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# Pointless or Profitable? Perceptions of Proactive Circles in a Second-Grade Classroom

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Pointless or Profitable? Perceptions of Proactive Circles in a Second-Grade Classroom

Jordyn Arendse

Abilene Christian University

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

### **Abstract**

Teachers are plagued with the unfortunate concept of “never enough time” in the classroom, trying to balance meeting the needs of the whole child and meeting the requirements of higher authority. The purpose of this study was to identify student and teacher perceptions of proactive circle and its impact on relationships, as well as its impact on students’ ability to appropriately express their feelings and emotions. The study took place in a second-grade classroom with seventeen students and one classroom teacher. Data was collected through surveys, sociograms, interviews, and field notes. Qualitative data was coded using the constant comparative method, and quantitative data was analyzed using frequency counts. Four major themes emerged including environment, circle, relationships, and introspection. The researcher identified a heightened awareness and voluntary vulnerability among students over the course of implementation, as well as the classroom teacher’s new found awareness for her students and their needs.

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

### **Pointless or Profitable? Perceptions of Community Circles in a Second-Grade Classroom**

I remember this moment so vividly as I thought to myself, *he trusts us, and he's connecting his feelings to language that was provided to him during circle*. That was enough to make me feel sunny. The following poetic transcription (Glesne 1997) was created from a conversation during the check-in portion of our time in circle. Maddox's (all names are pseudonyms) vulnerability was one of my first light bulb moments as a researcher; this might be a profitable practice after all.

I feel sunny  
 because I thought about playing with Jonathon  
 at the park.  
 "Will you get to play with Jonathon at the park after school?"  
 No.  
 Jonathon is my dad,  
 and my dad  
 is in jail.  
 I was just thinking about it,  
 and it made me feel sunny.

### **Purpose**

The concept of "the circle" as a place of meeting, community, and restoration is unique because of the type of environment that it fosters. When students are sitting in a circle with one another and the teacher, everyone is of equal status (Evanovich, Martinez, Kern, & Haynes, 2020). This foundation of equal status and commitment sets the tone for the type of community that happens in a classroom that engages in the practice. The proactive circle is simply a proactive step towards explicitly teaching behavioral skills and helping to develop social competence in students so that when conflict emerges students have tools in their tool belts to resolve problems appropriately (Evanovich et al., 2020).

The purpose of this research was to study proactive circle time and its impact on student relationships, their ability to implement techniques for appropriate self-expression, as well as their

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

perception of community in the classroom. The goal was to look at the impact that proactive circles had on classroom climate and the development of social skills in second graders at a Title I school. The study addresses the need for circle exploration in primary grades by answering the following research questions:

**Research Question:** What happens when proactive community circles are implemented into a second-grade classroom?

**Sub Question 1:** In what ways are students' and teacher's perceptions of relationships in the classroom community with peers impacted by the implementation of circles?

**Sub Question 2:** What are students' perceptions of their ability to effectively express their feelings and emotions after the implementation of circles?

During the time of the study, I was a graduate student fulfilling a yearlong clinical teaching placement. I co-taught in a second-grade classroom, alongside my cooperating teacher at Crawford Elementary. Crawford was located in a West Texas town that was home to approximately 122,000 people. The school served roughly 423 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. The student body was comprised of the following ethnicities: 21.9% African American, 47.7% Hispanic, 24.6% White, .7% Asian, and 5.1% identifying as two or more races. Ninety-one percent of Crawford's student body was economically disadvantaged, 2.2% were English Language Learners, and 12.2% were enrolled in Special Education. Crawford had a mobility rate of 19.1%, and the average class size ranged from 17 to 23 students depending on the grade level from K-5. For the purpose of this study, only one classroom at Crawford served as participants.

### Literature Review

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

There are a variety of different types of circles outlined in current literature on restorative practices in the classroom. Justice, family, faculty, and academic circles have been used in various classroom communities to resolve problems, address challenges, and problem solve solutions (Goldys, 2016). Goldys (2016) outlined both the community circle and the justice circle in her discussion of restorative practices. These are the more prominent forms of circle and have been implemented as a behavior management method. The community circle starts the learning day by following an outline that includes a greeting, a time for sharing, news, and goals for the community. Bustamante, Hindman, Champagne, and Wasik (2018) support the importance of structure and intentionality when it comes to planning an effective circle time in their study with preschoolers.

Community circles fall under the idea of proactive circles, which are used as a tool to help build community. Students that participate in this practice are able to build a classroom community that will benefit them both socially and academically. However, there is limited research on the implementation of proactive circles in school communities. The focus is on responsive circles, a practice falling under restorative justice, which are designed as a response to a specific incident in which offender and victim discuss openly what has taken place between them (Wang & Lee, 2019).

While the topic of circles is becoming a more prominent area of research, it is limited in what it addresses. Restorative circles, or responsive circles, were originally intended as a response to student conflict (Ortega et al., 2016) and have developed into an alternative strategy addressing suspensions and behavior management within Restorative Justice (Manassah et al., 2018). However, the practice of circles goes beyond conflict resolution and behavior management, and it has the potential to impact school climate and the development of social

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

skills in students. Students need to be given the appropriate tools for self-expression and self-management.

In a study of restorative circle implementation in a high school, Ortega (2016) identified the positive and negative outcomes of circles named by students. Positive outcomes were divided into five subcategories and included taking ownership of process, interrupting the school-to-prison pipeline, improving relationships, preventing destructive ways of engaging conflict, and conducting meaningful dialogue. Negative outcomes were divided into two subcategories and included frustration, specifically the belief that peers were not being truthful, and disappointment, which also included an unwillingness to be vulnerable. While this is an insightful study, it is limited to the perceptions of high school students that are being exposed to the practice as a way to address behavior. Social and emotional needs are not being specifically targeted in this use of the practice.

