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**ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM ETHICS: THE EMERGENCE OF ETHICAL  
LITERACY WITHIN THE MORNING MEETING**

A dissertation submitted to  
Marshall University  
in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education  
in  
Leadership Studies  
by  
Leo A. Zumpetta  
Approved by  
Dr. Barbara Nicholson, Committee Chairperson  
Dr. Ronald Childress  
Dr. Yvonne Skoretz

Marshall University  
December 2023

### Approval of Dissertation

We, the faculty supervising the work of **Leo Zumpetta**, affirm that the dissertation, *Elementary Classroom Ethics: The Emergence of Ethical Literacy Within the Morning Meeting*, meets the high academic standards for original scholarship and creative work established by the EdD Program in Leadership Studies and the College of Education and Professional Development. The work also conforms to the requirements and formatting guidelines of Marshall University. With our signatures, we approve the manuscript for publication.

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## **Dedication**

To Dr. Vincent Craig: teacher, mentor, friend, and one of the first and most vocal of my many champions as I pursued this degree. I am a better musician, a more effective teacher, and a kinder human being for having known you. You are missed.

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To my friends and colleagues that urged me on like rabid cycling fans crowding the twisting, cobbled roads atop French mountains;

And, finally, but most importantly, to my loving wife, Liesel, rivaled in patience only by Job as I whittled away at this dissertation, pausing just long enough to say “I do” before scurrying back into my writing shack, I so look forward to the resumption of our weekday date nights and, you know, maybe just seeing you for longer than seven and a half minutes on any given evening;

To you all – my heartfelt thanks, my sincerest gratitude, my undying love.

“Although my son often questioned why his daddy’s teachers gave him so much homework, he endured the lack of attention” (Zumpetta, 1987, p. vii). I get it, now. You should know, never once did I feel neglected.

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## Abstract

Rituals have proven effective in the elementary classroom. One ritualistic practice, the morning meeting, is rooted in social and emotional learning (SEL), an approach that integrates traditional academic pursuits with an understanding of emotional regulation, self-actualization and interpersonal relationships. Ethical literacy, a facility with ethical concepts empowering individuals to act as autonomous ethical beings, may be cultivated through SEL. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate the morning meeting for evidence of foundational experiences leading to ethical literacy in student participants, along with an analysis of the effectiveness of these experiences. Data were collected through nonparticipant observation of a sample of primary grade classrooms from a single district, alongside semi-structured interviews with each participating teacher. Ritualistic practices within the morning meeting promote ethical literacy by allowing students to feel seen and see others. A unique classroom sociology is created by navigating relationships and practicing ethical acts as the teacher decodes students and helps regulate emotions. Leadership opportunities encourage growth, autonomy, and responsibility. Right and wrong are placed in context as unethical acts are recognized and confronted. Stories serve as pathways toward the emergence of ethical literacy, connecting narrative and illustration to experience. Kindness and empathy are often the first connections made in an emergent ethical literacy. Tools are supplied to dismantle the egocentric barrier including an age-appropriate vocabulary, semi-scripted SEL lessons, and student social interactions, including role play. The emergence of ethical literacy is evident within the practice of the morning meeting, but varies in the depth and richness of the student experience. The egocentric barrier must be dismantled to allow the realization of ethical literacy in primary aged students. Seeing and connecting with others, storytelling, and the power of ritual all serve this purpose. Students experience ethical

absorption through constant exposure to ethical concepts and interactions, eventually developing a reflexive reaction to ethical dilemmas. A common, shared language would prove invaluable to the teaching of ethics to young children. Teachers are placed on a parental continuum, responsible for each student's ethical development, regardless of home support or opposition.

## Chapter One: Introduction

William Steig (1950) captured the complexities of navigating the social challenges of primary school in his quirky picture book *The Agony in the Kindergarten*. At first blush, the book reads as a whimsical glimpse into the daily chaos of elementary education from the child's perspective. Steig, with his simple snippets of text and jagged, asymmetrical doodles, places the adult reader in the alien world of school socialization. Doing school is more than academics: students also learn how to maneuver through social spheres on both sides of the schoolhouse walls, interacting with adults and peers. An emergent ethical literacy, the skills and awareness needed to identify, comprehend, and act when faced with an ethical decision, is part of this social element of education. This dissertation examines the dimensions of this literacy as it develops in the primary aged elementary student through the daily ritual of the morning meeting, a unique classroom practice that is situated within the context of ritual and grounded in social and emotional learning (SEL), the educational approach that is the progenitor of the morning meeting.

Sociologist Émile Durkheim's treatment of ritual is applicable to the educational sphere. The three components of ritual – the sacred and profane, the representation of the collective, and the performative nature of the ritualistic act (D'Orsi & Dei, 2018) – can be witnessed in the everyday practices of the classroom. Durkheim (1912/1995) cites the performative nature of ritual as an integral element in the construction of one's social world. The elementary classroom is a performative experience, for both student and teacher alike.

Rituals provide organization and structure to everyday practices, a superimposed structure that is especially useful in the elementary classroom. Bernstein, Elvin, and Peters (1966) define ritual in the classroom as “a relatively rigid pattern of acts specific to a situation

which construct a framework of meaning over and beyond the specific situation meanings” (p. 429). This “framework of meaning” reflects Durkheim’s support for rituals reinforcing social norms, familiarizing the unfamiliar and transforming the uninitiated into knowledgeable participants. Ritual serves as an invitation (Warnick, 2009) and as a transformative experience (Turner, 1969). Rituals in the classroom setting can prove to be valuable learning experiences. The morning meeting is one such ritual.

### **The Morning Meeting**

The worldview of primary aged children is, by nature, an egocentric one (Bondy & Ketts, 2001), and the morning meeting is an experience that attempts to draw children out of their egocentric shells. Experiences within the morning meeting, including the practice of verbal and nonverbal communication, listening skills, leadership acumen, and the asking and fielding of questions, encourages the growth of autonomy and confidence in the participants, as students take ownership of their learning (Bondy & Ketts, 2001; Collins, 2013; Shields-Lysiak et al., 2020). The benefits are not just intrapersonal: the morning meeting fosters a sense of belonging within the classroom community as well (Bondy & Ketts, 2001; Horsch et al., 1999; LaMoria, 1988; Leach & Lewis, 2013).

Variations upon the morning meeting are endless, as teachers shape the experience to meet the needs of their students. The Responsive Classroom, “a widely used professional development intervention comprised of a set of practical teaching strategies designed to support children’s social, academic, and self-regulatory skills” (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014, p. 569) lends structure to the practice. Strategies set forth by the Responsive Classroom fosters the inclusion of SEL in the classroom, including guidelines for the morning meeting. Kriete and Davis (2016) identify four components of the morning meeting – greeting, sharing, group



activity, and morning message – of which the daily practice “gradually weaves a web that binds a class together” (Kriete & Davis, 2016, p. 3). Acolytes may treat the Responsive Classroom’s structures as dogma, while neophytes consider them mere suggestions, but the common thread, the overarching theme of instituting successful SEL practices within the classroom, remains constant.

The morning meeting, through ritualistic repetition, becomes an authentic experience of empowerment and equality (Tilhou, 2020). The student participant is seen and heard in a trusting environment (Bondy & Ketts, 2001; Boyd et al., 2018; Horsch et al., 1999) and given the skills to cope with differences and find solutions to conflict (Collins, 2013) within the meeting’s atmosphere of respect and collaboration (LaMoria, 1988). If “established social rituals make explicit core social values” (Boyd et al., 2018, p. 335), then the morning meeting, through “the repetition of many ordinary moments of respectful interaction, enables some extraordinary moments” (Kriete & Davis, 2016, p. 11), including “the transmission and internalization of the school culture” and the revitalization of “the social order within the individual” (Chen et al., 2020, p. 9), awakening the student to the possibilities beyond the traditional passive-active dichotomous relationship between pupil and teacher.

### **Social and Emotional Learning**

Social and emotional learning (SEL) focuses on the integration of thought, emotion, and behavior to encourage self-awareness, responsible decision-making, and self-management (Elias et al., 1997). SEL also fosters competencies that develop communication and collaboration (Friedlaender et al., 2014). SEL is not just concerned with community and social competencies: it also builds the neural pathways needed to succeed in school (Brendtro et al., 1990; Perry, 1996). Since schools play an essential role in preparing children to become not just

knowledgeable but caring and responsible adults, SEL is the “missing piece” of the puzzle when considering educational improvement and reform (Elias et al., 1997). The morning meeting was crafted to meet these goals and the practice of SEL is inherent in its design.

The morning meeting and SEL form an effective pair. Classrooms incorporating the morning meeting foster a positive, caring climate for learning (Zins et al., 2004), supporting the claim that social and emotional skills can indeed be taught. In order for SEL to succeed, “students need opportunities to practice their skills in safe and reinforcing environments” (Johnson et al., 2005, p. 60), and the morning meeting, with the comfort of its rituals and routines, provides such an environment. One study found that teachers incorporating the morning meeting led classrooms with higher quality emotional interactions (Abry et al., 2017). These nuanced emotional interactions task the participants with reading a situation or an individual and acting in a responsive and empathetic manner. It is within these interactions that the emergence of ethical literacy is evident.

### **Ethical Literacy**

Literacy, at its most fundamental, is the measurement of one’s facility with language. Other signs, symbols, and gestures, both verbal and nonverbal, share a semiotic significance in the development of the individual. Modern interpretations of literacy cite the “complex interaction between the learner’s background and language and the context, purpose and discourse of the text” (Walsh, 2010, p. 215). Kress (2009) and van Leeuwen (2017) expand their definition of literacy beyond words alone in their exploration of multimodal literacy. Howard Gardner (1993) further opens the avenues of literacy – how one sees, interprets and comprehends everyday signs and symbols – with his theory of multiple intelligences.

Ethical literacy is a branch of new literacies that carries beyond the written word. Ethical literacy contains both a knowledge of ethical standards and the ability to consider all individuals involved in a given situation (Cook, 2002). It is more than a handbook to social graces: the development of ethical literacy is an important step on the path to self-actualization. “In becoming aware of who we are and what we are capable of, we gain a perspective and a sense of responsibility for our choices and actions” (Jafroudi, 2017, p. 4). Exercising ethical literacy, with its accompanying prosocial behaviors, also helps break the cycle of childhood egocentrism (Eisenberg et al., 2016). Core SEL competencies include making decisions with ethical implications.

SEL may grant students the ability to “decode” themselves (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017), and in turn decode others. The crucial piece of this puzzle may be the metacognitive ability to analyze one’s own motivation for an action taken and the development of the reasoning skills necessary to make a decision when faced with a value judgment (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017). Mirk (2005) confirms this sentiment: “ethical literacy forms the bedrock for the broadest aims of education” (p. 17). The educational experience is not limited to the purely academic:

That is why, in seeking (self-) knowledge of what it is to be human; in dealing with moral dilemmas that are generally complex, and often unique; in making moral decisions that are deliberate, sound and rational, the cultivation of ethical literacy, which fosters such empowerment, is an important educational aim. (Jafroudi, 2017, p. 4)

The empowerment acknowledged by Jafroudi, alongside the academic, civic, and social goals of education, is another means of preparing the student for success, within the classroom and in the outside world beyond the schoolhouse walls.

### **Problem Statement**

SEL, which emphasizes that “the whole child” be open and available to the educational experience (Lewallen et al., 2015; Noddings, 2005; Slade & Griffith, 2013), has become increasingly common in curriculum and classroom practices in an attempt to teach “the personal and interpersonal skills we all need to handle ourselves, our relationships, and our work effectively and ethically” (Schonert-Reichl, 2019, p. 223). The morning meeting, a social ritual within the classroom that sets the tone for the day, makes it the ideal educational setting to support SEL.

What is not known, and what this study investigated, is the depth and richness of ethical literacy that is currently present in the morning meeting experience. Ethics education is interwoven into the discussions surrounding SEL (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017; Cohen, 2006; Devaney et al., 2005) on the ground that, much like any adult, students are also tasked with making ethical decisions on a daily basis. While proponents believe that SEL incorporates ethical literacy (Elias et al., 2014; Elias et al., 2007), little is known about the extent to which ethics education is actually embedded into this unique classroom practice.

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the morning meeting for evidence of foundational experiences (e.g., scripted lessons, teacher perceptions, student responses during discussion, incidental and unplanned events, revelations during sharing exercises, and interactions of students within and beyond the morning meeting, etc.) leading to the development of ethical literacy in the student participants, as well as to examine practitioners’ perceptions of the effectiveness of these experiences.

## Research Questions

Is the morning meeting where SEL and ethical literacy intersect? Are there unique events or experiences that allow students and teachers to explore and develop this specific literacy? What conscious efforts are being taken by leaders and participants in the morning meeting to build and deepen both personal and classroom ethical literacies? In order to determine the presence of foundational ethical experiences and teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the morning meeting, especially as it relates to the development of ethical literacy in its student practitioners, the following research questions were considered:

1. How do teachers leading the morning meeting facilitate the development of ethical literacy?
2. How do the student participants practice ethical literacy during and beyond the morning meeting?
3. What elements of the morning meeting best support the development of ethical literacy?

## Method

This was a non-experimental, descriptive phenomenological study wherein the phenomenon studied was the inclusion of ethics experiences, most notably the development of an emergent ethical literacy, in participants through the ritualistic practice of the morning meeting. The study sought to understand the introduction to and development of ethical literacy through the lived experiences of the teachers and students observed within the naturalistic classroom setting.

Observations focused on ethics education experiences, either scripted or incidental, while interviews were conducted with the educators leading these meetings, seeking their perceptions of the morning meeting, the purpose of this daily classroom ritual, what strategies they deploy to

develop ethical literacy in their students, and how the morning meeting could be refined to better build the ethical competencies of the student participants. Data gathered from the field observations and interviews were analyzed to illustrate ethical themes, strengths, weaknesses, and implications for both implementation in the current morning meeting model and for further study.

### **Sample**

The population for this case study was teachers and students within the 39 primary grade (kindergarten through second grade) classrooms in a local school district. Both purposive and convenience sampling strategies were used to form the sample. The goal was to observe and interview teachers from different buildings, guaranteeing a collection of diverse and varied data, with a preliminary quota of eight participating teachers and their classrooms. The final data set contained 10 full participants, with an additional five participants in a limited role, described in detail in chapter four.

### **Limitations**

Qualitative research poses unique and challenging limitations. The quality and validity of data gathered depend upon the personal skills of the researcher and extreme care must be taken to keep the researcher's personal beliefs and biases from influencing the research process. The researcher was present during data collection, which could affect how participants react, and the researcher for this study was also known to many of the participants, which could serve as an additional distraction. Having an observer in the classroom often places even veteran teachers in an uncomfortable position and might encourage children to behave differently.

Confidentiality was a concern, considering the high level of interaction with the participants during field observations and interviews, alongside the fact that the researcher was

collecting data in his home district. A reader with inside knowledge of the settings observed may be able to place names to the participants' responses. While being interviewed, teachers may have felt pressure, intrinsic or extrinsic, to give answers that do not represent their true perceptions. Recollection bias was also a threat. Finally, this study took place in a single district, providing a small sample. It may prove difficult to apply the findings to populations beyond the scope of this study.

### **Significance**

The significance of this study lies in its potential to assess in a systematic way participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of the morning meeting as a viable practice for students' acquisition of ethical literacy as practiced in authentic classroom environments. The morning meeting as a classroom ritual exists in a myriad of variations, from a simple preview of the day to an exploration of SEL and scaffolded leadership experiences. The demand for SEL continues to rise, from both within educational institutions and the communities beyond (Mahoney et al., 2021), but educators and administrators have no blazed trail to follow, forcing them to find their own way.

This study attempted to capture the educational, social, and cognitive processes behind these experiences, cataloging the emergence of ethical literacy within a daily classroom ritual. The primary goal was to analyze the current state of ethical literacy as observed in the morning meeting, linking theory and practice, ultimately leading to suggestions to improve the experience. Findings from this study will inform educators guiding morning meetings, administrators seeking to introduce the morning meeting ritual into the curriculum to support district SEL initiatives, and give concrete examples of the emergence of ethical literacy in primary aged children.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

This review of the literature first examines the concept of ritual and its inclusion in educational practices. That discussion will be followed by an exploration of the morning meeting, one such ritual found in the classroom; social and emotional learning (SEL), a core element of the morning meeting; and finally, an exploration of ethical literacy.

### **Ritual**

Children navigate the complexities of social ritual within the classroom as students and beyond the schoolhouse walls as fledgling members of their communities. Conscientious elementary educators understand both the need for structured practice with these rituals and the power inherent within for true growth of the young student. How did ritology find a home in the elementary classroom? Much of it has emanated from the work of sociologist Emile Durkheim, particularly through his work on how relationships can vary according to student levels of moral regulation. Durkheim was deeply interested in shared experiences – in the values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that allow people to feel that they are a part of a group and that working together to maintain the group is in their common interest.

There is an inward activity that is neither economic nor commercial, and this is moral activity. Those forces that turn from the outward to the inward are not simply used to produce as much as possible and to add to creature comfort, but to organize and raise the moral level of society, to uphold this moral structure and to see that it goes on developing. It is not simply a matter of goods and services, but of seeing that they are done by rules that are more just; it is not simply that everyone should have access to rich supplies of food and drink. Rather, it is that each one should be treated as he deserves,



each be freed from an unjust and humiliating tutelage, and that, in holding to his fellows and his group, a man should not sacrifice his individuality. (Corrigan, 1981, p. 313)

Certainly, the development of practices to “organize and raise the moral level of society” is no small undertaking. A ritual practice in the elementary classroom, however – the morning meeting – comports with Durkheim’s definition of ritual, especially the performative aspect of the ritual as the genesis of social bonds (D’Orsi & Dei, 2018). The best classrooms are transformational, taking the mundane (what Durkheim calls the profane) and elevating it to transfigurative or transformative status (which Durkheim refers to as the sacred). Education is a collective in and of itself, with intersections between the social spheres of faculty, student body, and community.

Durkheim (1912/1995) identifies the performative nature of ritual as an integral element in the construction of one’s social world. The school day is a series of performances, including the different behaviors expected in both educational and social settings, the navigation of the school and schedule, and the negative connotations of simply “doing school,” going through the expected motions, regardless of educational benefit, simply to reach the end of the school day (Windschitl, 2019). Within the microcosmic classroom society, performance is compulsory.

The work of Richard Stanley Peters explores the use of everyday ritual in education specifically. Peters and his co-authors define ritual in this setting as “a relatively rigid pattern of acts specific to a situation which construct a framework of meaning over and beyond the specific situation meanings” (Bernstein et al., 1966, p. 429). Durkheim’s “totem,” explained as a symbol of the unquestioning fealty to an omnipotent power in his writings on religion as ritual, is replaced by the less elevated “symbol” that connects the individual, in this case the student, to the social order (Warnick, 2009). Peters infuses a mid-century modernity to ritual studies, emphasizing the elasticity necessary for its application in the dynamic environment of the

classroom experience. Durkheim believes ritual practices perpetuate social norms: those that feel comfortable and welcome within the ritual are more likely to play an active role. Students of any age may not fully grasp the instructional purpose of a given classroom ritual, which can operate on a subconscious level, without anything being explicitly stated (Peters, 2015).

### **The Morning Meeting**

First, one must understand the purpose, the driving force behind the enduring ritual of the morning meeting. Unimaginative, rote examples of the phenomenon find students reciting dates and facts with little social or intellectual engagement. Educators that seek higher levels of engagement in their students craft meetings that do much more: building relationships through the practice of verbal and nonverbal communication, listening skills, presenting to a group, taking turns, formulating relevant questions, and taking different perspectives beyond the standard egocentrism of the child (Bondy & Ketts, 2001). Within this practice of speaking, listening, and the building blocks of honest and open communication, students begin to develop a sense of self, growing assertive, confident, and taking ownership of their own learning (Bondy & Ketts, 2001; Collins, 2013; Shields-Lysiak et al., 2020). One thinks of the morning meeting as a time to share, perhaps a souvenir from a family trip or the discovery of a trilobite fossil still caked in dirt from the backyard, but in these instances the sharing occurs on a deeper level, through interpersonal connections of all the students involved. Perhaps most notably, regardless of the rituals or foci of the individual activities, the morning meeting fosters a sense of belonging in its student participants (Bondy & Ketts, 2001; Horsch et al., 1999; LaMoria, 1988; Leach & Lewis, 2013). “The students learned about one another’s lives as they expanded their vocabulary and knowledge of the world” (Bondy & Ketts, 2001, p. 145).

## Origins

Variations upon the theme of the morning meeting have been present in American public education since the era of the one-room schoolhouse (Bial, 1999; McIntush et al., 2018; Sly, 2015). Historians describe recitations of the Pledge of Allegiance, songs, games, and conversations, along with shared duties of the classroom, such as stoking the fire or preparing the blackboard for the day's lessons. Reading these historical documents and perusing surviving daily schedules, one gets the sense that these morning "exercises," as they are commonly labeled, were born from a deeper human need to connect, to convene as a community within these mixed age and ability classrooms to truly start the school day. Can the origins of these meetings be traced even further back, before the advent of formal schooling?

Many classrooms use the term "circle time" when describing the use of the morning meeting (Chen et al., 2020; Lown, 2010; Mary, 2014). The author of this dissertation remembers gathering in a set space in his preschool classroom each morning, seated cross-legged with his peers and the teacher in an amorphous circle. Lang (1998) suggests that this ritual originates from the social practices of the Native American. One of the first appearances of circle time in the curriculum was "The Magic Circle," which arrived in classrooms in California in the late 1960s (Lang, 1998). Ballard (1975) provides one of the first written guides for the educator with the publication of his *Circlebook*. He labeled circle time "growth and human relations skill development" (Ballard, 1975, p. 1). There is a symbolic quality, reminiscent of Durkheim's interpretation of ritual, in the daily drawing together, forming a community from disparate parts, whether it be in the outline of a circle or simply in a specially assigned spot in the classroom. Regardless of how the practice is undertaken, common themes of growth, understanding and community building are always present.

## Goals

How does the morning meeting meet such elevated aspirations, especially in a young target audience? Through the practice of this ritual, with all its social norms and expectations, the child participant feels heard and valued in an environment of trust and respect (Bondy & Ketts, 2001; Boyd et al., 2018; Horsch et al., 1999). Opportunities abound for the student to become an autonomous individual: one is faced with making choices and decisions based upon social and critical criteria (Bondy & Ketts, 2001), coping with differences and creating solutions for schoolyard issues (Collins, 2013), and the continuous fostering of respect through listening, responding, working, and playing together (LaMoria, 1988). The ritual, whether held in the traditional circle that carries its own anthropological mysticism or held within a classroom of evenly spaced rows of desks, casts a spell of “togetherness” upon the participants, a withdrawal from the everyday into something unique, a special place where all are integral and equal, productive participants (Chen et al., 2020). The morning meeting is a setting of shared rights that leads, through ritualistic repetition, to a deeper, more authentic experience of empowerment and equality (Tilhou, 2020).

## The Responsive Classroom and Meeting Structure

The morning meeting as a prescriptive educational practice is best found in the work of Kriete and Davis (2016). *The Morning Meeting Book* is published by the Center for Responsive Schools, the imprint of the Responsive Classroom. The Responsive Classroom is a commercial educational think tank that touts an “evidence-based approach to teaching and discipline that focuses on engaging academics, positive community, effective management, and developmental awareness” (Responsive Classroom, n.d.). Their work is influenced by the rise of SEL in the

classroom, with workshops, professional development sessions, and publications reflecting best practices in this arena of education.

Kriete and Davis (2016) summon the power of the communal circle in the introduction to their book:

In a morning meeting, all classroom members – grown-ups and students – gather in a circle, greet each other, and listen and respond to each other’s news. We take note of who is present and who is absent; whether it is still raining or not; who is smiling and buoyant; who is having a hard time smiling. We practice academic skills, briefly grapple with problems that challenge our minds, and look forward to the learning we’ll do together in the day ahead. Morning meeting allows us to begin each day as a community of caring and respectful learners. (p. 2)

In the Responsive Classroom approach, the morning meeting serves many functions, from the logistical to the emotional, while directing all within the classroom toward the best path for a successful day of learning.

Kriete and Davis (2016) list four sequential components to the morning meeting: greeting, sharing, group activity, and morning message. In their words, “Daily practice of the four components gradually weaves a web that binds a class together” (Kriete & Davis, 2016, p. 3). It is more than an agenda to complete at the start of each day; teachers must also “commit themselves to a belief in children’s capacity to take care of themselves and each other as they learn academic skills (like vocabulary and algorithms) and social-emotional skills (like respect, responsibility, and stretching the boundaries of their social world)” (Kriete & Davis, 2016, p. 3). It is a framework of great potential, but the power inherent within is only unlocked as all participants commit themselves fully and honestly to the performance of the ritual.

Setting a tone for the day, establishing connections, and establishing a safe place to practice conversational conventions and leadership skills while merging the academic with the social and emotional spheres are all integral to the morning meeting. “Established social rituals make explicit core social values” (Boyd et al., 2018, p. 335). The most fascinating aspect, and one that is imbued with a magical, near mythological quality, especially when observed in the younger grades, is “through the repetition of many ordinary moments of respectful interaction, [the morning meeting] enables some extraordinary moments” (Kriete & Davis, 2016, p. 11).

### **Perpetuation**

Why has the morning meeting persisted in the ever-changing, dynamic landscape of elementary education? The most sophisticated approaches to the morning meeting reach beyond the schoolhouse walls to the community from which the students arrive each day, and to which they return after the final bell rings (Boyd & Edmiston, 2021; Boyd et al., 2018). Student-led and student-owned conflict resolution reaches far beyond disagreements on the playground (Brown et al., 2007). Perhaps most intriguing is how the morning meeting fosters participatory and empowered democratic citizens (Tilhou, 2020). The ritual of the morning meeting celebrates the agency of the child in direct opposition to the traditional view of the child as a dependent. The practice aims “to facilitate the transmission and internalization of the school culture” (Chen et al., 2020, p. 9) and awaken the potential for each student to assume an active role in his education.

