher, I believe it is essential that children explicitly learn appropriate social skills. They must be modeled, practiced, and experienced, before they can be extended and refined. Even at the beginning of December I found myself supporting children’s efforts to learn good social skills. On the first of December I had to ask Tiffany to reread the morning message because Aaron and Anthony were not making eye contact with the easel. Furthermore, half way through the meeting I had to ask Zach and David to leave group after already reminding them that there is an appropriate time and place for being silly.
Another event requiring my efforts to model social behavior was the first day that Hope joined our classroom. Following our routine when someone new is joining us, I modeled introducing myself and then the students introduced themselves, too. I then read aloud the book, *The Brand New Kid*. Following the reading, I challenged students to think about how they could be a good friend to Hope.

1.4

Me: I want to let you know that the reason I chose this book is because I want you to think during the day about how you could be a good friend to Hope. Okay? Whether you help her find where the restroom is, find the lunch line, or find a seat to each lunch, or maybe you just share a good book with her, or just say something nice to her, or introduce yourself to her later, or ask her to play with you at recess...those are all things you could do to make her feel welcomed in our classroom because I think it’s pretty special that we got to have her in our class.

Owen: Maybe we could show her around the school grounds.

Me: Yes Owen, we can do that on our way to Guidance this morning!

There were other instances throughout the year that reflected the children’s efforts to model appropriate social skills. I cited many of these incidents in my discussion about how children regulate their talk and behavior as they are influenced by the school culture and learn to become Informal students. On a daily basis as children learned the routines of our classroom meetings, many of their words resembled my own behaviors. For example, before a child would share, s/he would thank those that were ready, waiting patiently. Children learned how to use their own personal connections to enter a topic of conversation and would offer praise to others when deemed appropriate. Children provided compliments to one another as they shared, like when George shared his flag book and Carly said, “I like what you shared in the Telling Tool Box.” Furthermore,
Evan added, “I really like the flags and the Canada one with the leaves is really good.” They offered these compliments to adults as well. For example, on October 26th Owen said to Lucy, “Oh yeah, your mom and dad made the Halloween Party really fun last year…I’m sure it will be like that again this year, too!”

The Northeast Foundation for Children has developed the Responsive Classroom approach to teaching and learning (Kriete, 2002). Based upon seven core values listed in Appendix E, at the heart of this approach is tenet number one: *The social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum* (Kriete, p. 4). Classroom meetings provide several important contributions to social development: Meetings set a tone for respectful learning and establish a climate of trust, meetings motivate children by addressing two human needs, the need to feel a sense of belonging and the need to have fun, and meetings provide a repetition of events that create classroom routines enabling extraordinary moments to occur (Kriete).

Whether it is the beginning of the school year or the beginning of a school day, beginnings are critical, for how we begin each day in our classroom establishes a tone for learning and reflects what and whom we value, our expectations for how we will treat one another, and our beliefs about teaching and learning. I often share with friends whom are not in the teaching profession that our careers are very different, for the moment a child walks through the classroom door, whether you’re ready or not, their learning begins. Children observe who notices them when they enter the room. They notice if you personally greet them, if you observed their new haircuts, or saw the newly formed scrapes from their bicycle wrecks. As a second grader, David knows that if he shares, “I may have to get rid of my snake but I don’t want to talk about it” there will be a
group wanting and willing to support him as he deals with this sadness. Furthermore, he can trust that no one will “make” him talk about it. Starting the day together, face-to-face, in a circle, welcoming each other with news and announcements, listening to each other’s voices, and communicating as a caring group demonstrates the power of socialization.

As an Informal teacher establishing a democratic classroom, I want the students to know that they, too, have rights, and that their voices are heard. On November 14th Maria questioned why my name was not on the sharing list. Although I was the teacher and held the authority, the students still viewed me as part of their group. Establishing a high level of respect allows everyone the comfort to take risks. Learning cannot occur without taking risks and risks will not be taken without trust. Classroom meetings support a classroom culture of respect and trust.

Classroom meetings fulfill children’s sense of belonging. It was third day of school and we were making cards for Ed while his stay in the hospital continued as he recovered from his fall from the monkey bars. It was not what I had planned for the third day of school, but I knew it was too important. I wanted to let Ed know that we had not forgotten him; he belonged there at school with us. All of us need to feel that we belong and that we are valued for what we bring to the group, and this is especially true of six, seven, and eight year-old children.

On December 16th Eliot reentered the room from using the restroom and interjected, “What were these shares?” pointing to those children he did not get to hear when he was out of the room. I quickly summarized what each of the students had shared to catch him up on what he had missed. He felt the need to know what his peers had
planned for the weekend. One knows that there is trust when a student, like Abby, feels comfortable enough to announce that she is feeling sad because she feels that she never receives letters in her message box (12.2). In that moment, Abby felt that she was no longer included. She was longing for that sense of belonging.

When Hope arrived in January, Maria repeatedly asked me when I was going to add her name to our sharing schedule (1.9). Furthermore, it was routine within our classroom to introduce ourselves whenever anyone new entered our classroom community. Although I initially modeled this for the children, it was the children that usually initiated the routine whenever there was a visitor joining our circle (12.15).

Perhaps some of the most memorable moments of the school year occurred during our classroom meetings because it was fun for the children. The children often heard me say that we can have fun without being silly. However, fun does create engagement and fascination (Kreite, 2002). It is also playful and light-hearted. It was fun when Maria brought her baby niece on her share day. She was only a toddler, yet the children laughed and were mesmerized by her movements. They chuckled when she sneezed and they were enthralled with her interest in my digital recorder. George even shared his theory that babies like to play with shiny things.

Another element of surprise was added when we drew for our Secret Santa Exchange to be held at our winter break party. The second graders anxiously shared with the first graders about our classroom ritual and the children loved learning more about each other as they tried to gather ideas so that they would know what to get their Secret Santa. On the day of the winter break party, the children sat in our circle and each child took turns guessing who their Secret Santa was before opening his or her present. No gift
was too small and everyone appreciated not only feeling the sense of belonging, but also the spirit of giving.

The repetitive routine of an event like a classroom meeting is full of events that may seem mundane or normal. However, the establishment of these routines enables extraordinary moments to occur that demonstrate the strength of the classroom community and the positive social development. These moments are most rewarding to me as Informal teacher. Although there were many, I will share only a few incidents where the ordinary was really quite extraordinary.

At end of September Maria made an announcement that she had gone to the dentist and had gotten in trouble for still sucking her thumb. Maria shared that her mom made her a promise that if she could go seven days without sucking her thumb, she would earn a trip to Build-A-Bear. Periodically throughout the next several weeks I checked in with Maria to learn about her progress. On October 5th Faith asked Maria while we were sharing our news and announcements, “Maria, are you going to Build-A-Bear today?” Maria proudly shook her head. I immediately congratulated her and announced that we should all give her a big applause for not sucking her thumb. After the students finished clapping I expressed how proud I was of Faith for being a great friend to Maria and for remembering to ask about her goal. Three days later, Maria shared her new dog Fido and its baby, Tiger, as what she did over the weekend. As she shared, both Evan and Owen offered Maria compliments.

The other incident that stands out in my mind occurred early in March when Mike, a very shy and quiet first grader, approached me at the end of a school day to ask if he could make an announcement the following morning during our classroom meeting. I
assured Mike that he would be able to make his announcement. I wondered what his announcement could possibly be about, however I concluded that maybe Mike needed to ask me in order to feel more comfortable about sharing his news. This was the same child that had a very difficult time in the fall with sharing the Telling Tool Box. On the morning he shared the tool box, his mom left me a voice message concerned that he may not share it. She explained how he spent the entire night worrying about his share, not wanting to pick items for the tool box. Months later on the morning of March 8th Mike made his announcement:

Mike:    Um, I’m getting a baby…um we couldn’t think of its name yet.
Me:     Do you know when the baby is coming?
Mike:    Around October…

Mike is one of the four students that frequently passed when we shared about our weekends. He is a very quiet, reserved, frequently fulfills a passive role, and mimics his friends’ behaviors. On a daily basis, he was most comfortable with Aaron, and by the end of the year, the boys were not allowed to sit together because of the distractions they would cause the rest of the group. I learned from my observations that several students, like Mike, needed support with their social skills.

**Social intervention.** The predicament of when and how much to intervene in the outcomes of specific individual and classroom problems provides a challenge to most teachers. Valuing the role of parents as co-educators, teachers know to intervene whenever parents are involved or there is a threat to someone’s safety (Ramsey, 1991). Ramsey lists several factors used to weigh a decision about social intervention: teacher’s resources and skills, type and extent of problem, needs of the students involved, and the
larger social issues that may be impacting the social dynamics of the classroom. Furthermore, the only way to be effective is to plan strategies that are congruent to your very own personal style. The child’s needs must be looked at in connection with the teacher’s personality. Initially the teacher must establish the seriousness of the problem. This can be apparent by the children’s reactions. Furthermore, if the situation impacts the entire class, then there is an increase in the severity level. Before intervening, the teacher must make observations, have discussions with the children and other colleagues, and prepare for trial and error. Interventions must be creative, flexible, and involve some amount of risk. Finally, the outcomes of the intervention must be measurable.

Although in the United States the terms testing and assessment are often used interchangeably, it is likely that over the next several years, these terms will become more clearly differentiated (Fischer & King, 1995). Until recently testing referred to “any form of measurement that yielded clear, consistent, meaningful data about a person’s knowledge, aptitudes, intelligence, or other mental traits” (p. 2). The term assessment, on the other hand, includes authentic, performance-based, alternative assessment systems, and the use of portfolios. More than a paper-and-pencil measurement, students not only respond but also demonstrate their knowledge and skills (Fischer & King). Observation is one of the most valuable tools for assessing children’s social development. The social interactions that occur during classroom meetings serve as a resource for teaching children how to create a respectful, caring classroom culture. Within the Informal Alternative Program, a child’s social development is valued as much as the academics, as we make our best attempt to establish a strong democratic classroom community.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Bigger than Oneself: The Classroom Community

The purpose of this study was to examine how children become students in a progressive, first and second grade classroom, and simultaneously learn to be citizens of a democratic society. The cultural event of a classroom meeting provides the lens for viewing these socially constructed processes as childhood cultures. In this discussion I will reconstruct this classroom event to analyze how coming to the carpet everyday to read a morning message, review the daily schedule, make announcements, and to share objects and stories is more than just a collection of individuals gathering in a circle for “childish activity.” Rather, classroom meetings are meaningful, perhaps critical, pedagogical, and cultural events that are constructed and reproduced daily guided by the participants. It is a place where relationships develop and the classroom community is constructed.

This chapter is organized around a set of theoretical assertions based on the analyses and interpretation of data presented in the previous chapter. It begins with a micro-analysis of two interrelated childhood cultures – the school culture and the peer culture. I then show how the intersection of these two cultures provides a departure point
for the relationships established within a classroom community. I also discuss the study’s contributions to current understanding of childhood cultures, the role of a classroom meeting, and the significance of establishing a classroom community. In addition, I relate this understanding to the practical implications of this study, particularly affirming the possibilities that exist from teachers that share the pedagogical beliefs of progressive educators. Recommendations for further research are also addressed in this chapter.

This discussion will highlight the sociocultural perspective within an ethnographic study. As a methodology, ethnography has been viewed as interactive research (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993). Therefore, it includes a considerable amount of interaction between the subjects and the researcher. As the classroom teacher, I fulfilled the role of a participant-observer. Ethnography is a valuable method for studying the social development of young children because many of their interactions are created and shared in the present moment and cannot be obtained easily through other research methods.

On a daily basis, I investigated classroom life and more specifically, the classroom event of morning meetings. As a participant-observer, I had the opportunity to observe from a different perspective how the classroom culture is created by its participants. Gumprez (1981) argues that in order to be able to interpret what happens in any classroom requires an understanding of that classroom as a social system, where life is constructed over time through the interactions of its members, and their reactions to others’ actions, intentions, and messages. It is a “mini society with norms and expectations, rights and obligations and, roles and relationships for its members” (Kantor & Fernie, 2003, p. 7). Over time, the life of the classroom became patterned by routines.
and rituals, reoccurring events, established norms, group expectations, and a common language. Cultural anthropologists define this patterned life as the “culture” of the group (Kantor & Fernie; Goodenough, 1971). At the center of an ethnographic perspective is culture. The culture of a system is used by its members in order to understand their world and how to relate it to others (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The year-long ethnography provided me with a broad encompassing perspective as I considered the cultures of the classroom.

Reflecting the notions of sociocultural theory, ethnography is sensitive to the context, giving considerable attention to understanding behavioral and social events, like morning meetings. In contrast to traditional views, the sociocultural perspective, influenced by the work of Vygotsky (1978), considers the significance of social construction (Fernie et al., 1988). The sociocultural school of thought maintains that “a child’s intellectual development cannot be considered in a social vacuum” (Sutherland, 1992, p. 42). This perspective developed around the premise that learning cannot be separated from its social context. These researchers use the process of interpretive analysis to examine issues related to children’s play, friendship, and social relations (Corsaro, 1985; Elgas et al., 1988; Kantor et al., 1993). Sociocultural researchers attempt to understand the meanings of different types of contexts, viewed by ethnographers, as cultures (Kantor et al., 1993).