Social and emotional aspects of students' lives are just as important as the academic content they are learning in schools (Dobia, Parada, Roffey, and Smith, 2019). In a study with year five and six students, Dobia et al. (2019) implemented a Circle Solutions intervention to analyze students' social emotional learning and connectedness with one another. Findings showed that the intervention provided a space for students to build positive connections that helped give them a voice in the community and improve overall well-being. Students in primary grades are still developing, and the opportunities that proactive community circles offer for social-emotional development and self-regulation are critical as they grow. It becomes even more critical for students that are experiencing adversity, stress, or trauma as they are more susceptible to challenges in social, emotional, and academic development (Jones & Kahn, 2017).

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

Self-awareness and regulation through mindfulness have had positive effects on student behavior and on student relationships within the classroom (Harpin et al., 2016). Research recognizes practices such as mindfulness that aid students in regulating their emotions; however, delivery of these practices varies. Exploration of proactive circles as a way to provide techniques such as mindfulness to address the self-regulatory needs of students is limited.

The second-grade classroom that I completed my clinical teaching in had time set aside for some variation of a morning meeting. However, I was curious as to how intentional community building with students' needs in mind would impact their interactions with their peers. Students appeared to get upset with one another, and they took their frustrations out by complaining about their peers to the teacher or speaking harshly to their peers directly.

The students in the Title I, second-grade classroom that I was in appeared to also have difficulty in both describing and expressing their emotions and needs, as well as acting on those emotions and needs in an appropriate manner. This study helped to identify student perceptions of community and its impact on both their relationships and their ability to express themselves in an appropriate manner. Most of the research around circles focuses on the immediate conflict, with little emphasis on how they can be used to build a community that can appropriately respond to that conflict in a healthy way.

### **Methods**

This action research was conducted in a second-grade classroom at Crawford Elementary where I studied what happened as a result of implementing proactive community circles into the fabric of the normal school day. I looked at student and teacher perceptions of relationships in the classroom community after the implementation of circle, as well as students' perceptions of their ability to effectively express their feelings and emotions after the implementation of

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

proactive circles. Because the study was conducted during my yearlong clinical teaching placement, I had a rapport with students that helped them to feel comfortable with me as a researcher as well as a teacher in the classroom.

### **Participant Selection**

The participants in this study included a single, self-contained classroom of second-grade students and one classroom teacher. I was the clinical teacher in the classroom, and I gathered research on the perceptions of my co-teacher and our students. I sent home a parent information letter and consent form, and the students were asked to sign an assent form. Of the 17 students in the class, 14 received parent permission and assented to act as participants. The class consisted of ten boys and seven girls. Of the seventeen students, ten identified as Hispanic, five identified as White, and two identified as Black/African American. The classroom teacher was a Caucasian female.

### **Data Collection**

Each day, there was time set aside before instruction for a classroom meeting. However, the time was not being used every day. Proactive circle was a more structured and formal way to intentionally use that time at the start of our school day to address social and emotional learning, along with other needs identified throughout the school day. Proactive circles were implemented eight times over the course of eight days. Each circle took place in the morning for approximately fifteen minutes. Each day followed the proactive circle structure of a greeting, check in, activity, and closing, excluding the first day which acted as an introduction and establishment of circle norms and expectations. All students participated in circle, but only the students that provided assent and consent acted as participants in the study. In order to create a

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

fuller picture of perceptions, I used a wide range of data collection methods including pre- and post-surveys, interviews, pre- and post-sociograms, and field notes.

All students were given a survey containing a mix of Likert scale and open-ended questions (see Appendix A). The survey addressed the idea of community within the classroom and students' perceptions of their own ability to effectively express their emotions. The same survey was given at the beginning of implementation and again at the end of implementation. The survey given at the beginning of implementation acted as a baseline so that comparisons of participants could be made before and after the intervention of circles (Hendricks, 2017). I also implemented pre- and post-sociograms (see Appendix B) to look at student perceptions of their relationships with their peers (Hendricks, 2017).

Along with the surveys and sociograms, I conducted semi-structured interviews comprised of open-ended questions (Hendricks, 2017). I conducted six student interviews in order to better reflect the make-up of the classroom. These interviews lasted about ten to fifteen minutes. I used data from the initial survey and the initial sociograms to select participants for the interviews. I chose from the pool of participants two who identified a strong sense of community, two who did not, and two that were ambivalent to the idea of community in the classroom. I also conducted one semi structured teacher interview that lasted about thirty minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. I also took field notes of what was happening in the classroom environment, specifically related to our conversation in the mornings during circle as well as during moments of the day when I observed students implementing the skills learned in circle into their daily routine.

### **Data Analysis**

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

The qualitative data, including the interviews, field notes, and open-ended survey questions, was analyzed using the constant comparative method by assigning initial codes and subsequent supporting codes (Hubbard & Power, 2003). I started the process of coding by manually analyzing 20% of all qualitative data collected to create a list of 15 to 20 level I codes (Tracy, 2013). I then used the codes that I generated from analyzing the first 20% of my data to code the remaining 80% of data. Level II codes were created to represent major themes from the data, which resulted in four major themes (level II codes) with sub themes (level I codes). I also created a codebook that provided a list of codes, their definitions, and an example of that code from the data (see Appendix C). To complete the qualitative analysis, I generated memos for each of the level II codes to deepen reflection on my own understanding of the codes. The quantitative data, the Likert scale questions from the surveys, was analyzed by frequency counts, and the sociograms were coded qualitatively and mapped (Hubbard & Power, 2003).