### **Social and Emotional Learning**

One of the primary goals of the morning meeting is the promulgation of social and emotional learning (SEL) in the classroom. SEL refers to the process of integrating thinking, feeling, and behaving in order to become aware of the self and of others, make responsible

decisions, and manage one's own behaviors and those of others (Elias et al., 1997). The Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was founded in 1994 to establish SEL as an integral component of the PK-12 educational experience (Payton et al., 2000). As the challenges of navigating this world grow more complex, schools are incorporating SEL into the curriculum and classroom practice in an attempt to teach "the personal and interpersonal skills we all need to handle ourselves, our relationships, and our work effectively and ethically" (Schonert-Reichl, 2019, p. 223). SEL fosters social and emotional competencies that develop communicative, collaborative, and analytical skills through student-centered learning (Friedlaender et al., 2014).

### **Need for SEL**

Education is a perennial flashpoint in public debate. All stakeholders desire improvements in how we educate our children, but few agree on what those improvements entail. Elias et al. (1997) "recognize that schools play an essential role in preparing our children to become knowledgeable, responsible, caring adults" (p. 1). To increase knowledge, students must be ready to learn, and capable of accepting and processing new information. To instill responsibility, students must understand cause and effect, action and consequence, and see that the needs of the many may indeed outweigh the needs of the few, or the one, opening their worldview beyond the common egocentrism found in youth. Finally, to develop caring in the young student is to invite that individual into a community that models concern, compassion, and provides a welcoming environment.

Student achievement, the navigation of the academic demands of the K-12 curriculum, and the accolades or stigma cast upon each district by the reporting of standardized test scores, reigns supreme in the assessment of teacher effectiveness. Learning does not exist in a vacuum,

and students are more than their standardized scores. Experience and research show that SEL is the “missing piece” of the puzzle in the conversation with improving the educational system (Elias et al., 1997). Knowledge, responsibility and caring are all enhanced by the inclusion of SEL within the curriculum, across classrooms and disciplines.

SEL does not just build community, it builds the neural pathways needed to succeed in school (Brendtro et al., 1990; Perry 1996). The business world has realized that “productivity depends on a workforce that is socially and emotionally competent” (Elias et al., 1997, p. 6), solidifying the value of SEL as a preparatory measure for students entering the workforce. Economists have even calculated that the benefits of SEL, for both the student and the society they will soon enter as contributing adults, far outweighs the educational cost (Belfield et al., 2015). SEL is more than feelings and emotions. It is a guide on how to succeed within and beyond the classroom.

### **SEL and Student Achievement**

SEL interventions have been found to have a positive influence on student achievement (Corcoran et al., 2018; Herrenkohl et al., 2020). As children navigate their own place within the microcosm of society that is their classroom, maturing and changing with each passing day of school, the skills they learn in the social, conversational and emotional realms will benefit their academic growth. Academic achievement is still the benchmark by which educational institutions will be judged, and the calls continue for an increase in SEL, executive functioning (e.g., the skills that enable us to control impulses, make plans, and stay focused; Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011), and the development of coping skills. Districts attempt to meet these demands through creative scheduling, new initiatives and professional development training sessions. The district in this study recently introduced the Zones of



Regulation (Kuypers, 2011), a method for self-regulation, to the elementary curriculum.

Pedagogy and curricular design will prove insufficient if children do not possess the “flexible attention, working memory, and inhibitory control” (McClelland & Cameron, 2011) necessary for early school success.

### **Struggles With Implementation**

As with all initiatives packed into the crowded curriculum, true immersion in the ideals stipulated by the progenitors of SEL is elusive, often resulting in a cursory or superficial student experience. Educators may not be able to afford this selective approach to SEL in their classrooms. Federal data released by the National Center for Education Statistics expose anecdotal alarms being rung by teachers speaking of their experiences: students are facing an increase in mental health challenges, struggles with stunted emotional growth, and are entering the classroom without the coping skills required or expected for their respective grade levels (Meckler, 2022). A student coming to school with such stressors faces an uphill battle when also confronted with traditional academic expectations.

SEL is not impervious to criticism and question. Some fear that the aim of SEL looks beyond the true issues, is self-serving in its goals, and is simply not enough for the current needs of students (Strauss, 2021). Others warn of the faulty assumptions made about SEL, claiming many of the ideas present in these programs are based on obsolete ideas on development and “perpetuate a harmful hegemonic positivity” (Stearns, 2016). There is a danger that the ideas of SEL are not connected to actual practice, making SEL just another method to focus solely on achievement and remediation without any of the social and emotional connections promised in such programs (Hoffman, 2009). Finally, in the contemporary political landscape, SEL is yet another hot button issue, with opponents claiming it is another means of leftist indoctrination

(Eden, 2022; Meckler, 2022; Kokai, 2022). Even with these criticisms, SEL continues to gain popularity within education, finding new advocates and curricular inclusion. As the economic theorists found, the benefits of SEL far outweigh the costs (Belfield et al., 2015; Klapp et al., 2017), regardless of the ensuing arguments.

### **SEL and the Morning Meeting**

Much like any academic task, these social and emotional skills can be taught, and classrooms using this approach foster a positive and caring climate for learning (Zins et al., 2004). The rise of SEL alongside the morning meeting is not just mere coincidence. The two form an effective pair, as the morning meeting is a prime opportunity in the school day for students to practice key SEL competencies: awareness of self and others, positive attitudes and values, responsible decision-making, and social interaction skills (Payton et al., 2000).

Guidelines are offered for the inclusion of SEL throughout the school day, but there is no true guidebook, no definitive map for any educator or curriculum designer to follow.

“For social and emotional learning to succeed, students need opportunities to practice their skills in safe and reinforcing environments” (Johnson et al., 2005, p. 60). This suggestion for the success of an SEL program can be met in the familiar structure of the morning meeting. Routine and repetition breed comfort and reinforcement. Regular opportunities to gather as a classroom help students form bonds with the teacher and with each other. “People behave better when they feel known and welcome rather than anonymous and alienated” (Johnson et al., 2005, p. 59).

In a study by Abry et al. (2017), it was found that teachers using morning meetings had classrooms with higher quality emotional interactions. Children receiving regular practice greeting each other, participating in group activities, and sharing elements of their personal lives

contributed to conversation and shared enjoyment, creating a positive atmosphere. For the educator, there is also the revelatory nature of these activities, as the students' interests and needs are made evident through regular interaction. Even for the uninitiated, those still learning how to incorporate SEL into the learning environment, the very design of the morning meeting builds community and improves communication (Camilleri, 2009). This may be the most accessible first step towards self-actualization within the classroom.

### **SEL and the Growth of the Self**

Systematic definitions of SEL are emerging from the literature, although no one single statement has taken root. CASEL offers a definition: "SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions." (CASEL, 2020, para. 1). Markowitz et al. (2018) list building resilience, a sense of optimism, intellectual capacity, and developing empathy for self and others, allowing their definition to expand beyond the classroom setting. The Committee for Children continues that inclusionary approach, looking beyond the school day: "SEL is the process of developing the self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills that are vital for school, work, and life success" (Committee for Children, n.d.). It is more than giving students the tools they need to be successful; it is encouraging the growth of the individual, nurturing the interpersonal skills necessary to not only function, but thrive in the world beyond the classroom. "Children thrive. Schools win. Workplaces benefit. Society strengthens. All due to social-emotional learning" (Committee for Children, n.d.). In order to understand others, to develop the empathy cited in many of these definitions, the individual must be able to read a situation, the needs of another

outside of his common world view, and act accordingly. Can SEL be the gateway to the emergence of an ethical literacy in the student practitioner?

### **Ethical Literacy**

Education must embrace change and innovation to meet the needs of children finding their path in a landscape of continuous evolution. Embracing SEL allows educators to take those first few hesitant steps with their students. A critical element necessary for these students to make the transition to adult life, however, is missing: the development of an ethical competence. Burroughs and Barkauskas (2017) warn of the assumption made by proponents of SEL that the social and emotional experiences inherent within these programs are also “sufficient to produce ethically literate individuals” (p. 5). SEL addresses the emotional and social literacy of the child, but is that sufficient to develop the related, yet distinct mode of ethical literacy? SEL may grant students the ability to “decode” themselves (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017), and in turn decode others. This skill may be used to develop empathy or understanding, but in the child without an ethical vocabulary, these same skills could be used for deceitful and manipulative purposes. The key to ethical literacy may be the metacognition regarding one’s own motivation for a given action and the emergence of reasoning skills to cope with value conflicts when faced with a choice (Burroughs and Barkauskas, 2017). In other words, SEL skills require direction for the individual to make connections with distinct normative societal values, in turn developing her own ethical literacy.

### **What is Ethical Literacy?**

Literacy, at its most elemental, is the ability to read. This has been a fundamental goal of education from its inception, as witnessed in the horn books of the 16th century (Bailey, 2013) and the alliterative and antiquated “three ‘r’s” (Pomata, 1994). To read is to successfully

decipher the written word, but words are not all one can read. How does one read faces, body language, situations, and implication? Contemporary interpretations of literacy identify a “complex interaction between the learner’s background and language and the context, purpose and discourse of the text” (Walsh, 2010, p. 215). In this light, literacy more closely resembles a social practice than a simple act of decoding. Kress (2009) and van Leeuwen (2017), in their explorations of multimodal literacy, further illuminate the complexities inherent in the study of literacy. Gardner (1993), in his theory of multiple intelligences, opens yet more avenues of inquiry of how one sees, comprehends, and understands the signs, symbols, and interactions they experience each day. The process of decoding, of interpreting words and actions into comprehensible units of meaning, is still the root of literacy. The facility with how one interprets right and wrong, the just from the unjustifiable in a given context, is a measurement of an individual’s ethical literacy.

Ethical literacy is not unique to the field of education. The concept surfaces in discussions of gerontology (Campbell & Hare, 1997), anthropology (Zarenko & Eyre, 2017), law (Crowley-Cyr, 2011), and social media networks (Bahrami et al., 2020). This succinct definition, from a discussion of technical writing pedagogy, captures the essence of ethical literacy in the classroom setting: ethical literacy contains both a knowledge of ethical standards and the ability to consider all stakeholders in a given situation (Cook, 2002). Tilhou (2020) addresses the ability of the morning meeting to perpetuate a participatory democracy, providing a glimpse of how children navigate their expanding social world through a political lens.

Jafroudi (2017) provides an explanation of ethical literacy that best describes its role in social interaction, the development of the self, and in education. She addresses the internal struggle to constantly satiate the desires of the individual:

Since there is a tension within each human being between harmful impulses, systematically opposed to true ethical values, on the one hand, and the voice of conscience, transcendent will and reason, fostering values such as altruism, on the other, educating for ethical literacy can be instrumental in paving the way towards self-transformation and self-realization, enabling individuals to reach a higher, more universal perspective about themselves and become less selfish and more compassionate and altruistic. (Jafroudi, 2017, p. 1)

Primary aged children must regularly fight their egocentric tendencies to demonstrate prosocial behavior (Eisenberg et al., 2016). The development of an ethical literacy will bridge the gap between a child's narrow perception of the world around her and the broader, inclusive world introduced through the school experience. In this way, ethical literacy acts not just as a guidebook to social interaction, but to a discovery of the self. "In becoming aware of who we are and of what we are capable of, we gain a perspective and a sense of responsibility for our choices and actions" (Jafroudi, 2017, p. 4).

"Ethical literacy forms the bedrock for the broadest aims of education" (Mirk, 2005, p. 17). At the elementary level, the aims of education are truly broad. The sole focus cannot be the academic, the raw achievement scores of the individual student. Socialization, decision-making, self-confidence and executive functioning are a few of the many skills students develop alongside the academic. Students learn not only the framework of the society into which they are emerging, but the result(s) of their actions and choices beyond their personal social spheres.

That is why, in seeking (self-) knowledge of what it is to be human; in dealing with moral dilemmas that are generally complex, and often unique; in making moral decisions that

are deliberate, sound and rational, the cultivation of ethical literacy, which fosters such empowerment, is an important educational aim. (Jafroudi, 2017, p. 4)

Framework, scaffolding, foundations: these are the structural metaphors used when describing the aims of education, used in defense of curricular and instructional decisions. The empowerment bestowed by the development of ethical literacy in the classroom is yet another means of preparing the individual students for both the demands of their educational programs and the expectations of the outside world. Consider the mission statement of any public school district in America: all state the necessity of preparing students to be responsible participants in society. Ethical literacy is a step toward that educational aim: “An ethically literate person is aware of and understands the fundamental principles relevant to moral thinking; is able to reflect, analyze and reason about moral issues and dilemmas; and behaves in a morally appropriate manner” (Jafroudi, 2017, pp. 5-6).

### **Tuana’s Moral Literacy**

Tuana (2007) provides an overview of the fundamental elements of moral literacy in her article, “Conceptualizing Moral Literacy.” Literacy in this context reflects “the fact that the skills and knowledge specific to making ethical choices in life are learned capabilities requiring skills in which individuals can be more or less competent” (Tuana, 2007, p. 365). A parallel between traditional literacies and ethical literacy is drawn by emphasizing “that the development of these abilities and skills can be and should be enriched through education” (Tuana, 2007, p. 365).

Tuana’s interest lies in moral literacy, of which ethical literacy is a prime component. Morals and ethics are distinct but intertwined. Palese (2013) states, “The moral comes first. It is social and not societal” (p. 367). The truth of this assertion relies on context, but for the young students entering a primary classroom, much of their ethical competence has been shaped by their

burgeoning moral compasses. As an understanding of their social worlds expands, the dividing line between ethics and morality grows more evident. Tuana separates her conceptualization of moral literacy into three distinct components: ethics sensitivity, ethical reasoning skills, and moral imagination. “It is important to realize that all of these abilities interact and mutually reinforce one another” (Tuana, 2007, p. 366). Ethical literacy, much like any other mode of literacy, is complex and multifaceted, requiring facility with many individual skills. Tuana’s work illustrates the cyclical nature of ethical literacy, its relationship to morality, and provides a defined model for identifying traits of ethical literacy in classroom practices.

### **Ethics versus Morals**

Any discussion of ethics includes the concept of morality, and vice versa. That poses the question: should one speak of ethical or moral literacy in the classroom? What is the division between concepts? Nearly 100 years ago, Lee (1928) supplied a guide to differentiation:

Now morals and morality both refer to conduct. On the other hand, ethics is a branch of philosophy. Philosophy is not conduct, but reflection, so ethics and morals are not the same and the two terms are not at all on the same plane of definition. Their relation, however, is simple: we may philosophize about conduct, and that is exactly what we do in the study of ethics. This is the difference in meaning between the term ‘morals’ and the term ‘ethics.’ (p. 455)

The action may be moral or immoral, but the study of that action, the interpretation of right and wrong in context, renders this inquiry an ethical one. Students engaged in the development of ethical literacy are asked to think upon a situation and its many branching paths, and to provide an analysis of the consequences that result from their individual actions.

Lee (1928) continues:



Man acts; we have no theory to advance as yet why he acts or why he should act; but he does, and he also evaluates action. All this is non-reflective. But in his quieter moments he may reflect on his actions and his evaluations. This reflection is the basis of all ethics. When it becomes ordered, systematic, critical, rational investigation and reflection, then it is ethics. Ethics is the systematic (or scientific) attempt to understand rationally the evaluation of conduct. (p. 456)

The rational and self-reflective nature of ethical literacy as a means of understanding conduct, actions, and decision-making is key here. This is not rote learning; this is an exploration of how and why one acts a certain way in a given context.

Durkheim (1887/1993) returns to this conversation when he mentions youth in his discussion of ethics and morals:

But if one admits the principles described above, then one can tell young people, and everyone else, that our moral beliefs are the product of a long evolution, that they are the result of an endless succession of cautious steps, hard work, failures, and all sorts of experiences. (p. 134)

The children developing their own sense of ethical literacy are following in these same cautious steps, placing their actions and the actions of others in context of their own life experiences, making ethical sense of the resultant consequences. These judgments are not issued from a higher power, delivered as a decree or sermon; rather, they are reached through conversation, experience, and debate. The young student becomes the young philosopher as he or she develops a proficiency in ethical literacy.

### **Does SEL address the ethical needs of children?**

Acolytes of SEL claim that the programs in place are also successful in developing ethical literacy (Devaney et al., 2005; Dusenbury et al., 2015; Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). What is the truth behind this assertion? What ethical connections currently exist in the morning meeting for this age group? If Burroughs and Barkauskas (2017) are correct, a student may be highly literate in SEL “and still know very little, if anything, about how she *ought* to act or respond to ethical challenges present in relationships or underlying instances of emotional upheaval” (p. 11, emphasis in original). What are these students missing in their ethical development? How does one define ethics for such a young demographic, still learning how to navigate the world both within and beyond the schoolhouse walls? What elements of the current approach to SEL can be modified, and what should be introduced, to create a systematic and replicable ethics education model for the student in the primary grades, kindergarten through second grade? Ethical literacy may be synonymous with ethical autonomy, coming to one’s own conclusions on what constitutes right and wrong. What is happening now in the morning meeting to instill this ethical autonomy in these young learners, and what do these children require to guide them down the path of ethical literacy?

Questions such as these are the driving force behind this inquiry. The method for executing the study seeking answers to these questions will be described in the next chapter.

### **Chapter Three: Research Methods**

The purpose of this study was to examine the development and practice of ethical literacy within student participants via the morning meeting, a pedagogical strategy consistent with the emergence of social emotional learning (SEL). “The school experience ... influences character, which is an individual’s approach to ethical issues” (Mindes, 2014, p. 22). The morning meeting is a ritual experience, embedded into the start of each school day, through which students can explore their character, their emergent identities, and their developing sense of ethical literacy within a familiar classroom practice. This study sought capture these instances as they occurred naturally.

This chapter provides details about the research design, population identification and sample selection, data collection and analytical procedures, and limitations to the study.

#### **Research Questions**

In this examination of the morning meeting as a vehicle for the development of an ethical literacy in its participants, three questions were asked:

1. How do teachers leading the morning meeting facilitate the development of ethical literacy?
2. How do the student participants practice ethical literacy during and beyond the morning meeting?
3. What elements of the morning meeting best support the development of ethical literacy?

#### **Research Design**

This study was a non-experimental, phenomenological study. The phenomenon of ethical literacy was examined within the microcosm of society that is the morning meeting. This classroom practice lies between the boundaries of academic pursuits and societal conventions:

the cultivation of ethical literacy bridges the academic and social lives of its participants. It used teacher and student participant observation, along with teacher participant interviews, to gather qualitative data. Research took place throughout the spring months of a single academic year. Field notes, participant discourse, descriptions of witnessed events, and the collected answers from interviews were the sources of this study's data.

### **Sampling Strategy**

The population for this study included kindergarten, pre-first, first, and second grade teachers that participate in a daily classroom morning meeting. Kriete and Davis (2016) claim that hundreds of thousands of classrooms follow the tenets of the Responsive Classroom for their morning meetings. This study used both convenience and purposive strategies to gather a representative sample. Volunteer teacher participants were sought from the primary grade classrooms within a single local school district. All of these classrooms shared the practice of the morning meeting; each teacher, group of students, classroom and building culture differed, however, ensuring a diverse collection of data. The complete data set included 10 full participants and five participants in a limited role.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data were collected through two methods: observation and interviews. The field observations occurred in the participant classrooms over the course of the spring of 2023. I spent between one to three days in each classroom as a non-participant observer. An additional day was reserved for an additional or rescheduled observation and the teacher interview. The observations began as students first entered the classroom for the day and concluded after the end of the morning meeting and the transition to the next activity. Field notes were recorded by hand and later transcribed using thick description. The aim during this stage of data collection

was to create “the primordial textualization that creates a world on the page and, ultimately, shapes the final ethnographic, published text” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 20).

In his discussion of qualitative writing, Weaver-Hightower (2019) captures crucial aspects to this research method. Qualitative research capitalizes on real-world engagement, bringing the social world alive through thick description, detailed recounting of small events: as Geertz (1973) describes it “exceedingly [extends] acquaintances with extremely small matters” (p. 21). These thick descriptions, colored by the researcher’s perception of events and the emergent research design, evolving in tandem with the phenomenon observed, produce the raw qualitative data to be analyzed. This research focused on the lived experiences of teachers and students within the morning meeting, capturing the emergence of ethical literacy within this classroom practice. The interactions of these individuals, their words, body language, and positioning in the room, were included in the observational data. In the pursuit of thick, contextual descriptions, data also included the layout of the room; the proximity all individuals throughout the observation; the temperature; any ambient sounds from within the classroom or in the surrounding hallways; the mood of the teachers and students present; and a running time code, measuring durations of each aspect of the observation, from the arrival of the first student, through the commencement of the morning meeting, terminating with the transition to the first academic activity of the school day.

Following the conclusion of the field observation phase in each classroom, I conducted a one-on-one, semi-structured interview with the teachers. The development of the interview protocol was aligned with Kallio, Pietila, Johnson, and Kangasniemi’s (2016) framework for qualitative semi-structured interviews. Following Merriam and Tisdell’s (2016) model, many of the questions were scripted, and the order predetermined, but with a flexibility of sequence,

wording and specific questioning that allowed for responses to “the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (p. 110). All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The primary purpose of the interviews was to illuminate elements of the morning meeting and its role in the development of an ethical literacy in its participants that were difficult to ascertain through field observation. The respondents were also asked to clarify or explore specific observed instances of ethical literacy in practice as witnessed in their classrooms. After transcription, member checking – also known as participant or respondent validation, which is precisely the role it played in this research (Birt et al., 2016) – followed, as each respondent was supplied with a copy of their answers and granted the opportunity to confirm or expand upon their initial responses.

“Reflexive analysis in research encompasses continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself” (Finlay, 2002, p. 532). Reflexivity must be at the forefront of every qualitative researcher’s method. There is an artificiality to the act of nonparticipant observation, the placing of an outsider within an environment in the hopes that his presence does not affect the mood or actions of the participants. The researcher must also consider her own personal beliefs, experiences, and biases, and how those preconceptions color the data collected in the field. Reflexivity “taps into a more immediate, continuing, dynamic, and subjective self-awareness” (Finlay, 2002, p. 533) than mere reflection alone. It gives the researcher the best chance to collect honest data that truly represent the lived experiences of the participants.

This study required the same “thoughtful, conscious self-awareness” (Finlay, 2002, p. 532). Interpretation was differentiated from pure observation by the use of the label “observer

commentary.” Care was taken to make the researcher’s presence as inconspicuous as possible, and multiple days in the same classroom allowed the researcher to become a natural, unobtrusive element of the environment. Constant, thoughtful assessment of the researcher’s mindset and expectations continued throughout the research process. Preconceptions and personal experiences were “bracketed out,” allowing the researcher to “enter the lived experience and attend genuinely and actively to the participant’s view” (Finlay, 2002, p. 537). Distributing the field experiences across buildings and classrooms helped prevent familiarity bias. Finally, continual self-reflection on the entire research process – the field notes, the interview questions and follow-up probes, and the reporting of findings – encouraged a constant and active engagement with reflexivity.

### **Data Analysis**

Creswell (2013) defines qualitative research through the metaphor of an intricate piece of woven fabric: composed of many threads, multilayered, and varied in texture. “This fabric is not explained easily or simply” (Creswell, 2013, p. 42). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) manage to tease a single thread from the qualitative tapestry:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world ...turn[ing] the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self ... qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

This study used a phenomenological approach, which traces its origins to the work of Merleau-Ponty (2002). It is the study of essences, the very foundations inherent in an experience. Creswell (2013), in his data analysis spiral (p. 183), lends structure to the process of qualitative

data analysis, the “choreography” each qualitative researcher must learn to dance with the data (Huberman & Miles, 1994).

- The data gathered were organized: in this study’s case, field observations were typed into files including observer commentary, along with the transcription of teacher interviews.
- A sense of the data was ascertained by continual reading and review of the transcripts, including notes and memos capturing initial impressions and avenues to explore throughout the analysis process.
- Taking the step from notes and memos to describing, classifying, and interpreting the data introduced coding (Saldaña, 2013) to the analytic process: building detailed descriptions, developing themes, and providing interpretation based on the researcher’s own views and perspectives in the literature (Creswell, 2013, p. 184).
- Classification took the form of thematic analysis, deconstructing the qualitative data to discover “broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea” (Creswell, 2013, p. 185).
- The findings were represented in narrative form.

The phenomenological approach introduces intricacies to analysis, as described by Moustakas (1994). These intricacies modify stages of the approach outlined above to fit the nature of phenomenological inquiry. Placing the researcher’s own experiences with the phenomenon in context will allow the focus to shine on the participants in the study. Developing a list of significant statements from the data was part of the coding and thematic analysis. Textural descriptions, “what” the participants experiences, were combined with structural descriptions, “how” these experiences unfolded (Creswell, 2013, pp. 193-194). The resulting



composite description of the phenomenon, in this study the development of ethical literacy in the participants of the morning meeting, captured the essence of the experience.

Saturation is a methodological principle in qualitative research that indicates that the study has reached a natural and satisfactory conclusion. “It is commonly taken to indicate that, on the basis of the data that have been collected or analysed hitherto, further data collection and/or analysis are unnecessary” (Saunders et al., 2017, p. 1893). Saturation offers a “guarantee of qualitative rigor” (Morse, 2015, p. 587). Time played a factor in the decision to terminate this research project: despite a commonly shared student belief, the school year must eventually end.

Indicators were anticipated during the collection and analysis of data that would signal that saturation had been achieved. During field observations, echoes of previously cataloged events and experiences arose. Like a set of themes and variations, what was heard in one classroom was heard again and again, albeit in a new setting, perhaps with a new, unique twist. During data analysis, two events indicated saturation: first, no new codes emerged from the collected data (Urquhart, 2013), and any additional data collected did not lead to the discovery of new, emergent themes (Given, 2016).

### **Limitations and Mitigation Strategies**

There are limitations inherent in this research design. All research was completed by one individual, so care was taken to keep personal bias from tainting the data. The quality of the data collected depended on my skill as an observer, interviewer, and my facility with the resultant qualitative data. The presence of an outsider in the classroom could alter the behaviors of those being observed. Interview respondents may have also felt pressure or an expectation to answer questions in a certain manner, responding in ways that did not reflect their true perceptions, or omitting information altogether. Finally, as is typical in qualitative work, limiting this study to a

single district produced a necessarily small sample size, a possible threat to the generalizability of the data.