In an educational context, sociocultural researchers view schools as social settings and classrooms as group cultures, where life is patterned as the culture is co-constructed over time by its members (Kantor et al., 1993). As I investigated the daily life of the children, I wanted to understand the locally constructed meanings of classroom meetings.
I examined the classroom interactions that took place during these meetings as well as the culture-laden context in which these interactions occurred. Daily, the classroom and the children were studied within the context of the cultures that existed.

In the discussion that follows, findings will be revisited to show their meaning within the context of what is known about the classroom. The following theoretical assertions will be discussed as they are demonstrated throughout the findings:

- The school culture of this Informal classroom demonstrates the philosophical beliefs of progressive educators. Classroom meetings provide a forum for learning how to become an Informal student.

- Within this and every classroom of children exists a peer culture that is constructed over time. Classroom meetings provide one place for the children to construct their peer culture and to make it visible.

- The school culture and peer culture within a classroom “intersect” during classroom meetings to provide the potential for “educational possibilities” (Kantor & Fernie, 2003). These intersections support children’s academic and social development.

- Through the intersections of the cultures, classroom meetings provide a place for relationships to develop and for a classroom community to be co-constructed.

I started this study with a broad question: How do classroom meetings provide a place for children to become students within a particular pedagogy and how is it a window into children’s cultures? The study of large group times has captured the attention of sociolinguistic researchers (Kantor et al., 1989). Throughout the 1980s, this research uncovered the implicit social and conversational processes that occur during group events within early childhood educational settings (Dorr-Bremme, 1982; Green & Harker, 1982; Michaels, 1986). Other empirical studies and theoretical statements have
been made about the processes of communication and the competence that is required of individuals within a classroom (Green & Harker; Wilkinson, 1982). My analysis complements these bodies of research in addition to the work that has been done by ethnographers who have investigated the cultures that exist within early childhood educational settings (Corsaro, 1985, 1988, 2003, 2005; Dyson, 1997; Fernie et al., 1988; Kantor, 1988; Kantor & Fernie, 2003, Paley, 1984).

One of the most common events in preschool that supports children’s learning of new roles and relationships is the whole group event of a classroom meeting. Although very popular among early childhood programs, classroom meetings, also referred to as circle time, rug time, and sharing time, are nearly extinct in traditional primary and intermediate classrooms (Kantor et al., 1993). Furthermore, very little research is available to early childhood educators to help them make meaningful decisions about the teaching of these whole group events (McAfee, 1985; Kantor et al., 1988). In order to examine the role of classroom meetings, I first had to establish what the cultures of the classroom were and uncover how they impact this classroom event.

The School Culture of an Informal Classroom

I first investigated one of my sub-related questions: How is the classroom event of a meeting representative of the school culture? The whole group event of the classroom meeting is common among all of the Informal classrooms in the alternative program in which I teach. The Informal Alternative Program of the community that supports this classroom was founded in 1972 in response to parent requests and teacher initiatives. The program was established through its connections with The Ohio State University’s Educational Program for Teaching in Informal Classrooms (EPIC) Program. The
Informal program is committed to developing intellectual independence for children and teachers. Children are trusted to make important decisions about their learning through active teacher guidance. Teachers strive to address the individual needs of children in classroom communities that are positive, respectful, and trustworthy. Children are challenged to fulfill the role of citizens as they participate in the democratic practices of their classroom communities. There is a dynamic relationship between the child, curriculum, and community that supports the creation of learning experiences reflecting the beliefs and interpretations of sociocultural theorists like Vygotsky (1978) and Dewey (1938).

I must note that classroom meetings are not common amongst traditional elementary school classrooms. Although every classroom has a school culture, school cultures are constructed at the classroom level by its participants (Fernie et al., 1988). Therefore, when I began to analyze the school culture, I realized that the formation of the school culture within an Informal classroom directly supports the pedagogical beliefs of progressive educators (Appendix A). Classroom meetings serve as place where children learn the school culture of how to be an Informal student. Thus, classroom meetings serve as a vehicle for implementing the tenets of progressive education. It is an obligatory event that occurs daily, reflecting not only the demands of group organization, but also the routines of the school culture within a progressive education program.

Classroom meetings serve as the place for discussions about the roles and responsibilities children fulfill as an Informal student. Researcher Frederick Erickson (1984) argued that ethnographic research should “make the familiar strange” and shift the focus of study “from the exotic to the commonplace.” As I examined my role as the
facilitator of our meetings, I discovered how much explicit language I used to model social situations for the children. Classroom meetings provide a setting where social skills can be modeled, experienced, practiced, extended, and refined by the teacher. Classrooms are complex events and children need support as they develop the competencies of the school culture. The establishment of explicit norms and expectations supports children’s social competence during classroom meetings.

The literature informing pre-service and new teachers that it is more effective to establish classroom rules that are generated by the students supports the notion of establishing a strong classroom community (Denton & Kriete, 2000). However there is little research explaining the significance of establishing the rules with the children or supporting how writing the rules together strengthens the formation of a classroom community. This study provides a connection between the cultures that exists within a classroom and the strong classroom community that is constructed from within them.

I did not begin to establish the dos and don’ts of our classroom until the third week of school. I needed to provide time for me to model the expectations I had for the children and for them to practice them. When I read aloud, Lizzie’s Dos and Don’ts I was confident that the children had a solid understanding of my expectations. At the same time, I wanted them to generate our T-chart of Dos and Don’ts because I wanted the norms and expectations of the classroom to be co-constructed. It is more than a source of empowerment. When students share in the responsibility of establishing norms and when there is a high expectation for their commitment to these norms, they begin to feel a sense of belonging. They receive the message that they are needed. More than empowerment, they feel ownership. They begin to experience a community. I would
like to offer caution that establishing these norms is only one step in forming a classroom community.

As an eighth year student of my own teaching, never before had I questioned why the children sit in a circle for meetings or how the children establish rituals for sharing. On a daily basis, I would begin morning meeting by thanking friends who had made good seating choices. It would have been very simple to have assigned places for children to sit, for this was trivial, but it was an opportunity to teach responsibility and respect. Likewise, the sharing of news and announcements had to be modeled during different social situations. Whether it was sharing an object, a story about the weekend, or a comment and/or question, all of these social interactions were explicitly modeled by me during classroom meetings. Positive reinforcement effectively guided my efforts to establish respect between children as they fulfilled the role of the sharer and the listener.

As children established rituals that supported their social participation in our classroom meetings, we were able to focus on creating a democratic classroom community that supported their role as inquirers and offered them an integrated curriculum. Supporting the efforts of John Dewey, identified as the “father of progressive education” (Semel, 1992), progressive educators use classroom meetings to hold thought provoking discussions, negotiate decisions, and vote upon issues. Demonstrating the children’s right to have a voice within the classroom empowers them to take control of their learning. As the teacher, I must be willing to listen and to give them responsibility for their learning. It is a reciprocal relationship that forms between the teacher and the student. When Anthony returned from lunch recess upset with the aides for making him throw away the walnuts he had collected, he was reaching out to
me, searching for his rights as a member of the classroom community and school community. Living democratically requires time and flexibility. I could have been too busy to have listened to Anthony’s story or I could have believed that the word study lesson we were about to do was much more important than saving his walnuts. I could have stopped the children that were defending Anthony and neglected to hear their “side of the story.”

In America, the historical democratic ideals of our founding fathers are established upon the experience, rights, and freedom of the individual. The United States Constitution and Bill of Rights reflect the protection of the individual, and Americans are socialized to value individualism. Self-reliance and independence are highly valued. This results in individuals whose lives become increasingly instrumental, competitive, insulated, and self-seeking. Consequently, freedom, which is one of most resonant, deeply held American values becomes interpreted as “…being left alone by others, not having other people’s values, ideas, or styles of life forced upon one, being free from arbitrary authority and work, family, and political life” (Bellah, 1985, p. 23).

Therefore, I must distinguish the democratic ideal of which our country was founded upon from Dewey’s (1916) representation of democracy in schools. Distressed by the dislocation of families from rural to urban environments, concerned by the loss of traditional ways of understanding the maintenance of civilization, and anxious about the impact of individualism as well as materialism on a democratic society, Dewey turned to the schools for maintaining social order.

Dewey argued for a restructuring of schools as communities and for the creation of a curriculum that embraced the child’s interests and developmental level. Dewey
believed that the goal of education was growth but within the context of a democratic society. According to Dewey, the school should be a “miniature community, an embryonic society” where there would be “a spirit of social cooperation and community life” (Tanner, 1997, p. 40-41). Dewey advocated both freedom and responsibility for students since he considered both to be vital components of living democratically. He believed that the school should reflect the community in order to help graduates assume societal roles and maintain the democratic way of life. Dewey’s vision of schooling was one part of a larger project of social progress and improvement. While he was concerned with the social dimensions of schooling, he was also aware of the school impact on the individual. His philosophy of education incorporated the need to balance the social role of the school with its effects on the social, intellectual, and personal development of the individuals. Thus, Dewey believed that the school had to balance the needs of the community with the needs of the individual. This balance is central for understanding Dewey’s work as well as the work of progressive educators (Semel & Sadovnik, 1999).

As the teacher, I have a special role in developing a democratic community within my classroom. I must be assured that the relationships I form with my students model active citizenship. It is my obligation to teach the students the values of democracy and the skills of active citizenship. I must show the students how these values and skills support the expectations we have for living together. Ultimately, it is my responsibility to model the importance of community members caring for each other. Bringing 24 bodies together to spend 180 days together does not constitute the establishment of a classroom community. There must be mutual respect and trust. Anthony, who I identified in chapter four as one of my neglected students, took a risk when he chose to
enter the room expressing his emotions. Without risk-taking, there is no learning and with out trust, there is no risk-taking.

Elections are the heart of democracy. The vigor of American democracy rests on voting, and citizens believe that their votes matter. Elections are the instrument for the people to choose leaders and hold them accountable. At the same time, elections are a core public function upon which all other government responsibilities depend. According to the Washington Post (2005), a census poll following the 2004 primary election showed that voters between the ages of 18 and 24 had the lowest turn out, with 47 percent reported going to the polls. Although Election Day provides the opportunity to discuss the powerful implications of voting, our schools must do more. Progressive educators strongly believe that like our government, our schools should represent a democratic society. This past year, my students voted on 24 issues between the first and third quarters of the school year. These issues ranged from plans for a project to establishing our sharing schedule. Voting not only resolves conflict but also instills fairness and establishes within the community the value of having one’s voice heard.

Classrooms as democratic communities embrace both children and adults. Active citizenship forces everyone to come together to form a collective identity, to work together to solve problems, to invest together in the welfare of the community, and to live together with community norms. Democratic communities demand social participation from all of their members. In the classroom, the teacher and the students have responsibilities to each other that must be met. These demands let members know that they are needed by the community and belong to the community, solidifying the connection that has brought the community together.
By being democratic, children learn how to negotiate and cooperate with one another as they make decisions together. Vea Vecchi, a teacher at the preprimary schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, states, “If skills of collaboration and negotiation are deemed to be important in a given society, then school is perhaps one of the places where they can most easily be explored, developed, and practiced” (2001, p. 178). She adds, “Effective learning benefits from organized collaborative situations, though varying in form, are repeated over time” (p. 178). When Ricky expressed his frustrations that his group member, Mike, had signed up to create the wolf when he wanted to do it, too, we had an in-depth discussion during our classroom meeting on what it means to work in a group. As we brainstormed ways in which Ricky and Mike could work on the project together, Jason suggested voting. At this point, I realized that I needed to teach the children that voting does not resolve all problems. As a group, we brainstormed other fair ways to make decisions when working in a group. Children suggested rock, paper scissors, flipping a coin, rolling a dice, and drawing a name.

The Project Zero research team at Harvard University identified seven propositions for group learning (Giudici, Rinaldi, & Krechevsky, 2001). The seventh proposition includes the indicator that, “Collaboration strategies are an integral part of the group learning process and can determine the quality of learning” (Giudici et al., p. 266). By planning and working in a group together, children learn to use collaboration strategies effectively that help make their thinking productive. By using negotiation, flexible thinking, listening skills, and humor, the children learn to build on ideas that come from one another within the group.

In his book, *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) wrote, “Education will
vary with the quality of life that prevails in a group.” Furthermore, Political scientist Robert Putnam suggests that the quality of lives will vary with the groups of which we are members (Kreckevsky & Mardell, 2001). Putman’s work signifies the importance of social networks and civic engagement for the success of our social institutions and democratic way of life. The majority of learning that occurs in and out of schools happens during group interaction. Although children are always in groups at school, we must question whether they are learning groups.