### **Findings**

As I began the data analysis process, I noticed the following four overarching themes emerge: relationships, circle, introspection, and environment. In the sections that follow, I present these major findings through the seven lenses of my participants: Leah, Cassi, Alexander, Isabella, Caleb, Adrianna, and Ms. Shephard. Who better to explain individuals' perceptions of relationships and expression than the participants themselves? Before each section is a poetic transcription (Glesne 1997) composed of conversations taken from the qualitative data of each participant. Each transcription represents the participants' perceptions and voice, and if my voice is present, it is differentiated with quotation marks.

#### **Leah**

I liked snowball share  
because it taught us about our brain when we get frustrated.  
I don't like to talk very much



## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

classroom, and the students that were not chosen at all were identified as isolates. Leah, along with two of her peers, were identified as isolates in the first sociogram. However, the post sociogram identified no isolates; everyone was chosen at least once. There was a heightened awareness of individuals in the classroom. For example, Isabella, a leader identified from the sociograms, during a Thankful Thursday circle, thanked Leah for her ability to cheer her up when she was sad. Leah's face lit up both during circle and when she recounted the experience during our interview together. The circle provided the space for potential affirmation by peers for peers, and helped to establish new relationships that are depicted in the post sociogram.

Along with positive relationship building, there were also side squabbles among students. Leah in particular noted that Mia was an unkind friend. At the same time, Mia identified Leah as an unkind friend. Both being isolates in the pre- sociogram, I wondered if their squabble impacted their relationships with others. As an observer of relationships in the classroom, I noticed the fluidity in which students moved in and out of relationships, and they were rarely one sided. Circle, however, provided the space for students to listen to each other and express themselves to one another, which Ms. Shephard noted in her interview impacted their views of their peers.

Leah also noted her sense of safety in the classroom. When asked why she felt safe to share, she stated that it was because she knew that only our class would know. Establishing this relational trust was critical to students' ability to begin to express themselves in the first place, and yet, it did not mean that they would choose to. Leah expressed that she learned skills of how to talk to others when she was frustrated, but that she did not always want to use them because they made her even sadder. Her ability to name an appropriate strategy for addressing her

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

emotions that was learned during circle sheds light on her heightened awareness, even though she chose a different regulation strategy that had not been explicitly taught during circle.

### **Cassi**

#### The Check In

You get to say I'm sunny because  
I'm cloudy because  
I'm rainy because,  
and

you get to know how you are feeling, and  
it makes me feel happy.

After circle,

I feel proud

and good,

and I'm not scared of anything that might happen.

I was in foster,

and I was the new kid.

First I was scared, but now

I'm happy.

Cassi joined the class mid-year as a new student. During her interview, she associated positive feelings towards time spent in circle, particularly Thankful Thursdays, exclaiming, “Yes!” on Thursdays as we moved to the carpet to receive and give affirmations to one another. Along with identifying circle as an entertaining and fun practice, she recognized opportunities that allowed her to “share [her] life with somebody.” During a get to know you activity students were randomly paired up and asked to share something that they wanted their classmates to know about them. Cassi was partnered with me where she shared, for the first time, that she had been in foster care. This voluntary vulnerability required a safe space. It was something she wanted me to know, but something that she just now after a few months of being with us, chose to share. These moments shared between individuals built trust within the community, strengthening the relationships between the individuals in the classroom.

Acknowledging kindness was a common identification within relationships between students. Cassi recounted the book *Each Kindness* by Jacqueline Woodson that was read during

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

an ELAR unit during the weeks of implementation. On the day that we read the text, I chose to have students participate in the activity that was in the book during our circle. As we read the book in the afternoon students exclaimed that we as a class had done the same thing. The opportunities for connections to content allowed for stronger synthesis of what it meant to be kind to others, something that some still struggled with. Cassi, along with her peers, named specific instances where they either received kindness or gave kindness. For example, she described when Oliver, a student I observed to be a social outcast and who was chosen once by the same person in both the pre- and post sociograms, helped her up when she was crying after falling down in the wood chips on the playground. Not only was she able to acknowledge the kindness of a classmate, she was also aware of another student, specifically, a student that struggles to fit in.

Check in was a practice that followed the greeting. To get students comfortable with sharing, we began with a pair share where students turned and checked in with the person next to them before choosing whether or not they wanted to check in with the whole class. Quieter students like Elijah and Noah surprised me by taking advantage of this group check in on some days, sharing positive parts of their evenings after school the day before or what they were looking forward to during the present day. Cassi made a point during her interview that I believe helps to answer the question on circles' impact on students' ability to express themselves. She stated that during check in "you get to know how you are feeling." This pause allowed students to identify emotions that might play into the rest of their day, and they were given the opportunity for introspection. It also provided them with developmentally appropriate language to express how they were feeling with the community, as portrayed through Cassi's transcription above.

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

### Alexander

Are we doing the same thing today that we did in the morning yesterday?

Are we doing circle today?

Is it time for circle?

I feel cloudy today,

because I had to take grandma to the hospital.

I feel sunny today,

because grandma got to come home.

Circle,

it makes me feel very excited and happy

because we get to do fun activities.

We get to learn,

we get to say our feelings,

and

it helps me calm down.

I feel safe around you.

And Noah,

he plays with me and says kind words to me.

And I can play,

even with Oliver,

because people be mean to Oliver,

and he gets sad.

So I try to help him

to be kind.

The expectancy of circle to be a natural rhythm in the classroom is exemplified by Alexander's craving for the practice. I observed students' immediate association of circle with me, and when I first saw them in the morning, particularly with Olivia and Alexander, the first thing they wanted to know is if we would be doing circle. After implementation, students recognized the change in rhythm back to a day without it. This theme of expectancy in the data showed me a sliver of what happens when circle is implemented, and when it's gone, students noticed.