Steps were taken to mitigate these limitations. Personal biases were addressed and neutralized at each step of the research process through self-assessment and careful analysis of observer commentary. Reflexivity was practiced throughout the research process. I have spent a significant amount of time collecting qualitative data, including field observations, in a variety of classrooms in my role as an educator, as well as in a pilot study that led to the rationale for this dissertation. Care was taken to put all participants at ease in my presence. Multiple, consecutive field observations normalized my presence, allowing me to blend into the fabric of the classroom. Ensuring confidentiality to the extent possible encouraged respondents to answer interview questions honestly.

### **Summary**

This non-experimental, phenomenological case study explored the development and practice of ethical literacy in primary grade classrooms through participation in the daily morning meeting. The research was designed to contribute to the literature in educational ethics and ethical development in three ways: first, by capturing and describing concrete examples of the development and practice of ethical literacy through direct observation; second, by eliciting teacher's perceptions of ethical literacy as it pertains to their classrooms, their students, and the practice of the morning meeting; and third, by the discovery of themes surrounding the phenomenon of ethical literacy within the classroom ritual of the morning meeting through the coding and analysis of qualitative data.

## Chapter Four: The Interviews

This study sought to answer three questions regarding the emergence of ethical literacy through the practice of the morning meeting in the primary classroom:

1. How do teachers leading the morning meeting facilitate the development of ethical literacy?
2. How do the student participants practice ethical literacy during and beyond the morning meeting?
3. What elements of the morning meeting best support the development of ethical literacy?

Two approaches to data collection, field observations and interviews, were pursued to answer these questions. Both elements of this research took place in a single public school district in Pennsylvania over the course of three months. The author of this dissertation alone was responsible for the completion of all research within this study.

Ten teachers and their classrooms served as full participants in the study, with an additional three classrooms hosting the researcher for a single day of observation. First and second grade teachers were considered the primary sources of data collection. The kindergarten and pre-first<sup>1</sup> observations sought a glimpse of the evolution of the morning meeting from its use with the youngest learners. One first grade teacher was featured only in the interview data, fearing objections to the nature of this research from a parent in her classroom. An incidental conversation with a guidance counselor about the educator's role in the ethical development of her students is also included within the discussion of findings.

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<sup>1</sup> The pre-first classroom is a unique learning environment that blends kindergarten and first grade curricula, its primary goal to encourage social, emotional and academic growth to best prepare students for the demands of first grade. Parental consent is required to enroll students in this optional grade level. Most students opting for enrollment have late summer birthdays, making them younger, and often less mature, than their kindergarten peers.

Permission was granted by district administration to pursue this research and all elementary principals granted access to their buildings and faculty. Teachers responded to an invitation to participate in the research project, were added to the participant pool, signed an informed consent, and were assigned one to three days of observation and an interview. All potential research participants met three requirements: the morning meeting had to be a regular fixture of the classroom environment; the teacher had to be a willing participant, without objection to the researcher's presence or any elements within the informed consent; and each classroom had to be available within the research window, beginning with the granting of IRB approval and ending before the summer recess.

All participants were assigned pseudonyms. Pseudonyms were also applied to the building and district names. This chapter will analyze the data collected during the teacher interviews. Data collected during the classroom observations will be reported in the following chapter.

### **The Participants**

Participants were divided into two categories. The first, "full participants," were interviewed and observed leading the morning meeting on two or three consecutive days.

**Table 1**

*Full Participants*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Grade Level</b>	<b>Years Experience</b>
Mr. Russell	First	17
Mrs. Audubon	First	10
Mrs. Marlowe	First	11

**Table 1 continued**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Years Experience</b>
Mrs. Kidder	Second	33
Mrs. Loggia	Second	17
Miss Fabrizi	Second	22
Mrs. Mills	Second	25
Mrs. Kahn	Second	21
Mr. Yoder	Second	25
Miss Harrison	Second	1

“Participants in a limited role” took part in only one aspect of the data collection.

Observations in these classrooms were limited to one morning. A guidance counselor is included on this list: details of our incidental conversation concerning the role teachers play in the ethical development of their students appear in these findings.

**Table 2***Participants in a Limited Role*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Role</b>
Mrs. Lukens	First	Interview
Mrs. Reynolds	Guidance Counselor	Incidental Conversation
Mrs. Simon	Kindergarten	Observation
Mrs. Meadows	Pre-First	Observation
Mrs. Munroe	First	Observation

The data collection was split between two elementary schools within a single district. All data were collected from primary classrooms: kindergarten, pre-first, first, and second grades. I spent three days in each classroom observing and interviewing the 10 full participants. A few observation windows were shortened due to building or teacher conflicts. Five additional teachers played limited roles. Three teachers – one kindergarten, one pre-first, and one first grade – hosted the researcher for a day of observation. These three participants were not interviewed. The purpose of these observations of participants in a limited role was to gain a greater understanding of the morning meeting as it is experienced by its youngest practitioners, and how this practice evolves through the primary grades. Another first grade teacher participated in an interview only, and there was one incidental conversation with a guidance counselor.

Interviews began with easy-to-answer questions about the participants' backgrounds, including any work experience before becoming teachers, and their years of experience in the classroom. There was a broad range of teaching experience among the participants, with the most veteran teacher having 33 years of experience. One participant was just completing her first full year. The average experience within the sample was 18.2 years.

### **Teacher Definitions of Ethical Literacy**

The term “literacy” has expanded to include comprehension of more than just words on a page. Consider the work of Gardner (1993) and his theory of multiple intelligences as well as Kress (2009) and van Leeuwen (2017) and their study of multimodal literacy. Cohen describes this expansion of the conception of literacy:

Historically, literacy has referred to our ability to read and write. In recent years the usage of the term literacy has expanded to include a number of additional forms of ‘reading’ and expression ... Solving problems, functioning on the job and in society,

achieving our goals and developing knowledge and our potential necessarily rests on another form of literacy: social and emotional literacy. (Cohen, 2001, p. 195)

An ethical literacy, demonstrating a facility with ethical concepts, placing right and wrong in context, allows the ethically literate individual to “decode others and ourselves and to use this information to solve real social-emotional problems” (Cohen, 2001, p.195).

How did the participants of this study define ethical literacy? This term is not commonly encountered in teacher training or pedagogy. “Ethics” is usually applied to the actions of a teacher within the classroom and “literacy” is almost always associated with the ability to read and write: the multimodal findings of Gardner (1993), Kress (2009), and van Leeuwen (2017) have not quite infiltrated the daily practices of the elementary educator. The teacher participants in this study defined ethical literacy as the development of citizenship, honing effective interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, building an SEL vocabulary, and as a means of viewing right and wrong in context. The elements of this definition, and its implications in the emergence of ethical literacy in the student participants of the morning meeting, are explored in the answers to the research questions within this chapter. After examining the data gleaned from the 11 interviews and one incidental conversation, the following are the emergent themes that answer the three research questions.

**Research Question 1: How do teachers leading the morning meeting facilitate the development of ethical literacy?**

Five particular themes could be detected in how teachers perceived the purpose of the morning meeting. They understand their role in facilitating the development of ethical literacy as: 1) decoding the student, which includes creating an atmosphere of communication, trust, and connection, addressing interpersonal and intrapersonal problems, and regulating emotions; 2)

encouraging growth, starting with the teacher as the growth model; 3) exploring right and wrong in context, increasing student awareness of citizenship; 4) the use of stories to teach ethical concepts, including the expansion of an SEL vocabulary; and 5) the teacher's placement on the parental continuum of ethics education, requiring insight, intuition, and often artistry to meet individual student needs.

### **Decoding the Student**

Children enter the classroom with a host of concerns. The nature of the primary aged student, combined with the structure of the classroom, with a significant lack of privacy to discuss personal issues with adults and the ever-present schedule urging the student body from bell to bell, often means these concerns remain a mystery to their teachers. The morning meeting can serve as a means of “decoding” the student, making the teacher aware of their personal struggles. Consider the “family dinner” metaphor mentioned by Mr. Russell, acting much as a parent would at the kitchen table, deciphering the moods of the family gathered for the evening meal. Three supporting themes – communication, trust, and connection; interpersonal and intrapersonal skills; and emotional connection – are subsumed under the theme of decoding the student.

Miss Harrison took time during the communal gathering of the morning meeting to tune into her students who were often “worried or sad.” These check-ins began during the morning meeting and continued throughout the school day:

I do a lot of check-ins throughout the morning and throughout the day. Sometimes midday when we come back from recess, lunch, then specials [special area classes: art, music, technology, physical education, library, health]. After specials, I sometimes make



them redo a check-in just to make sure I could see if it's getting better, if it's still bad, and work through coping strategies.

Mrs. Loggia, in her second grade classroom, compared the academic to the non-academic within the morning meeting. Social and emotional learning (SEL) may be considered “non-academic” work, with its focus on the social needs of the individual, but for Mrs. Loggia it was highly academic, allowing her to identify and meet the needs of her students:

I also think it's a non-academic [feeling] to the student population feeling that they get. However, it's very academic for me in the routines and getting to know them socially, emotionally, and setting their day off on a good foot ... academic for what I see in them in just their language, their vocabulary, the way they're interacting. I think those are things you can pick up. When they're answering on their whiteboard, they're showing how they can respond and how they can, sometimes it's taking notes, sometimes it's listening skills and how they're comprehending questions and how they're responding.

A morning meeting that serves as an anchor for the classroom, with each and every day beginning with this practice, allows the teacher the opportunity not just to decode her students' social and emotional needs for the day, but for the entirety of their time in her classroom.

### ***Communication, Trust, and Connection***

To successfully decode the student, that student must reside in a learning environment that cultivates communication, trust, and connection. Miss Harrison stated, “My personal goal that I've always had from the beginning of the year is just making that a connection time.” Mrs. Kidder elaborated:

To improve communication and trust. But I would say connection is what matters most. I also learn a lot about the kids, the classroom and what they are learning socially and

emotionally. It is funny this is a big concern for parents at conference time; does my child have friends, are they doing their best, how do they handle mistakes, do they have empathy, can they win graciously ... You can see who is shy, who needs more attention, who is insightful and who is not. We are planting seeds and giving the gift of positivity and hope to primary age students.

This was reminiscent of the stated purpose of building community, but here Mrs. Kidder highlighted the SEL embedded in the morning meeting. She stated that it is not just the students that benefit from the social and emotional elements of this practice: teachers learn about the specific needs for each of their students as they lead these meetings (Bridgeland et al., 2013), and parents seek insight into the social and emotional health of their children within the classroom setting (Elliott et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2018). Mrs. Kidder mentioned empathy, good sportsmanship (“can they win graciously?”), insight, and positivity, all elements of an emergent ethical literacy.

Mr. Russell indicated the importance of trust as a necessary first step toward connection: “The beginning of the year, my biggest purpose is just to build community. Get the kids comfortable with one another. Create a good classroom environment.” Mrs. Kahn went further, using the activities embedded in the morning meeting to create a sense of trust between students and with the teacher, establishing a safe atmosphere for sharing:

To really just understand what’s going on, what my children are thinking, and see what kind of a morning they’ve already had. Anything that’s bothering them, put it out there on the table and they are sharers, this crew’s very needy. They love to tell me ...

Young children love to share. I often observed students following their teachers around the room, regaling them with all types of stories of the varied minutiae of their lives. “They love to tell

me.” Mrs. Kahn harnessed this natural childhood urge, combining it with the carefully curated classroom atmosphere and the daily practice of the morning meeting to allow children to start conversations that, in other, less welcoming environments, may never make it to the metaphorical table.

### ***Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Skills***

Mrs. Kidder’s aforementioned answer illustrated two related concepts to the development of ethical literacy: interpersonal (i.e., how we cope with each other) and intrapersonal (i.e., how we cope with our own feelings) skills. This can mean simply understanding more about classmates, as Mrs. Kidder stated: “Learn a little more about what makes their classmates tick.” School rules are more than a list of expectations for the classroom, as students will be tasked with applying these expectations to their relationships on both sides of the classroom door and as they mature into young adults. Mrs. Loggia explained:

Those expectations are there, and they’re there from the beginning and they’re recited every day for them to understand that these are just lifelong expectations. I said, ‘I want you to be honest, but I want you to be honest with yourself and others.’

Aristotle lists honesty among his virtues, and Mrs. Loggia included it within her conception of rules. For her, it was the key to successful relationships with others and with the self.

Miss Harrison spoke of the “drama” that can fracture the classroom community, an issue that evolves over the course of the school year. The morning meeting can also serve as a receptive space to address more immediate conflict, in the form of specific incidents as they arise. In her earlier statement on classroom community, Mrs. Mills sought to “get a feel for how the students are feeling during the day ... so we do address issues as they come up.” For Mrs. Kahn, addressing these incidents often informed the design of her morning meeting:

And usually I will center meetings around what I'm observing. A lot of times they walk in and something has happened or transpired on the bus, and so that will become the focal point of our morning meeting. I truly am one of these real-life connections, that's how I teach, truly. I think that's one of the best things I have, is teaching from the moment. If it's a moment that grabs me, I run with it. And that's when the kids are really enthralled. They're like, 'Okay, I understand.' Because if it happens and you don't discuss it right then and there, it gets put under the carpet. No one ever discusses it again.

Mrs. Kahn stressed the importance of addressing these issues in the moment, as the smoke is still clearing from an incident, whether it be in the classroom, on the recess yard, during the bus ride to and from school, or even from home. Mrs. Audubon agreed, taking a similar approach in her first grade classroom:

I think it's also a time for us to chat about things that are happening in the school, events that are coming up, problems that we may be having as a class. It's a good time to discuss it in the morning when they're not tired and before we go about our day, because then whatever we learn in that meeting, they can try to apply throughout the day.

Mrs. Kahn feared that, if left undiscussed, the problem would simply be left to fester, tainting the classroom atmosphere. Mrs. Audubon not only wanted to keep the classroom community free from these types of lingering conflicts, but also desired to give her students opportunities to practice the solutions presented during the morning meeting throughout the rest of the day. These solutions were often egalitarian in nature, as many of the solutions were presented by the students themselves through guided discussion (Reznitskaya et al., 2009).

### *Emotional Regulation*

Students cannot learn if they are unable to regulate their emotions (Goetz & Hall, 2013). A bad start to the day will leave the child on an island, socially separated from her peers and unable to attend to academic tasks. Unregulated emotions will stymie the development and erode prior progress in the development of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. After multiple such days, the student risks falling behind her peers (Pekrun, 2009). The morning meeting serves as a method of emotional regulation, meeting the students where they stand as they enter the door, and addressing those needs before the first academic task of the day is assigned.

Mrs. Kidder recognized this need in her second grade classroom: “Students need help with emotional regulation and they need a place to learn strategies that are directly taught so teachers can reference them.” The morning meeting serves as both the support system the students require and the place to teach and learn these strategies. The morning meeting becomes a focal point, one that teachers can reference when a student is in need of emotional regulation. The ritualistic nature of the morning meeting, coming together each and every day, allows students with a developing sense of autonomy to reference these experiences, applying the theoretical strategies introduced in the morning meeting to real-life situations.

The routine is also beneficial to young learners, as Mrs. Lukens noticed in her first grade classroom:

Whatever they came in with, getting them in that right frame and start. And it’s a nice way to nip any of those little things in the bud. Like someone’s coming in grumpy, someone’s coming in upset. It’s just a way to just even out and it’s a nice routine. These little guys, they’re so routine driven.

Much like Mrs. Kahn, harnessing the natural desire to share, Mrs. Lukens did likewise with her “routine driven little guys.”

### **Encouraging Growth**

To become ethically literate individuals, students must mature into autonomous beings. In the case of emergent literacy, this growth can begin simply, with the realization of autonomy and personal responsibility. Mrs. Audubon used the morning meeting to encourage this growth in her first grade students:

I’m trying to get them to be more independent in going home and saying, oh, I need to wear this shirt on Friday because Mrs. Audubon said we’re having [a special event], or this hat is red, white and blue day. Or I need to wear a long skirt and a bow or fancier clothes on old-fashioned school day. I’m trying to get the kids thinking about their being more independent with things like that and not relying on their parents as much. I do communicate everything to the parents too, but I’m trying to get them to go home and tell their parents about their day and what they need to do ... I know I am impacting some students with that. Not everyone, but a good majority of kids are remembering things and going home and telling their parents.

This statement did not stand alone in the interview data, as Miss Harrison also mentioned giving her second grade students an opportunity to be “more independent because they’re about to be third graders.” Field observations confirmed that, through the practice of the morning meeting, students were granted leadership opportunities alongside other experiences that encouraged the growth of the autonomous individual. This independence of action – leading elements of the morning meeting, communicating with parents without teacher intervention – also encouraged an independence of thought, as these students continued to mature and develop as individuals as

well as elementary school students (Boehm, 1957). Independence opens the door for the consideration and manipulation of ethical concepts that indicates the emergence of ethical literacy.

Modeling and repetition continue to be key components in the approach to teaching ethical concepts to children, especially in the younger primary grades. The teacher becomes the model of personal growth that students aspire to achieve. Mrs. Loggia told her students that she serves “as their guide” to create the desired classroom community. Mrs. Lukens often walked students through scenarios, either manufactured or drawn from actual classroom conflicts:

I think modeling, repetition. I think pointing it out. ‘Was that kind?’ ‘No.’ ‘Would you like someone saying that to you?’ ‘No.’ ‘Well then what do you need to do?’ ‘I need to go over and say such and such to this person.’ And I want to see it. And I teach them when someone gives an apology not to say, ‘That’s okay.’ I said, ‘No, it’s not okay. When someone apologizes you say, ‘I accept your apology.’ You don’t say, ‘That’s okay.’ Because it’s not okay that they punched you, or they hit you, or they did something to you.

These ideas – conflict resolution, kindness, apologizing, accepting apologies – need constant repetition and opportunities for practice to allow younger learners to become comfortable with the conventions of these interactions, as well as the thought processes required. It also places the concepts of right and wrong in context with clear, rule-based boundaries: “It’s not okay that they punched you, or they hit you, or they did something to you.” This need for continual exposure and opportunities for application was echoed by Miss Fabrizi:

I think that first you have to really continually reiterate particular emotions or particular guiding principles or particular moral values, so that they understand what those things

mean before they can even relate them to themselves. Or express ideas that are related to those particular themes or moral values.

To apply these “particular emotions, guiding principles, or moral values,” students must first understand and demonstrate an emergent literacy with these ethical concepts. The cultivation of ethical literacy is an integral part of their growth as ethical agents.

### **Right and Wrong in Context**

The emergence of ethical literacy includes the ability of students to recognize right and wrong in a given context and react in the appropriate manner. The aforementioned modeling and repetition by the teacher grants students the opportunity to witness right and wrong in context, encouraging their growth as autonomous ethical beings. Often these examples are drawn from actual classroom scenarios, removing the abstraction that can arise in the discussion of ethics, especially when addressing the young child. Mrs. Mills and Mrs. Kahn both cited “knowing right and wrong” in their discussions of ethical literacy. Mr. Russell also spoke of student assessment of a given situation: “Ethical literacy is the kids’ understanding of ethics and how to act in certain situations.” Miss Fabrizi included a similar, succinct definition: “The ability to identify between right and wrong and respond to situations in an appropriate way, depending on whatever the particular situation is that presents itself.”

Many participants included the development of citizenship, the stalwart of public education (Roosevelt, 1930/2008), in their definitions of ethical literacy and their discussions of placing right and wrong in context. “Really knowing what’s right and wrong and being able to be honest, be truthful, be a good citizen” (Mrs. Mills, second grade). Mrs. Kidder expanded:

I think citizenship, if you look at our goals as a district, what we are hoping to grow, we want the kids who contribute to society and succeed in life. And so we want them to be



active citizens and they need to learn how to have discourse, how to disagree with someone, how to communicate their feelings effectively, how to be disappointed, how to learn to be resilient.

Notice the need to cope with the negatives in life: “how to disagree with someone” and “how to be disappointed.” These skills, dealing with life’s minor setbacks, were part of Mrs. Kidder’s definition of ethical literacy. Citizenship and ethical literacy are intertwined.

### **Stories**

Teachers use stories to facilitate the development of ethical literacy. The power of stories (Egan, 1989) was mentioned frequently throughout the interviews. These could be read-alouds, sitting down to read from a chapter or picture book, or storytelling in the oral tradition, with either teacher or student relating a tale with ethical ramifications. The use of storytelling also included the discussions of the story, the implications that follow, and the applications of these concepts in the students’ social lives.

Mrs. Kidder used the term biblioliteracy<sup>2</sup> to describe how storytelling is used to teach ethical concepts to children:

I think through biblioliteracy. So you have the character, it doesn’t feel so personal. And you can say, ‘Joey Pigza (Gantos, 1998) swallowed the key. Why did Joey Pigza swallow the key? Oh, because he’s so impulsive. Huh, I wonder what it’d be like to be so impulsive or be the Fidgety Fish’ (Galloway, 2014). And then, ‘Is everybody like that? Well, we don’t want everybody to be like that because that would be boring. But how can

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<sup>2</sup> I was unable to find this term in the literature. I asked Mrs. Kidder about it. “Originally, I learned about bibliotherapy from teaching gifted students, who generally need more social and emotional instruction than your average bear. I think I made the term up since we (teachers and students) need it.”

we help the Fidgety Fish or support the Fidgety Fish where they don't feel so much like an outlier?'

Helping others feel less "like an outlier" confirms the efforts of teachers to encourage inclusion through the activities within the morning meeting. Mrs. Kidder also cited the remove supplied by a fictional character, allowing students to examine the concepts in a more objective manner:

The separation allows students to gain insight into a character's challenges, or maybe their own so they can develop strategies to try out. Even by talking about a character's motivation, feelings and or strategies, whether they are effective or not. It is an alternative way to model problem solving, understanding, and self-awareness, but not so personal that it feels uncomfortable.

Emotions or examples ringing true to a student may help them relate, but if students continue to struggle in the aftermath of an incident and its raw emotions, they may erect barriers that keep them from fully engaging with the material, stunting their ethical growth. Mrs. Audubon used stories to make real-life connections for the students:

If there's something happening in our school or community like the Special Olympics, they were like, 'What's that?' So, we talked about what it is. I take opportunities that are happening in the world, in the school, in the classroom, and then talk to them about it. Either just talking as a class or reading a book about it so they can understand ... They didn't know what Down Syndrome was. There wasn't anything on the morning announcements about it. They did not know, so I talked to them. I put a name to it. I told them, my nephew's name is Aaron, and here's what he struggles with. Here's what he's really good at. This is what Down Syndrome means. They need to be exposed to that. I

don't just think of an idea and talk about it. Usually something is happening and then we talk about it just so it connects to them a little bit.

With younger students, abstraction can lead to a lack of comprehension. Students cannot identify right and wrong in a scenario that is alien to them. Mrs. Audubon stated she takes current, relevant events and "... we talk about it, just so it connects to them a little bit."

Miss Harrison had a similar approach, filling gaps in her students' knowledge to create connections.

I like to talk a lot about what's going on in the world right now because we learn about history, but at the same time, this is what's present. We just had a conversation about TikTok. Someone was like, 'Oh, China owns TikTok. You're being watched.' And I asked someone else that goes, 'I don't even know what language Chinese people speak.' 'Okay, well, so we know some facts and we don't know.' I like to keep them not coddled in a sense. I want them to be open to everything that's going on. I had a student that wasn't really understanding about [racial] color barriers and things like that. 'I don't get how that's not fair.' Just things like that. So I've been trying to change that mindset to be open. 'This is why it's bad.' I said, 'How would you feel if it was the opposite way?' That's when I've started to break through these walls that some students have built up just from being home.

The teacher participants in this study experienced success teaching empathy, opening doorways to understanding a seemingly nonsensical situation ("I don't get why [racial discrimination's] not fair."), through stories.

A crucial element of the development of coping skills is the growth of an SEL vocabulary, as ethical literacy requires a facility with ethical terminology as much as traditional

literacy requires a facility with phonics and the written word. Stories introduce words to the student, allowing them to express their emotions and be understood by their teachers and peers. Stories can be impromptu, drawn from the teacher's own life and experiences, or presented in the more traditional manner, read aloud from picture or chapter books. Story time was a common occurrence in the SEL portion of the morning meeting. Since this classroom practice is often featured throughout the day and across curricula, it freed the exploration of SEL concepts from the confines of the morning meeting.

I asked Mrs. Loggia about her approach to incorporating an SEL vocabulary into her classroom practice: "It is teaching them that. But it's also giving me the words to use with them when things happen in a classroom." Mrs. Kahn confirmed the use of vocabulary in the ethical development of her students. "Ethical is just doing the right thing and making sure that I don't cross the fine line of being inappropriate, using the right vocabulary with the children." During the field observations, Mrs. Kahn was the epitome of the ethical storyteller, using both her own life experiences and stories from the printed page to encourage the growth of ethical literacy in her students.

### **The Parental Continuum**

Teachers find themselves placed upon a parental continuum, where they are obliged to assume the role of a surrogate parent in their efforts to develop ethical literacy within their students. Each individual student's home experience, and the extent to which the parents are involved in the ethical development of their children, dictates the teacher's position on the parental continuum. Teachers are ultimately responsible for creating an inclusive and welcoming environment in which children feel safe and comfortable in engaging in classroom activities that address ethical concepts. Forming the bridge between home and school life and crafting the

scaffolding necessary to allow each student to develop as ethically autonomous beings requires teachers to demonstrate artistry beyond traditional classroom practices.

Along with the myriad of roles listed by Miss Harrison and Mrs. Kidder, the sheer number of hours spent in school places educators in the unique position of parental figures to their students. Mrs. Kidder believed:

We should be partners with parents and students. Maybe two different kinds of partnerships. And that is challenging because I think the role of parenting has changed, certainly over three decades.

Mrs. Mills concurred, also desired to form a partnership with parents, but feared that the brunt of responsibility for the ethical development of her students fell upon the teacher.

I think we really should be a support for what happens at home. But I don't think that's the reality of it. I think that it's a little bit flip-flopped ... We're going to take that job because I think it is falling primarily on us, but I think that I wish that we were building more on what's happening at home.