Kreckevsky and Mardell (2001) define learning as “outcomes involved in solving problems or creating products that are considered meaningful in a culture” (p. 285). In accordance with Howard Gardner, who defines intelligence as, “the ability to solve problems or fashion products that are valued in a culture or community” (Krechevsky & Mardell, p. 285), the Project Zero research team defined a learning group as, “a collection of persons who are emotionally, intellectually, and aesthetically engaged in solving problems, creating products, and making meaning – an assemblage in which each person learns autonomously and through the ways of learning of others” (Krechevsky & Mardell, p. 285). The learning that occurs within a group differs from individual learning. When in a group, an individual learns from and with others. The individual encounters new perspectives, strategies, and ways of thinking that broaden one’s view and enables learning from others. Learning with others means modifying, extending, clarifying and enriching one’s own ideas to include the ideas of others (Krechevsky & Mardell).

Participation in groups is essential for learning. The fourth proposition identified by the Project Zero team is, “The focus of learning in learning groups extends beyond the
learning of individuals to create a collective body of knowledge” (Krechevsky & Mardell, 2001, p. 292). Learning groups build individual and group knowledge.

By focusing on a collective understanding, individual ideas are always discussed by the group. By generating collective knowledge, both teachers and students feel that they are contributing to a larger, more meaningful whole, one that they share in and communicate to others. Learning in a group supports the establishment of a classroom community, for it is the collective knowledge that is larger than what any one individual may know.

Making visible to the class learning and being together in a group fosters a sense of group identity. As children learn how to work together in groups, they begin to rely as much on their peers and themselves as on the teacher for input and problem solving. They begin to view their peers as another resource for information.

As the year progressed children supported one another as they learned more about the roles they were expected to fulfill as an Informal student. This first demanded for them to learn self regulation (Vygotsky, 1978) or self control (Dewey, 1944). An analysis of their behavior and language resulted in the formation of a continuum illustrating the growth in their ability to provide self-direction. Figure 5.1 portrays this progression.
According to Dewey (1938), individuals contribute efforts of social control within a social enterprise in which they feel they are providing a contribution and a responsibility. At the beginning of the year, the twenty-two students that made up our classroom had not formed a community. They did not have a group identity, for many of them did not even know each other. However, as the year progressed and relationships formed, the “social enterprise” defined by Dewey became that of our classroom community. When individuals build relationships with one another, they begin to care about one another and the perceptions formed by others. Dewey believed that groups stay in control because of the social pressures from within the group. These pressures are not present without first constructing a classroom community. The construction of a classroom community supports children’s efforts to control their behaviors. Thomas Sergiovanni (1994) adds that in democratic communities norms count more than rules and self control is embedded within the community’s norm structure. Democratic communities not only support positive student behavior but they also create ties that bond students together and students and teachers together. These connections establish shared ideas and ideals (Sergiovanni).

The sharing that took place amongst the children during classroom meetings supported children’s efforts to socially interact with another. Figure 4.8 shows how a child’s average number of verbal exchanges per meeting increased from 5 the first
quarter to 6 the second quarter, and finally 9 the third quarter. The additional participation lengthened the average minutes of each meeting. An average meeting the first quarter lasted 19 minutes, where as the third quarter an average meeting lasted 27 minutes. Teachers must establish a classroom environment that values social interaction by committing the time for sharing.

As early as September I recorded in my field notes children making associations with one another. These associations were a result of shared experiences. As children learned more about one another, they became more comfortable and participated more during classroom meetings. Gradually, the sharing of associations between children led to traces of conversation. I was able to distinguish a conversation from class discussion because the class discussions were bounded by the norms and routines of the school culture. When I observed an exchange of dialogue that reflected the children’s efforts to converse with another, the students did not raise their hand nor did they wait to be called upon. The topics of conversation reflected the dominance of the peer culture.

Conversations emerged during classroom meetings when the intersection of the two cultures was overshadowed by the peer culture (Figure 5.2).
During our classroom meetings, children found joy in sharing common experiences with one another. Whether it was David and Lucy sharing their adventures on the same roller coaster at an amusement park or Zach and Abby sharing their similar memories of Christmas morning, these moments of common experience contributed to the formation of our classroom community.

Among the important purposes for schools in a democratic society is that of providing common or shared educational experiences for young people with diverse characteristics and backgrounds. The idea of such experiences has long been tied to the concept of integration through emphasis on curriculum that promotes some sense of common values or a “common good” (Beane, 1997, p. 5).

These common experiences shared through children’s social participation reflect progressive educators’ view of curriculum design. For nearly a century, progressive educators have practiced curriculum integration.

While the idea of democratic schools is usually taken only to mean the use of participatory decision making, its extended meaning includes attending to the issues, problems, and concerns that confront the larger democratic community. This aspect of the democratic way of life involves the right, obligation, and power of people to seek intelligent solutions to the problems that face them, individually and collectively. And for this purpose, the integration of knowledge is especially suited (Beane, 1997, p. 8).

Curriculum integration is driven by the purposes of deepening children’s understanding of the world and of themselves. Children use knowledge to resolve issues, to practice democratic social integration, to learn respect, and to build from diversity. Each of these purposes demands students to apply knowledge, think critically and problem solve
Beane (1997) reminds us that “curriculum integration is not for the professionally faint-hearted” (p. 71). Traditional schools and classrooms are not set up to do curriculum integration. Textbooks dominate the resources that teachers are given and are always organized around separate subject areas. Furthermore, the infrastructure within a school is designed to support traditional subject-centered curriculum. Time is expected to be allocated on the basis of disciplinary areas. Traditional assessments, like report cards, call for an evaluation of students’ work by subject area. Beane (1997) defines classrooms with teachers who have been working with a curriculum design that uses the concept of curriculum integration as “places of high pedagogy” (p. 48). Bringing this design to life in a classroom requires a professional commitment from the teachers and unique classroom practices. Beane highlights: the engagement of students in a collaborative planning process, large whole-group projects, the use of “popular culture” as a resource, the building of relationships, and the establishment of a democratic classroom community. Although Beane outlines the larger picture of classroom life, there is little research that addresses the specific practices.

Classroom meetings support teachers’ efforts to teach an integrated curriculum. This cultural event supports one of the aims of this curriculum design: to promote social integration. Classroom meetings provide a forum for teachers to engage children in discussions about the questions and concerns they have about themselves and the world. It is where the collaborative planning in my classroom takes place. Classroom meetings provide an environment for conversations about the direction and progress of classroom projects. Traces of our study of the moon, stars, and bedtime stories were found
throughout our classroom meetings from October 16th through February 11th. Upon the arrival of Jason’s baby brother, our “Welcome to the World” party was planned over the course of several classroom meetings. These meetings serve as a place where teachers can use resources, like literature, to integrate themes of study and weave threads of curriculum together with children’s interests.

Curriculum integration supports the construction of classroom communities. According to Beane (1997), teachers that use curriculum integration engage students in activities intended to build community. A sense of community is established not only by the relationships that develop between the teacher and the students but on the premise that these individuals are mutually engaged in addressing shared questions and concerns. In order to be mutually engaged, the questions and concerns must be representative of the students. When the curriculum is opened to issues in the larger context of the world and when the questions and concerns of the children influence the curriculum, the content and interest of the “popular culture” emerges. It is the “popular culture” that provides the potential of possibilities for connecting with students’ personal experiences. For example, our study of the moon shifted to an investigation of the stars when the children suddenly became interested in the animal patterns found amongst constellations of the night sky. I will discuss the role of the “popular culture” further when I examine how classroom meetings make the peer culture visible.

Establishing a democratic classroom community not only supports the organization of the curriculum, but also supports the children’s role as inquirers of knowledge. “Classrooms have never been better places than they are today for hearing inquiry’s many voices. This is because classrooms are increasingly about voice: about
having it, about using it” (Lindfors, 1999, p. 67). Lindfors adds that classroom activities which support students’ inquiry have two features: these events must empower students and involve students in interaction that is abundant, diverse, and authentic. The classroom event of morning meeting serves as a place for the many voices of inquiry to be heard. It is an event that not only offers empowerment but also encourages social interactions.

Throughout our classroom meetings, sharing served as vehicle for the development of the students’ inquiry skills. Whether it was at the end of a child’s share when s/he asked for questions and comments or an interjection in the middle, children constantly expressed their desire to construct an understanding of one another’s experiences. These instances demonstrated how children use others to help them construct meaning. Throughout the year, different children struggled with understanding the difference between a question and a comment. Often, I would have to interject and explicitly clarify the kind of statement they had made. As I reviewed my transcription notes I discovered that much of the inquiry occurred when children impulsively interjected their thoughts. Likewise, the children that offered responses replied in sequence to the inquiry. Lindfors (1999) adds, “Inquiry acts and responses are the most tightly interconnected of all. One person’s talk does not make an act of inquiry. Without response, without the active coordinated participation of another, an inquiry act seems but half an act” (p. 129). Many of the responses represented how children construct, revisit, revise, and review their theories and hypotheses. These conversations led to negotiated shared understandings.

When Claire brought her guinea pig in to share at morning meeting, the themes of
birth and death emerged. Ed asked Claire, “Will she have babies or no?” Claire responded, “She doesn’t have any babies.” Not satisfied by her response, Ed asked again, “But will she have babies at…once, maybe?” Claire’s facial expression clearly demonstrated her uncertainty. Jason came to Claire’s rescue and interjected, “You have to be married to have babies.” Ed’s sigh of relief reflected the confidence he had in his peer’s response. When Hope asked Claire how old she was when she got the guinea pig, Claire failed to respond to Hope’s question. Instead, she shared how she had another guinea pig before Daisy that had died because of a bad paw. Immediately, more hands shot up into the air as the children expressed their curiosity to learn more about the death of her first guinea pig.

Children are not the only sources of inquiry. Teachers, too, provide guidance, support, direction, and challenge through a process identified by Barbara Rogoff (1990) as guided participation. This concept places emphasis on the mutual roles played by the learner (novice) and the more skilled adult or peer (expert). Guided participation occurs when the expert and the novice are in the zone of proximal development. Guided participation reflects the interpersonal transactions that take place during social interactions. The process is characterized by a gradual internalization of shared knowledge, with an increasing ability on the part of the child (novice) to move toward self-regulated activity (Rogoff). The success of this process is directly dependent upon the extent to which the assistance that is provided is within an appropriate range of interest and possibility, known as intersubjectivity.

Morning messages used during classroom meetings provide teachers with a tool for supporting children’s development of inquiry. Although many of these messages may
end with a question, I want to clarify that the question alone is not an act of inquiry. The question serves the purpose of stimulating the conversation that then leads to acts of inquiry which engages the group in a class discussion. For example, on Election Day I ended the morning message by asking: *Why is it important to vote?* Initially children responded with ideas that represented what they know about voting. For example, David shared that elections are used to pick presidents. Individually, children shared their background knowledge. Many of their responses represented their personal experiences of going to the polls with their parents. The conversation deepened as I explained that we do not just vote to elect individuals. I also clarified their understanding of who is allowed to vote. I then rephrased the question I had written in the morning message. At that point, I offered the children an expression of uncertainty: “*So why do we vote?*” This expression invited them to offer their reflections now that they had begun to construct new understanding. My tentative and invitational expression tells the child that this is not a yes/no or right/wrong question. It is a discussion, drawing on their past experiences and perspectives to move them beyond their present understanding. An act of inquiry is one’s articulation of uncertainty and of invitation. During classroom meetings, acts of inquiry represent conversational turns. The child has others join him in collaboratively constructing new meaning. Lindfors (1999) calls for children’s inquiry acts and the conversations they provoke to be central in the life of a classroom. Making time to hear these new voices within classroom discussion is at the heart of children’s learning and classroom meetings serve as forum where we can hear, recognize, appreciate, and foster the language of inquiry.

The voices of inquiry and the voices of collaborative planning within an
integrated curriculum truly represent the ideals of progressive education: the construction of a democratic community. The culture of the community in a democratic classroom is not imposed by one on another, for it is created together. The established routines of the school culture contribute to the construction of the classroom community and we cannot forget the presence of the peer culture.

The Construction of the Peer Culture

The classroom inside a school is an intense social experience. For nearly seven hours a day, five days a week, for thirty-six weeks, the twenty-three children in my class lived together with me in a space the size of a living room. Traditionally, most teachers have managed to deal with the crowded conditions of the classroom by placing restrictions upon the students. These “restrictions” or rules produce silence, which is supposed to reflect productivity. However, in our classroom the school culture provided the means for putting these restrictions in place.

Researchers Kantor et al. (1989) examined the experience of preschool children as they learned how to participate in their first circle times. These researchers shared how the large group event of circle time (rug time, sharing time, classroom meeting) exemplifies the school culture by demonstrating the perspective of learning how to go to school. Viewing this activity as a social event, after their year long study, Kantor et al. discovered that the peer culture as well as the school culture emerged. They revealed that circle time is an authentic place for social exchanges amongst children. With topics centered on the interests of the children, there were many opportunities for children to construct shared experiences and a shared reality together. Through their analysis, these researchers began to uncover the complexities of this school event and warranted further
analysis of the layer of reality as seen through the lens of the peer culture and the “double lens” created when they intersect (Kantor, et al.; Fernie et al., 1988).