The theme of establishing safe spaces in relationships was exemplified yet again in my interview with Alexander. Sharing was a result of perceived safety with teachers and friends. Valuing friendships was also a recurring theme in the data falling under the relationships

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

umbrella. These two things appeared to be intertwined throughout the data. As safe spaces were identified, so was appreciation for others in the classroom. Alexander noted a new appreciation for Noah, someone he went from not choosing on the first sociogram to choosing as his first choice for the second sociogram. He appeared to have a heightened awareness for someone that he previously did not identify as a first or second choice of a friend to work with. Oliver also came up in discussion with Alexander who, when I asked if he felt like he could play with everyone in the classroom said, “Yep, even Oliver.” Coming to the conclusion that Oliver was a social outcast based on my observations as a classroom teacher, I pressed and asked why he would say that. Alexander commented that people are mean to Oliver which makes him sad, so to be kind, he helps him. Interestingly enough, Oliver was chosen by one person in both sociograms as a first choice friend: Noah.

Alexander's use of the check in was also revealing of the potential for the practice. He used it as a continuation of important life events that were weighing heavy on his mind. He was given the language to express that one day he felt cloudy because his grandma, who he lives with, was in the hospital. This gave students, as well as Ms. Shephard and I, a better understanding of his mental state for the day and how we all might be able to comfort him. The next day, he was able to follow up during the same time and share that he felt sunny because his grandma got to come home. As a community, we were able to then celebrate this important marker with him. This was impactful for me not just as the researcher, but also as a member of the classroom, thinking back to the beginning of the year when Alexander would shut down, kick desks, and sob. Alexander also named circle as a space that helped him to calm down, identified as a component of appropriate self-regulation as a result of introspective reflection. While I

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

recognize that we only implemented circle eight times, I firmly believe that this practice gave Alexander space and language to build relationships and express himself appropriately.

### **Isabella**

My grandpa and my daddy were in the army,  
and they fight.

My grandpa survived,  
but my dad  
didn't.

But, I

got

over it.

When we go in circle time  
and we talk to another person of how we feel,  
it helps me for the rest of the day.

I can trust them,  
and I feel

like I am about to EXPLODE  
WITH

HAPPINESS!

Isabella, like her peers, also identified a cultivation of trust in the community as well as positive feelings associated with the practice of circle itself, specifically in sharing her feelings with others during check in. Several of her comments during her interview fell under a theme I identified as a sense of pride and belonging with being a part of the classroom. This sense of pride emerged as a feeling from the morning greeting during circle, as well as from her perceptions of students liking to play with her during recess where she is the “queen”, which was validated by her emergence as a leader in the sociograms. Isabella also reflected on how circle helps her for the rest of the day and how it makes her feel happy.

Being one of the two participants selected to interview as having a strong sense of community based on the pre- survey, as well as my own observations of her being what I would consider a very “happy-go-lucky” student, I anticipated Isabella's strong sense of belonging in the classroom. What I did not anticipate was her vulnerability in sharing how circle prepared her

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

for the rest of the day and her heightened awareness of her “subjects,” having identified herself as the queen. One day after circle, I recorded in my field notes a conversation that occurred at her table which included Isabella, Olivia, Alexander, Noah, and myself. Noah and Alexander were observers in a conversation between Olivia and Isabella. I entered into the conversation after noticing Olivia making faces at Oliver, who was a table away, and making snide comments about him. I entered into the conversation to ask what was going on. Isabella, a rule follower that typically is quick to share when someone is not following directions, hesitated before telling me that Olivia was talking bad about Oliver. She followed it up with this comment: “Honestly, I don’t mind if he touches my supply box because I don’t think it is right to talk bad about people. I just want to do the kind thing.” This awareness of kindness to others was a strong take away from our time spent in circle, recognizing others’ feelings and how we as individuals impact them.

### **Caleb**

I'm only seven,  
almost eight,  
and I've had a lot,  
I mean a lot,  
of hard times.

And  
it's hard  
to be a big brother for two.

I gotta watch my brother,  
and I gotta watch my sister,  
and sometimes

I gotta watch them both.

My grandma died,

and another family member went to jail.

Me and Olivia,

who moved,

were friends for a really long time,

and

there are a lot of new kids here.

But,

I got a lot of friends, and

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

they treat me with kindness and respect.  
It makes me feel good  
every time  
I get to do circle with the class.

Caleb unpacks two concepts that emerged as a result of circle: introspection through voluntary vulnerability and an environment marked by shifting personalities. Caleb, like other students in the classroom, had a lot weighing on his seven-, almost eight, year-old mind. He entered into the classroom carrying all of these things on his shoulders. He noted in his interview that circle had helped him while he was “away from home for eight hours.” Circle allowed him to release some of the things that he entered in with, and it gave Ms. Shephard and me a better understanding of where he was coming from.

On his surveys, Caleb marked “strongly disagree” on the question regarding his feeling safe to share in class. I pressed in his interview on this question so that I could better understand the discrepancy between the two data collection methods, and he told me not only does he feel safe to share, he enjoys sharing. I found this to be similar across interview participants, where their interview answers differed from their survey answers. While I tried to assure them that I wanted their honest answers, me being a part of the classroom community had the potential to skew some of these results. I also recognize the fluctuation of feelings from day to day in the life of a second grader that could also contribute to the discrepancies between the methods.

The survey data for the whole class did not show significant differences from the pre-survey to the post-survey. The average answer for each question on both the pre- and post-survey ranged from 3.1 to 3.8 which fell into the “agree” category. In questions four, five, and six, the averages were slightly lower from pre- to post-survey which indicated a shift towards a more negative association with the question. However, looking at the individual surveys that shift was created by only one student in each question.

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

The second major theme was this idea of circle as a communal practice for shifting personalities in the classroom. With a 19.1% mobility rate at Crawford, our classroom saw a good deal of transition. Caleb did not let it go unnoticed, and he showed me just how much students are paying attention. We had five students leave and five students enter the classroom over the course of the year, two of which entered and two who left during the four-week research period. Ms. Shephard will later identify the benefits of using circle as a way to strengthen classroom community in a fluctuating environment; however, I find it important to note Caleb's heightened awareness of individuals in the classroom and the toll that “losing” a friend took on him. Circle provided the space for him to think deeply about losing a friend and processing how to welcome others into the existing fold.