Mrs. Lukens agreed. "I think we are a big piece, but I don't think we should be the only piece. I think we are a good model for it, but I don't think we should bear that charge alone."

Mr. Yoder was not as concerned with home support, or forming an allegiance with parents to facilitate the ethical development of his students. Instead, he believed the teachers become "almost like a caregiver, kind of like a second parent, making sure they get everything they need ... They're away from their parents a lot, I believe, so we're like their second parent." Mr. Yoder welcomed a partnership with parents, but believed that, within the schoolhouse walls, educators assume the role, and the responsibility, of a caregiver or surrogate parent over the

course of the school year. The very nature of elementary education bestows a parental sheen on the student-teacher relationship. Miss Harrison added:

I feel like that's another thing is they almost feel like you're their guardian or something because you're there and you're helping them. You're boosting their confidence, you're making them feel good, but you can also make them feel sad. So [it's important to know] your position and how much you mean to that student.

These daily interactions carry serious emotional weight. It makes the teacher a de facto surrogate parent, regardless of the state of reciprocation at home from parents, family, and guardians.

Mrs. Marlowe offered a bridge between home and school life, in which the student is given ownership of her own ethical decision-making at home:

I think we're teaching them to be the best versions of themselves and not letting outside factors really affect [them] ... Even though it does, try not to let it affect as much as it could, that social media aspect. Whatever's going on at home, I mean, this is their safe spot. They can be who they want to be and teach them how they can carry that over outside of school.

School becomes a "safe spot" primarily because teachers assume the caregiver role, often without the complications of the family dynamic. It is a world custom built to support the growth of the individual student. Feeling safe is also a result of feeling "seen and heard," as Mrs. Loggia explained. "I think that that's a huge piece to feeling like you are seen, I feel like, and heard, and that there's someone there for you."

Curious about my research effort in her building, I was approached by Mrs. Reynolds, the guidance counselor at Clay Creek Elementary. This was her response to the question of what role the educator should play in the ethical development of her students:

With little kids, it's even more important. Open-mindedness, seeing you for who you are. You have to touch the heart before you can touch the mind. Children must feel safe: socially, emotionally, and physically. It starts with the teacher. It's a part of being an elementary educator. It is both an art and a science. The ethical development of elementary school students ... that's an art.

**Research Question 2: How do the student participants practice ethical literacy during and beyond the morning meeting?**

Four themes were evident in teachers' perceptions of how their students practice ethical literacy. In their interview responses, teachers cited: 1) the building of a classroom community, including resolving conflicts as they arise; 2) applying empathy in social situations, which involves sharing sessions within the morning meeting and helping a fellow student in need; 3) observation of the teacher as a model for ethical interactions, later assuming that role in interactions with classmates; and 4) the exploration of ethical concepts through stories.

**Community Building**

The morning meeting allows the classroom to build and improve upon its sense of community. Mrs. Kidder, second grade, claimed "community and connection" as the purpose of the morning meeting. In order for the students to form their own classroom communities, they must first connect as individuals, building relationships with each other as well as with the faculty and staff. Mrs. Mills, second grade, made this observation:

It's really to build that class community, get a feel for how the students are feeling during the day, ease into the day. I have a pretty good class, so we do address issues as they come up. That's not as typical.

To build community, the students must also possess the tools to resolve conflict. It can also serve as a transition from home life to school life, as witnessed in Mrs. Mills' "easing into the day."

Mr. Russell, first grade, referenced the family, notably the ritual of the family dinner, in his approach to the morning meeting:

I also think it's good for building community, so we always try to always do a share, make it a very kind of family-around-the-dinner-table sort of thing. Play games

sometimes. Do a share. And then, as needed, talk about things that we need to talk about.

Students spend seven hours or more in the classroom, with their teachers and peers functioning as a surrogate family. The morning meeting can act as a supplement or proxy for an honest conversation at the dinner table.

The morning meeting can also heal the divisions that develop naturally over the course of a school year. As the days drag interminably on, students grow short on patience and understanding, fraying the existing relationships within the classroom. The morning meeting can stanch those wounds. Miss Harrison, second grade, explained:

I like to make sure we start the day with saying good morning to friends near us, because sometimes towards the end of the year, we've had drama. So it's like sometimes people don't want to talk to each other, so it's nice to come together and really work as one.

The elementary classroom may not suffer under a state of perpetual conflict, competing for the limited resources of the teacher's attention or the last unpeeled fuchsia crayon, but conflicts will surface. If left unaddressed, these conflicts will fester, eventually destroying any sense of classroom community. The morning meeting grants students the opportunity to practice these skills in a structured environment. Often, conflict resolution begins with a sharing session embedded within a teachable moment, as Mrs. Loggia explained:



Just when something might happen on the playground or something might happen on the school grounds or in the classroom, and they're asked, 'If this is what happens, and please be honest with me, please share what your responsibility is as a student here at Clay Creek. And are you following that?' I just think that there's a lot that they might not be coming into school with because there's so much in their world. They leave here, they go to their sports and things like that. And so then I say to them, 'Even on the sports field or in the dance world, you need these.'

Just like Mrs. Kahn, Mrs. Loggia used the morning meeting as a sounding board, a safe space to resolve these conflicts, modeling all of the skills necessary, including that crucial step of being honest and owning personal mistakes.

Mrs. Loggia connected these skills to the outside world with her acknowledgment that "even on the sports field or in the dance world, you need these." Mrs. Mills utilized this same approach, addressing real-life conflicts in the classroom during the morning meeting, in the hope of preparing students to handle similar concepts outside of her classroom. Students can be quick to anger, lashing out without considering all aspects of the conflict. Revisiting these situations in an environment like the morning meeting, designed to foster exactly these types of conversations, allows children a chance to apply theory to practice in ways not normally accessible in a traditional classroom activity.

### **Applied Empathy**

Learning about empathy is the first step. Applying empathy to situations is a different matter. Teachers often cited this act, experiencing empathy, in explaining how their students learn ethical concepts. This application can be in real-life situations or fictional ones, digging deeper into the stories presented with ethical themes. Within the overarching theme of applied

empathy, teachers cited sharing and helping others as examples of students applying empathy to social situations within the classroom. Mrs. Kidder observed that, when faced with a situation where a student must empathize with another, they often find success.

But I would say my kids pretty readily can assign a feeling to the other person like, ‘You must have felt this way and I’m sorry for the thing, exactly what I did, and next time I’m going to ...’ and I always give them the choice. But I’m going to say 90% of the time, they’ll apologize. Which is pretty high.

The students are not just successful with empathizing with another, especially when their actions have harmed the other in some way, but can also analyze their actions, and make a plan to avoid this injury in the future. This is the development of ethical literacy – the facility with ethical concepts in context – in this case the soothing of a perceived slight.

This application of empathy is not limited to interactions between students. Mrs. Loggia pointed out that the student is reassured by the knowledge that the teacher understands, and is able to empathize, with him:

I would hope that we learn through what we go through and what we are experiencing. I think that there have been things in each of their little time here that they’ve picked up on, ‘Oh, I remember you told me this just yesterday ...’ I think tools are really important as well, because I think that, in their little minds, they want to be heard. They want to be seen. They want to know that she understands what I’m feeling maybe inside or thinking.

And many times they forget.

Applying empathy requires tools, which the teacher attempts to instill daily in her students.

Students are more likely to attempt to apply these concepts, flex their emergent ethical literacy, if they feel seen, heard, and understood by their teacher (Mitra & Serriere, 2012).

Instances of applied empathy lead to higher level conversations, encounters where students can create new cognitive connections. This is Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development in action: guiding a student through a task slightly above their ability level, at first with teacher intervention. Later, as the student improves, the teacher is no longer necessary. In these instances, the improvement is in the student's ethical literacy. Mrs. Kidder, second grade:

We did *The Chalk Box Kid*, and a lot of the things that we talked about, they were just having much higher-level conversations and discussions about these concepts because they have this experience. I think the days of consequences, negative consequences, being subjected to shame in front of your peers, those are long gone. And so you really have to put the kids toe to toe and give them the tools and walk them through and make them feel safe. And sometimes say, 'Well that's not really a three-part apology. You forgot the last part.' But nobody really teaches you that. Ethical concepts are embedded in the school day if the educators are awake!

Miss Fabrizi agreed, stating that after gaining personal experience, "They can relate to it and understand it on a different level." Mrs. Audubon had similar experiences in her first grade classroom, steering her younger learners toward higher level conversations, including stepping beyond superficial compliments:

Sometimes when you do things like that, things come up that you can then talk about because students will say things that spur on a new conversation ... I want them to look beyond the superficial and more about how kids were kind and helpful and not, 'I like your shirt,' or whatever.

Miss Harrison observed these higher-level discussions guiding others toward the next stage of their ethical development as they become ...

... more susceptible to hear it or to kind of witness it and be like, ‘Oh, I think this is what we were talking about.’ So that way it kind of sticks with them and that helps them grow and learn as an individual.

### *Sharing*

The “share” is the most commonly cited opportunity for students to practice ethical literacy within the morning meeting. Teachers stress that it was not just the act of sharing itself, but also playing an active role as listener during these sharing activities. It follows from the practice of a formalized greeting, one in which students experience both seeing others and being seen themselves, recognized by name and body language, and sometimes bodily contact, as in a high-five, handshake, or other gesture. It is a gateway to empathy, as students connect with each other, learning about differences and celebrating commonalities. Miss Fabrizi witnessed this in her second graders:

I would say ethical literacy is probably practiced the most when we do the sharing, because they do have to discriminate between what is appropriate to share and what is not. They also have to be able to often identify some type of a moral – I don’t want to say trait – but some type of moral theme in the morning and relate their own thoughts and their own experiences to that, whatever the particular theme of the day is.

Miss Fabrizi pointed out that sharing requires self-assessment, of both the material to be shared and the relationship with the “moral theme” of the morning meeting. Mrs. Kahn combined her greeting with sharing, first with peers and then with the class, all while focusing on the positive:

We’ll say, ‘I want you to share a positive. One positive for the person sitting to your right ... And we’re going to share it out loud.’ And I might even be doing that with you when you come in ... So sharing positive, no negatives, just a positive and something about

your classmates, something that happened in school ... I like to find the positives more so than to bring out the negatives all the time, because it just brings them down.

Mr. Russell maintained a continual focus on the positive, often using the prompt “try turning that negative into a positive,” asking the students to rephrase a statement. He recognized the teachable moments embedded within each sharing experience:

Well, let’s say somebody shares something and let’s say they laugh. Or they give an inappropriate reaction. Either they laugh or they get a little too crazy. We’ll talk about that. We’ll say, ‘Well, how would you feel if you shared something and somebody laughed, or somebody talked while you were sharing?’ And they get it. I mean, they understand, ‘I wouldn’t like that.’

It is not just the selection of appropriate content to share, but also demonstrating appropriate conduct toward others. Mr. Russell began to sow seeds of empathy by asking those who transgress to place themselves in the other’s shoes (“I guess that’s role playing.”), opening pathways to understanding and making a lasting impression that leads to altered behavior.

There are also opportunities to practice kindness and thankfulness within the morning meeting. In Mrs. Lukens’ examples of opportunities to practice ethical skills in her first grade classroom, she listed “interactions with each other, practicing kindness, [and] acknowledging another individual.” Seeing others in the room, increasing awareness beyond the egocentric sphere, is a mainstay in the morning meeting, starting with the introductory greetings. Mrs. Kidder supplied her own list:

What respect looks like, sounds like and feels like, how to be mindful, when to use those strategies, how to take charge and be responsible, how to be self-aware, how to be thoughtful and thankful, and how to be friendly and kind.

Much like Mr. Yoder observed, repetitive modeling is the most common path toward developing these skills. The morning meeting allows for such repetitive efforts to thrive, without the artificiality of rote learning. Mrs. Kidder confirmed Mr. Yoder's statements:

So I feel like, again, in this developmental band, they still need reminders and they still need a lot of modeling. And so it's almost like you're hitting them over the head, over and over and over again.

### ***Helping Others***

Students offering to help others was cited as the primary demonstration of ethical literacy. It was empathy in action. This often took the form of simple kindness, as seen by Miss Fabrizi:

'If you are late, ask a friend for their agenda, their homework.' And the person up front didn't wait, said, 'Here you go,' and took out her agenda and handed it to the person without saying, 'I need help.' She just knew he needed it ... It was like, 'I will do this for you, because I know you need it.'

These gestures of kindness started with an ability to read a situation, or another's emotions, an instance of applied empathy. Mr. Russell witnessed students offering to help when others were distraught in his first grade classroom: "If he sees somebody upset, he will walk over to that person and be like, 'Hey, are you okay? What's wrong?'" And you can see first-graders doing that ... I asked Mr. Russell if this was the end of the encounter, or if the child seeking to comfort his classmate followed the ethical thread by asking probing questions or offering to help in some way:

One time he did it with a student, and she was upset because, why was she upset, there was something silly. I think it had something to do with she wanted indoor recess instead

of outdoor recess, or it was too hot, or she was just tired ... So, they just talked about it for a second. I don't recall exactly what Benny said, but he's the type that will commiserate with you, and say, 'I felt like that, too, before,' something like that.

This was an example of applied empathy, identified as such by the student. "I felt like that, too, before." Mr. Russell used the term "commiseration," indicating an empathetic response. This makes the other student feel seen, heard, and understood, supporting the growth of the classroom as a community. It is another example of students becoming independent ethical beings.

### **Observation**

Direct observation of behavior plays a significant role in the ethical development of students. These observations are of the teacher as a role model or of peers as they interact with each other throughout the day and over the course of the school year. It is not quite the same as the modeling cited by so many of the respondents as a necessary approach to teaching ethical concepts. Modeling implies a planned approach, demonstrating a skill or action with the specific intent of teaching others. Acting as a role model is not a passive act, as teachers (and students, as they mature as ethically autonomous individuals) must be conscious of their words and actions, but it is incidental, as one may never be certain when the actions of the teacher connect the cognitive and emotional dots for the observant student. Mrs. Marlowe, first grade:

I think by observing the adults around you, and the other students around you, and how the teacher treats the students. I mean, if I didn't treat them with respect and give them that choice, I don't think they would do it to each other.

Mrs. Kahn confirmed this statement, citing both acting as a role model and "being around good role models," highlighting the incidental, unplanned nature of learning through observation in a microcosm of society like the elementary classroom.

“Being around good role models” means that anyone in the classroom can serve as a resource for the growth of ethical literacy. Mr. Russell pointed this out when considering the children in his first grade classroom:

I think they learn it from direct instruction, but I think they learn a lot from their peers. In a morning meeting, you’re like, ‘Well, how would you feel in this situation?’ It might not even be turning the tables; it might just be you presenting a situation and having the kids brainstorm what to do. And they usually focus in on the best idea of how to handle it.

The classroom does not exist in a vacuum. Young students can learn from role models in any environment, including those in their home lives. The teachers stressed the need for home reinforcement, to give the students the best opportunity to grow as ethical individuals. Mrs. Lukens spoke of hearing, listening, and being ready to listen, and the importance of home reinforcement:

It depends if they hear it, but if they’re also listening. There’s hearing and listening. It depends on the child and if they’re ready to hear that information. And if it’s followed and reinforced at home.

Mrs. Mills believed the development of ethical literacy originates at home: “I think a big part of that comes from home. And I truly do think that’s where it starts is at home. But then I think you learn it from watching your peers.” There are opportunities for home and school connections, but also the potential risk of barriers to creating these connections (McCarthy, 2000). Without home reinforcement, any efforts at building ethical literacy may be stymied, regardless of the experiences within the school setting.

The teacher serves as the aspirant model for the students. What he says and does, and how he interacts with his students, defines not only how students should treat each other, but also



establishes the role of the teacher within the classroom community. Through observation, students begin to absorb these actions, incorporating them into their own social practices. Often, these gestures place the student in a teacherly role. Another anecdote from Miss Fabrizi's second grade classroom:

I have a student who really struggles in class, and he becomes visibly upset to a point where he becomes tearful. He has a lot of struggles in the class, emotionally, and with the schoolwork ... Recently, and it had nothing to do with me and my direction, the students were really just encouraging and saying, 'It's okay. Copy my paper,' or, 'You can catch up later.' Things that I would typically say to him, [the students said] in their own way, though, not mocking my words, in their own voice, relaying those messages to him and encouraging him and being very genuine in their support of him.

Miss Fabrizi noted that students assume the role of teacher in both actions and words, in what they offer to their peers in need, and the vocabulary and tone of voice they use in these interactions. This indicates that students are gaining facility with ethical concepts through observing their teachers performing similar actions.

### **Stories, Again**

The teachers found great success teaching ethical concepts through story. The participants revisited storytelling over and over as they explored how students best learn ethical concepts. Mrs. Kidder, second grade:

I feel like the book [*The Chalk Box Kid* (Bulla, 1987)] is where you revisit. You learn that a character's not just a compilation of the things they do, but also what they say ... So Uncle Max was really selfish and the main character was on the receiving end of that. And Uncle Max went as far as to take all the posters down in his room and he didn't have

a job. And so we talked a lot about Uncle Max's behavior and his impact on the main character, but also the main character. How could he be empowered to stand up to Uncle Max, and I wonder why he didn't do that in the book ...

The key here is connection: the students are able to connect with the characters and their struggles, the dilemmas they face and the decisions they make. Mrs. Kahn confirmed the power of story to create connections when she said, "And they really do connect with stories. They can make those connections, and they see how important family units are." Miss Fabrizi listed stories in her description of how her students best learn ethical concepts, listing them alongside the traditional activities embedded in the morning meeting:

I think a lot of learning happens through stories, presenting stories to the class, giving, sharing your own experiences with the class, so that you're modeling that for them, and that they can relate to it and understand it on a different level.

**Research Question 3: What elements of the morning meeting best support the development of ethical literacy?**

The interview data answer the final research question, what elements of the morning meeting best support the development of ethical literacy, with three themes: 1) the rituals inherent within the classroom practice; 2) the semi-scripted social and emotional learning (SEL) lessons included in the morning meeting, most notably the use of role-playing exercises; and 3) yet again, the inclusion of stories.

**Ritual Within the Morning Meeting**

The sounding of the school bell as a call to the morning meeting, the drawing together as a classroom community, the repetitive and performative nature of the practice: these aspects are ritualistic in nature. They are reminiscent of Durkheim's definition of ritual as a shared

performance that generates social bonds (D’Orsi & Dei, 2018) and defines the participant’s social world (Durkheim, 1912/1995). Teachers were asked to describe the rituals embedded in the morning meeting, their meaning and purpose. There was some confusion, as the term “ritual” is not in the common lexicon of the elementary teacher. The teachers prefer the term “routine,” which carries the same repetitive connotation as ritual, but loses the deeper, transformative social connotation. As Mrs. Lukens stated, in her first grade classroom, “Our ritual is routine.” It may appear simple on the surface, but any disruption to the routine can put the students “on edge” (Mr. Russell, first grade) or “make them go bonkers” (Mrs. Kahn, second grade). These rituals include a tone-setting ritual to “start the day,” daily themes, the greeting, and the share.

### *A Tone-Setting Ritual to “Start the Day”*

The school day is built upon routine. The students grow to anticipate and crave these daily expectations: the ringing school bell acts much like the pealing of church bells, calling students to study much like parishioners to worship. The morning meeting becomes one of those known, expected experiences, a daily practice that lends both comfort and structure to the participant classroom. Mrs. Lukens, first grade, reported, “It’s my way of starting our day ... It’s our time to tell who lost a tooth, who has a birthday coming up. It’s just my way of just centering and starting my day.” Mrs. Marlowe, first grade, agreed:

To get us together for the day, to get our day started, routine, to go over calendar ... It’s mostly just so the kids know how every day our day’s going to start. It’s like that routine to first grade that they need.

Mrs. Kahn, second grade: “[The] purpose of the morning meeting is just to get us acquainted with one another, see how everyone’s feeling as they walk in the door. Sets the tone for the day.”

Mrs. Audubon, first grade, made a similar point:

I think it's a good way to just start the day with the expectations for the day, what we're going to do for the day, because there's a lot of kids in my class that need that structure of what's going to happen today.

In Mrs. Audubon's classroom, structure leads to success. "If there's anything new, a special event, because they really thrive on structure. They do much better when they're structured, and they know what's going to happen." The opening of each morning with a classroom meeting superimposes structure to the entirety of the school day, and gives the teacher and students a known, safe and comfortable setting to introduce special events, those daily wrinkles that adults may take for granted, but prove disruptive to the primary aged student. It primes the student for the day to follow, regardless of the novelty of its path.

The concept of "tone" surfaced often in the interview data. Here tone applies to both the classroom (i.e., how students will interact with each other and their teachers) and how each student feels inside as each day begins anew. It is a focus on the interpersonal (e.g., working together, treating others with kindness and respect, and drawing upon coping strategies to resolve conflicts) and the intrapersonal (e.g., identifying and managing one's own emotions) for both personal well-being and to ensure academic success. A student in crisis will struggle with academic tasks (Linnenbrink-Garcia & Pekrun, 2011; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012; Stockinger et al., 2021); thus, the morning meeting serves as a ritualistic practice to help students begin their day "on the right foot," as Mrs. Mills, second grade, stated: "Gosh, it's just a way to get our day started on the right foot and set the tone for the day."

### ***Daily Themes***

Tone can be set by daily expectations in the form of rituals and routine. In second grade, it is common practice to assign each day of the week a theme focusing on SEL concepts. As

there is no set curriculum for the morning meeting, these themes were adopted by the teachers independently. In my observations, all second grade teachers used the same thematic material for each day, often with the exact same vocabulary. The teachers mentioned that it is common to share these ideas in grade level meetings, both within separate buildings and across the district. Mrs. Loggia, a second grade teacher at Clay Creek Elementary School, was cited by many teachers as being the original source for these materials. Mrs. Loggia herself cited the website Teachers Pay Teachers (Teachers Pay Teachers, n.d.) as her source, alongside her own ideas and collaboration with her colleagues. These themes were:

- Mindful Monday: Today we will practice mindful strategies!
- Take-Charge Tuesday: Today we will practice being responsible!
- Wise Wednesday: Today we will practice being self-aware!
- Thoughtful Thursday: Today we will practice being socially aware and thankful!
- Friendly Friday: Today we will be a friend and practice kindness!

These themes were accompanied by an activity, placed in the final slot in the morning meeting reserved for SEL activities. They varied in form and depth: In my observations I witnessed pair-and-share partner discussions, a scenario featuring role play and group discussion, and a breathing exercise to calm the mind and the body, among others. Some ethical concepts are indicated explicitly, such as the rule-based ethics of Take-Charge Tuesday (Today we will practice being responsible!) and the virtue-based ethics of Friendly Friday (Today we will be a friend and practice kindness!). The cyclical nature of the themes granted familiarity, and therefore comfort, to the students as they engaged in activities related to the daily theme throughout the year. Time also ceases to be an issue, as teachers have the freedom to develop intricate activities, or a simple, quick sharing session between neighbors. Discussion and group

or partner activities served as anchors, and therefore a secondary scaffold, to supporting the growth of ethical literacy.

### ***The Greeting***

Being seen and seeing others is the first step toward considering those beyond the egocentric sphere, allowing the first glimpses of an emergent ethical literacy. Teachers made an effort to greet each student as they arrive, and students often greeted their peers as they trickled into the classroom. These interactions were incidental and unscripted. The morning meeting greeting is a planned event, in which the students participate in a practiced, class-wide greeting, focusing on acknowledging each student by name and body language. These greetings take many forms, including a simple “turn to your neighbor” and say hello, greeting others as they pass while taking a lap around the room, songs, and games.

### ***The Share***

The “share” was discussed previously when examining how students practice ethical literacy. Within the morning meeting, the sharing activity takes two forms. The first is a structured open forum, in which students are given a simple prompt. Examples included “What did you do this weekend?” and “What is your favorite ice cream flavor?” It gives students the chance to practice speaking in front of a captive audience and the class an opportunity to practice good listening skills. Sharing can also delve beyond the superficial, asking students to share feelings, emotions, and reactions to scenarios. This second form often resembles a pair-and-share or small group discussion, with a sharing session with the class upon reconvening. These small sharing sessions were heralded in the interview data as a prime example of students exploring ethical concepts and, much like the daily greetings, allow students to form connections and open their eyes to the social structure of the classroom.

## The Semi-Scripted SEL Lesson

Each element of the morning meeting provides glimpses into the ethical development of the student participants. The purpose of the SEL lesson within the morning meeting is to explore, experience and build upon the students' burgeoning ethical compasses. Some classrooms follow a theme of the day, with prompts or activities to match. Often, these lessons begin with a resemblance to the lighter topics from the previously described sharing sessions, but evolve into deeper explorations of SEL concepts. Role play and the use of stories, yet again, are themes nestled within these semi-scripted lessons.

This is the most ethically rich experience embedded in the morning meeting. Some classrooms, however, never quite make it this far. Mrs. Lukens, a first grade teacher, lost over half of her students 20 minutes after the first bell. Other scheduling conflicts, both immediate ones like a scheduled special area class or change for math, or the constant ticking of the clock chafing against the academic and logistical requirements of the school day, meant that the SEL lesson was the first element to be sacrificed.

The modular construction of the morning meeting grants significant freedom to the teachers, as they can swap or move elements to best fit the needs of their students. In fact, the morning meeting is not limited to the morning. Kindergarten wove elements of the morning meeting throughout the first few hours of their day. Miss Harrison, along with Mr. Russell, revisited the morning meeting whenever the need arose:

That's what I love about morning meeting is that I don't always do it in the morning. I might do a pop-up one in the afternoon when an incident happens where I get word that something happened at recess and I'm saying, 'We're not being kind friends. Let's talk

about ways that we can reenact this situation and work through it.’ That’s the beauty of it: morning meeting isn’t always just the morning. It can be a meeting in general.

### ***Role Play and the Morning Meeting***

Role play asks the participant to “get into the skin” of a hypothetical character, often one far removed from one’s own temperament. It makes the abstract concrete. There is also the inherent joy and excitement of “playing pretend:” role-playing exercises “afford the students a considerable degree of creativity and independence as well as enjoyment of the dramatic process itself” (Doron, 2007, pp. 742-743). Crawling into the mind of another in a controlled environment can grant students an understanding of unfamiliar and even incomprehensible concepts and attitudes completely foreign to their daily lived experiences (Van Ments, 1999). Role play served two primary purposes in the morning meeting: the assessment of right and wrong in context and to develop empathy in the student participants.