In my efforts to expand the research of Kantor et al. (1989), I investigated the following sub-related question: How is the classroom event of a meeting representative of children’s peer culture? In my analysis of the children’s social participation during our classroom meetings, I discovered children use this event to socialize with one another. Classroom meetings encourage children to interact with their peers. These interactions support the construction of the peer culture. The peer culture is unveiled through central themes, the use of language, the impact of focal concerns, and the roles and relationships developed by the children.

Corsaro (1985, 1988, 2003, 2005) has spent nearly thirty years as an ethnographer within early childhood programs. As a participant observer, he closely examined children’s peer cultures. Corsaro identified two prominent themes made visible when children begin to construct a peer culture: gaining control and sharing. Through his observations of children’s play patterns and friendships, Corsaro discovered that children produce the shared reality of the peer culture and participate in it.

Unlike Corsaro, I was examining an event constructed by the school culture. Classroom meetings were not optional. There was the expectation that everyone must be present, sitting in a circle. However, as I reviewed transcriptions of our morning meetings, I was able to identify instances in which children used secondary adjustments to work around the norms and routines of the school culture. These secondary adjustments were common when I would ask children to share news and announcements as well as when we would share about our weekends. In each situation, the child was
finding a way to have more social participation. During announcements, children would express their concerns about bodily injuries in order to share the stories of how they became injured. Likewise, during our shares about the weekend, children would opt to come back even after they had already shared a story. Either they had something they forgot to say and wanted to add on or they would share something completely different. In both cases, they were using a secondary adjustment for additional social participation.

Corsaro (2003) identified socio-dramatic role-play as the type of play where “kids collaboratively produce pretend activities that are related to experiences from their real lives” (p. 111). Unlike fantasy play, which is based on fictional characters, role-play is often a direct imitation of adult models. Corsaro contends that socio-dramatic play significantly impacts children’s social and emotional development. Children do not simply imitate adult behavior when fulfilling these roles. Corsaro argues that they elaborate and embellish upon these roles as they attempt to address their own concerns.

Although Corsaro (2003) observed how children use socio-dramatic role-play during episodes of free-play, I witnessed evidence of role-play during our discussions in classroom meetings. Whether it was Jason sharing his army figurines and discussing his Halloween costume of an Army Mine Finder or Claire and Maria bringing their baby dolls with them to group meetings as they fulfilled the role of being mothers, both of these instances represent the children’s attempts to address the issue of status, power, or control. Jason was grappling with his fear of not having control. He perceived war as death and he was uncertain of how to deal with aunt’s boyfriend’s deployment to Iraq. Claire and Maria enjoyed sharing the status and power of being mothers. They would attempt to bring their baby dolls to group and I would often say, “I think it is nap time.
Please make a comfortable place for your baby inside your locker.” In the security of their role-play, children connect aspects of the adult world with their peer culture. The children link features of their play to their developing conceptions of the adult world. They feel empowered as they project to the future when they will be in charge and in control of themselves and others. Even in the midst of an event constructed by the school culture, elements of a peer culture were present.

According to Bahktin’s (1981; 1986) dialogic theory, learning to use language involves learning to interact with others in specific social situations and within particular relationships. Language is interactive. According to Bahktin, the production of language is a social construction. The perspectives of educational researchers (Bloome and Egan; Dyson, 1997; Gallas, 1994, Green & Harker, 1982; Paley, 1984; Robertson, 1993), reflect Bahktin’s theory as they investigated the role of language in children’s learning. Gallas specifically examined the value of classroom sharing. Sharing stories creates a rich historical background that constantly supports and expands the development of a classroom community. We had common experiences and shared accounts that we repeatedly referred to during our daily interactions. Gallas defines this as a “semantic history” which separated our classroom community from others and made our speech more “sociocentric” (p. 32). Paley supports this notion with her vision of the storyteller as the “culture builder” who depends on the audience participation to build a new group reality. This shared reality is that of the peer culture.

Classroom meetings provide children with the opportunity to share, creating collective experiences that strengthen the community of the classroom. During our classroom meetings children would share news and announcements, personal connections
or associations, an object or story, or weekend happenings. These shares are stories, told unedited, directly reflecting the peer culture. A critical analysis of one of the 38 times we shared about our weekends (Figure 5.3) displays how the peer culture used sharing to seek further understanding, show empathy toward one another, and make personal connections or associations. The objectives of the peer culture form the foundation of a strong classroom community. As peers learn to collectively construct meaning from one another, express understanding of one another’s feelings, and build connections through shared experiences, relationships gradually develop. These relationships are the base at which a classroom community forms.

In addition to sharing stories, children shared objects from home and school. The sharing of objects during classroom meetings supports the children’s construction of a peer culture. During the first quarter children only shared objects from home, portraying the influence of the peer culture. Even in the third quarter of the school year, 73% of the shares involved objects from home. Furthermore, of the objects shared from school, 60%
Figure 5.3: The interconnectedness established through the sharing that occurs during classroom meetings

were toys either made at school or attained as a prize from school. The routines and rituals for sharing during a classroom meeting may depict the school culture however what is shared is a direct reflection of the peer culture.

The shared reality constructed by the children as they shared each morning during our classroom meetings represented the construction of a peer world. Early childhood researchers support the view that young children are competent in developing social relationships among their peers (Corsaro, 2003, Elgas et al., 1988; Gottman, 1983; Lee, 1975). According to Lee, social relationships can form as early as infancy. Gottman’s research concluded that young children are capable of facilitating and coordinating social interactions during their play. Corsaro’s ethnographic studies suggest that young children not only form friendships but construct their own peer culture. Prior to Corsaro’s work, most of the research was collected through a variety of interview techniques. His ethnographic approach provided a new aspect to developmental research on the formation of groups by investigating the development of the relationships within the social context (Elgas et al.). Corsaro was the first to examine of role of friendship and play within the peer culture.

In line with the work of Corsaro (2003), Elgas et al. (1988) examined how to make this peer culture visible through friendship and play. Elgas et al. concluded that play periods reflect the dynamics of the peer culture. Moreover, objects play a pivotal
role in serving the needs and social dynamics of the complex relationships that exist within the peer world.

In my efforts to investigate how a school culture event, like classroom meetings, portrays the peer culture, I examined the social positions negotiated within the peer world. The elementary classroom represents the structure of academia life. Therefore, new social concerns emerge. These friendships are more than just playmates. Relationships are established through common interests and in the fulfillment of needs (Ramsey, 1991; Rizzo, 1989; Selman, 1981). Classroom meetings provided the children a window for displaying their interests and needs. These interests and concerns, often shared through objects, are a direct reflection of the peer culture. Corsaro (2005) defines these objects as the material artifacts of the culture. Anthony’s love of action heroes served as motivation for him to engage in our classroom meetings. Anthony is a very quiet child who is frequently neglected by his peers however he was able to establish relationships with other boys based on their mutual interest in action figures.

An analysis of the objects shared by children when they returned the Telling Tool Box revealed that over half of the children shared objects related to past achievements. Whether it was a soccer trophy, gymnastics ribbon, or swimming certificate the children proudly shared objects that symbolized their accomplishments. This is a direct reflection of Erikson’s (1963) stage of Industry versus Inferiority. At this age, children feel a need to reach achievements. Nearly half of the shared objects represented their interest in sports as well. As the children learned more about one another, they began to establish relationships with each other. These relationships demonstrated the creation of the peer culture. Furthermore, they contributed to the formation of the classroom community.
Thirty-eight times throughout this study children shared about their weekends.

On Friday, September 9th I recorded in my field notes the patterns that were emerging from the children sharing their stories.

9.9
As I begin to observe patterns within children’s sharing about their weekends, I have begun to write down topics. These topics are usually repeated several times throughout the circle and I am wondering how much one child’s share may influence another child. Was Maria able to come back today because of what she heard another child share or did she just need that time to develop her thought? Did the two students that shared about going to the swimming pool both plan to share this or did the second child hear the first child and then think to share to it? I must begin documenting exactly who shares what so I can trace these patterns.

I then was able to analyze the topics that were shared most frequently. During 84% of the meetings, an average of seven children shared a story related to sports. Sixty percent of the time an average of three children would discuss birthdays. Family was the third most frequent topic followed by play dates/sleepovers. These categories, defined by Gumperz et al. (1986) as focal concerns, reflect the interest and needs of the children. Although holidays were only discussed during 24% of the meetings, an average of nine children shared stories about them. Therefore, when the topic of holidays surfaced, it was dominant during that day’s sharing. Mythical figures, like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, reflected children’s symbolic culture (Corsaro, 2005; Griswold, 1994). Unlike the material culture that represents objects, the symbolic culture reflects children’s beliefs, concerns, and values. Both the material and the symbolic cultures contributed to the production of the peer culture and children’s participation in it.

Differing from early childhood settings, elementary classrooms limit children’s opportunities for social contact. Traditionally children rely on recess to establish social
relations. Therefore, children attempt to plan out their activities. Classroom meetings provide children with the space to preplan their social interactions. At times it would occur as a whisper between peers sitting in close proximity to one another. At other times, plans would be announced within a conversation. As the year progressed, I witnessed how pairs of ‘best friends’ would sit together in their attempt to overcome the restraints the school culture places on these relationships.

As children establish relationships with their peers, they begin to form reputational biases (Ramsey, 1991). This type of bias was displayed by peers several times throughout the year during our classroom meetings. In each instance, these biases were gender specific. Differentiation in peer relations increases with children’s age. Gender and status are two aspects of social differentiation exhibited in children’s peer culture (Corsaro, 2005; Ramsey, 1991). As the peer culture became visible within our classroom meetings, I was able to identify signs of gender and status differentiation.

Past research from both the preschool and elementary school settings has examined how gender differences impact the peer culture (Berentzen, 1984; Corsaro, 2005; Paley, 1984; Thorne, 1986). These researchers have unveiled distinct themes amongst both genders. In this study, I specifically looked for the gender differences revealed by the peer culture during classroom meetings. In my analysis of children’s sharing of the Telling Tool Box, I discovered that the objects children chose to share reflected a gender bias. Over half of the girls shared a stuffed animal or doll where as none of the boys brought one. On the opposite spectrum, none of the girls shared action figures where as 38% of the boys shared them. Of the 33% of students that shared jewelry, 57% were girls and only 13% were boys. The objects shared by children during
classroom meetings not only reflected the interests of the peer culture, but specifically the interest of each gender.

In her work on gender arrangements within elementary classroom settings Barrie Thorne (1986) noted that the boys and girls she observed did work together in situations in which mixed-sex groups were formed by the teachers and were engaged in productive tasks. In my research, I observed how the presence of the material culture during classroom meetings can contribute to cross-sex socialization. Despite the boy’s themes of action heroes and sports and the girl’s theme of dramatic play, the Tamagotchi toy brought both genders together in our classroom.

Perhaps, it is the nature of the toy that makes it appealing to both genders. Discovered in Japan in the mid 1990s, this hand held toy is a virtual reality creature. Tamagotchis hatch from tiny eggs after traveling millions of light-years through cyberspace to learn what life is like on Earth. The Tamagotchi will always return to its home planet, however how well it is cared for determines how long the Tamagotchi will stay on Earth. In order to keep it here on Earth, it needs proper care and feeding. The Tamagotchi is a virtual pet that grows into a wide variety of shapes and personalities. The boys love that it is a virtual reality creature and the girls love that they get to treat it as if it’s a pet. During the holiday season I recorded six instances in which we discussed Tamagotchis during our classroom meetings. It was more than a fad in our classroom. They quickly became part of the identity of the peer culture and over one-third of the students had them. Whether a child shared a Tamagotchi on his or her sharing day or as a weekend story, the toy was at the center of class conversations. It represented a common experience shared by the group, for in several of these incidents, the children helped one
another understand how to “play” with this toy.

Through his investigation of children’s peer cultures, Corsaro (2005) observed children talking and joking about gender in both same and cross-sex groups during structured play activities as well as snack time. In my analysis of the conversations that took place during classroom meetings, I recorded two occasions in which children discussed the role of gender in relation to marriage and babies. The first incident occurred during the sharing of a pet where as the second incident occurred when a child shared about attending a wedding. Although these incidents were only momentary, discussions about appropriate cross-sex relationships in the adult world depict the collective knowledge of the peer culture. According to Corsaro, this knowledge influences how children portray their cross-sex peers, distinguishing these relationships from those they have with individuals of the same sex.