### **Adrianna**

*We are smart,  
we are kind,  
we are powerful,  
and  
we are all different.*  
It makes me feel  
excited.  
“What makes you feel like you belong?”  
Circle time  
because it is fun  
talking to people.  
Can we do that again?

Adrianna’s transcription begins with her repeating our circle closing that we said together as a way to wrap up our time in circle every day. About half way through implementation, I decided to have students stand with their hands on their hips, heads up, and legs shoulder width apart during our closing, just to get them moving and engaged after fifteen minutes on the carpet listening to others. The day that this was implemented, I noted in my field notes a sense of urgency in their voices that I had not heard before. They took ownership of the words that

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

matched their new posture. While Isabella and Leah noted that it made them feel like superheroes, Adrianna noted her feeling of excitement because of it. This sense of fun and excitement was a common expression of Adrianna's during her interview. Ms. Shephard, in her interview, spoke to the giddiness that was found in Adrianna's comments stating the following: "[the students] had fun, which if a few of them learned something great, but as long as they had fun and didn't see it as a burden or a consequence like that, if you keep doing it, they will get something out of it."

### **Ms. Shephard**

I feel like it went really well.

I have tried to utilize it in the past,  
but then it just

falls

away.

And, it's never been modeled to me.

But, I feel like it would be really helpful

if we did it more,

like thankful Thursdays.

The more that you do it

the faster things go.

It just comes with time,

and I feel like they have been talking

to us more

since circle.

Or, maybe

I am more aware of it.

Ms. Shephard's perceptions on the practice in the classroom were insightful. Having struggled in the past to implement some sort of classroom meeting structure, she stated her appreciation for seeing a structured practice. One of the most common themes that surfaced in her interview was the concept of time. Recognizing that only implementing for eight days was a limitation, she emphasized that like with any sort of expectation or procedure, it would take a lot longer for students to get into the rhythm so that our time spent together would be both effective and efficient with consideration for the rest of the school day. Despite this limitation, she

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

appreciated the flexibility that came with it and that it was not “this is what you do the first day, this is what you do the second day. It [was] very adjustable for each class.” She also noted that it would be beneficial to welcoming new students into the fold of the classroom. Because of the high turnover, in the past she did not do anything to welcome students. However, she noted a benefit to introducing the student into the community, allowing other students to take the lead and model expectations and behavior in circle, and processing any emotions that may come with that process.

Ms. Shephard also noted that she did not necessarily see big shifts in relationships between students; however, she noted more of a shift between herself and the students. Outside of “some of them just pointing out kindness...within the hour” of circle, she did not notice any major shifts in student relationships. However, she noticed that students were more willing to share what was on their minds with her. Ms. Shephard recounted Mia sharing with her in the middle of the day that she was worried about her mom, and she stated that she was able to use that time to reassure Mia while helping her get back to the task at hand. Circles and students’ heightened willingness to share made her more aware of where students were coming from so that she could address their needs throughout the day. Along the same thread, Ms. Shephard noticed students using the language learned during check in (sunny, cloudy, etc.) to express themselves at other parts of the day. She expanded on that point by stating the following: “Sometimes they are just very reactive because that is what they see at home. It is just a lot of reactive language and so modeling how to pause, take a breath, and not just reacting right away and thinking before you speak and trying to calm down would have an impact.”

### **Implications for Teachers**

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

As I began this study I recognized a lack in depth of research of proactive circles as a way to build community in elementary classrooms. I sought to explore what might happen if the practice was implemented into a second-grade classroom. Four major themes were identified throughout the course of study that both answered my original questions and prompted new wonderings.

After the implementation, I found a consistency in students' heightened awareness of themselves and those around them. They were also able to name learning during circle as a means of calming them down when they got frustrated. There was also a vulnerability that surfaced in sharing worries from outside of the classroom that not only built trust within the community, but also shared with the teachers critical information on how to help students succeed during the day when they were in a state of worry. The opportunities provided by circle for voluntary vulnerability shaped the rest of the school day and not only how teachers interacted with students, but also in how students interacted with each other. The flexibility provided by circle allowed us to pull a variety of resources to help aid students in understanding more about themselves and others, and the expectancy that came with having the practice as a regular rhythm contributed to the overall classroom environment.

While recognizing that second-grade relationships are ever changing, the shift in culture, specifically pointing out kindness, was a result of lessons conducted during our time in circle and expounded upon throughout the school day. We honed in on what it meant to be a part of a classroom community, and addressing kindness played a large role in that because of previous behaviors I had observed among students before choosing what to address during circle.

Establishing safe spaces was important to the relationship building that occurred, specifically creating trust so that students were willing to share with others. Relationships

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

embody more than just an identification of friendship. It includes an awareness of self and others, an awareness of negative interactions, and an awareness of one's perceived sense of safety and reprieve in a space that is trustworthy. Students identified a sense of pride and belonging as a result of getting to know other people and spending intentional time in circle, which was named specifically by a student as the reason they felt like they belonged.

This research opened my eyes to the importance of implementing a practice like proactive circles into the regular rhythm of the classroom for community building and emotional scaffolding. The benefits of spending those fifteen minutes together at the start of the day extended into the rest of our time spent together. I encourage teachers to look at what their students need. How could those needs be addressed in a structured meeting like proactive circles? The structure of the circle prompts accountability, listening, participation, and engagement. When implementing, it is important to have an agenda to follow, but be willing to listen to what students are revealing about what they need in their comments and answers. With restorative practices on the rise as a hot topic in education, this research shows just one of those practices in real time. It supports what educational researchers are encouraging teachers to take a chance on, and it proves that it can be profitable.