**Assessing Right and Wrong.** The assumption of roles in an acted scenario can illustrate right and wrong in a given context much better than words alone, especially in the younger grades. Mr. Russell used role play to teach conflict resolution in his first grade classroom:

Sometimes a share will be like, ‘This happens. What do you do?’ Sometimes I’ll act something out with a kid. I know one example is when there’s a disagreement or you’re trying to figure out who’s starting a game, some things to do.

Through role play, students begin to find ways to navigate a middle path between their personal desires and the wants of others. The morning meeting is a safe, low-risk environment to experiment with these techniques before putting them to use.

Role play can also be used to demonstrate right and wrong in context. Mr. Yoder described the approach he uses during his morning meeting discussions:



I'll have a group. A group will show me. Someone will be the teacher and the other one will be the students. And they make a group of four. And they will role play and we'll watch. The rest of us will be the audience and watch them and see what they're doing. And this teacher might be telling them what to do, and they're following the directions and listening. And then there'll be another group that you can see that they're breaking the rules. And then we talk about, 'Okay, which group was doing this correctly? Which one wasn't? And what rule was it that they were doing correctly? Or what was it they were breaking?'

This type of activity is especially effective with the use of hyperbolic behavior, demonstrations well beyond what may be encountered in an actual situation. Miss Harrison, second grade:

They love role play and they really enjoy when someone does the wrong things because then it gives them an idea of what not to do, but it also gives them a visual and gets them to giggle and say, 'Oh yeah, that shouldn't be happening.'

I mentioned to Miss Harrison my observation of her use of hyperbolic examples way beyond the actual behavior the students demonstrate. Although Miss Harrison assured me that I "would be shocked" by the severity of behaviors demonstrated, she concurred that "over-the-top acting" can capture the student's attention and imaginations, and subtle examples run the risk of making little to no impression. The joy and mirth elicited by overacting leads to a general consensus of just what would be the correct behavior in a given situation.

**Developing Empathy.** Role play supports the development of empathy. Mrs. Kidder spoke of the inclusion of empathy and its cross-disciplinary connections:

The concepts are generally bigger. Empathy is something they did in their guidance lessons, and then it's something that's carried over into our literature [curriculum]. So it

was ironic we had the story where the characters were these animals that were bullying each other, and we got to revisit empathy because I knew that they had had one of those lessons with the guidance counselor.

Lessons from an anti-bullying program (Olweus, 2007) have also been repurposed to support the development of empathy, as Mrs. Lukens noted:

It is something that we used to do when we did Olweus years ago. We moved away from Olweus. I still have the books. Now, that's not to say that I won't read a book that has been in that Olweus as my read aloud ... But I might not make a big lesson to go with it. But when the kids need it, I'm like, 'How did that make you feel?'

These role-playing sessions are especially effective when they feature scenarios drawn from the students' actual experiences. Mrs. Audubon witnessed this first-hand in her first grade classroom. "Anytime you give them real-life examples, it always hits home a little bit better." Using actual incidents also allows students to empathize with each other rather than a hypothetical abstract, as described by Mrs. Marlowe:

Then, eventually, they got to, 'It made me feel scared. It made me feel bad for the student because he is my friend, or he or she is my friend. I knew they were having a bad day.' They came up with really cute answers once they understood that I was like, 'I don't want you to recap it for me. I want you to just tell me how it made you feel so that if you're having a certain anxiety about coming to school, I can help you with that.'

### ***Stories, Yet Again***

Once again, participants cited stories as a support structure to encourage the growth of ethical literacy. The sharing of stories, especially in the form of "story time," gathering around the teacher as she reads aloud to the class, lends that same air of familiarity as the SEL themed

days, but to a greater degree, considering the widespread use of story time witnessed during this research study. Stories often matched the daily theme, and serve as gateways to the teaching of ethical concepts.

Mrs. Audubon incorporated storytelling into her morning meetings as an approach to ethics education: “I do read stories during that morning meeting time that have to do with how kids can behave ethically. How to solve a problem in a kind way or things like that.” Mrs. Lukens used the picture book *A Bargain for Francis* (Hoban, 1970) to teach her first grade students about the value of friendship and conflict resolution. Throughout these interviews, teachers reported shaping the content of the morning meeting to address the needs of each class, encouraging the introduction of stories about emotional regulation, bossiness, and kindness.

Discussion and student interaction in partners or small groups was also common when stories were incorporated into the semi-scripted SEL lessons within the morning meeting, as well as the experience of mindful listening. Miss Harrison, second grade:

I like to encourage that everyone is whole body listening and just giving each other their attention. I feel like showing that respect of just listening. Even if you're in your head thinking about what you're doing, I'm like, 'Just show that you're a kind friend and just listening.'

Listening itself becomes an ethical act, giving each other, teacher and student alike, the kindness they deserve as they speak or read.

In this chapter, the voices of the teacher participants were heard as they put words to their own thoughts and perceptions of the ethical development of their students. In the next chapter, thematic analysis of data from field observations of the morning meeting in multiple classrooms spanning the primary grades (kindergarten through second grade) will be used to answer the

three research questions posed in this study. The words and actions of the teacher participants, alongside the words and actions of their students, were captured as they occurred naturally within the classroom setting while participating in the morning meeting.

## Chapter Five: The Field Observations

Field observations were completed over three months in the spring of 2023. These observations occurred in two different buildings within a single public school district in Pennsylvania. First and second grade classrooms were the primary sources of data, hosting the researcher for three days of observation. Certain conflicts, namely special school events (e.g., field days, spring concerts, and end-of-year celebrations) occasionally shortened this residency. These conflicts allowed for visits to other classrooms, including kindergarten and pre-first classes. The final set of collected data included 28 field observations of 10 different classrooms spanning the primary grades.

I was a nonparticipant observer during these observations. I arrived before the students and claimed an inconspicuous spot for observation. Teachers explained my presence at the first observation. For some classrooms, this served as an introduction. For others, I was a known entity, serving as their music teacher before my sabbatical leave to pursue this research. From time to time, the teacher included me in a small portion of the morning meeting, asking me to add to the sharing session or including me as an example for an activity to follow. I answered briefly before fading back into the background. Students would also approach me, usually as they first entered the classroom, to wish me good morning and engage in a bit of small talk, sharing bits of their personal life, confirming Mrs. Kahn's observation, "They love to tell me." These small incidents aside, for the majority of my time in each classroom I was able to blend into the surroundings, observing the events as they unfolded without intervention.

These field notes were taken by hand. Immediately upon the conclusion of the observation, I relocated to a different room in the building to type an observational narrative from my notes. This narrative report included an observer's reflection, serving as an initial

thematic analysis, breadcrumbs to follow during the in-depth coding and analysis to follow. After the first round of coding, all passages assigned codes were placed into a separate document, to allow easier facility with the volume of data. These coded passages were categorized by theme in smaller batches of nine or 10 classrooms. Each smaller cluster was organized by the emergent themes present in the data. Finally, all three thematic groupings were reanalyzed, seeking commonalities in structure to prepare the presentation of findings included in this chapter.

Tables identifying participant roles can be found in chapter four. Mrs. Lukens, a first grade teacher who sat for an interview, did not grant access to her classroom. Her reasoning will be explored briefly in the final chapter of the dissertation. Mrs. Munroe, a grade level partner of hers at Clay Creek Elementary, granted access in her stead. Mrs. Meadows, a pre-first teacher, and Mrs. Simon, a kindergarten teacher, both at Naughton Elementary, invited me to a single day of observation in their classrooms.

After examining the data collected during the 28 field observations, these are the emergent themes that answer the three research questions.

**Research Question 1: How do teachers leading the morning meeting facilitate the development of ethical literacy?**

Teachers' facilitation of the development of ethical literacy reflected a number of commonalities expressed through five themes emerging from the observational data: 1) the acknowledgment of their students with personalized greetings and small talk, allowing students to feel both seen and heard; 2) the encouragement of student ownership of their actions and their responsibilities; 3) direct intervention in unethical student behavior, including the modeling of more appropriate actions; 4) referencing ethical lessons from outside of the morning meeting,

confirming the presence of curricular ethics; and 5) sharing personal, slice-of-life stories, forming personal bonds with the students and fostering a safe and nurturing environment for students to experiment with their own burgeoning ethical literacy. Each of these themes is thoroughly explored in the pages that follow.

### **Acknowledgment of Students**

As revealed in the analysis of the interview data, setting the tone for the day was an important aspect of the morning meeting. Teachers were observed seizing every opportunity to cultivate an open, inviting learning environment. In the spirit of Mr. Russell's and Miss Harrison's conception of the morning meeting as a classroom practice without boundaries, teachers wasted no time, setting the tone from the moment students entered the building. Greetings and acknowledgments from the teacher, directed toward every student as they arrived, extended beyond the modeling of social conventions: ensuring every child was greeted and invited into the social fabric of the classroom community allowed students to feel both seen and heard by their teachers, described in detail below as the two related subthemes within the primary theme of teacher acknowledgment.

#### ***Being Seen***

Modeling was cited often in the interview data. Examples began with the teacher, spreading rapidly throughout the classroom. This ethical contagion was witnessed frequently in the field observations, as students observed, absorbing through repetition, the efforts of teachers and peers to greet each other, and eventually following suit. In Mrs. Mills' second grade classroom, the teacher continued to greet each student as they arrived, getting details on lunch and holding small conversations. As larger groups arrived, her greetings were delayed, but she

made sure to say hello and ask how each student was doing, periodically scanning the room after a large group arrived to ensure no one had been skipped.

The students were busy diving into their morning meeting, dedicating themselves to the minutiae of preparing for the day. Even while demonstrating this single-minded devotion, I wondered whether the students were aware of the care and effort the teacher expends to connect with each of them. Mrs. Mills ensured that all of her students received a personalized greeting, even if these greetings were delayed as she spoke with another student. My speculation concerning student awareness of the personal greeting phenomenon was confirmed through the observational data, as students definitely noticed when anyone, teacher or student, took the time to greet them by name. There was a pause in work or activity, eye contact, a greeting in return: these small acknowledgments were not overlooked.

Mrs. Loggia spent her mornings flitting between the classroom and the hallway, greeting all that passed. Her gregariousness led to some students entering without a personal greeting. The teacher remedied her oversight as she returned to the classroom, delivering well-wishes to her students and praising their efforts to start the day productively: “Good job, friends!” A student who approached the teacher handed her a large bag of popcorn. “Oh my goodness, more popcorn!” The teacher embraced this student. “You need more popcorn!”

Mrs. Kahn cited authenticity as a personal goal in her approach to ethics education. This was seen here in Mrs. Loggia’s classroom, as students took the same care to say hello to each other, infusing these greetings with their own personal touches. The gift was an acknowledgment of the teacher by the student, after learning that Mrs. Loggia enjoys popcorn. During teacher appreciation week, I observed students asking the teacher questions and speaking among themselves, seeking inside information in the search for the perfect gift. These efforts to learn



more about others were a means for students to connect with each other and their teacher, deepening the bonds of the classroom community.

The intentional acknowledgment of others was also present within student interactions. In Mrs. Loggia's second grade classroom, students shared greetings as they arrived. They greeted each other by name: "Good morning, Hazel." Some had fun with it, adding a sense of theater or jocularity to their tone, but most seemed genuine and true good morning greetings.

I watched as the students greeted each other almost reflexively, as if they were practicing a behavior learned by rote. I suspected otherwise: the children stopped to acknowledge their peers, making eye contact, using first names, and often including a physical interaction of some type, like a high-five, fist bump, hug, or rehearsed handshake. The small details of these student interactions were usually borrowed directly from the teacher's greeting. It was more than students simply parroting back learned phrases or mannerisms: after feeling seen, their existences validated by the teacher's recognition, they spread that same sense of community and connection by extending personalized greetings of their own to their peers.

### ***Being Heard***

Part of being seen is also being heard, and this was evident in the numerous instances of students sharing details from their personal lives with their teachers. In Mrs. Marlowe's first grade classroom, a student arrived and excitedly began telling the teacher about winning a stick race this weekend, and receiving a gold medal. "That's great, Ariel, fantastic!" Turning to another student, the teacher asked, "How was your birthday?" as she prepared to lead the morning meeting. The student paused her preparations, walking over to the teacher to tell her about her birthday weekend in a quiet, personal conversation. Students approached the teacher, offering tidbits of information from their weekend, small little events. The teacher acknowledged

each student, sometimes asking probing questions to follow-up, or just giving praise or a simple “Wow!”

These interactions were both public, as students shouted from their desks, or intimate, as students approached the teacher to speak quietly. These personal sharing sessions tended to spread throughout the classroom, with the conversation continuing between or among students after beginning with the teacher. These impromptu sharing sessions served as miniature lessons on the everyday struggles of life, a low-risk model for social interactions. In Mrs. Audubon’s first grade classroom, the teacher greeted the student and began a conversation. The subject matter meandered from the school open house to baseball. The student told Mrs. Audubon, “... and we lost!” “I’m sorry!” The conversation continued with the teacher and student miming swinging a baseball bat slowly. The teacher added, “... and then the coach says, “Everybody’s hittin’! Yeah ... yeah ... that’s how baseball goes, sometimes.” Mrs. Audubon then spoke about her own son’s baseball team. More students arrived, and were greeted by both the teacher and the paraprofessional. A student approached, addressed Mrs. Audubon by name, then repeated the syllable “um” over and over. She eventually offered to help prepare class materials in the back of the room. The teacher accepted her offer of help and thanked her.

The small talk observed in interactions like the one above was more than just small talk. These conversations allowed students to forge connections between home and school as they built personal relationships with their teachers and peers. They served as social laboratories, allowing children to explore the intricacies of social interaction in a welcoming environment. The teacher was able to model social skills alongside the ethical concepts of kindness and gratitude. These incidental interactions carried more weight than it first appeared on the surface, as these students were learning to navigate their growing social spheres.

### **Encouragement of Student Ownership**

Teachers encouraged students to assume ownership for their actions and their responsibilities as students. Consider this interaction from Mrs. Kahn's second grade classroom, as the teacher exclaimed to a gathering crowd of students, "You were probably talking! Maybe you can ask your neighbor for help!" The students, after first glancing at the morning work, were confused and had approached the teacher to ask for help. Instead of helping, she reminded them that she had just explained the assignment, and they missed it. She did this kindly, without recrimination, and explained why they may be lost. She then placed the responsibility to find help within the individual, and suggested that other classmates can offer guidance. The students were compelled to seek help from their peers.

When a solution did not materialize quickly, students were observed begging the teacher for guidance. In this case, it was a mad dash of six or eight students who had just arrived, and instead of taking time to gather their thoughts, they asked the teacher to connect the dots for them. The teacher offered strategies to find the answers, and most students were eventually successful, except for one who did not seek help from his peers. This attempt to develop autonomy was unsuccessful for the student in question, but as the teacher continues to scaffold problem-solving strategies, he may begin to assume ownership for his actions.

### **Direct Intervention of Unethical Student Acts**

The morning meeting is a student-centric classroom practice, the needs and development of the student participants serving as its guiding principle. There are no curricular benchmarks that must be achieved, no standardized test to measure proficiency. As demonstrated through these observations, teachers served as facilitators within the morning meeting, allowing student interaction and collaboration to take center stage.

When students demonstrated unethical behavior, however, direct interventions were witnessed. Miss Fabrizi, upon noticing one of her students roaming about the back of the room, asked him, “Carter, where do you belong, my friend?” Another student shouted, “At home!” Others laughed and cajoled. “No, I don’t like that.” The teacher replied immediately. She ceased her own preparations for the next academic task and spoke directly to the classroom. “That is not appropriate. That is not a random act of kindness.”

In this instance, the student was attempting to make a joke, although the teacher found no humor in his interjection. She was especially disappointed since, just moments earlier during the morning meeting, they had discussed random acts of kindness. The student was cowed and apologetic.

In Mrs. Meadows’ pre-first classroom, a student approached: “Mrs. Meadows, Henry wanted us to smell his farts! His butt was in our faces.” The teacher called both over for a conversation. In Mrs. Audubon’s first grade classroom, a student stood at his desk, cutting lumps of teal Play-Doh with a set of children’s scissors. The student at the desk next to him reached over and stabbed one of the lumps of Play-Doh with a pencil. “Kevin! Don’t draw on my desk!” The teacher was sitting close, and intervened. “How can you ask it? What can you say instead?” The teacher helped by giving prompts, guiding the students through the conflict resolution process. One student repeated her prompt, but Kevin, the pencil stabber, opted to argue, rather than repeat her suggested response.

As the school year drew to a close, patience was running short and tempers hot. Students had months to study the emotional triggers of their peers, and some had become masters of antagonism. Some of these actions were simply for one’s own amusement, or to while away the time as school drew to a close. The issue arose when, much like in some of the other incidents

described, the students demonstrating undesired behaviors refused to accept responsibility or attempted deflection. In the second incident from Mrs. Audubon's classroom, one of the students made an effort to follow the teacher's supplied social prompts, while the other tried to extend the conflict by resorting to argument and deflection. To truly alter behavior, students must accept responsibility and understand the effect(s) their actions have upon their peers. Students who accept ownership for their actions, ethical and unethical, will expand their own ethical literacy.

### **Curricular Ethics**

Ethics education was embedded throughout the school experience in the primary grades, and direct ethics instruction was present during my observations. The most common reference was to the ethics of ecology, caring for the earth and the creatures that inhabit it. Mrs. Simon's kindergarten message of the day touted the importance of caring for the earth. "Read with me if you can!" Most of the students recited the daily message, following along with the teacher, speaking slowly and pointing to each word. "Good morning! Today we will talk about how to take care of the earth! Have a great day!"

The students were also reading *Why Should I Recycle?* (Green, 2002) and practicing sorting items into categories. During this observation, I sat in a small alcove surrounded by a pile of cardboard, plastic and aluminum cans waiting to be sorted. Through activities common within the morning meeting – in this instance, choral recitation and stories – students learned to care, value, and respect the earth. This served as an introduction to the universal nature of ethics.

All of the second grade classrooms were participating in a biology lesson, studying the butterfly life cycle. At the start of the observation window, the students had small plastic cups on their desks, each containing a caterpillar. The teachers often referred to the caterpillars when correcting student behavior. Miss Fabrizi told her students, "If you want to keep your caterpillar

on your desk, you have to be quiet. They're little!" She used this opportunity to bring up some undesired behaviors seen yesterday, most notably shaking or flipping the caterpillar containers. "It would be like being flipped upside down in an airplane!"

The caterpillar served as a gateway to the development of empathy, seeing or feeling a situation from a different point of view. It was a very effective strategy: whether concerned for the comfort of the caterpillar, or simply frightened by the possibility of losing their desktop pet, the students always responded favorably to these instances of redirection.

Later, as the chrysalises formed, I observed students role playing as teachers, rushing to the classroom to check on the butterfly enclosure, then waiting for their classmates to arrive to report their findings. Many of these students were able to identify individual butterflies, their growth, and their identifying markings. The students were also forced to cope with the death of some of their adopted caterpillars that failed to hatch from their cocoons.

Materials from other subjects were referenced during the morning meeting, reminding students that they had encountered these concepts before. Stories read in the classroom were the most popular callbacks. Mr. Russell asked for help finding his big stack of letters. Before the students could volunteer, he found them in a cabinet. He handed out letter cards, placing them in a second interior circle in front of the students, in alphabetical order. As he prepared the cards, he referenced the current reading lesson, in which animals were helping each other.

In Mrs. Audubon's first grade classroom, a student raised her hand and told the teacher that students were calling out earlier during the morning meeting. "We're still a little bit working on the blurting." The teacher referenced two stories the class read on calling out: *My Mouth Is a Volcano* (Cook, 2005) and *Interrupting Chicken* (Stein, 2010). The teachers made these cross-curricular connections throughout the observations, and students were always receptive,

referencing favorite lines from the story, identifying with characters that struggled with impulse control, and quieting to protect the sensitive hearing of their caterpillar friends. It expanded the development of ethical literacy beyond the confines of the morning meeting. Forming these cross-disciplinary connections awakened students to ethical considerations nestled within the traditional curriculum.

### **Slice-of-Life Personal Stories**

Throughout the interviews, the use of story as an effective approach to developing ethical literacy was cited frequently. The efficacy of stories as a vehicle for ethics education was also evident through the observational data. A primary source of stories could be easily overlooked: the honest, slice-of-life stories teachers shared from their personal lives with their students. Mrs. Simon, at the start of the kindergarten weekend share, told her students about a college visit with her son and a birthday party, using the same social prompt (“This weekend I ...”). Mr. Russell also shared small tidbits from his personal life concerning his two daughters and his love of combing through garage sales for vintage toys and games. This interest proved to be a very effective personal connection: the room was adorned with some of his finds, including retro gaming systems and Star Wars figurines. These connections allowed the students to view their teacher in a humanistic light, not just as an elder authority figure.

Mrs. Kahn accidentally stumbled upon the social bonding power of pets when regaling her second grade class with tales of her dog, which was having some medical problems that required a visit to the vet. A student asked whether the dog was all right, adding that she had told her parents about Mrs. Kahn’s pet. The teacher thanked her and reported that the dog was doing much better.

Mrs. Kahn spoke frequently of her dog in class, so the students knew all about his eccentricities. These tales from home opened an avenue of connection between Mrs. Kahn and her students. Students forming these types of personal connections with their teachers, taking an active involvement in aspects of their personal lives, were presented with a comfortable venue to practice their blossoming ethical literacy, including skills like empathy, compassion, and caring. It made these students more receptive to interventions applied by the teacher. If a student was treating a classmate poorly, the teacher could use their relationship as an example of how she would feel if treated in the same manner, encouraging the development of empathy.

**Research Question 2: How do the student participants practice ethical literacy during and beyond the morning meeting?**

During the observations within the primary grades, five themes emerged from the resultant data to answer this research question. Students practiced and developed ethical literacy by: 1) either overcoming or succumbing to the egocentric barrier, the struggle to view the world existing beyond the self; 2) developing a sense of ethical autonomy and ownership, notably through the use of totemic practices and assuming responsibility for one's actions; 3) engaging in role play, assuming the role of the teacher in peer interactions or participating in a prepared role-playing activity within the morning meeting; 4) engaging in the sociology of the classroom, helping others when the need arises and practicing the ethical acts of kindness, friendship, and inclusion; and 5) confronting unethical acts by their peers, noticeably in the identification and addressing of "bad" behavior and coping with exclusionary actions.

**The Egocentric Barrier**

The worldview of the primary aged child (kindergarten through second grade, four to eight years of age) is a naturally egocentric one (Piaget, 1965). A child cannot be blamed for this



perspective, as the self is the first filter of all experience: the experiences of others can be perceived only in abstraction. This natural egocentrism does create significant problems within the development of one's own ethical literacy. Without the ability to consider or acknowledge those beyond the concept of the self, ethical growth is not possible. In these field observations, this phenomenon was visible in what I identified as the egocentric barrier.

The egocentric barrier was observed in each grade level, but it was most evident in the pre-first classroom. The inability of these students to see others outside of their own egocentric spheres not only hindered the development of their ethical literacy, but their capability to interact successfully with their peers at all. This manifested commonly as students ignoring others, a reaction that could be seen when a student who received tickets (i.e., a reward for good behavior) began shouting, "Who wants to see what I won? Who wants to see who won?" No one responded. She spoke loudly some more, raising her voice in volume and pitch, but no one replied or paid any attention to her.

More students arrived and the teacher greeted them. "Good morning! How is everybody?" No one replied. "Is anybody going to say good morning back?" One student replied with a muttered "good morning" while looking toward the ground. No one else acknowledged the teacher.

The student seeking acknowledgment attempted to modulate her voice to garner attention, but made no effort to direct her energy toward another. As her classmates continued to ignore her, her cries resembled screaming into a void, despite being surrounded by others. No student greeted another by name during this observation, and most of the teacher's greetings remained unanswered. The student who replied did so without the social conventions of eye contact or directed body language.

These incidents included individuals at a distance, but the egocentric barrier was also present in interactions taking place in close quarters. The following incident occurred between students at arm's length or less. Two students playing with Legos at a desk made dog noises, whining and barking. One of the students shouted, "Quiet!" No one reacted. The whining continued. Another student asked, "What's the memory box for?" A student answered and the teacher then gave more detail, reminding them of the past year's projects. The student who originally asked the question ignored them. The answering student hesitated for a moment, then walked away. There were more dog noises. "Stoooooop!" Once again, the dog noises continue without pause, as if the shouting (which is rather loud and quite shrill) was unheard, even though these children were sitting at the same desk.

Even when making a conscious decision to ignore another, young children usually demonstrate a reflexive reaction, especially to loud, piercing shrieks. In this case, it was as if the complaining or replying party simply did not exist. They were inaudible and invisible to their peers.

The egocentric barrier was not limited to unscripted or incidental student interactions. A scripted greeting was included in the pre-first morning meeting. The students were gathered on the carpet in a circle. When tasked with the greeting, even with their teacher modeling and scaffolding their interactions, the students were unable to participate fully, eschewing the social conventions of using names, eye contact, or facing each other when speaking.

"Say good morning," the teacher instructed. "Make sure you make eye contact. And no sillies. [Sillies don't] feel good. It embarrasses me." The teacher began the greeting by looking toward another student and saying, "Good morning, Elijah." The greeting continued. The eye contact appeared to be incidental, accidental, a result of sitting in the circle. Students sometimes

turned their bodies and looked around the room, but there was no apparent purpose or intent to their movements. They stared at the floor, the SmartBoard, or glanced in random directions. Small waves that occasionally accompanied the greeting were spasmodic, reading as dismissive rather than an act of acknowledgment. The students spoke in hushed, shy tones. First names were quickly dropped, leaving only a mumbled “good morning.” This is a stark contrast to the voices present at the start of this observation. Students begin speaking loudly among themselves, drowning out the murmured good mornings being passed throughout the circle. The teacher interrupted, “That’s what we don’t need ... no thank you.”