Traditionally, researchers interested in measuring children’s social status use sociometric measures, peer descriptions, teacher rating scales, behavioral observations, and social problem-solving situations (Asher & Hymel, 1981; Wexner-Sherman, Gardner, & Feldman, 1988; Ramsey, 1991; Ladd & Olden, 1979). The literature on different status groups has typically focused on individuals’ characteristics and behaviors. Children’s successes or challenges are attributed to their social competence or deficiency. The cultures of the classroom, however, play a pivotal role in how well individual children respond in a group. The process of negotiating a social position is very complex and reflects each child’s ability to access and contribute to the cultural patterns co-constructed by the group. Unlike traditional school settings, Informal classrooms are structured in multi-age and looping configurations. Therefore, the teacher spends two
years with the child, supporting the program’s emphasis on relationships. As relationships develop and the cultural patterns of the group are constructed social positions emerge.

Although there are mixed findings in the literature on the presence of dominance hierarchies among peers, I observed two layers of social positions. The first layer involved dominance and submission. Categorized under these layers were social positions reflecting the status of popular, controversial, rejected, and neglected (Figure 5.4).

![Diagram of Social Positions]

Children that display dominance hold power. Whether this power is used in a positive or negative manner those students withholding power can read and contribute to the cultural knowledge of the group. As these children negotiate their positions amongst the group, they can be the most popular or the most controversial. The children that were most dominant within the peer culture of my classroom were all boys. The dynamic relationships between the girls attributed to this factor. Of nine girls, there were two sets
of best friends that often excluded the others. Furthermore, I only had two first grade girls and each of them formed close friendships with other first graders outside of our classroom. The dominant boys included both first and second graders. In a multi-age setting, dominance is anticipated from the second graders. They are older and have already spent an entire year in the classroom so therefore, they have a social history with at least part of the group. However each year, the new first graders change the dynamics of the group. New cultural patterns are created over time by the new members that have joined the classroom community.

Children’s successful participation in the group contributed to their dominant social positions. The popular children expressed their dominance through their leadership. These were the children that established a high level of respect with both their peers and other adults. They had strong social skills and were able to take the perspective of another individual. The controversial children thrived on being in control. They used humor to gauge how well they were liked by their peers. Frequently, these children required redirection from me.

Students that were often rejected and neglected fulfilled submissive social positions. Traditionally researchers have identified two types of rejected children, aggressive-rejected and withdrawn-rejected. I, however, only observed two children reflecting withdrawn traits. Subtly disliked by their classmates, these children had a difficult time fitting in with the peer culture. In both cases within my classroom these children were rejected because they could not understand the cultural knowledge of the group.

The other submissive position fulfilled by Anthony was one of neglect. Although
he may have appeared uncomfortable or reluctant to join the group, Anthony used passive strategies to gain access. Unfortunately he was frequently ignored. Neglected children are not in tune to the social interactions of the group, for they do not find the social life the classroom interesting. By the fourth day of school, I had recorded in my field notes my concerns about Anthony demonstrating the behaviors of a neglected child. An analysis of our weekend sharing illustrates that Anthony had the highest percentage of passes.

Classroom meetings not only make the peer culture visible, but also provide the teacher with valuable insight into the social dynamics of the children’s negotiated positions amongst the group. To support individual development and positive classroom relationships, I must be aware of present and potential individual and group needs. For instance, in order to provide a child support, I must know whether the isolation of this child is a function of poor social skills or a mismatch between the child and the social environment. I must have a clear understanding of any problem within the classroom before I can make an intervention plan that has appropriate goals. My daily observations of children’s behavior during classroom meetings provided me with rich information about their social positions. I will discuss how my observations serve as an assessment of social development when I discuss the intersections of the school and peer cultures.

Before examining the intersections of the two cultures I would like to address how children invent their own norms and expectations as they establish a sense of shared reality within the peer culture. Researchers (Ramsey, 1991; Rizzo, 1989) have established that elementary children’s norms reflect their concerns over the mastery of skills. Representing the developmental stage of Industry versus Inferiority (Erickson,
children are concerned about academic achievements and social acceptance. By observing the social interactions that took place during our classroom meetings, I discovered that children’s concerns over schoolwork and friendship are demonstrated through two reappearing norms: fairness and competition.

The issue of fairness has an underlying presence in primary classrooms. When children are six, seven, and eight years of age, equality is one of their biggest concerns. During our classroom meetings, children frequently remarked about both adults and peers being unfair. Often I was perceived as treating someone unfairly due to repeated behavior or gender bias. Furthermore, I was accused of favoritism. For example, when I called upon Owen to introduce our puppet show for The Three Little Pigs Eliot interposed, “He always gets it!” The children also accused each other of being unfair. Although this occurs frequently during play interactions at recess, I still observed the presence of this issue during classroom meetings. Whether it was during a child’s sharing or a discussion about a working together on a project, this issue lingered within the group.

Two factors influencing children’s perceptions of fairness include reputational bias and ownership. When children have formed close friendships they develop a reputational bias toward one another (Hymel, Wagner, & Butler, 1990; Ramsey, 1991). This bias impacts how children react on behalf of their peers, for it causes individuals to respond in a protective manner. These peers will stand up for one another when confronting both peers and adults. After Faith had share about her toad’s broken leg, Lucy spoke up validating that there was truth to her story. Likewise, when Anthony returned from recess outraged that the aides had ‘stolen’ his walnuts, many of his second
grade peers came to his rescue, confirming to me how much the situation was unfair.

Just as Corsaro (2003) observed preschool children’s desire to protect their interactive space when playing, I witnessed how elementary school children take ownership very seriously. We had numerous discussions about taking each other’s personal playground balls or jump ropes at recess. The issue of being fair as a result of ownership was common when we worked on communal projects. These concerns surfaced during the process of completing the project and at the end when it came time to decide who was going to keep the project. From their observations of preschool children working together in groups, the researchers of Project Zero at Harvard (2001) have concluded that when children are working on projects…

The ultimate choice for the best theory is usually based on a complex network of cognitive, aesthetic, and social factors. The ideas that a group ends up preferring and using are usually those that enable the group to keep in mind both their search for a solution to the problem and their sense of justice and democracy (p. 254).

The discussions that take place during classroom meetings serve to support group learning. Group learning reflects not only what individuals learn by participating in a group, but also a collective knowledge that extends beyond the learning of any one person (Project Zero, 2001). As children worked in groups we would spend time during classroom meetings reflecting on the progress of their projects. Often, I would model for the students how to resolve issues when working together. By role-playing strategies of decision-making or brainstorming different approaches for settling conflicts, I was strengthening the students’ understanding of group learning. Conflicts of fairness heightened when students feared the loss of ownership within a project. In order to consolidate each individual identity with that of the others and to affirm a shared sense of
fairness, children firmly declared their projects as a creation completed by everyone involved. Therefore, it became a problem when there was no longer a need to keep a project at school. Each child within a group felt such strong ownership that no matter what strategy was used to decide who was keeping the project, several of the group members perceived it as unfair.

As I examined the data for themes of unfairness I disclosed several incidents where the implicit expectations of the peer culture instigated reactions from students. Occasionally students would accuse one another of stealing each other’s spots on the circle. These incidents occurred when a student returned to group after briefly leaving the circle. However, there were several instances when close friends wanted to sit together and before one of the friends arrived, a third person sat down. The reaction from the best friends directly depended upon the person taking their spot. On most occasions the other person would give in and move so that the two friends could sit together. However if the third person was attempting to build access strategies with the pair of best friends, these individuals, wanting to protect their interactive space, would complain. I observed this specific interaction between Lucy, Faith, and Abby. Lucy and Faith were exclusive best friends. Whenever Abby would make an attempt to sit by Lucy during classroom meetings, Faith immediately would complain to me that Abby had taken her seat.

I also observed implicit expectations from peers when children were sharing. Our sharing schedule, negotiated by the children, identified who was sharing on each day. The week of Thanksgiving we only had school on Monday and Tuesday and Maria expressed that it was unfair because her sharing day was suppose to be on Wednesday.
She asked the group if she could share a day early, however her peers disagreed, thinking she was being unfair, therefore she was unable to share until after the break. This occurred again in the spring when Abby asked if she could share a day early because she was leaving for Michigan on Wednesday and would not be present on Thursday, which was her sharing day. Abby shared on Tuesday when she returned to school.

Furthermore, when children forgot that it was their sharing day or were absent on their sharing day, there was the expectation that they would be able to share the next day. Those sharing that next day would always share first, believing it was fair because it was their original sharing day. Additional issues developed when children would call on more same-sex peers for questions and/or comments than cross-sex peers. Faith frequently reminded Owen and several of the other boys to put their hands down after a boy had shared a comment, assuming that the individual sharing was going to call upon a girl.

A close examination of Erikson’s (1963) psychological theory of development reveals how he modified Freud’s psychosexual theory of development by placing more emphasis on the psychological needs as well as the critical role of society in sharing and forming reality for a child. He believed that at each stage of development an individual confronts a specific crisis as new demands are imposed by society. In his stage of Industry versus Inferiority, Erikson addresses the child’s “work” performance. The child faces the crisis of failure and must overcome this by feeling competent and skillful. Erikson’s theory is a direct indication of the competition I observed present throughout the children’s peer culture during classroom meetings.

In my analysis of the items shared by children in the Telling Tool Box, I
discovered that 60% of students, both boys and girls, shared objects reflecting their past achievements. It was when these items were shared that I observed how children respond to the success of their peers. Children are very competitive, and feel the need to outdo one another. Ricky could not accept that Aaron had received a trophy because his paper airplane went the farthest in the Indian Guides’ competition. Likewise, when George brought his Rubix Cube, Owen challenged George’s time, confident that he could solve it in less time.

This competition also appeared in discussions about sports. Whether it was an organized sport played by individuals within our room, a conversation about a professional game, or the playing of pick up games at recess, children would dispute scores, values of points, and fairness of teams. The frequency of these conversations is demonstrated through my analysis of the categories of focal concerns (Figure 4.15) in chapter four. Sports were discussed in 84% of our classroom meetings. On average, seven children were involved in each of these discussions.

Competition, related to academic success, was subtle and more implicit. At the elementary level in my school district we do not assign letter grades on quarterly assessments. Furthermore, as a primary teacher, I do not believe in assigning letter grades on completed assignments or projects. Without a reference for evaluation, the competition among children academically was implicit. When Aaron asked, “Where do the advanced kids go to learn?” I realized that I could no longer be naïve about their understanding of each other’s academic abilities. However, when I examined my transcriptions and field notes, I was not able to find any other evidence during classroom meetings indicating children’s outward discussions with each other about their academic
At the beginning of the year I spent time during our classroom meetings extensively demonstrating how each one of us begins the year at different levels in all subject areas. I had the second graders share with the first graders the books they read last year and I explicitly showed how the print inside of books as well as writing inside journals will look different at each of level. According to Erikson (1963) children at this stage of development need to feel successful academically. It is my best hope that the structure of multi-age settings alleviates this crisis as unique relationships form across grade level within the classroom. When Owen shared with Aaron, “I remember reaching Frog and Toad. I loved those books!” the two shared a common experience that lets Aaron know he is becoming a successful reader. Perhaps, academics reflect the school culture more than the peer culture. My analysis warrants further investigation into how the peer culture responds to academic success when it is the central factor for crisis at this stage of development.

The shared reality constructed by the children creates patterns of behaviors represented through norms. In my analysis of the data, the norms that developed within the peer culture of my classroom had underlying themes of fairness and competition. Norms related to fairness and competition were expressed by the students during our classroom meetings as they socially interacted with one another. These norms worked in conjunction with Erikson’s psychological stage of development for this age group and the prominent themes found within children’s peer cultures: social participation and gaining control of others (Corsaro, 2003).

*The Intersections of Classroom Cultures*
In chapter four I used the metaphor of the school culture as a canvas where children paint their own scenery as they construct a collective identity of the peer culture. The result, a beautiful piece of art, has infinite possibilities. Just like the painter’s canvas, the educator’s classroom has endless potential for teaching and learning. In their study of the socialization process of preschool children becoming students, Fernie et al. (1988) defined the constructs of a school culture. In their analysis of how teachers responded to the cultural artifacts that children used in their peer-culture life, the researchers concluded that the school culture and peer culture spheres within the classroom were not separate, distinct domains of activity. Instead, these two spheres were, “configured so that they frequently met and intersected in meaningful ways” (p. 138). Mutual accommodations made by the school culture and the peer culture provided for dynamic intersections. The unveiling of this configuration within the preschool classroom served as a structure and guide for ongoing research. It made visible the idea that teachers and students can negotiate and accommodate ways of living together in a classroom. As their research team investigated children’s involvement in the construction of these parallel worlds, Fernie and Kantor (1994) envisioned the potential exemplary teaching and learning practices that existed from these intersections, defining them as educational possibilities.