While this study was informative on the use of proactive circles in an elementary classroom and its impact on social-emotional and relational responses, I am still left with further wonderings for potential study. Throughout the research I wondered what this practice might look like in other contexts, including upper elementary to a different population with different demographics. I found that my students needed an outlet and they needed tools to address relational conflict. Would this practice be beneficial if this was not a need? I also am curious as to what supports teachers could be provided with to aid them in implementing what might be a

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

foreign practice. Research demonstrates the importance of social-emotional development, and yet many teachers feel ill equipped to meet those needs with other academic pressures during the school day. As educators it is our responsibility to teach the whole child. I hope that we see the value that comes from investing in student relationships and providing them with tools so that they can regulate their emotions and feelings in the future.

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

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## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

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PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

Appendix A

Classroom Climate Survey

1. I have lots of friends in my class.

			
Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

2. The students in my class treat me with kindness and respect.

			
Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

3. The students in my class treat others with kindness and respect.

			
Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

4. I feel safe sharing my thoughts and ideas with others in my class.

			
Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

5. I feel comfortable asking a classmate for help when I need it.



Strongly Agree



Agree



Disagree



Strongly Disagree

6. I know how to work through my frustrations.



Strongly Agree



Agree



Disagree



Strongly Disagree

7. I know how to talk to others when I am upset.



Strongly Agree



Agree



Disagree



Strongly Disagree

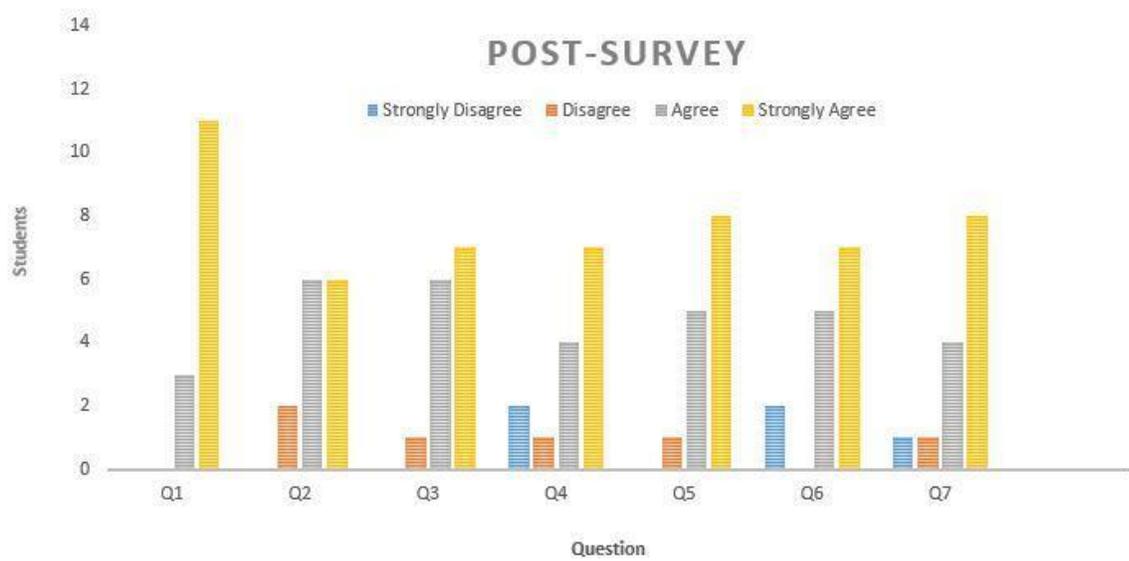
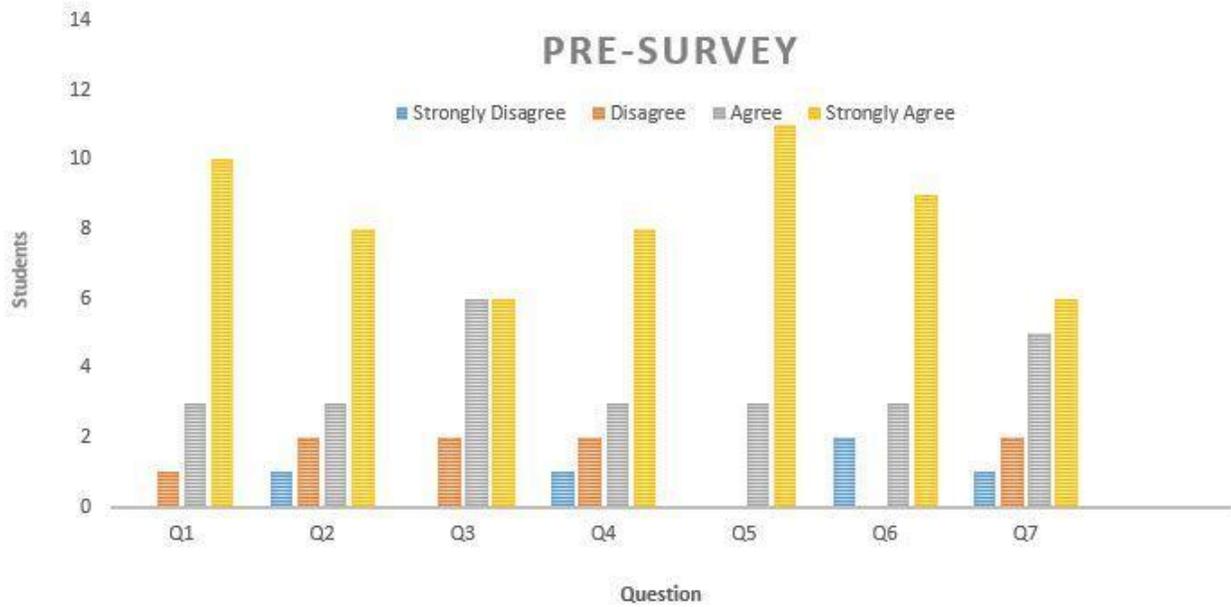
8. What do you like about being in your class?