In an activity focused solely on acknowledging one another, these students were unable to engage in or simply imitate the expectations of social conventions of greeting one another. In the session that followed, students were eager to share, but were ignored by their peers. While students shared, most of the other students talked over them. There was not much listening or focus on the person speaking. The students were unable to overcome or even create small fissures within the egocentric barrier.

### **Ethical Autonomy and Ownership**

Even with teachers acting as models, students must act with agency to develop their own ethical compasses. Students in the primary grades, despite their age, possess and demonstrate agency (Adair, 2014; Corsaro, 2005). This agency was often scaffolded through the leadership opportunities present in the morning meeting, but was also witnessed in unplanned, incidental interactions within the classroom, most notably through the use of totemic practices – brandishing an object that imbues the one wielding it with a sense of power and responsibility – and in observed instances of students claiming ownership for their responsibilities as members of the classroom community.

### *Totemic Practices*

A physical totem can make abstract concepts concrete for primary aged children. This was observed in the use of leadership totems within the morning meeting. For students, these items – an oversized green finger pointer, a stuffed dog toy, the teacher’s pendant microphone, a rolled ball during greeting – became a tangible representation of power and responsibility. Small assignments of leadership took on deeper meaning for the individual, and from that meaning sprang a burgeoning sense of responsibility. In Mrs. Kidder’s second grade classroom, a student fetched a leadership totem (the green pointer finger). “This is mine” he said as he returned to his seat with the pointer finger in hand. This student had previously been engaged in his morning work, but as the realization that he was to assume a leadership role during the morning meeting dawned, he began scanning the room, seeking this totem of power. After finding it, he wielded the finger pointer over his head as he proceeded slowly back to his desk, and his demeanor changed: he was dedicated in his morning preparations, later successfully leading his portion of the meeting. He even assumed a teacherly role by successfully (albeit unsubtly) redirecting two of his peers speaking over a classmate.

Totems can indicate leadership, power, and responsibility, but often they simply indicate the presence of another sharing the same space. The “rolling ball” greeting was observed in a few classrooms: seated in a circle, students greeted each other by name, then rolled a ball across the floor to each other. The physical item acted as a leadership totem, a visual cue for the observers and a tactile reminder for the student holding the totem. Passing the teacher’s pendant microphone around the room while sharing, wielding an oversized pointer finger, and presenting a stuffed animal to each student during a silent greeting activity, were all totemic practices

witnessed during the field observations. Brandishing a totem focuses the collective attention on the individual, another technique to encourage the acknowledgment of others.

### *Assuming Responsibility*

Some students did not require totems. The assumption of a leadership position still imbued power without physical tokens. In Mrs. Marlowe's first grade classroom, a student leader was preparing the morning meeting area, placing velcro dates on the calendar, filling out blanks with a dry erase marker. She did this quietly and without assistance from peers or the teacher.

This student entered the classroom, stowed her belongings, and immediately began working in the morning meeting area, moving with purpose, writing with care. If she were not three feet tall and seven years old, one may have mistaken her for the teacher preparing for the day. Later, she approached her leadership role with confidence: "Today is ... yesterday was ... tomorrow will be ... today's weather is cloudy." The students echoed her, matching her cadence. She waited for these items to be spoken, then repeated their answers. The experience was practiced and polished, and it was impressive.

Much like the scripted experiences presented for the morning meeting, these instances of leadership gave the students an opportunity to develop autonomy and responsibility within a prepared, controlled environment. These experiences, their implied power, and the feelings elicited, were more stepping stones toward the development of ethical literacy.

Taking ownership was not just for assigned leaders. Students also continued to develop self-awareness, and when mistakes were made, instead of crying foul or blaming others, they accepted responsibility. In Mrs. Marlowe's first grade classroom, as the teacher was returning to the kidney table, she bumped into another student. Both were startled. The teacher said, "Sorry, sweetie!" The student responded, "That's okay, I wasn't looking where I was going."

The teacher modeled an apology, and the student accepted graciously while admitting fault, taking ownership for his actions. This behavior was observed commonly in the crush of students stowing their items in closets: finding her path blocked, one student requested access, and those milling about apologized and made room, often lending a hand by opening the closet door or helping the student with her items. Not only were the students recognizing others, but they were practicing kindness in an uncontrolled social environment.

### **Role Play**

Role play took two forms in these observations: 1) students playing the role of teacher, a natural or impromptu instance of role play; and 2) a scripted, planned activity, in which a group of students acted out a presented scenario. In Mrs. Marlowe's first grade classroom, a student helped her peer with spelling:

Student 1: How do you spell breakfast?

Student 2: I can help you! b-r-e-a-k ... how do you spell 'fast?'

Teacher: Good job, teacher! That's how I would have said it!

In this case, the teacher witnessed the interaction, and confirmed that the student played her role sublimely. This type of impromptu role play was also commonly observed in students playing a leadership role in the morning meeting, especially in addressing inappropriate behavior from their peers. In Mrs. Kahn's second grade classroom, a student called out, "Hey, Robbie!" and laughed. The teacher's helper looked directly at this student, hissing his name to silence him. She scolded him. He reacted by momentarily pausing his incessant pen clicking, placing all four legs of his chair on the ground, and quieting at his desk. The teacher asked for a round of applause for the teacher's helper and the students complied. A few students asked their neighbors

if they should be standing. The teacher reminded them, “You need to use your brain yourself!” The former teacher’s helper scolded the same student again for speaking to a neighbor.

This was a more subtle attempt at redirection, as the student’s hissing chastisement was a result of her exasperation with this student and her attempt to speak quietly. Some students were not as subtle, as I observed in Mrs. Kidder’s classroom. A student leader (the same student brandishing his leadership token with pride in an earlier example), in response to two students speaking when they should not have, bopped the offending parties on the head with his finger pointer, placed his own finger to his lips, and gestured toward the blackboard. Students were not only taking ownership of their actions, but also the actions of others, as a poor reflection on the classroom as a whole. They were identifying right and wrong in context – it is right to help someone spell breakfast; it is wrong to speak when someone else is speaking – and taking decisive action.

Prepared role play activities were more labor intensive, but also provided a more rewarding classroom experience. I observed one of these role-playing sessions in Mrs. Kidder’s second grade classroom. The discussion that followed, and the social and emotional learning (SEL) and ethical connections that were made, were effective instructional devices.

The teacher transitioned to the next activity in the morning meeting, role play. A slide read: “Act out showing empathy in this situation: A group of kids throw garbage on the ground and laugh when they see the custodian clean it up.” Volunteers were sought to act out the scenario. The students clamored, crowding around the teacher, speaking excitedly with hands raised. The teacher selected six or eight students, asking these volunteers to use rock, paper, scissors to select roles.

The rest of the students were asked to take their seats at their desks as the audience.

The teacher addressed both the audience and the actors, reminding them the activity was not just about acting out the scenario. She challenged them to think about how they would feel empathy for the custodian, reminding the students of the definition of empathy: “Empathy is putting yourself in somebody else’s shoes.”

The student playing the custodian was asked to leave the classroom, to allow a dramatic entrance like a stage play. Students began chanting, “Throw the garbage! Throw the garbage!” “Lights, camera, action!” The teacher turned out the light and the skit began with the actors kneeling, crouching, or sitting on the floor. They were ripping pieces of paper, some of them crumpling them and throwing them to the ground. Others tossed whole sheets of paper into the air, allowing them to drift down to the floor.

The custodian entered, clutching a dustpan and hand broom. She started sweeping paper into the dustpan, but the bigger pieces of crumpled paper were too large. They rolled back out or up and over the dustpan, falling under her feet.

Upon the arrival of the custodian, the actors increased their efforts, throwing the rest of their paper, or picking up papers that have fallen to throw them again. The audience was raucous, jeering and shouting. One student at his desk laughed, a forced and unnatural sound, and pounded on his desk. The teacher brought the skit to an end.

Empathy was the focus of this activity, and was defined explicitly. Students began flexing their ethical muscles, finding solutions to their conflicting desires within the scenario. A class discussion followed the role-playing exercise:

Teacher: How do you think it feels to be this person?

Student 1: Bad. One, this person isn’t getting paid, two ...



[The teacher stopped the student and asked him to clarify his statement. He repeated what he had just said. She explained that a custodian is an employee at the school, just like teachers and other adults in the building; that pay has nothing to do with the situation. The student reconsidered.]

Student 1: Oh ... uh, feel bad.

Student 2: Because she's getting bullied.

Teacher: Well, this is pretty bad, isn't it? All these people doing this?'

[The teacher drew a few elements of the scenario to the students' attention. First, the nature of their actions, throwing trash on the ground and laughing while watching a custodian clean up the mess they created. Second, the fact that a large group of people was involved.]

Teacher: Can you use a different word besides "bad?"

Student 1: I think she's kind of feeling ... torture.

Teacher: Torture! Who can think of something we can do?

Student 3: Don't litter.

Teacher: Something else?

Students responded with various suggestions: "She is mad ... it's not hers." "Something other than our litter." "If you see things on the ground ... you don't have to wait for someone else to clean ... you can choose to take action and clean it up by yourself." A student started answering hesitantly, describing the situation. It seemed she was considering the tableau still in front of her, the students frozen in their spots at the end of the role-playing scenario. She slowed her speech, allowing time for her mind to catch up to her words. She used the phrase "take action," and once she reached that point, she finished confidently, without any hesitation.

The teacher praised this response. “I want you to say thank you to one person that helps keep the school nice today.” The students began to clean up the bits of paper scattered about the room. Some of the students in the audience called out, “Thank you!”

At first, the students struggled. They parroted each other’s answers. As the conversation continued, the students were able to access more eloquent answers from their developing ethical literacy, empathizing with the custodian and taking responsibility for cleaning the mess, even if they were not responsible for creating it. The final scene frozen in tableau, the papers scattered, the students posed on the makeshift stage, seemed to serve as a reference point for the members of the audience answering the teacher’s probing questions. They practiced the act of gratitude, thanking their peers as they cleaned up upon completion of the activity.

### **Classroom Sociology**

Each classroom environment is unique, especially those in the population of this study, as students are in a constant state of social evolution. The purpose of education, knowing and learning, is a communal act, creating a microcosm of society within the classroom (Palmer, 1996). This section explores the social interactions within the classroom that support the development of ethical literacy within and beyond the confines of the morning meeting. Within these patterns of social relationships, two distinct subthemes emerged: students helping others and demonstrations of kindness, friendship, and inclusion.

### ***Helping Others***

Ringo Starr is not the only individual who gets by with a little help from his friends. Students who have scaled the egocentric barrier, or have at least grown tall enough to peek over its ledge, are given opportunities to help others in need. The extension of a helping hand was a common occurrence during the observations. Many of these incidents were nonverbal.

In Mrs. Simon's kindergarten classroom, a student had spilled the contents of his busy box on the floor. It made a hollow clattering sound, loud enough to create a momentary lull in the conversation, but not the dramatic freeze that can accompany such unexpected events in the classroom (like something breaking or someone getting hurt). "That's okay!" one of the adults called out from a different area in the room. One of the other students, sitting in close proximity to the student who spilled his busy box although not at the same table, immediately stopped what he was doing to help clean up. He did so nonverbally, without prompting from an adult or another student.

As a student was returning from collecting his red folder in Miss Fabrizi's second grade classroom, crossing the room diagonally, he picked up a jar of Play-Doh that had fallen from a student's desk and handed it back without breaking stride as he continued to his desk.

In Mrs. Kidder's second grade classroom, a student was struggling with placing a red folder in a bin underneath the whiteboard, in front of the children seated on the floor. "Darren, we will wait for you," the teacher said. He fumbled the folder, and a pile of papers fell out, scattering across the floor. A student currently seated on a sit spot scooted closer to him and began to help straighten the papers, helping place them into the folder. This happened without either student talking. The student struggling with the paper did let out a sound of frustration, a voiced exhalation, but did not call for help. The helper did not say anything either: she simply scooted over and began putting the papers in order without words. This was not the first time I observed help being offered without words exchanged.

In these incidents, the help was offered without prompting, without the students speaking, and in an impulsive manner, as if the urge to help were a natural reflex. This could have been a demonstration of the natural altruism of children (Warneken & Tomasello, 2009), but the

recurrent nature of these interactions suggested the actions were more likely a result of the social environment of the classroom.

Students were also observed collaborating, working together to solve a problem. In Mrs. Kidder's second grade classroom, a student offered to help another who was looking for a lost item. "I know where the lost and found is!" The two students asked to go to the lost and found and left the classroom together. They walked past two desk neighbors helping each other, their pencils pointing to problems on a single copied page. They were joined by a third, who turned in his seat to face them and discuss possible problem-solving strategies.

One student in Mrs. Marlowe's first grade classroom was perturbed by the lack of water in the plant spray bottle. "When did it get so low?" I offered some guidance on how to refill the spray bottle. The student listened, then started walking toward the classroom sink, unscrewing the nozzle from the bottle. He called out, "Can someone turn this on?" His hands were full and he was asking for help with the tap. Another student near the closets walked over to him. "Sure! Which one?" "Hot!" Afterward, the student approached me while tightening the newly-refilled spray bottle. "Jason had to turn the water on, because I was holding the thing!" The teacher overheard a bit of the conversation, adding, "Oh ... that was great helping, bud!"

In Mr. Russell's first grade classroom, the teacher noticed the unkempt state of student desks, as books and personal items had spilled and piled on the floor. "Would you like a desk-cleaner-helper?" A neighboring student volunteered to help, and the two students began to collaborate. "I can help! So, first, we need to ..." The desk-cleaner-helper suggested a plan of action for the task. As the helper left her partner to head back to her own desk, she exclaimed, "I'm glad I could help you!"

Students began to treat each other as equals, regardless of their need or ability. Struggles with academic tasks or organizational skills were not derided: students simply offered to help when made aware of the need. These interactions often involved one student playing the role of teacher or mentor, offering support and encouragement. When witnessed by the teacher, this behavior was reinforced (“That was great helping, bud!”). Classmates often thanked their peers for the assistance, and in the case of the desk-cleaner-helpers, the helpers themselves thanked their peers for allowing them to lend a helping hand.

### ***Kindness, Friendship, and Inclusion***

Helping others is one of the many manifestations of kindness. Small gestures of friendship were also commonly observed in each classroom. Often these interactions involved the presentation of items or gifts in an altruistic manner. In Mr. Yoder’s second grade classroom, for example, two students found, with my help, another student’s lanyard. They gathered their friend’s lanyard, then exchanged them, a brief and interesting interaction. The first student, when I indicated her lanyard, declined and took another. The second student came and told me she was looking for the first student’s lanyard. Once she had it in her hands, the students met in the middle of the classroom and exchanged them. What was this? A small gesture of friendship? Little rituals committed by friends as a bonding experience? There was no discussion of this previously (“Hey! I have your lanyard!” etc.) A few moments later, another student came to the table to fetch her lanyard, left briefly, then returned to find another student’s lanyard. She delivered this lanyard to the student before returning to her seat.

In Miss Harrison’s second grade classroom, the birthday girl received a tattered and folded piece of paper from one of her classmates. “This is for you.” It was a personal card, made at home, with a paragraph’s worth of writing on the inside. The birthday girl thanked her, read

over it, and smiled to herself. This was a very cute and incredibly kind interaction. The birthday girl was touched by this gesture, which seemed to affect her deeply. The emotions were visible on her face. This was similar to the showering of gifts during teacher appreciation week, but there was something more intimate and more authentic in these interactions. They were perceived as small, personalized gestures of friendship and caring.

Kindness was also seen in the demonstration of caring and compassion for other students. One student in Miss Harrison's second grade classroom was sitting at her desk, her head resting on her folded arms. She was still looking forward, her head propped up by her chin. She looked unhappy. A student approached her and asked, "Anna, are you okay?" She replied, "No." The other student said, "Okay," patted her on the back, hesitating before walking away.

A student in Mrs. Marlowe's first grade class rocked back on his chair, causing it to slip out from under him. He struck his face sharply on the desktop as he fell, and the teacher came to his aid immediately. He was distraught, but not crying. Blood trickled from his nostril. There was the usual immediate hush over the classroom after an injury. The Explorer of the Week exclaimed, "Oh my God!" She jumped up from her seat and began walking toward the student. A few others joined her. The teacher told them everything was okay and asked another student to walk him to the nurse.

These students were still developing the skills necessary to help one another. They were able to recognize a need – a student in need of comfort, another in need of medical attention – and made an honest effort to fulfill that need, even if they were not quite equipped to provide an actual solution.

Kindness also surfaced in inclusionary practices. This was observed in the efforts to welcome students with special needs into the classroom community. In Mrs. Loggia's second

grade classroom, a student with two one-on-one aides rose to leave, and a neighboring student offered him an open palm for a high-five. He obliged, and she told him, “Good job!” The teacher came over to also offer a high-five. Both the teacher and a few students called out, “Good job, Grady!” as he left the classroom.

Here both students and teacher extended gestures of friendship toward the student as he left the classroom. These efforts did not go unnoticed by any teacher, who often thanked their students for their efforts at inclusion. A similar situation played out in Mrs. Kahn’s second grade classroom when a special education student left with her two student aides. She shouted goodbye as she left, and as the teacher paused (she was reading a story to the class) to say goodbye, a few students joined her. They then returned to the narrative of the story. The student continued to shout “Goodbye!” as she left the classroom. “You are so good with Olivia in the classroom,” Mrs. Kahn offered. “Sometimes it is hard to focus and you are so kind.”

Whether kindness is inherent or learned, in these observations this type of behavior was modeled, celebrated, and encouraged. As witnessed in Mr. Russell’s class, as the desk-cleaner-helpers thanked their classmates for allowing them to help, the impetus to be kind may be a compulsion, encouraged by teacher modeling and peer interactions.

### **Confronting Unethical Acts**

Placing right and wrong in context is the crux of moral thought and the basis for ethical decisions (Sliwa, 2017). Like any other microcosm of society, the classroom has its own ethical relativism, with students packing their own experiences and values alongside their lunches and textbooks. Right and wrong must be placed in context, but an unkind word or an unethical act is often obvious. This section explores observed incidents of unethical behavior and their relationship to the development of ethical literacy in the student population. These confrontations

were apparent in two unique subthemes: students identifying and addressing “being bad,” and coping with exclusionary behaviors.

### ***“Being Bad”***

“You’re a bad boy! I want to be a bad girl when I grow up!” This was an excerpt from a student conversation overheard during a transition in the morning meeting. These students were laughing, and the students in question never demonstrated “bad boy” behaviors in my presence. Despite observational evidence of the nascent development of ethical literacy, many students did demonstrate unethical behavior.

In Mrs. Mills’ second grade classroom, two students discussed last Friday’s outdoor concert. There seemed to be some disagreement, or perhaps an argument, about the performance. I overheard a student confront another with the question, “John, did you yell ‘chicken nugget’ during the song?” John denied this outburst, but he also appeared incredibly guilty.

Mrs. Kahn took a moment between activities in the morning meeting to speak with her class. “On Friday, when I left here, I was feeling really disappointed; I was really kind of sad.” She reminded her students of the sour note upon which the previous week had ended. She explained that behaviors like that “affect the whole morale of the classroom.” Many of the students voiced their agreement with an enthusiastic choral “Yes!” Another student appeared upset. While the teacher explained her feelings about last week, many of the students looked in his direction, indicating the role he played in making his teacher sad. He exclaimed, “Don’t even say ... everyone is pointing at me!” “You were being bad!” another student shouted. He attempted to defend himself with “I’m not being bad right now!”

Mrs. Kahn continued. “How was yesterday? Were we good for the sub?” “Well ...” Some students reported on their behavior, singling out a student. He immediately protested. The



teacher replied, “We’re not going to point fingers. Today is a new day. We’re going to move forward.”

Students were able to identify right and wrong, and attempts at self-policing were common. In most cases, the offending party or parties claimed ignorance, attempting to place blame at the feet of another. In specific instances, such as the shouting of “chicken nugget” during a school performance, confronting the student with his behavior was an effective deterrent. In the second case, the student in Mrs. Kahn's classroom struggling with disruptive behaviors, his constant refusal to accept responsibility and the growing exasperation of his classmates created an undesirable behavioral loop, one that may not terminate until the summer recess. Perhaps even more effective was the shrugging off of these attempts as unworthy of one’s time or energy, as witnessed in another incident from Mrs. Kahn’s classroom.

A student announced while seated at his desk, “I finally roasted Kenny.” No one seemed to be listening to him. I believe they were choosing to ignore him, considering his proximity and the hush over the classroom. He continued speaking out loud, “I burned Kenny! I burned Kenny so bad!” He tried to speak directly to his neighbors, but was ignored. One student responded with, “That’s easy to do,” without pausing in her coloring of the morning work or lifting her eyes from her paper. Kenny himself voiced his agreement, and they all went back to working, leaving the instigator dumbfounded, at a loss for words.

### ***Exclusionary Actions***

In Mrs. Loggia’s second grade classroom, a group of students were socializing around a cluster of desks. One student extended an arm to block another student from reaching a desk where others were seated and working. The student that was barred access asked, “Why?” and received no response.

In Mrs. Meadows' pre-first classroom, a student approached the teacher and told her about an exclusionary action taken by another student. The teacher suggested a response and they both approached the student in question. The student, following the teacher's suggested prompt, said, "Carla, you're making me feel like I cannot play with you!" A conversation ensued between the students. The first student continued to voice her feelings in a broken, whining tone. The other gave her reasoning, "You were eating!" "I'm not now!"

Exclusionary actions can damage the sense of classroom community. Students struggling against their egocentric tendencies will be discouraged, their social growth stunted. Unfortunately, the teacher in the first instance did not witness the exclusionary interaction, and could not model an appropriate response. In the second case, from Mrs. Meadows' pre-first classroom, the teacher applied direct intervention, giving the student social prompts to use in an attempt to resolve the conflict. This attempt was stymied by the defensive reactions of both students as well as the constant specter of the egocentric barrier, but it served as an introduction to conflict resolution and the healing of social wounds.

**Research Question 3: What elements of the morning meeting best support the development of ethical literacy?**

While observing the morning meeting throughout the primary grades, four distinct themes defined practices that best supported the development of ethical literacy. To encourage the growth of ethically literate students, the morning meeting contained: 1) scripted greetings, a ritualistic practice that helped students see others and allowed them to feel seen; 2) story time, through which teachers aided students in connecting ethical concepts as they were described and illustrated on the page with their own lives; 3) the building of an SEL vocabulary, most notably through the choral recitation of classroom pledges and the use of SEL-themed days; and 4)

ethical exploration through student interactions, including sharing sessions and the exchange of compliments and appreciations.

### **Scripted Greetings**

The morning meeting begins with a prepared or scripted greeting. The modular nature of the classroom practice allows for easy shuffling of its elements, but even as activities are cut for time, greetings and the sharing session are usually retained. The ritualistic nature and the familiarity of the students with these practices explained their constancy within the meeting, and the value of recognizing others, of seeing and being seen, confirmed the importance of the self-other dynamic (Amer & Obradovic, 2022). Within the observations, these prepared greeting activities rose above the traditional classroom good morning recitation (“Good morning, second grade!” “Good morning, Mr. Yoder!”). The greeting within the younger grades was often sung and accompanied by hand movements.

In Mrs. Simon’s kindergarten classroom, she began her morning meeting with a class song. “Good morning, good morning, good morning to you! Good morning, good morning, and how do you do?” The song was accompanied with patsching (tapping palms on thighs) and clapping. Afterwards, the teacher exclaimed, “Good morning!” The students responded with “Good morning, Mrs. Simon!”

In Mrs. Marlowe’s first grade classroom, after the good morning song, time was granted to greet each other with practiced social conventions. After singing, the students began greeting each other, waving and saying, “Good morning, Joseph!” They did this all at once, but it was not chaotic. They spoke excitedly, but did not shout. They greeted everyone, including the teacher and the visiting researcher. I waved while scribbling my field notes.

The students in Mrs. Marlowe's classroom were truly seeing each other, not just going through rote motions. They recognized others within the classroom, taking care to greet them by name. In this first grade classroom, the greeting shifted from the collective to the individual, as students turned and faced each other, waving, speaking names, and exchanging other forms of greeting, including fist bumps and hugs. Teachers would interrupt the greeting if students were not fully engaged. Absently waving without eye contact and shouting blanket hellos without names did not encourage students to see others or to be seen. As in so many of these experiences, the teacher served as a model, greeting those present in the classroom alongside her students.

Second grade retained the daily greeting ritual, but introduced variations to the activity. Mrs. Kidder used a chant that focused the attention of the class on a single student, who then took a lap around the greeting circle, high-fiving everyone before returning to their spot. "Two, four, six, eight, who do we appreciate? Me, me, me, yeah, me!" For each individual, "me" was replaced with their first name. The focus was on the collective seeing the individual, much like a spotlight on a soliloquizing actor. Physical touch was also mandated, unlike the optional physical greetings observed in other classrooms. Mrs. Kidder also used a greeting she called the "electric squeeze," where students clasped hands and sent a single squeeze through the greeting circle like an electric current. The tactility of physical touch forced the students to acknowledge each other: it is difficult to ignore another in close physical contact.

In Mrs. Mills' classroom, nonverbal greetings were included alongside spoken greetings, encouraging the participants to acknowledge each other with eye contact, body language and physical contact. In the "wink," the students stood, walking about the room and wishing each other good morning by winking or blinking. The teacher was included, and a few students included me. These winks and blinks were directional, the students often leaning dramatically

toward the target of their greeting. Once they had made their rounds, they took a seat in the morning meeting area. With “spirit fingers,” the students stood and walked about the room, saying good morning to each other with fingers splayed, like jazz hands. Some of them wiggled or flexed their fingers in the direction of the person they were greeting. There were no names used, but – just as I observed with “the wink” – the good mornings were not flung about haphazardly: each student looked to another, pointing hands in their direction and making eye contact. Once again, the adults in the classroom were included by the students.

The students greeted each other with purpose. There was a feeling of joy and camaraderie as well as a serious intent. I observed students realizing they had missed one of their peers, rushing back to the overlooked individual to ensure all of their classmates received a greeting. Every student was worthy of and received a personal greeting. Each student was seen, and students were quick to correct any accidental oversight of their peers, running to them as the greeting activity drew to a close to deliver a heartfelt good morning.