The prior research conducted by Fernie and Kantor’s research team guided my formation of additional sub-related questions. How does a classroom meeting provide space for the school culture and peer culture to intersect? What are the ‘educational possibilities’ that evolve from the intersection of these childhood cultures? What role do classroom meetings have with children’s academic and social development?
The ongoing social interactions that occur during classroom meetings provide an opportunity for the children to share their interests. These interests, a direct reflection of the peer culture, become visible only when the teacher establishes a school culture that not only respects the peer culture, but makes accommodations for it. The teacher must provide time and space within the school day for social relations. Informal teachers use classroom meetings to support children as they ‘uncover’ content threads of interests disclosed through their social experiences (Hawkins, 1974). Using time and space in a flexible manner, teachers provide children with opportunities to share, interact in conversation, and participate in collective inquiry. Classroom meetings influence academic development as they support the establishment of an emergent curriculum that is authentic and negotiated between the students and the teacher.

Implications for Academic Development

With the national movement for standardization, school testing is at its peak. Today more than ever educators must be well-organized, have clear goals set, and be able to demonstrate how their assessments compare to the norm. Unfortunately, with the demands to demonstrate accountability, many educators prefer to map out themes, set goals and objectives, identify the concepts children need to learn, and decide upon appropriate lessons without any input from the children that will be learning them. All teachers will admit, however, that the experiences that actually happen within a classroom have little relationship to the plans written in a notebook. Teachers find themselves struggling as they decide whether to stick with the plans or abandon them. They often find that these plans are not responsive to the ideas and interests of their students. In Frazier and Gestwicki’s text, (2000) Rinaldi explains the implications of a
The educational institution is, in fact, a system of communication and interaction among the three protagonists [children, educators, and families] integrated into the larger system. Given this system in its complexity, it can be understood why the potential of children is stunted when the endpoint of their learning is formulated in advance (p. 163).

Supporting the philosophical beliefs of progressive educators (Dewey, 1958; Hawkins, 1969; Wells, 1986), an emergent curriculum begins with the teacher observing the interests of the students (Jones & Nimmo, 1994). Teachers listen, document children’s ideas, and then select from their observations one or more topics of interest to the children. Although the teacher will brainstorm possible directions for pursuing the topic further, there must be flexibility in allowing the children to add new ideas and suggestions to the web as the experience actually unfolds. An emergent curriculum is responsive to the children’s interests, questions, and concerns. It is specifically generated within a particular environment by a particular group of people at a particular time (Cassady, 1993; Frazier & Gestwicki, 2000). The experiences mapped out may change direction at any time in response to new ideas. Therefore, the project always remains exciting for the teacher and the students. (Frazier & Gestwicki, 2000).

The educators of the pre-primary schools in Reggio Emilia perceive the curriculum as more than emergent. It is a negotiation amongst all that are involved in the development of the curriculum and in the planning of projects. This perspective represents sociocultural theory. Children co-construct knowledge within a social group. An emergent negotiated curriculum goes beyond the observations of children’s interests. By listening closely to their conversations, teachers are able to uncover the children’s
beliefs about the topics of study (Foreman & Fyfe, 1998). Teachers are careful to consider key individuals within this negotiation. Children’s families, other teachers, and community members all have important ideas about what is important for children to learn within their sociocultural context. The ideas of these individuals influence the negotiation of curriculum decisions (New, 1999). A negotiated curriculum does not center on the issue of being child-centered. This curriculum is “child originated and teacher framed” (Forman & Fyfe, 1998, p. 240).

A curriculum that is emergent and negotiated by those involved in the classroom community should emphasize authentic learning activities. The term authentic is commonly understood as something that is real, genuine, or true. Teachers frame tasks to have some connection to the world beyond the classroom, making them more than academic exercises. Although these classrooms hold themselves accountable to conventional curriculum standards, such as those mandated by the state or district, they take very seriously the goal of preparing students to apply knowledge and skills in real-life situations. Their repertoires of authentic tasks include both the familiar and the innovative. Students have the opportunity to ask questions and study topics they think are important, and they are allowed to influence the pace and direction of their own learning. Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran (1996) found much higher levels of achievement on complex performance tasks for students who experienced what these researchers termed “authentic pedagogy” – instruction focused on active learning in real-world contexts calling for higher-order thinking, consideration of alternatives, extended writing, and an audience for student work.

The sharing that took place daily within our classroom meetings provided a forum
for me to learn more about the interests, concerns, and questions of my students. This event served as a tool for applying an emergent curriculum negotiated with the students. The interests that emerged provided authentic opportunities for learning. When George shared his flag book in the Telling Tool Box, we had a brief geography lesson as the children discovered the location of the states on the national map. We also discussed the aesthetic features of flags and the symbolism involved in their designs. The sharing of David’s amusement park book provided a framework for other classroom writing. I had introduced writing stories the previous morning during writing workshop so his story served as a model and frame of reference as we revisited story development throughout the fall. David’s creation sparked Zach to make a similar book. Both books reflected the children’s interests. David used pictures of roller coasters where as Zach used pictures of ship wrecks, ocean creatures, and Star Wars figures. Zach’s book echoed the children’s curiosity in non-fiction texts.

As I analyzed the transcriptions of our classroom meetings, I was presented with the challenge of categorizing specific experiences as certain subjects of academic learning. When planning an emergent curriculum that integrates the subject areas, teachers face a bottom-up planning structure. Embodying the ideals of democratic learning, the teachers and students organize knowledge in relation to issues they are working on, rather than following a specific detailed scope-and-sequence prescription developed by state and district offices. Curriculum integration must be understood as a conceptual framework.

In the following sections I will present how hearing the voices of the children during classroom meetings supported their academic development. Rather than looking
at specific academic areas, I have identified the potential for an emergent literacy that supports both language and writing development. I offer caution that the absence of the discipline areas does not represent a lack of evidence for growth. As a matter of fact, our integrated study of the moon, stars, and bedtime stories portrays just the opposite. In this discussion I have chosen to present the academic growth from the experiences involved within specific studies, rather than attempting to deconstruct categories of knowledge.

**Literacy development.** One of the newer traditions of research, the sociolinguistic approach, focuses on the study of social interactions in the classroom. The field of sociolinguistic research is both multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary. Linguists, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, and educators make up the researchers within this field (Cazden, 1988; Green & Harker, 1982; Wilkinson, 1982). These researchers examine descriptions of students’ and teachers’ use of language. The use of language in social situations is at the center of language and communicative development for school age children. According to Wilkinson (1982), the structural knowledge of language is largely developed by the time a child enters the elementary school-age years. Little is known about the continuing development of language and communicative skills in elementary school children.

In the peer world, children are very social. Traditionally the school culture tells the child to listen but not to speak. Teachers that provide the time and space for children to share in classroom meetings support children’s language development. Sharing is an event that encourages children to be social within the classroom setting. The social interactions that take place represent the intersection of the two cultures. Children develop communication skills, learn how to formulate questions, collectively investigate
their inquiries, and discover how to articulate their thoughts and connect them with the thoughts of others to form conversations.

When Claire brought her guinea pig to school on her sharing day, 17 minutes of our classroom meeting was spent listening to Claire share and converse in dialogue about her pet. Children asked information-seeking questions like, “What does she eat?” and “How long have you had her?” Children also expressed inquiry acts of wonderings: “Will she have babies or not?...Well, will she have babies once maybe?” This collective inquiry challenged Claire. Since the age of three, Claire has been diagnosed with delays in her speech and language development. She entered first grade with little social competence and attended speech two times a week to increase vocabulary and strengthen question formations. After spending two years in our classroom, she had made great strides in her language development. Claire responded to every question asked and remained confident throughout her entire share. The collective inquiry also sparked others to respond with their own theories and ideas. Jason told Ed, “…You have to be married to have babies!” and when Claire shared about the death of her old guinea pig, Owen and Seth began to theorize what her family did when they buried it. These interactions occurred daily within the classroom as children shared during our classroom meetings. Sharing not only contributed to the communication of thought, but also to the construction of conversation.

At the beginning of this chapter I discussed the role of the school culture in teaching children how to be an Informal student. One of these factors was children learning to self-regulate their behavior. As a result, I observed changes in their speech patterns. The learning of self-control is a direct reflection of the school culture and the
items or stories the children chose to share in classroom meetings represents their peer culture. The influence of the children’s self-regulation on their communication skills when sharing symbolized the intersections of the school and peer culture. Although Owen was very impulsive, he learned not to share off topic. Furthermore, I observed a shift in the types of verbal exchanges or message units (Bloome & Roberston, 1993). During the first several weeks of school, my message units dominated the group discussion. Teacher-to-group, teacher-to-child, teacher-to-group associations, and teacher-to-child associations were common. As time progressed, there was a transformation in the types of verbal exchanges made by the children. Defined by Bloome and Egan-Robertson (1993) as interactional units, children were making associations with my comments and with one another’s thoughts. Furthermore, they were constructing more verbal exchanges in response to these interactional units.

Children frequently made associations with their peers during the sharing of our weekends. As children shared their life stories they would make connections with each other’s common experiences. Moreover, they began to verbalize these associations by calling them “self-connections.” The personal connections shared between peers fostered their language development, leading to traces of conversation. Bloome and Egan-Robertson (1993) define these conversations as intertextuality. Children were learning to construct their thoughts and link them to the thoughts of others. By closely examining my transcriptions, I was able to differentiate between an association and threads of conversation. Associations were confined within the boundaries of the school culture. Children would raise their hands, apologize for interrupting, or express the need to share a “self-connection.” Conversations, on the other hand, characterized the intersection of
the two cultures. The peer culture dominated these intersections (Figure 5.1) as children shared common experiences in dialogue with one another.

Drawing on Bakhtin’s (1981, 1986) vision of language and Bloome and Egan-Robertson’s (1993) notion of intertextuality, learning to use language involves learning to interact with others in social situations and in human relationships. Texts are formed at the intersection of the social relationship between ourselves and our audience and ideologically, between our inner meanings the cultural signs available to us.

Early-childhood researcher, Ann Dyson (1997) has contributed to the new understandings of children’s literacy development. In her research, Dyson (1997) uncovers how children are active contributors to communities that both utilize and influence larger cultural systems. Dyson’s (1997) work contributes to the sociocultural perspectives on literacy development, which depict learning to write as a tool for using socially appropriate ways to participate in the cultural life of the classroom (Green & Harker, 1982; Heath, 1983; Moll & Whitmore, 1993; Rogoff, 1990). In her study, Dyson (1997) defined the peer and school cultures as the popular, unofficial social world and the official school world. She specifically examined how young children use superhero stories from popular culture through the “interplay” of the unofficial and official worlds (p. 16). Aligned with the work of Dyson (1997), this study portrays how children’s literacy is shaped not only by their interactions with adults in the school culture, but also by their own social interactions and positions in their peer world.

The growth in children’s language development was reflected through their writing. Sharing not only impacted their communication skills, but also supported their use of literacy strategies. Intertextuality served as a resource for children’s writing.
Following everyone’s shares about the weekend, the children wrote in their writing journals. Although the children had freedom to write about a topic of their choice, the students usually wrote sentences that reflected the ideas they had shared in group. Furthermore, these journal entries contained sentences reflecting not only their ideas, but also the social exchanges made by their peers. After engaging in social relations with their peers, children represented their extended thoughts through their journal writing. According to Dickinson and Tabors (1991), there are “clear and consistent patterns of relationship between children’s language and literacy development (in ODE, 2006, p. 12). Figure 5.5 portrays how sharing during classroom meetings creates one of these patterns.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 5.5: The impact of sharing on children’s literacy development**
The acts of sharing that take place during classroom meetings symbolize the potential educational possibilities that exist when the school culture and peer culture intersect. Maria’s sharing of her letter to Santa Claus is a direct reflection of how children’s symbolic culture influences their peer culture. The spheres of the peer culture and the school culture intersected when I chose to use the letter to model the process of writing a letter. We used Maria’s list as an example of pre-writing. She had brainstormed everything she wanted to share with Santa. The children created their lists and the following morning Maria and I demonstrated for the class how to use a piece of pre-writing to construct a draft. It was the element of the peer culture that engaged everyone in this activity. All of the students were excited to be writing their letter to Santa at school. I was thrilled to be teaching the writing process.

Although Dyson specifically investigated the “interplay” of the unofficial and official worlds in children’s fictional writing and dramatic play, this study also reveals how these intersections support reading instruction. When Hope announced that she would be in a performance as the wolf in a Little Red Riding Hood play, I encouraged her to bring her play script to school. Hope was our new student. She had only been a member of our classroom community for eight weeks. As she shared her announcement, I felt proud of her and of the rest of the students. I was reassured that she felt that she belonged in our classroom and I attributed this to the compassionate behavior of her peers. I also viewed her sharing as an opportunity to introduce reader’s theatre. I knew that if Hope shared her play script, the entire class could be exposed to reading plays and the reading strategies integrated within this task. As Owen assisted Hope by fulfilling the role of Little Red Riding Hood, I intermittently stop them to teach the class about reading...
fluently, using voice to project expression, and understanding the format of play scripts. An interests in plays emerged and many of our guided reading groups began performing reader’s theatres.