9. What do you not like about being in your class?

10. What is one thing you want me to know about your class?

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

## Survey Frequency Counts



## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

**Appendix B**

Pre-Sociogram  
February 3, 2020

If you could choose two friends to work with, who would you choose and why would you choose them? \*all names are pseudonyms\*

<b>Student</b>	<b>Two friends</b>	<b>Why</b>
Cassi	Adrianna and Rose	Adrianna- she is really nice and she is my friend and we do most of the stuff together  Rose- she is nice and she is my friend too and when I don't have anyone to play with at recess it is her
Noah	Oliver and Caleb	Oliver- He is a nice friend  Caleb - he is funny and he smart
Maddox	Jacob and William	Jacob- We can be a good team  William- He knows how to spell some words
Rose	Lucas and James	Lucas-don't talk with him much and i wont get distracted  James- Don't talk with him much either
Alexander	Maddox and Lucas	Maddox- He is nice  Lucas- He is nice
Olivia	Isabella and Adrianna	they are both my best friends
Isabella	Adrianna and Olivia	Adrianna- She is talented and she is smart  Olivia- She is smart also and she can help me with a word that I don't know
Caleb	Maddox and James	Maddox- He is my friend  James- He is also my friend and he is funny and so is Konnar too.
Adrianna	Isabella and Cassi	Isabella- She is my friend

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

		Cassi- She is my friend and she plays with me on the playground
<b>Mia</b>	Isabella and Noah	Isabella- She is nice and doesn't be mean Noah- The same as Aubrey
Oliver	Maddox and William	Maddox- Because he is my best friend William- because he is my best friend too
Elijah	William and Jacob	William- If I don't know a word he can help me with it. Jacob- If I don't know an answer he can help me.
<b>Emily</b>	Adrianna and Rose	Adrianna- She is really kind, really nice, and she has great personality. Rose- She also has a really good personality and she's really nice and she's a friend in my class.
<b>Leah</b>	Rose and Isabella	Rose- Rose is a good worker and when she works she doesn't tell anyone the answers Isabella- Sometimes Isabella gets a lot correct and she is good at helping people
Lucas	Elijah and Alexander	Elijah -Because he is smart Alexander- He helps me do spelling stuff. `
James	Maddox and Lucas	Maddox- likes to help Lucas- he is friendly

PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

First Sociogram

	Cassi	Noah	Isabella	Rose	Jacob	Alexander	Olivia	Caleb	Adrianna	Mia	Oliver	Elijah	Emily	William	Leah	Lucas	James	
Cassi				1				2										
Noah								1			2							
Maddox					2									1				
Rose																2	1	
Alexander			2													1		
Olivia							2	1										
Isabella							1	2										
Caleb			2														1	
Adrianna	1						2											
Mia		1					2											
Oliver			2											1				
Elijah					1									2				
Emily				1				2										
Leah				2			1											
Lucas						1						2						
James			2														1	
TOTAL POINTS	1	1	8	4	3	1	1	7	1	7	0	2	2	0	4	0	4	2

Isolate- No one said them

Leaders/Most Points

2 points- First Choice

1 point- Second Choice

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

Post-Sociogram  
February 26, 2020

If you could choose two friends to work with, who would you choose and why would you choose them? \*all names are pseudonyms\*

<b>Student</b>	<b>Two friends</b>	<b>Why</b>
Cassi	Mia and Isabella	Mia- she is nice to me and she is never mean and never lies or anything to me Isabella- she is my friend and she is a good citizen
Noah	Oliver and Jacob	Oliver - he is really nice to everyone and he uses his manners Jacob- he is very funny and he is a good friend
Maddox	Jacob and William	Jacob - we work well together and can be smart together William- we can also work and think in our heads to make like pictures
Rose	Jacob and Lucas	Jacob- I don't talk with him very much and I want to Lucas-I don't talk much with him either
Alexander	Noah and Maddox	Maddox- he's is nice to me and he is my best friend Noah- we are always best friends
Isabella	Adrianna and Leah	Adrianna- she is funny and smart and she is good at stuff like math Leah- she's also funny and she's talented and very smart at math
Caleb	Elijah and Alexander	Elijah- he is a good friend and knows how to play basketball and i know how to play basketball and sometimes we go one v one against each other. He is an awesome friend to me and always so nice Alexander- he is a good friend he likes dogs like me and he helps me sometimes
Adrianna	Cassi and Mia	Cassi- she is my bestest friend and she works with me alot

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

		Mia- she is also my bestest friend and we play at recess and we sit next to each other at circle
Mia	Rose and Isabella	Rose- she is sweet and smart Isabella- she is nice and smart
Oliver	Caleb and William	they are two of my best friends and they always play with me on the playground
Elijah	Noah and Lucas	Noah- because he is smart Lucas- he is smart too and he can help me when I don't know
Leah	Cassi and Isabella	Cassi- she is a good worker Isabella- she is a good worker too
Lucas	Caleb and William	Caleb- he is nice William- he always helps me
James	Lucas and Maddox	Lucas is friendly and nice and so is Maddox and they are kind and sweet and they are mart and they are not mean

PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

Second Sociogram

	Cassi	Noah	Maddox	Rose	Lucas	Alexander	Isabella	Emily	Adrianna	Mia	Oliver	Elijah	William	Leah	James	
Cassi							1			2						
Noah				1							2					
Maddox				2									1			
Rose				2										1		
Alexander		2	1													
Isabella								2						1		
Caleb						1						2			1	
Adrianna	2									1						
Mia				2			1									
Oliver								2					1			
Elijah		2													1	
Emily				1				2								
Leah	2						1									
Lucas								2					1			
James			1												2	
TOTAL POINTS	4	4	2	3	5	1	3	4	4	3	2	2	3	1	4	1