### **Story Time**

Story books are a powerful educational tool, and story time possesses many of the ritualistic qualities present in the morning meeting: gathering together; the hushed and attentive silence; the sharing of perceptions, interpretations, and feelings. Mrs. Audubon, in an attempt to curb an uptick in observed bossy behaviors in her first grade classroom, read a short picture book to her students during the SEL activity portion of the morning meeting entitled *I Can Be the Boss of Me* (Basso, 2020). She displayed each page, holding them up for the students to see, reading the words, sometimes pausing to add some explanation or description. These pauses and descriptions were attempts to place the statements in context, making connections between the abstraction of the book and the struggles witnessed in the classroom.

“During the school day,” the book began, “there are many times that I have the power to make my own decisions for myself.” The concept of power was cited often in this lesson: having power, wanting power, claiming power, and making someone else feel powerless with their actions were referenced within the narrative. “I can think for myself. I can speak for myself.” The teacher provided a few examples of thinking and feeling one’s own thoughts, without outside influence. “I can think for myself and speak for myself when other students try to make me do something I don’t want to do.” The teacher gave another example: “If you see children running in the hall, do you have to run, too?” “No!”

The story continued: “I am only the boss of me, not other students, not other adults in the school.” Mrs. Audubon elaborated, “You don’t get to decide who your friends play with, what they do for recess. When I try to make decisions for my friends or think for them ... that’s bossy.” The teacher then asked a series of rhetorical questions. “Am I being unkind? Am I speaking in a rude tone? Am I being demanding or difficult?” Mrs. Audubon asked for a definition of demanding. A student offered, “You have to do something.” The teacher described reactions that might be brought on from bossy behavior: making faces, walking away, being ignored, getting frustrated.

The story was paired with reproducible cards containing social prompts for the children to use when confronted by bossy behavior. The very next day, the students were observed using these prompts and reiterating statements from the picture book in their review of bossiness and the strategies to quell bossy behavior. “Did anyone catch themselves [*sic*] trying to be bossy yesterday, and use one of these words?” A student volunteered, “Can you please sit down?” The teacher repeated the statement and praised her. “Keep thinking about it. Let’s think about it for the rest of the year.”

A few moments later, a student was seated at his desk, spreading glue on a piece of paper. He called out, “Stop!” in an agitated tone, directed toward the teacher as she was continuing with the meeting and he was not yet prepared to join. The teacher intervened with, “Hey! Should you say ‘stop’? Or should you say, ‘Can you give me more time?’” The student repeated the teacher’s suggested response. “That’s better!” A student called out, “That’s bossy!”

The students continued to struggle with identifying bossy behavior, especially when engaging in self-assessment, but the developing facility with this concept was apparent. Reading the picture book, combined with examples drawn from actual classroom events and the choral recitation of the card of social prompts, made a distinct impression on the students. They were experimenting with identifying unkind (in this case, bossy) behaviors, coping strategies, and alternative courses of action.

Mrs. Kahn paid a visit to the school library seeking picture books to address some of the issues she had observed in her second grade classroom. This story time took up the bulk of the morning meeting, but was well worth the time invested. Her selection, *The Most Magnificent Thing* (Spire, 2014), dealt with determination and coping strategies for extreme emotions like frustration. Mrs. Kahn read, pausing to explore the illustrations and take questions or comments from her students. She asked questions encouraging her audience to make connections with the protagonist and her dilemma.

“Have we ever done something that is not right, that made us unhappy? We might throw it aside and give up.” The teacher was attempting to connect the emotions illustrated in the book with emotions experienced by the students. “Is she setting high goals for herself? Is anything worth getting that upset over? No, it will all work out.” The teacher assured her students that, regardless of how one feels at the moment, it will get better. The students seemed receptive, but

were in need of the next step: strategies to quell these bad feelings, or connections to real-life experiences these students may have encountered, to create a connection.

“Look at her face! She is not happy.” A student asked, “Why does she have a tornado over her head?” Another replied, “Black is cold ... it’s not warm and fuzzy.” Picture books and illustrations allow for abstraction, surrealism, and hyperbole, exaggeration of the emotions being portrayed. Teachers were observed using these same techniques, like Mrs. Audubon and her use of voices and dramatic body language when describing uncomfortable emotions.

“Sometimes, when we get worked up, we lose control.” A student chimed in, “If she could talk, she’s probably saying, ‘Stay together, pieces! Make it work!’” She compared the struggles of the character to build something to the frustration of attempting to build something out of Legos. Another student observed, “I am pretty sure that everyone in here has empathy for what she’s feeling.”

Illustrations are an excellent tool for decoding feelings, emotions, facial expressions and body language. Teachers often used hyperbolic examples in their own descriptions of emotions or reactions, ensuring their point was not lost to subtlety (although, as Miss Harrison assured me in her interview, I “would be shocked” at the extremity of behaviors she had witnessed). This helped students decode their social world, and expanded their SEL vocabulary: “Black is cold ... it’s not warm and fuzzy.”

Students were able to identify SEL and ethical concepts within these stories. “I am pretty sure that everyone in here has empathy for what she’s feeling.” This student could empathize with the protagonist’s frustration. The words and images on the page connected with her own personal life experiences. She believed others had felt the same emotions, and was able to use the term “empathy” in the correct context. Another student gave an example from her own



experience, struggling to build something with Legos. Stories can form connections that may prove difficult through other methods of instruction.

Near the end of the research study, a group of social workers visited to discuss sexual abuse with the second grade classes. They were invited to present at the end of the morning meeting, serving as that day's SEL lesson. They told stories to the children, presenting scenarios using puppets. Much like these other experiences, students were able to connect with the puppets, experiencing each scenario not from an abstracted remove, but from the viewpoint of the characters, successfully empathizing with characters dramatizing difficult situations. One of the scenarios placed the puppets in a doctor's office for a physical examination.

"How did she feel before the examination?" The students answered, "Nervous, scared, uncomfortable, grossed out, embarrassed, weirded out." "How did she feel afterwards?" "Excited, a little bit better, over and done with, happy." The students elaborated, "Happy, she knew it was a safe touch." The presenters lauded this response. "Safe touches! The feelings are really important. How you feel about something can help you understand." The students began to identify specifics within the story, including their projections of what the child was feeling. "He asked to touch her." "It's the doctor's job, and he should ask first." "He gave a good reason for the touch." "He asked to touch her to help her." "Her mom was with her, she was not alone." "It is important to be with someone you trust."

This presentation relied on empathy, the ability to identify the feelings the characters would experience in each scenario. It also asked the students to identify these feelings in their own bodies and minds, and to trust those emotions. All of the stories described above – personal stories from home, stories from literature, and social stories enacted with puppetry – served as a bridge connecting these concepts with the lived experiences of the students. Students were able

to access the concepts of empathy, caring, compassion, kindness, and coping strategies through the plots and events within these stories. Illustrations helped decode facial expressions, body language and emotions. Students took what they had seen and heard in stories and applied it to their own lives, both within the classroom and in their social and ethical worlds beyond the schoolhouse walls.

### **Building an SEL Vocabulary**

The emergence of ethical literacy refers to a growing facility with ethical concepts. While it is true that ethics can be demonstrated without the use of language – instances of students helping others described previously fit into this nonverbal category – if students are to develop as autonomous ethical beings, they must be able to put to words their feelings and comprehension of ethical concepts. The morning meeting introduces a shared, common social and emotional learning (SEL) language with age-appropriate vocabulary. Two of the primary sources of SEL vocabulary within the observational data were the classroom pledges and the SEL-themed days used to frame the activities within the morning meeting.

#### ***Classroom Pledges***

Choral recitation is part of many rituals, although repetition risks complacency in the participants as they grow familiar with the experience. Consider the bored Catholic sitting in the back pew, able to recite the Apostles' Creed while thinking of any myriad of things unrelated to the celebration of Mass. In the classroom, it often manifests as rote recitation, the children spitting back times tables like automatons, without conscious thought. A classroom pledge, when recited with cognizance, encourages the growth of ethical literacy by encouraging the students to live the words they speak and building SEL vocabularies. This was the pledge recited in Mrs. Kidder's second grade classroom:

I pledge to myself, on this very day, to try to be kind, in every way. To every person, big or small, I will help them, if they fall. When I love myself, and others, too, that is the best that I can do.

Mrs. Audubon's students recited their own pledge:

Today is a new day. I am ready to be the best me I can be! I will listen, so I can learn. I will try hard, so my brain can grow. I will not give up! I can learn anything I put my mind to. I will show respect. Respect for people. Respect for our school. Respect for myself. It is my day to make great. So let's make it a great day!

These pledges were placed within the morning meeting – for Mrs. Kidder, as the opening activity; for Mrs. Audubon, the final activity before transitioning to English and language arts – and all children engaged in the recitation, most from memory. The recitations were everyday occurrences, anchors to the morning meeting experience. They described ethical acts, such as compassion, empathy, kindness, respect, resilience, determination, and love, all in developmentally appropriate language. Mrs. Audubon told me that some of her classes wrote their own pledges to be recited in combination with the traditional pledge. The students were demonstrating ownership of their actions. The consistency of this experience, recited daily and often without the teacher acting as lector, encouraged students to absorb these concepts, gain a facility with this vocabulary, and experience what occurs when these concepts are put into practice.

### ***SEL-Themed Days***

All second grade classrooms in this research study used SEL-themed days to guide the morning meeting. These themes introduced a concept or term, leading to small group and class discussions. It was a fascinating glimpse into student perception of ethical concepts, and a way

for teachers to increase ethical literacy through discussions that more closely resembled the Socratic method than traditional classroom discourse.

Mrs. Kidder began one of these discussions with the question, “Does anyone remember what we practice on Wise Wednesday?” A student answered, “Being self-aware.” “And what does it mean, to be self-aware?” The student struggled to provide another answer, offering, “... aware of your ... self.” The teacher added, “... and how you affect others around you.”

The teacher continued, “If you see another person coming down the hall, with no control over their arms and legs, what can you do?” “Move aside.” The teacher confirmed this answer through elaboration, recalling situations where self-awareness also meant an awareness of your surroundings and how your actions could affect, or in this specific case, help another.

Often teachers brought attention to an answer by repeating it verbatim (“You can move aside.”) This captured the attention of the class through reiteration of the answer, and bestowed a weight, a sense of importance, by hearing the teacher speak those same student words. It allowed the individual answering to feel seen, acknowledged, and valued. Teachers rephrased answers for clarity, or added wording to improve intelligibility. These techniques granted the same benefits as reiteration, but ensured that other students fully understood the statement and could build upon this understanding with their own words.

Activities related to these themes served as confirmation of student understanding of SEL concepts. Students were able to define ethical concepts in their own words. Consider an example from Miss Fabrizi’s second grade classroom. “It is Mindful Monday. Today we practice being mindful. What does it mean to be mindful?” A student raised her hand, but stated that she did not know. Another student offered, “Being mindful means being present.” A different student added, “It means to not think about something later, but to think of something now.” Miss Fabrizi

elaborated, “It means to be aware of the people around you, and how you are treating them.” The students replied with a choral and lively “Yes!” The students eventually reached a consensus, their thunderous choral “Yes!” matching their level of agreement.

The struggle to put complex concepts into words was part of the developmental journey, another means of developing ethical literacy in the primary aged student. In this example, Miss Fabrizi’s students struggled with defining the term “responsibility.” “Friends, today is Take Charge Tuesday. Today is a day when we take responsibility. What does that mean, to be responsible? Who can tell us what that means?” A few students offer their ideas: “Taking care of messes and stuff you make.” “Taking care of your school tools.”

The teacher continued the discussion with, “These are examples of how to be responsible, can someone explain what it means to be responsible?” The students were struggling with supplying a definition. The teacher offered a prompt to follow: “If I’m responsible, I ...” A student attempted to follow her teacher’s lead, but was unable to complete her thought. “It means that you ... you’re like ...” Miss Fabrizi commiserated, “It’s hard to explain!”

The dialogue continued. “You’re mature.” “You keep your body under control.” Miss Fabrizi added, “If you are responsible, it means you’re doing what you’re supposed to be doing. Doing the jobs you’re supposed to do!” The teacher had to add more scaffolding for her students in this example. They struggled to define responsibility in their own words. Notice that the teacher used developmentally appropriate language, supplied a social prompt (“If I’m responsible, I ...”) to encourage the students to think about the concept from their own points of view, and made reference to familiar concepts, like “doing the jobs you’re supposed to do!” Through discussions such as these, responsibility and other words from the SEL vocabulary were no longer abstractions, as students had gained personal experience through classroom discourse.

## **Ethical Exploration Within Student Interactions**

The themed days provided a familiar setting to explore SEL and ethics. Activities involving kindness, friendship, caring, and empathy were observed. Sometimes these activities delved deeply into student understanding, including extended conversations featuring aspects of the Socratic method, the teacher asking a series of questions to encourage students to continue exploring their own interpretation of these concepts. These activities could also be mere moments within the morning meeting, an acknowledgment of a neighbor with a wave or fist bump, or a brief teacher-guided meditation session. Two other elements of the morning meeting, unique in their focus on student input and interaction, broadened the scope of the exploration of ethical concepts: the sharing sessions and the exchange of compliments and appreciations.

### ***The Sharing Sessions***

The sharing sessions were a versatile element of the morning meeting, applicable to any grade level. As observed throughout this project, students loved to share, often forgoing their daily obligations to engage in intimate sharing sessions with their teacher or a peer. These sharing sessions could be quite simple and superficial, and in the younger grades, this was their most common form.

In Mrs. Simon's kindergarten classroom, the teacher stated that, since it was Monday, today's sharing time was what students did this weekend. Everyone was compelled to reply, as everyone did something that weekend. "Except if you're sick!" "You still did something ..."

Even though this activity featured students simply sharing their weekend adventures, it also gave the class as a whole the opportunity to practice listening skills, expanding their understanding of their peers, finding common interests, seeing and acknowledging them.

This sharing session featured the use of a pendant microphone as a leadership totem, and the first instance of an English as a Second Language student providing his own answer, unassisted, for the first time in class. This student needed to echo the prompt, word by word. Once he echoed his teacher's example, however, and spoke aloud the start of the social prompt once again, he was able to indicate that he played with his brother. The teacher whispered in my direction, "That's the first time he gave me his own idea." She was pleasantly surprised.

The superficial share had potential to tap into more profound matters. Students practiced empathy when listening to a peer describe a visit to the emergency room, a tough Little League loss, and expressed condolences when hearing about the passing of a loved one. As the students matured and demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of ethical concepts, the sharing sessions shed their superficial veneer in favor of more philosophical explorations. It was more common for these shares to begin in small groups, giving the students time to speak among each other before reconvening to share with the class. This allowed students to explore these concepts without the pressure of an audience or the desire to simply answer the question correctly.

Mrs. Kidder led a sharing session about conflict resolution in her second grade classroom. "Tell about a time you had a disagreement with someone. The question is, how did you handle it? Go! When you are ready, stand up." The students began sharing in small groups. All students were talking, sharing an instance that matched the criteria presented by the teacher. Students stood as they finished their conversations. Mrs. Kidder called on the students to "tell about a disagreement and how you handled it." The students answered:

Student 1: [Describing a disagreement about a cookie and a brownie] We both tried each other's.

Teacher: So ... you shared? [The teacher praised this decision.]

Student 2: [Describing a disagreement while playing a game] We took turns.

Teacher: Turn-taking as a way to solve a disagreement.

The teacher used the same language and phrasing throughout, sometimes restating the word choices of the students to match these phrases. Taking turns had become a common refrain in the discussion. The teacher sought new answers by asking, “Anyone know another way, other than those two ways, to solve a disagreement?”

Student 3: You can compromise.

Teacher: What is that?

Student 3: Instead of two different things, you can combine the two.

Student 4: An ‘I-feel’ message.

Teacher: What does that mean?

Student 4: If someone is being bossy, you would do ...

The student struggled to give a concrete example of a learned coping strategy, the “I-feel” message. The teacher continued to ask questions, guiding the student toward making a real-life connection. “How would that make you feel?” Mrs. Kidder supplied examples of possible emotions: sad, angry. The student replied, “Anxious. I am feeling anxious, because you are being bossy. I would like you to stop, because of the first sentence.” The teacher praised this response: “Very empowering!” She also offered a solution of her own: let those who are disagreeing with you do what they want, hope that later they will do the same for you.

Reiteration and rephrasing by the teacher were present here, along with the building of a shared SEL vocabulary. Conflict resolution was the focus, and one student was able to identify a strategy: the “I-feel” message. This practiced coping strategy, along with the teacher’s series of



probing questions, helped students translate their emotions into words, allowing students to understand each other's emotions. These types of sharing sessions encouraged students to expand beyond their natural egocentric spheres, finding ways to communicate their feelings as well as seeking ethical solutions to interpersonal conflicts.

### *Compliments and Appreciations*

An observed powerful ethical experience was the sharing of compliments and appreciations. It was evident that these compliment and appreciation sessions occur frequently, considering the student familiarity with the procedure and the teacher's referencing of past experiences. The activity was highly structured, with the students following a series of prepared social prompts. Each student was tasked with supplying a compliment. Both the delivery of an authentic compliment and the gracious acceptance of that compliment were important elements of the activity. Superficial compliments did not hold water, as I observed when two students returned to their seats seconds after the start of the activity. Mr. Yoder asked, "Did you do it? What was it?" The students complimented each other on being such great Roblox stars. "No ... remember, it's supposed to make you feel good. Try again."

Embarrassment often accompanied the sharing of emotions, especially in intimate pair-and-share activities. When given the opportunity, however, students rose above their inhibitions to craft honest compliments. In a different sharing session, two students stood near the closets. One student was complimenting the other, punctuating each compliment with a dramatic dip or squat, knees pointing in opposite directions. "You are funny (squat), and smart (dip), and ..." He rushed away across the room to his seat.

When two students made a real connection, the results were impressive. Kindness, friendship, and a mature facility with these concepts were all evident, a testament to the potential

for SEL and ethical development within this type of sharing activity. In another example of sharing compliments and appreciations, two students were seated on the floor behind the teacher's desk, engaged in a personal, thoughtful conversation. "You have the best ... imagination." "You are funny. You are silly. You love everything. You love trying new things." These students were the last to rise. They went through at least three rounds of compliments and appreciations. The students returned to their desks and were asked if they would like to share with the class. "Noori said that I am kind and brighten up the day." "Chloe said I'm silly and loves how I'm so brave." Other students chimed in. "He likes how I finish DOL (Daily Oral Language) so quickly." The teacher responded, "That's a good comment! That means you're coming in and doing your morning routine and getting stuff done." Even a seemingly superficial comment ("He likes how I finish DOL so quickly."), with connections supplied by the teacher, could lead toward a deeper appreciation of others by noticing these characteristics and developments in their peers, receiving compliments in kind.

Mrs. Kahn's classroom contained a more antagonistic social tenor. Instances of students chastising others during the morning meeting, along with indicating blame and refusing responsibility, were prevalent and described throughout this chapter. Most impressive in the compliment and appreciation activity in this classroom were the demonstrations of students rising above their inner struggles to deliver personalized, heartfelt compliments.

The first example was between an especially antagonistic pair. One student shushed or chastised the other multiple times, while the other continued to deflect or refuse responsibility for his actions, all while continuing to demonstrate the same undesirable behaviors.

Student 1: I think Phoebe is funny because she makes funny faces.

Student 2: I think you are funny and a good athlete. I like that you are always crazy and

funny, because you have the same energy as me!

The first student, the one who has been scolded, was able to deliver only a superficial compliment (“Phoebe is funny ... she makes funny faces”). The other student, despite her frustration, was able to deliver a compliment that was personal, unique, and authentic. She was able to rise above her disagreements with her classmate and deliver a true compliment.

In another instance, a student was struggling with emotional regulation. His emotional state, combined with a dislike of the activity, manifested in a brief outburst. When called upon, this student refused to join his partner, remained seated with his head resting on the desk. His partner called to him, “Michael, I’m waiting for you!” Michael raised his head, then punched the desk, slamming a fist down on top of it. He refused to stand. The teacher spoke with him somewhat privately, but did not call him aside or change the volume of her voice, allowing others to observe their interaction. He begrudgingly stood and joined his partner. She began by saying, “He makes me smile when you come to my house. It’s so fun!” Michael stood next to her, head low, dejected, while he received this compliment. After a moment, Michael responded. “You’re nice to me, and you give me nice drawings, and you make me laugh.”

Michael was visibly upset. It seemed that he was struggling with more than just the current activity. When it was his time to share a compliment, however, he gave three, all of them sincere and authentic. He rose above his personal struggles in order to be kind to a classmate and, from what his partner shared, a personal friend outside of school. The ability to regulate one’s emotions opens the door to the further development of ethical literacy.

In Mrs. Mills’ classroom, the sharing of compliments and appreciations was a weekly experience in the form of “exit tickets,” anonymous written compliments shared during the closing activity of the morning meeting. On exit ticket days, a pile of cards with each student’s

name was placed on a communal table. Upon arrival, students selected one of the cards and crafted a compliment to be shared later.

I asked a student about the exit tickets. He told me, “You write things about other people. I chose Samuel. He’s a good friend, and a good football player. Then they’ll pull it, and they’ll get it.” I peeked at a few finished exit tickets. Each ticket already had the name of a student in the class printed at the top. I read through some of the completed tickets. “Tracy is supportive because she helps me up.” “William, you are very caring because you say are you okay? when I’m hurt!” “You are a good friend and creative!”

In this activity, not just the compliments but the reasons why were important (“... you say are you okay? when I’m hurt!”). This encouraged students to avoid superficial statements. Later that same day, the teacher read each exit ticket. There was a round of applause as the teacher handed the ticket to the student. The tickets were completely anonymous: the author was not indicated or revealed by the teacher. “You are amazing because you are friendly.” “You are loyal because you are a good friend.” “You are very supportive and helpful.” “Zander is so smart and kind.” “You are the best friend I’ve ever had and you are very caring.”

Here students began to expand their SEL vocabulary: friendly, loyal, supportive, caring. They placed these concepts in context, giving their reasoning for the compliment. The students acknowledged each exit ticket with a round of applause, repeating the statement to their neighbors on the carpet, voicing their agreement. The teacher often paraphrased these compliments, drawing attention to the actions that led to their creation: “It’s so important to be supportive as a friend.” Through these exit tickets, the students were learning what it means to be a good friend, and gaining a greater facility with SEL and ethical concepts, actions, and personal characteristics that elicit these compliments from their peers.

This chapter described the themes surrounding the development of ethical literacy in the student participants of the morning meeting through classroom observation. This discussion reinforced themes from the interview data and introduced new findings unique to the observational data. The implications of these findings will be examined in the next chapter.

## Chapter Six: Conclusions

The Angel that presided o'er my birth

Said, "Little creature, form'd of Joy & Mirth,

Go love without the help of any Thing on Earth." (Blake, 1957, p. 541)

On a cold morning in November of 1988, I boarded a bus for my first day of school after moving from central to southeastern Pennsylvania. I remember the bulk of my winter coat (blue) and the texture of a knit cap (also blue) pulled low over my ears, and I remember the deep unease I felt climbing those bus steps. In my memory, the driver and passengers gawked as if I were an insect, a shy seven-year-old Gregor Samsa, as I stumbled gracelessly into the first empty seat I encountered. I sat alone for the entirety of that ride, shorter than the rural routes to which I had grown accustomed, and listened to my new classmates snicker and whisper behind me.

It was not until boarding the bus for dismissal that I realized I had sat on the side assigned to girls. I remember how disappointed I was in myself for not realizing my mistake, failing to notice the dichotomous nature of the seating arrangement. Not until recently did I begin to consider the roles my fellow passengers played in this incident: what if one of my new classmates had leaned across the aisle, informing me of my error? How would I look upon this incident now, 35 years later, if the bus driver had greeted me, and one of the strange children had smiled and scooted toward the window, inviting me to take a seat? If the roles were reversed, would I have seen a lost and nervous boy or the chitinous sheen of a beetle? More importantly, would I have made room and invited him to join me? The transformed Samsa managed to emerge from his cocoon within a single morning: after seven years of experience, my new classmates and I were still fumbling with our ethical appendages.

### **The Emergence of Ethical Literacy Within the Morning Meeting**

As children learn to recognize and understand the emotions of others, to empathize and perspective-take with their peers, they can better understand when their actions (or the actions of a peer) harm a friend. Developing the ability to recognize and understand emotions (social and emotional learning [SEL] skill sets) is an essential first step, then, in developing concern for others and, in turn, responding with responsible decisions (ethical skill sets). (Arda Tuncdemir, Burroughs, & Moore, 2022, p. 2)

This research study explored the depth and richness of ethical education, notably the emergence of ethical literacy, a growing facility with ethical concepts, within the classroom practice of the morning meeting in the primary elementary classroom (kindergarten through second grade). Data were collected from interviews with teachers and field observations of their classrooms, coded and analyzed thematically, the resultant findings presented in the previous two chapters. Those findings are summarized under each research question below.

#### **Research Question 1: How do teachers leading the morning meeting facilitate the development of ethical literacy?**

By acknowledging their students, informally through unscripted greetings as they first enter the classroom and formally through the scripted greetings within the morning meeting, teachers allow the students to feel seen and heard, a crucial first step toward the recognition of others and the development of ethical literacy. The teachers also foster an atmosphere of communication, trust and connection by using the information presented within the morning meeting to decode each student, addressing interpersonal and intrapersonal problems and assisting in the regulation of emotions. The teacher encourages student growth, including autonomy and ownership, often serving as the growth model. As facilitators of the morning

meeting, teachers assist students in placing right and wrong in context, intervening directly when students demonstrate unethical behaviors, modeling more appropriate actions. Teachers make cross-disciplinary connections by referencing ethical lessons from curricula outside of the morning meeting. Stories, from traditional sources such as picture books and drawn from the teacher's own life experiences, deepen personal bonds with the students and expand their social and emotional (SEL) vocabulary. Finally, all teachers find themselves placed on a parental continuum, responsible for each student's ethical development – a task that varies in complexity and rigor dependent on the current level of each individual's ethical literacy.