At the beginning of this section I noted the challenge of unveiling academic development when using an integrated approach to teaching and learning. Curriculum integration requires more than just piecing the subject areas together. Therefore, it is difficult to explain academic growth in one specific discipline. In the next several paragraphs I will discuss how the tracings of our integrated projects, found in classroom meetings, serve the potential for academic growth.

In chapter four as well as my beginning discussions of chapter five I refer to our four month study that originated with our observations of the harvest moon and concluded with a pajama party full of bedtime stories. In Figure 4.12 I provided a flow chart tracing how this study emerged from the children’s inquiry about the moon and shifted focuses throughout its course. Knowing that the K-2 Benchmark of the Ohio Content Standards for Space and Earth Science is to “observe constant and changing patterns of objects in the day and night sky” (Ohio Department of Education Science Academic Content Standards, 2006 p. 34), I was able to weave the interests of the students in with the state curriculum. Although this study initially covered science standards, when the children wrote their moon observations, worked extensively with non-fiction texts, researched facts about stars, and created their own constellation boxes, literacy skills were incorporated into the project. Furthermore, the children learned how to read charts and tables and studied elements of A.M. versus P.M. Thus, there were elements of mathematical skills integrated into this study as well.
Likewise, in February when Jason’s mom had her baby and the class decided that they would like to have a “Welcome to the World” celebration in honor of Jason’s new sibling, the children voted on several activities they wanted to accomplish before the party. They voted to not only create a class counting book, but also to make Native American dream catchers to hang above the baby’s crib. I then read books about the legends behind the making of the dream catchers and the tribal beliefs that supported this custom. This activity, along with our study of the Native American legends about day versus night, achieved several of the social studies content standards identified under the K-2 Benchmark: People in Societies (ODE Social Studies Academic Content Standards, 2006). Moreover, many of the discussions that took place during our classroom meetings supported my efforts to create a democratic classroom community and were relevant to the Social Studies Benchmark of Citizenship Rights and Responsibilities (ODE Social Studies Academic Content Standards, 2006).

On the ODE (2006) website, academic content standards are identified as “clearly defined statements and/or illustrations of what all students, teachers, schools, and school districts are expected to know and be able to do…” The standards are supposed to provide, “clear and rigorous expectations for all students.” For kindergarten through twelfth grade, there are academic content standards for seven subjects. According to the website, these standards cover all areas of every subject. There also are academic content standards for preschool. The early learning content standards for preschool children are categorized by four academic subjects: English language arts (ELA), mathematics, science and social studies. In both the preschool and the K-12 sets of standards, there is only one standard within the language arts subject area that addresses children’s social
and linguistic development.

Federal and state governments are failing to provide a social curriculum. It is not deemed as having significance, therefore, classroom meetings and the sharing that takes place within them, are not viewed as instructional events. From a sociocultural perspective, these events reflect the culture – that of the school, of the peers, and of their intersections. These meetings serve as an essential tool for supporting the children’s academic and social development.

**Implications for Social Development**

In 1979, Hugh Mehn observed that historically, large-scale educational studies have failed to acknowledge at any significant degree, the social processes of education. He argued that if researchers do not understand the social interactions through which education takes place and the contexts in which they occur, they cannot begin to generalize whether or not these same interactions could be reproduced in other classrooms. Classroom interactions have specific conversational characteristics that separate them from everyday social interactions. These characteristics demand special study and attention.

When children are immersed within an environment that values their oral and written communication, they have the motivation and purpose for successful language development. When we talk with children and give them the time and space to talk, language is being taught. Children need effective and appropriate language skills to
think, learn, share ideas, express feelings and needs, and to develop relationships with one another. Children’s social development grows when they are within an environment that supports risk-taking. Significant to academic achievement, social skills must be modeled, experienced, practiced, extended, and refined. Teachers who form classroom communities that have daily classroom meetings teach a social curriculum.

The teacher plays a pivotal role not only by providing the space and time for socialization, but also by modeling positive social interactions. From the very first day of school, a teacher must establish the standard of mutual respect. Constant positive reinforcement supports children’s efforts to learn how to live together as a community. Gradually, the children’s respect for the teacher and for each other will be reflected through their social interactions. Positive social relations extends beyond just thanking the person holding the door or greeting your peers when you enter the room each morning. Specific social situations warrant discussion. Whether it was my discussion with Anthony about how he should handle his frustrations with the aides who would not let him keep his walnuts or our class discussion on how to interact with the third graders at their Fairy Tale Museum, in each instance, there is a need for me to model scenarios of positive social interactions. As children observe, experience, and practice social skills, they begin to teach each other and serve as models for one another.

In chapter four I cite many of examples of the children’s efforts to model appropriate social skills in my investigation of how the school culture teaches children to become Informal students. I am able to conclude that the democratic ideals of a progressive education classroom directly support children’s social development. Informal teachers support children’s social interactions during classroom meetings.
Furthermore, in their attempts to establish mutual respect with the children, it is important that the children have rights and are given opportunities to exercise those rights. Voting on classroom decisions not only supports democracy within schools but promotes discussion and empowers the child. By having their voices heard, the children now feel responsible for their learning. Children become very serious about their role within the community. As the teacher and children work together to make decisions about their learning, they interact, establish relationships, form trust, and initiate risk-taking. These moments all contribute to children’s social growth as they provide the foundation for a strong classroom community.

Although research on classroom meetings at the elementary level is scarce, The Northeast Foundation for Children has developed an approach to teaching and learning that views the social and academic curricula on equal playing fields (Kriete, 2002). According to Kriete (2002) classroom meetings support social development by establishing trust, satisfying children’s needs, and turning an ordinary event into an extraordinary moment. As I examined my data and found instances that represented each one of Kriete’s assumptions, I began to view classroom meetings as a resource for assessing children’s social development.

*An alternative assessment.* If classroom meetings truly support children’s cognitive and linguistic development, then like all effective teaching practices, there needs to be a way to assess students’ progress. Unfortunately at the turn of the century educators were greeted with newer mandates and the ever-pressuring increase of standardization. More than ever, teachers are administering high stakes test to evaluate students’ progress (Harnisch & Mabry, 1993). Furthermore, legislatures at the state level
have created state curriculums with specific content standards, benchmarks, and grade-level indicators from preschool through twelfth grade.

Even though the state only identified one content standard for social development, the Informal Program places heavy emphasis on children’s social abilities. As a matter of fact, *Community, Compassion, and Civility* intentionally is the first section on our quarterly progress report. Consistent with the ideals of progressive education, we believe that the objectives within this section provide insight into the child’s social competence. Alternative authentic assessments of classroom meetings provide me with the insight I need to mark each of these objectives. In opposition to objective, standardized tests, alternative authentic assessments include the teacher’s observations of each child and his or her work. A teacher’s observations during classroom meetings provide a wealth of information on patterns of social interaction.

In chapter four I displayed three charts that reveal patterns of social interactions found during classroom meetings. As early as September 2nd I recorded my concerns about children’s social behaviors. The charts provide an extensive view of the patterns that developed throughout the first three quarters of the school year. My analysis (Figure 4.22) of the percentage of passes during weekend sharing allowed me to identify those children that fulfilled submissive social positions. By interviewing these students, I was able to gain further insight into their social behaviors. As I analyzed the frequency in children’s verbal exchanges, I wanted to assure reliability. Therefore, I examined five transcripts of classroom meetings from each quarter. The changes in these frequencies (Figure 4.29) offered additional information about each child’s social growth. For example, as I investigated who had the most dramatic increase in the average number of
verbal exchanges, I discovered that these students were the most controversial. On the other hand, those who the least amount of change were more submissive. Children that emerged as classroom leaders had gradual increases in their averages.

Authentic alternative assessments have purpose and meaning. With standardization on the rise, today, more than ever, testing is driving our instruction. Vygotsky’s (1956) socio-historical theory reaffirms our need to free ourselves from this growing epidemic. Barbara Rogoff and James Wertsch point out Vygotsky’s (1956) concern with assessing both the child’s actual and potential levels of development. He criticized the view of instruction that is based upon “where a child has been” (the child’s level of actual development) with the exclusion of the child’s potential for growth.

Vygotsky (1956) argued instead that

Instruction is good only when it proceeds ahead of development. It then awakens and rouses to life those functions which are in a stage of maturing, which lie in the zone of proximal development. It is this way that instruction plays an extremely important role in development (Vygotsky, 1956, p. 278).

Classroom meetings serve as an assessment of children’s cognitive and social development. These assessments provide teachers with valuable information that not only drives instruction, but also influences the children’s academic growth.

When classroom meetings are used to assess children’s social development, teachers have a clearer understanding of when to intervene and how much intervention to provide. Ultimately, the teacher wants to establish a safe environment that maintains the trust established within the classroom community. In her work on social intervention, Ramsey (1991) identified key elements that should play a role in determining the need for social intervention. The first element she discusses is the teacher’s resources.
Furthermore, she adds that the teacher’s most important resource is observation. In support of Ramsey’s (1991) research, classroom meetings provide teachers with the observations they need to make critical decisions about intervening in children’s social development.

_Establishing a Classroom Community_

Situated in a holistic perspective I wanted my descriptions of classroom meetings to capture the actions and events of the cultures as they are understood not only by me, but also by the children (Corsaro, 2005). The notion of holism is summarized in the statement, “The whole is greater than its parts” (Johnson & Christensen, 2004, p. 375). A holistic description does not neglect the parts of the whole. An analysis of the parts is essential for understanding the whole. In the previous sections I reconstructed the simple event of a classroom meeting to unveil its complexity as a cultural event that contributes to children’s academic and social development. In this final section I will focus on how this event contributes to being part of something bigger than oneself, the formation of a strong classroom community.

The teachers and students of learning communities differ from those classrooms adhering to the contemporary model of teach and test. Today there is so much pressure from the state for education institutions to count up numbers without recognizing the child’s perspective, intention, or influence of motivation on those numbers (Wightman, 2003). Kohn (2000), Malaguzzi (1992), Goleman (2000) and Wightman (2003) offer exemplars of what happens in schools where teachers and children together build classroom communities. In each of these studies, quality surpasses any quantity.

Throughout the field of educational research, various scholars have offered their
definitions of classroom communities. In Dewey’s (1956) revised work of *The School and Society*, he provided a definition of community that embraced democracy. Aligned with the ideals of the progressive movement, Dewey called for classroom cultures that portrayed the democratic society in which we live. Richard Peterson’s (1992) work supports Dewey’s perspective. In order for teaching and learning to move beyond conformity and compliance, Peterson explains that the teacher must provide the students with direct liberation and empowerment. Teachers must be willing to give responsibilities to the students.

Nel Noddings (2002) described a community as a dichotomy between “the light and dark side.” Noddings (2002) quotes John Gardner’s dichotomous interpretation: “The community teaches. If it is healthy it will impart a coherent value system. If it is chaotic or degenerate, lessons will be taught anyway, but not lessons that heal or strengthen” (Gardner, 1991, p. 17).

Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996) characterize a community as an “open system.” Their work provides a link between Dewey’s democratic purpose and Noddings’s ethical considerations (Wightman, 2003). In an open system, information flows back and forth between its members. These systems encourage participation and ongoing learning as they contain networks of relationships that are fluid (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996).

The literature surrounding the construction of a classroom community offers wide interpretations. Alfie Kohn (1996) characterizes it to be a deliberate act. Kohn describes teachers and children of classrooms as “active meaning-makers” absorbed in the search for a social community. As “active meaning-makers,” children and teachers
are “….testing out theories and trying to make sense of themselves and the world around them. Learning comes from discovering surprising things…grappling with a peer’s perspective, and reformulating one’s own approach…” (Kohn, p. 66). A “we” proposition develops when communities develop as places where students feel cared about and are encouraged to care for each other. Together, the teacher and child begin to think in the plural (Kohn).

Daniel Goleman’s (1997) work on emotional intelligences supports Kohn’s proposition. Goleman’s list of emotionally intelligent abilities demonstrates the competencies needed for the co-construction of the classroom community. This list includes: self-motivation, persistence, control impulse, delayed gratification, regulation of moods, empathy, and hope. In her attempts to show the co-construction of a community within her kindergarten classroom, Wightman (2003) viewed community as a place to nurture emotional intelligence where “inclusive lessons…could heal” (p. 19). Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the pre-primary schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, viewed emotions as a binding force in constructing a community. Emotions shared amongst one another “…add depth and breadth to the humanity of a program” (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998, p. 301). Moments within the day that are filled with emotion are occasions that become part of the shared memory and vocabulary of the group.

Kohn (1996), Goleman (1997), Malaguzzi (1998), and Wightman (2003) acknowledge the formation and shift of identity when a group is co-constructed. Additional researchers like Bohm (1989) and Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996) touch upon the notion of a group identity. Bohm (1989) expresses the need for the community to share a coherent meaning. The sense of meaning impacts individual’s perceptions,
decision-making, and actions. Therefore, shared meanings are critical to constructing a community. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996) view the formation of the community as actions “revolving around the perceived needs of the group” (p. 98).