Isolate- No one said them

Leaders/Most Points

2 points- First Choice

1 point- Second Choice

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

## Appendix C

## Codebook

Code	Level	Definition	Example
<b>Relationships</b>	2	This code identifies student and teacher perceptions of the various relationships in the classroom including teacher to student and student to student relationships.	“I got a lot of friends in the classroom and they are always nice to me and I am always nice to them.”
Acknowledging Kindness	1	This code identifies student recognition of their own kindness towards other people or kindness that has been given to them.	“Because there are a lot of students in our class and they treat me with kindness and with respect so I am pretty sure that they will treat everyone else with kindness and respect.”
Valuing Friendships	1	This code was used any time a student specifically named an appreciation for a ‘friend’ or for the classroom as a group of ‘friends.’	“One day I tripped over something I can’t remember what it was but me and Elijah were playing tag on the field but it wasn’t when it was cold so I was able to run around and he was it and I tripped over something like my foot slipped and I hit my head on the floor and then I started to get upset and then he helped me up and then we just kept on playing.”
Side Squabbles	1	This code was used to identify negative associations with peers in the classroom ranging from fights to unkind words.	“Like sometimes she is nice before lunch and then after lunch she is always saying no leave me alone and then she will try to be nice but then

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

			she will keep on being mean.”
Teacher Appreciation	1	This code was used to identify positive perceptions of students of their two teachers.	“I have the best teachers ever.”
Establishing Safe Spaces	1	This code was used to identify student and teacher perceptions of safety, trust, and a willingness to share with others because of that perceived sense of safety.	“I feel safe around you and you’re kind to me.”
<b>Environment</b>	2	This code explores the different perceptions of what it means to be in community as well as the different components that contribute to the overall environment.	J-“What is it that makes you feel like you belong?” A-“Circle time” J-“How does it make you feel like you belong?” A-“Because it is fun when we do it”
Welcoming into the Fold	1	This code is used to identify perceptions of new students being brought into the existing classroom community.	“Well at first I was scared I was the new kid but now I’m happy.”
Shifting Personalities	1	This code is used to describe the specific personality shifts and how they change the dynamic of the classroom.	“Because we’ve got Cassi she moved here and Maxine and then we got Maddox and it was his first year here and so was Mia and James so five students moved five students are new to here”
All for one and one for all	1	This code is used to describe the	“It’s not each person out for themselves

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

		individual differences that come together to create one communal experience.	like we are a class and working together to reach a goal or just like even we can all learn so we all have to behave or whatever like not individualistic, we are a class we are all in this together”
Sense of pride and belonging	1	This is a code used to describe perceptions of purpose and place in the environment.	“We closed by saying our mantra, but this time we started posing like a superhero with our legs shoulder width apart and hands on our hips...Students took this very seriously and the closing had a stronger sense of power. There was urgency in their voices when they positioned their bodies differently than in circles past”
Working through challenges	1	This code is used to identify both working through difficult conflicts as well as difficult content as a means of learning, very much an identification of growth mindset.	“Because we get to learn new stuff and I like when the hard stuff comes because the hard stuff is more fun because you get to learn more stuff and it’s new and the more hard stuff you learn it gets very easy.”
Appreciation of content	1	This code is used to display students’ excitement about content material.	“I like reading!”
Classroom instruction methods	1	This code is used as a way to describe students’ positive perceptions of teacher	“I like math stations.”

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

		chosen instructional methods.	
<b>Introspection</b>	2	This code is used for when students or teachers recognize any forms of self-regulation including a willingness to open up and express feelings and emotions.	“Maddox said he felt sunny because he thought about playing with Jonathon at the park. I asked him, ‘will you get to play with Jonathon at the park after school?’ to which he replied ‘no Jonathon is my dad and my dad is in jail. I was just thinking about it and it made me feel sunny.’”
Appropriate regulation of emotions	1	This code is used to display moments of appropriate self-regulation of emotions.	“Circle helps me calm down...it helps me calm down by not getting crazy or anything.”
Heightened awareness	1	This code is used to describe participants’ awareness of both themselves and the people around them.	“I feel like they’ve been talking to us more since circle, or maybe because I am more aware of it.”
Voluntary vulnerability	1	This code is used to describe students’ willingness to share intimate details of their lives and their emotions with the community.	“its become more positive and if they are feeling something they will come and tell us not just at circle time but in the middle of the day and just using some of that different vocabulary or like Mia like we weren’t doing circle but she was like I’m worried about my mom.”
<b>Circle</b>	2	This code was used to identify any comments or perceptions that were associated with the practice of circle and	“It helps me for the rest of the day because I feel like I am about to explode happiness.”

## PROACTIVE CIRCLE IN SECOND-GRADE

		its impact on the classroom.	
What I need	1	This code is used to describe the flexibility of the practice as a means to meet the needs of the students every day.	“So its not like this is what you do the first day this is what you do the second day, its very adjustable for each class.”
Circle expectancy	1	This code is used to describe students’ expectations of having the practice as a regular rhythm in the school day.	“In the cafeteria when Olivia and Alexander first saw me they immediately asked about circle.”
Making connections	1	This code is used to identify content and real life connections that students were able to make because of the work they participated in during circle.	“Ya, like that Maya and Chloe book, spread each kindness.”
Limitations to the practice	1	This code is used to describe some of the areas of the practice that could be improved, as well as some of the limitations of the study itself.	“I think the only challenge is time.”
Positive association	1	This code is used to describe student and teachers’ positive comments, thoughts, and opinions on the practice of circle in the classroom.	J-“How do you feel after we do morning circle?”  L-“I feel happy and more awake.”