The shared meanings and actions of the group cannot occur without the construction of relationships. Malaguzzi (Edwards et al., 1998) contended that without the group the child could not even develop any identity, for each identity is constructed from the relationships formed with people and things in the environment. Many other theorists, including Vygotsky (1962), Corsaro (1985; 2003), Gardner (1993), Rinaldi (1996), Schwandt (1994), Walsh & Graue (1998), and Wightman (2003) have specifically examined how relationships affect and effect the work of forming a classroom community. Corsaro (1985) used an “interpretive approach” to demonstrate that children not only act on their environment, but also participate in the constructed social world. He unveiled how children “…help to shape their own developmental experiences through their interactions with peers” (p. 279).

The pre-primary schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy exhibit the provocative relationships that can exist between teachers and students. These municipal schools serve as a cross-cultural model of an environment that uses shared meaning-making to build a web of relationships that reflect the co-construction of communities. Built in postwar Italy, the schools were founded when Malguzzi gathered mothers around him who were interested in building schools from the wreckage that surrounded them at the end of World War II. Together, they established a learning community that eventually obtained support from the city government. In 1992, nearly fifty years after establishing the first school, the Scuola Diana was recognized by TIME magazine as one of the most
outstanding preschools in the world. Today these schools continue to serve as a model for American educators.

Reggio teacher, Carla Rinaldi (1996) views this co-construction as a symbolic relationship between the teacher and the child. As teachers we must “reinvent and reeducate ourselves along with the children. Not only does our knowledge organize theirs, but also the children’s ways of being and dealing with reality likewise influences what we know, feel, and do” (p. 111). Malguzzi (1998) adds, “relationships and learning coincide with an active process of education. They come together through the expectations and skills of children, the professional competence of adults, and more generally, the educational process” (p. 66-7). The idea of schools as systems of relationships in Reggio Emilia is reflective of the phrase used frequently by the Italians in that particular region: Io chi siamo. Reflecting their socialist traditions, the term, in its roughest translation, means “I am who we are.” This phrase signifies the possibilities that exist when reaching beyond the individual by building relationships with others.

In the American culture our democratic ideals center on individualism and triumph over any consideration of the collective. This perspective is reflected in our schools and classrooms (Seidl, 2001). In most American schools, the focus of most aspects of instruction and assessment is on promoting individual work and learning (Krechevsky & Mardell; Seidl, 2001). Despite the research on the social nature of learning, most classrooms represent a collection of individuals. Seidl (2001) contends that the group is often viewed as the enemy as Americans fear their loss of identities within the group and a loss of needs. Many researchers, including myself, have discovered quite the opposite. Children within learning communities can do together
what they cannot accomplish alone.

The intersection of the school and peer cultures during the event of a classroom meeting creates more than just educational possibilities for student’s academic and social development. These intersections establish the foundation for the co-construction of a classroom community. In her own attempts to understand how classroom culture is socially constructed, Green (1983) explains how classroom events “…are dynamic activities constructed by teachers and students as they process, build on, and work with both their own and other’s messages and behaviors…” (p. 335). The common experiences shared by the children each day during our classroom meetings supported the co-construction of a classroom community.

The tenets of progressive education influenced how routines were established within the school culture. Classroom meetings served as the setting where children learned how to be Informal students. The democratic school culture supports Dewey (1943) and Peterson’s (1992) work on classroom communities. Classroom meetings provide children with an opportunity to have their voices heard. It is one place where children actively participate in making decisions about their learning, learn the skills of negotiation, and discuss strategies for resolving conflict. Classroom meetings provide empowerment. Children take responsibility not only for their learning, but also for their behavior. Through self-regulation (Dewey, 1938), children exhibit appropriate manners and responsible behaviors.

By providing time and space within the school day that promotes the intersection of the two spheres of classroom cultures, classroom meetings serve as tool in creating an “open system” (Wheatley & Kellner, 1996). The open system is constructed by both the
teacher and the students as they participate in social interactions during these meetings. The interactions directly reflect the school and peer cultures. The system supports networks of relationships that develop when children are provided an opportunity for sharing. Children learn more about their peers and establish interconnectedness with one another as they seek understanding, show empathy, and make personal connections with shared experiences (Figure 5.3). An environment that establishes trust and respect within the school culture, and at the same time provides opportunities for the peer culture to share focal concerns and common experiences, strengthens the foundation of the classroom community.

Although there are many educational theorists that have offered different definitions of community, it was important for me to extend my search to examine the literature on how these communities are constructed. Often enough, new teachers are reminded to spend the first six weeks of school forming a classroom community, however the creation of a classroom community extends beyond writing rules together and learning more about one another. If the construction of the community is truly a deliberate act (Kohn, 1996), then as teachers, we must be aware of how we can nurture it. Classroom meetings provide teachers and students opportunities to be “active meaning-makers” of knowledge. Together, teachers and students engage in acts of collective inquiry as they produce an emergent integrated curriculum based on the course of study and the children’s issues, concerns, and interests.

The classroom cannot form shared meanings without first establishing relationships with one another. In his attempt to understand the child’s perspective, Corsaro (1985) discovered how young children form relationships as they interact with
their peers. In chapter four I illustrate how children make their peer culture visible during classroom meetings. By sharing stories and objects that reflect their focal concerns, peers begin to learn more about one another, build common interests, and commit energy to a shared future.

Kohn’s notion of “we” versus “I” unfolds in children’s oral language as the school culture supports the development of children’s talk. In chapter four I report my findings in the reduction of teacher talk over the course of the year as well as an increase in child-to-child interactions. As the year progressed, children made more and more self-connections with the commonly shared experiences they had with their peers. These social constructions of intertextuality (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993) supported children’s language development. Threads of conversation existed when children were able to make connections with the group.

Connecting with a group establishes a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging, of having continuity and being connected to others, as well as to ideas and values that make our lives meaningful, are universal needs (Sergiovanni, 1994). Children form this sense of belonging when they share in the responsibility of establishing the routines and rituals of the school culture as well as their own norms within the peer culture. These repetitive practices contribute to a group identity.

As I extensively examined my field notes and transcriptions, I revealed how each individual’s identity is influenced by the others within the group. In chapter four, I identify two positions of social status: dominance and submission (Figure 5.4). These layers could not characterize the social traits of a child if there were not other children involved influencing the child’s behaviors. This explains why children’s social positions
are negotiated with other members of the group. Thus, the social dynamics of a group change when its members change.

Goleman (1997), Malaguzzi (1998), and Wightman (2003) all depicted how emotions play a pivotal role in the creation of a community. In order for individuals to share their emotions with one another, there must be a level of trust. This trust supports the risk-taking involved in expressing one’s feelings to the entire group. Trust forms as relationships are constructed. When there were incidents during classroom meetings of children expressing their true feelings, these situations became part of a shared memory exclusive to the group. When Ricky expressed how sad he was that his dog may die and when Hope shared how nervous she was for her play performance, it was their peers that offered words of comfort. These collective memories demonstrate the history of the community (Bellah, 1985).

Bellah defines a true community as a “community of memory” one that does not forget the past…” (p.153). When I think about our classroom community extending beyond the static life of the present to include memories of the past, events in the present, and hopes for the future, I have a new understanding for the philosophical beliefs supporting the structure of progressive education classrooms. In the Informal program at first and second grade, as well as third and fourth grade, children remain with the same teacher for two years. This structure not only supports the solid construction of relationships, but also contributes to keeping the past alive for each classroom community so that it may have a source of identity and inspiration. This proposition warrants further research.

Earlier I discussed how Bohm (1989) identified that each community shares a
coherent meaning. Vygotsky (1987) believed that shared meanings are constructed in context and reconstructed many times until they approximate conventional cultural meanings. These cultural meanings represent the co-construction of a classroom community. It is a community that has formed from the intersection of two worlds: the school and peer cultures (Figure 5.6).

In February of 2004 I attended an international conference in Reggio Emilia, Italy and spent four days touring their municipal preschools. Without opening the pages and pages of notes that I frantically scribbled during my seven day visit, there are several defining points that I walked away with and that have served as an inspiration within my
own research study. As American educators attempt to understand the philosophical beliefs representing the teaching and learning that takes place in these Italian schools, I offer caution that the image of the child in Reggio Emilia is one that places the child within the context of history, both personal, lived history, and the heritage of the one’s culture and society. Therefore I believe that as much as one may try to replicate the exemplary practices I witnessed in their classrooms, the history of the classroom community, the history of Reggio Emilia, and the Italian culture all contribute to the rich community life found within each school.

Together, with the children of my classroom, we are the keepers of the history, geography, and culture of our community. As a progressive educator teaching in an alternative program, there is thirty-four years of teaching and learning that influences the program’s history. The history of our classroom, however, is the collective memories from our classroom meetings, where the intersection of the school and peer worlds reflects the educational possibilities and the co-construction of a classroom community. It is the community that acts as the tie binding students and teachers together in special ways, something more significant than themselves. It is the community that lifts both students and teachers to higher levels of understanding, commitment, and performance. There is the formation of a unique and enduring sense of identity, belonging, and place. Classroom meetings are more than just simple events for they are complex and culturally connected, offering a potential of possibilities, and the classroom is more than just a collection of individuals for it represents being part of something bigger than one self.
APPENDIX A

THE TEN FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES
OF THE INFORMAL ALTERNATIVE PROGRAM

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As educators within the Informal Alternative Program we...

1. Structure experiences that actively engage the child in producing rather than solely consuming knowledge.

2. Integrate thematic units of study and foster authentic learning opportunities.

3. Provide opportunities for the arts to occupy an integrated place in the curriculum as an essential way to acquire and express knowledge.

4. Use time and space in a flexible manner to maximize student opportunities for in-depth inquiry.

5. Respect diversity among children and variation in their development.

6. Raise social consciousness by encouraging children to examine and confront complex issues within society.

7. Collaborate with parents as co-educators in meeting children’s needs.


10. View our school as a center for teaching and learning for all ages and we are students of our own teaching.

* The Informal Alternative Program  * Living the Progressive Tradition Today  *
APPENDIX B

THE HUNDRED LANGUAGES OF CHILDREN
THE HUNDRED LANGUAGES OF CHILDREN

No way.
The hundred is there.

The child
is made of one hundred.
The child has
a hundred languages
a hundred hands
a hundred thoughts
a hundred ways of thinking
of playing, of speaking,
A hundred always a hundred
ways of listening
of marveling of loving
a hundred joys
for singing and understanding
a hundred worlds
to discover
a hundred worlds
to invent
a hundred worlds
to dream.
The child has
a hundred languages
( and a hundred hundred hundred more)
but they steal ninety-nine.
The school and the culture
separate the head from the body.
They tell the child:
to think without hands
to do without head
to listen and not to speak
to understand without joy
to love and to marvel
only at Easter and Christmas.
They tell the child:
to discover the world already there
and of the hundred
they steal ninety-nine.
They tell the child:
that work and play
reality and fantasy
science and imagination
sky and earth
reason and dream
are things
that do not belong together.
And thus they tell the child
that the hundred is not there.
The child says:
No way.
The hundred is there.

Loris Malaguzzi
APPENDIX C

THE INFORMAL PROGRAM CURRICULUM TRIANGLE
The Informal Program Curriculum Triangle

Authentic Curriculum
emerges from individual, group, teacher interests

Integrated Curriculum
Interdisciplinary
Thematic Studies
Conceptual

Discipline Centered Curriculum
Curriculum organized by disciplines
Webs
Discipline-centered

Community * Compassion * Civility
APPENDIX D

WALKING ON THE MOON 3D
Only 12 Have Walked On The Moon. You’re Next.

Join us
Wednesday, November 2\textsuperscript{nd}
AMC Easton 30 IMAX
~ 3:55 pm

Tom Hanks
Presents
Magnificent Desolation:
Walking on the Moon 3D

This is a wonderful opportunity for your child to view the surface of the moon through the magic of IMAX 3D. This documentary transports the viewer to the lunar surface to experience what the 12 astronauts saw, heard, felt, and thought on their explorations. Unfortunately the theater is no longer offering an evening show time. We understand that this time may be inconvenient for many of you. If you cannot join us on Wednesday, we encourage you to attend a matinee on the weekend. Tickets are $6.50 for adults and $5.50 for children. If you would like more information from the theater, feel free to call 614.428.5716 or go to http://www.eastontowncenter.com/tenants/amceaston30.cfm. We encourage you to watch the trailer at http://www.imax.com. We hope to see you next Wednesday!
The Responsive Classroom

1. The social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum.

2. How children learn is as important as what children learn.

3. The greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction.

4. There is a set of social skills that children need to learn and practice in order to be successful. They form the acronym CARES- cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, self-control.

5. We must know our children individually, culturally, and developmentally.

6. Knowing the families of the children we teach is as important as knowing the children.

7. Teachers and administrators must model the social and academic skills that they wish to teach their students.

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