**Research Question 2: How do the student participants practice ethical literacy during and beyond the morning meeting?**

Through participation in the morning meeting, students are given tools and opportunities to break the egocentric barrier, a natural and stubborn obstacle to the development of ethical literacy. By navigating relationships and conflict and practicing ethical acts like kindness, friendship and inclusion, students create a unique classroom sociology. Listening to and discussing stories allow students to connect with and explore ethical concepts. Ethical literacy is enhanced and promoted through role play, both in structured, teacher-led scenarios and by assuming the role of the teacher in social contexts. The dawning comprehension and application of empathy enhances student ethical literacy, especially through sharing sessions and the extension of a helping hand to a fellow student in need. Ethical autonomy and ownership are developed through leadership opportunities, totemic practices, and the assumption of responsibility for one's actions. Students also experiment with their burgeoning ethical literacy by recognizing and confronting unethical actions demonstrated by their peers.



**Research Question 3: What elements of the morning meeting best support the development of ethical literacy?**

Ritualistic practices within the morning meeting, including the exchange of scripted greetings, task students with seeing others and, by proxy, feeling seen, encouraging the growth of ethical literacy. An SEL vocabulary, allowing students to understand and verbalize their feelings and describe complex ethical concepts, is built through choral recitation of classroom pledges and the activities embedded in thematic SEL material assigned to each day of the week. Semi-scripted SEL lessons guide students through ethical dilemmas and decisions, nurturing the development of their ethical literacy. Story time, in a variety of forms, helps students connect ethical concepts presented on the page to their own lives. The morning meeting enables ethical exploration through student interaction in activities like sharing sessions and the crafting and accepting of personal compliments and appreciations.

**Dismantling the Egocentric Barrier**

“Education is much more than a matter of imparting the knowledge and skills by which narrow goals are achieved. It is also about opening the child’s eyes to the needs and rights of others” (Dalai Lama, 1999, p. 181).

To develop as ethical beings, young children must overcome the egocentric barrier. A child trapped in an egocentric sphere will be unable to consider the wants, needs, or feelings of another, even those sharing their physical space. From an outsider’s perspective, this type of behavior will be judged as rude, oppositional, combative – at the very least, unethical. While it is true that the behavior exhibited would be deserving of such labels, the child himself would not be: he is a victim of his egocentric nature, incarcerated in a socially isolated cell without the tools or resources to rise above his natural tendencies. He needs help, scaffolded experiences and

exchanges with the world that exist beyond the egocentric barrier. The morning meeting can supply these experiences, at first weakening, eventually shattering, this barrier.

### **Seeing Others and Being Seen**

“Because a friend is another self” (Aristotle, 2020, p. 223).

The very first step is the acknowledgment of others. It is a simple one, to just see those in close proximity, recognizing their personhood, accepting differences and commonalities as part of what defines us, encouraging us to form social bonds. As adults, we often take this recognition for granted. “Hey, buddy” and “how ya doing” can be bandied about in social automation, with little regard for its intended target, just a vague sense of proximal humanity accompanied by a reflexive, unconscious action. Of course, seeking conscious recognition in daily incidental social interactions could be awkward and irrational in the adult social world. When considering the microcosm of society within the primary classroom, however, the manufactured community of young learners drawing together daily, spending seven hours or more in the same institution, often the same classroom, this recognition serves as the genesis of ethical literacy.

In the classroom, acknowledgment is often passive, such as listening when another is speaking. In the development of ethical literacy, it is active and intentional, and it starts with seeing others, recognizing them, welcoming them to a communal space. Scripted greetings within the morning meeting impose form and shape on the cognitive processes behind this social practice, much like the variations of exercises and repetitions within the bodybuilder’s training program. Unscripted greetings, as witnessed in each field observation, allow students to filter their structured understanding of this social practice through their own expanding social spheres. Any artificiality is soon shed in favor of the authentic joy of connection.

## Connection

“For [Martin] Buber the ethical is rooted in the interhuman and must be fulfilled in the concrete situation insofar as each partner moves beyond the mere observance of ethical norms as they have been taught and authenticates such in real relationship” (Kristiansen, 1996, p. 215).

Philosopher Martin Buber’s “I and thou” relationship (1970/1923) stresses mutuality, being present, and truly seeing another. “It is an encounter of equals, who recognize each other as such. It is a dialogue” (Morgan & Guilherme, 2012, p. 982). Greetings themselves are not dialogues, but they serve as social antecedents, laying the groundwork that enables true connection between individuals. The meaningful connections that coax the emergence of ethical literacy are formed in these relationships, with each partner being seen and seeing the other. This ability to see another requires practice, and the morning meeting provides scaffolded opportunities within a controlled environment. Students take these skills and apply them to their daily incidental interactions, honing their interpersonal skills. It all starts with “hello.”

## Stories

The historical Christ speaks as a teacher, not as a savior, and thus his message is more anthropocentric, [Fred] Rogers [from *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*] would say, than theological. Rogers likewise communicates primarily with everyday people and in everyday, storytelling language. (Klarén, 2019, p. 97)

Students must also connect with ethical concepts. Filtering ethics through an academic sieve lends an air of abstraction to the concepts. Students are likely to form the same relationships with kindness, compassion, empathy, and friendship as one does with inanimate objects: transactional, impersonal, removed. Stories help form the connections with these concepts required to develop ethical literacy. They allow children to place themselves in

another's shoes. The multimodal quality of picture books, using both words and images to create meaning, present multiple pathways to the growth of ethical literacy: a student may not connect with frustration as a word, but will understand, connect, and perhaps even empathize with an exaggerated illustration of a character depicted in the throes of frustration. Storytelling language is not limited to the social sciences and can be adapted to any subject, placing the experience in a humanistic context and allowing students to experiment with their growing SEL vocabulary.

Stories are not restricted to the page, and connections are not just formed between students. Teachers make themselves more accessible and relatable by sharing stories from their own lives. The student-teacher relationship becomes reciprocal, rather than transactional. It is through these types of personal connections that a comprehension of and facility with ethical concepts can be fully realized. I observed classroom teachers reminding their students of the humanity of their special area teachers (e.g., music, art, physical education, health, library, and computers); that these adults were people possessing feelings, just like each one of them. These descriptions fell flat for the intended audience: no such connections with the teachers had been formed, the students' ethical literacy remaining dormant.

### **Ritualistic Practices**

The collected data confirm the presence of ritual practices within the morning meeting. These rituals are responsible for the growth and development of the individual child as a contributing member of the classroom community, encouraging them to take an active role in their education as well as their ethical development. The morning meeting, itself a ritual, is the ideal environment to establish and experience the practices. Rituals were witnessed during the observation window, but the teachers' own words best describe the importance and power inherent in these experiences. When discussing rituals within the morning meeting, four

noticeable effects upon the student participants were cited: calming, independence, autonomous decision-making, and ownership.

### **Calming**

Teachers cited the calming influence of ritualistic practices embedded in the morning meeting. Mrs. Kidder said, “Rituals bring calm, students know what to expect, the tasks are bite sized and they can all contribute in one way or another.” The soothing nature of familiar ritual creates an environment in which students are comfortable playing an active role in the academic and social spheres within the classroom (Quantz & Magolda, 1997). Mrs. Kahn spoke of everyday routines as ritual in her second grade classroom, and the calming influence they have on the students:

It’s a ritual. I just find that they need that routine. If you don’t have it, then that’s when they do go bonkers. If they have routine and they know what is expected when they come in that door, it’s usually very calm and they need to feel a sense of a safe environment when they walk in this classroom. So the ritual is just making sure that everyone comes in here and feels like they’re in a safe, happy place, and that they can share with me whenever something’s bothering them, even when it’s a good thing.

Rituals create an environment that encourages the open exchange of thoughts and feelings, the ideal environment to nurture the growth of ethical literacy in young students.

### **Independence**

Rituals within the morning meeting encourage the growth of independence, setting the guidelines for what should happen, or how one should be acting. Miss Fabrizi stated, “I would say that they [the rituals] prompt the students to develop routines independently.” Independence

in the elementary classroom does not come easily. Consider Mr. Yoder's observation from his second grade classroom:

I've done that [called a student to the front of the room to model giving a compliment] at the beginning of the year. But now you don't have to as much, but it's a lot of modeling, modeling, modeling, modeling at the beginning of the year. They're more independent now ... You want them to be more independent on their own, and prepare them for third grade.

The ritualistic routines within the classroom supply a framework in which students can slowly wean themselves from the need for constant teacher support ("modeling, modeling, modeling, modeling at the beginning of the year"), as the student's sense of autonomy develops (Wood, 2016). This independence is one of thought and of action, crucial to the emergence of ethical literacy in the primary aged student as he realizes the effect(s) his actions have on others.

### **Autonomous Decision-Making**

Independent children are able to make their own decisions, weighing their options and the consequences of their actions without adult intervention. In an effort to build autonomy in their students, teachers will supply the tools to allow the children to find their own solutions and make their own decisions. Mrs. Marlowe told her students:

There are always options. You're your own person. You're going to make your own decisions. You need to assess the situation and do what's best for you. I mean, whether that's you telling your best friend, 'Hey, buddy, that's not a great decision. Teacher's going to look at you and you're getting in trouble,' or whether it's you have to tell the teacher, or it's you have to walk away and figure something else out. I give them the

option. They don't always have to tattle. They don't always have to tell us unless it's an emergency.

Mrs. Marlowe hinted at the concept of ownership, taking the initiative to intervene and redirect a classmate when that individual is struggling to make good decisions, and also assessing a situation to decide on appropriate words and actions.

Initiative and independence may not come naturally to the young student. Their worlds may not offer many opportunities to carve their own paths. Guided experiences in which students are compelled to make their own decisions, such as role play, serve as the bridge between dependence and autonomy. Role play and recent incidents factor into helping students make their own choices when faced with a dilemma. Mr. Russell mused:

I think a lot of role play, situational stuff. Just out on the playground, I had to say to a kid, 'You didn't answer him. How would you feel if somebody asked you to play and they just didn't answer you?' You got to make them have that empathy, give them the role playing, also the opportunity to try on different strategies, give them strategies for figuring out who plays the game first by letting them play that game, give them chances to put things into action.

The nature of the morning meeting, led or moderated by the teacher in a comfortable, familiar setting, helps construct the toolbox from which students can draw strategies when faced with conflict.

### **Ownership**

Rituals instill a sense of ownership, both of the morning meeting and one's own actions. Most teachers included student-led roles within the morning meeting. Mrs. Marlowe described

how student-led activities within the morning meeting bestow a sense of ownership of their role as learners in each student:

I like the student-led [aspects of the morning meeting] because I think it promotes a lot of independence, a lot of student responsibility in the class. They feel like it's their classroom more so than my classroom. Our classroom, I guess ... building a little class community, ownership in the room, that internal want to be a part of the room and not just come in and do morning work and call it a day.

Once again, community surfaced here in the discussion of student ownership. Mrs. Marlowe compared this active learning environment to a less dynamic, passive one, in which students simply “come in and do morning work and call it a day.” This sense of ownership improves student motivation, which in turn improves the quality and depth of learning (Mikalayeva, 2016). Students who accept ownership within the classroom experience an improved learning experience alongside the development of a nascent ethical compass as they take responsibility for their actions, realizing how their decisions affect their peers and their relationships with others.

### **Agency**

Very young children display what we may call moral capacities. They can reason about the rules and their violation and can distinguish between rule-governed and accidental regularities and between intentional and accidental violations, and they manifest punitive attitudes to norm violations. And from an even earlier age they show empathy and helping and comforting behavior. In short, while still very young, they are already primed to see themselves and others as moral agents intentionally performing actions whose different consequences they can begin to assess. (Lukes, 2008, p. 54)



Young children have agency. They are able to act as autonomous beings. An aspect of agency is the realization that each individual can make her own decisions, and these choices have consequences. This is also a characteristic of an emergent ethical literacy: an awareness of the effect an action has upon another. Having the potential for agency and demonstrating that agency are not directly correlated, hence the scripting, planning, and scaffolding within the morning meeting that leads students toward fully grasping their autonomous potential. These experiences allow students to flex that agency in a controlled environment. Students yet to realize their potential as ethical agents are given opportunities to do so among peers. Children who demonstrate advanced levels of ethical literacy can discern the consequences of their actions, the emotions they evoke, and how to best tailor their interactions with others. This realization is the dawning of the autonomous ethical being.

“But with virtues, we exercise them first, and that’s how we acquire them – just like the way it is with technical skills” (Aristotle, 2020, p. 28). Academic study risks abstraction, and for the primary aged student, the divide between theory and practice may prove insurmountable. Direct experience with authentic interactions is the surest path to the development of ethical literacy. The rich interior lives of children, their interpersonal struggles, will remain inaccessible and unmalleable without real-life application. Children, especially those possessing an advanced ethical literacy, may grasp the concept of ethics as an idea, but what they require most for growth are ethics in action. To imagine consequences, one must first experience them. The morning meeting provides an opportunity to experience these consequences through planned interactions – the greeting, the share, SEL lessons, role-playing scenarios, emotional assessment – of word, deed, and emotion. Classroom discussion, especially in the Socratic tradition, serves as a bridge between the abstract and concrete.

Part of the learning process is the analysis of reaction: what was the result of my words and actions? Lived experiences can be recalled, remembered, and later, as the student improves her ethical literacy, reexamined. Incidental opportunities, although not scripted, provide the same experiences in unique, personalized episodes. Student leadership of the morning meeting, confronting unethical acts and supplying help when needed stimulate self-discovery, the realization of the ethical self. Students with actualized agency will seize these opportunities for ethical growth. Those still in the emergent stage of ethical literacy, including those not yet playing an active role in their education, learn these concepts through absorption.

### **Ethical Absorption**

“Because ‘exercising your goodness’ is dependent on being a good person.” (Aristotle, 2020, p. 15).

“Modeling, modeling, modeling, modeling ...” Actively demonstrating ethical literacy for students, serving as their model, was prevalent in both sources of data collected for this study. Teachers engaged in this practice mindfully, consciously choosing their words and actions when interacting with students, as well as spontaneously, without conscious thought. Primary-aged students can also be conscious learners. The very act of arriving at school and participating in the affiliated rituals indicate a pending engagement with active learning. Students are in a perpetual state of passive learning as well, absorbing knowledge from the stimuli that surround them, even complex concepts like an emergent ethical literacy.

Within the microcosm of the classroom, students are in a state of continual evolution, discovering who they are and how they fit within this unique social structure. With a growing awareness of the self-other dynamic, they also begin to explore their position in the world beyond the schoolhouse walls. The actions of their teachers and their interactions with peers, as

full participants and observers, continually build a social schema, including their understanding of ethical norms and expectations. Like an aquatic moss, they are immersed in an environment of ethical development, soaking in actions and consequences, gaining a greater facility with ethical concepts. Scripted lessons are successful vehicles for the development of ethical literacy, but educators must be aware that the primary aged student exists in a state of constant development.

### **Empathy**

“And we must somehow find a way to build on their natural feeling of empathy so that they come to have a sense of responsibility towards others. For it is this which stirs us into action” (Dalai Lama, 1999, pp. 181-182).

Kindness and respect are often the first ethical actions demonstrated by emergent ethical beings. The seeds of dissertation were planted when, during a pilot study, I observed in first grade children their comprehension of leadership as an ideal based upon the virtues of kindness, respect, and honesty. These ethical concepts fit well into the rule-based world of elementary education. A classroom decree can be issued – thou shalt be kind, respectful, and honest – and enforced punitively, if necessary. Feeling impelled to act ethically for fear of retribution, however, ultimately stymies the development of ethical literacy, as students simply comply as a means of avoidance coping. The ethically literate student treats others in a certain way because he desires to do so, either for his own gratification (i.e., the resultant feelings from acting ethically) or out of concern for the needs of others. It is here that the seeds of empathy are sown.

Empathy can be modeled through teacher and student interactions, by listening, connecting, and commiserating, yet another variation on the student desire to feel seen and heard. Direct instruction may prove arduous: empathy requires situational awareness, interpersonal connection, and the ability to not only look beyond the emotions of the self, but

also identify and comprehend the emotions of another. Empathy is best learned through experience. With its focus on positivity, the sharing of compliments and appreciations supplies practice with seeing others, their successes and desirable traits. Through role play and storytelling, students can use characters, plot devices and scenarios as emotional anchors. These instructional devices serve as artificial portals allowing a glimpse into the thoughts and emotions of another, a type of workshop to explore the consequences of a choice or action. Some students will be quick to demonstrate empathy: I am reminded of the rush of students offering to help a fellow student after falling from his chair. Others will need constant exposure, however, allowing empathy to seep into the foundations of their emergent ethical literacy.

### **Reflexive Ethics**

“It’s the people actually doing things, in each case, who have to think for themselves about what the situation calls for, like a doctor treating a patient or a helmsman steering a ship” (Aristotle, 2020, p. 30).

I noted often during the field observations, teachers intervened after witnessing an unethical or unkind act, modeling conflict resolution and supplying social prompts. The students had not yet developed a facility with these skills, or the ability to understand how their actions could injure another. This type of direct instruction proved to be very successful, as students could apply these same social prompts alongside other supportive constructs, like a buddy bench to help students practice inclusion, to their next interpersonal conflict. At first, as students experiment with these new strategies, there may be a stiltedness, a schooled formality, to these interactions. It is when the student begins to demonstrate an ability to not only assess need but then supply assistance without adult intervention, that reflexive ethics will emerge.

Teaching a skill asks the student to apply conscious thought to their actions, following a mental flowchart that matches situation with action. There comes a point in one's ethical development, much like the blossoming musician as she internalizes the physical nature of her instrument, where actions become reflexive, an impulsive response to stimuli. The student sees a need, whether it be for help, support, kindness, or comfort, and takes action to meet it. So many of the observed interactions of students helping others happened in such a way, without hesitation or fanfare. The students helped each other out of duty, concern, or simply an unconscious impulse. They were no longer struggling with the words and letters from their ethical hornbooks, grappling with the foreign shapes of the written characters and their awkward sounds. They had taken another significant step in their development of ethical literacy.

### **The Parental Continuum**

Children's love for their parents, like humankind's love for the gods, is a love for something both good and superior. Our parents have benefitted us in the greatest ways possible. They're responsible for our existing at all and for our growth, and, having given us existence, for raising and educating us. (Aristotle, 2020, p. 210)

All of the teachers interviewed agreed: they play a role in the ethical development of their students. They differed in what that role should be, with an analysis of those statements placing the role of the teacher on what I termed the parental continuum, a sliding scale of ethical responsibility. At one end, the teacher serves as support for the ethical lessons taught at home. A partnership with parents working toward the ethical development of their students was the most common answer within the data. At the opposite end of the parental continuum, teachers act as a second guardian, a caregiver in their own right, working independently to encourage the growth

of ethical literacy in their students. No matter where each student falls on the continuum, the teacher plays a role in his ethical development.

Complications arise when parents object to ethics being a part of their child's education. The district that hosted this research project asked that I send a letter home to parents in each classroom in which I would observe, explaining my reason for being there and describing the research process. After reading my letter, one teacher feared serious backlash from one of her parents. At the beginning of the year, this parent had submitted an opt-out notice from the Citizens Advisory of Pennsylvania (<https://www.citizensadvisorypa.com>), included in the appendix of this dissertation. It specified that her child was not to take part in "any activity, communication (written or oral), and curriculum that includes advocating for the ideology of SEL and DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion)." The teacher and principal received a steady stream of inquiries and complaints from this individual, and she was a regular presence during the community comment portion of the monthly school board meeting.

These types of objections are increasingly common, especially as groups like the Citizens Advisory and Moms for Liberty (<https://www.momsforliberty.org>) grow in popularity. These groups "advocate for [their children's] constitutional rights, educational choices, and pursuit of happiness" (Citizens Advisory of Pennsylvania) and "[fight] for the survival of America by unifying, educating and empowering parents to defend their parental rights at all levels of government" (Moms for Liberty). As a music teacher, my exposure to these groups has been marginal, and my colleagues with more first-hand experience describe a deluge of emails and conferences with the principal, resulting in little to no change in their classrooms. Librarians receive the brunt of the objections, centering upon the contents of the school libraries. Teachers

describe an aggravating and exhausting experience that has no influence on the day-to-day events within the classroom.

It is conceivable that members of these groups could gain footholds in local governing bodies like local school boards. The Southern Poverty Law Center labeled Moms for Liberty an extremist organization, saying that it advances an anti-student inclusion agenda (Yousef, 2023). Education, already facing a historic sea change, would find itself in complete and total transformation. Practices like the morning meeting, tailored to meet the SEL needs of the student population, could be scrapped entirely. The parental continuum would cease to exist. Until then, teachers recognize that they must assume an active role in the ethical development of their students, regardless of any outside influences, including the state of ethics education at home or protests from political organizations. Teachers are a key factor in the emergence and cultivation of ethical literacy in their students.

### **A Common Language**

“Now, what about the language which describes my inner experiences and which only I myself can understand? How do I use words to stand for my sensations?” (Wittgenstein, 1945/1986, p. 91). “And sounds which no one else understands but which I ‘appear to understand’ might be called a ‘private language’” (Wittgenstein, 1945/1986, p. 94).

A theme that quickly rose to prominence during the analysis of the observational data was the use of the morning meeting to support the expansion of the students’ SEL vocabulary. The experiences embedded in the morning meeting did not just teach students how to treat each other, how to interact and communicate ethically, but contextually, identifying the words and methods of communication in a broad range of possible situations. The teachers in this study were experts at selecting and using age-appropriate vocabulary, and rarely did I encounter

unfamiliar terminology. Never was there a classroom patois that proved indecipherable, but there also was no true uniformity of word choice, no common ethical language shared, even within the same building and grade level. Keeping the discourse at an age-appropriate level should avoid the disconnect lurking in Wittgenstein's "private language," but considering the language-intensive nature of the development of ethical literacy, a common lexicon could act as an ethical Rosetta Stone, translating emotions and ethical concepts instead of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. Adapting an SEL curriculum may be the answer for those seeking the development of a common language.

### **Implications for Further Research**

Burroughs and Barkauskas (2017) question the depth and richness of ethics educational experiences within SEL practices. Their primary criticism is that addressing social and emotional needs does not necessarily or simultaneously address ethical ones. In the limited scope of this study, it cannot be denied that the emergence and development of ethical literacy is present in classrooms beginning the school day with the morning meeting. The depth and richness of the experience, however, varied between classrooms and grade levels. What is the root cause in these variations of ethics education? What themes would emerge from the data if the sample were greatly enlarged and diversified?

This was a cross-sectional study, a glimpse into the development of ethical literacy within 13 classrooms at a single point in time. Ethical literacy is not a skill that is learned for a test and immediately forgotten: it becomes a characteristic of the individual. Researchers interested in the development of ethical literacy should consider a longitudinal study, following a single group of students as they mature as children and as ethical beings, possibly from kindergarten through their senior year of high school.



This district has no official curriculum for either SEL or the morning meeting. What is missing from the educational experiences observed in this study when compared to a school that has adopted such a curriculum? What about a dedicated ethics curriculum, like the Heartwood Ethics Curriculum for Children in use at the Children’s School at Carnegie Mellon University (Carnegie Mellon University, 2023)? It should be noted that this curriculum uses curated children’s literature as the vehicle for teaching ethical concepts. How do modeling and storytelling function within an existing, developed ethics curriculum?

How does the use of language factor into the development of ethical literacy? I believe this to be a rich avenue of inquiry worth exploring. Language was the very heart and soul of the field observations. How students interacted, their expanding vocabularies, the code-switching present when speaking in scripted and unscripted settings, the use of both verbal and nonverbal communication, and how students verbalize and contextualize their emotions and perceptions, may be the very essence of the ethical lives of children.

### **The Agony in the Kindergarten**

[William Steig’s] books are silly and sweet, as books for children should be, but they are also unsettling, strange, and sometimes scary. Beauty and dread coexist; there is whimsy, even silliness, but also palpable anxiety, peril, and despair in Steig’s world – or maybe this is just the real world. (Alam, 2019)

The William Blake quote at the start of this chapter also served as the epigraph for William Steig’s *Agony in the Kindergarten* (1950). When I first encountered this odd little picture book, I read it as the illustrated secret lives of children juxtaposed against words overheard from the adult word that towers over them. As I considered the emergence of ethical literacy in primary aged students, I was reminded of my first impressions of this book and its

images as simultaneously amusing and disturbing, a glimpse into an alien world. Memories of that first bus ride to a new school resurfaced, my own personal encounter with alien life. I was fortunate: the alienation I felt during that bus ride was dispelled once I found my way to Mrs. Hopson's second grade classroom, one of many in a long line of outstanding teachers in my life. I have her to thank for my love of writing and literature, in particular the works of William Shakespeare. Unlike Blake's newborn, I knew I would not be tasked with navigating this strange new world alone.

Much like the small talk I observed most mornings, as students trailed behind their teachers preparing for the day, chattering away on all manner of things, education addresses much more than the academic needs of its students. If teachers are to succeed in preparing their students for the frightening and beautiful world that exists just outside the schoolhouse walls, mere academic mastery will not be enough. The very young lead rich and complex ethical lives, tiny Aristotles asked to confront ethical dilemmas on a daily basis. If we as teachers can understand that world, a very real world we once all inhabited ourselves, we will produce more than good citizens who vote and pay taxes: we will let loose into the wide world an ethically literate population, individuals who have mastered the art of seeing others, can express authentic empathy, and have a true appreciation of a good story. In this vision of the future, when the insectoid new kid boards the bus, he will be greeted enthusiastically and invited to take a seat.

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## Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter



**Office of Research Integrity**  
 Institutional Review Board  
 One John Marshall Drive  
 Huntington, WV 25755

FWA 00002704

IRB1 #00002205  
 IRB2 #00003206

April 21, 2023

Bobbi Nicholson, PhD  
 College of Education and Professional Development

RE: IRBNet ID# 2030936-1

**At:** Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral)

Dear Dr. Nicholson:

**Protocol Title:** [2030936-1] Elementary Classroom Ethics: The Emergence of Ethical Literacy Within the Morning Meeting

**Site Location:** MUGC

**Submission Type:** New Project APPROVED

**Review Type:** Exempt Review

In accordance with 45CFR46.104(d)(1)&(2), the above study was granted Exempted approval today by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Designee. No further submission (or closure) is required for an Exempt study **unless** there is an amendment to the study. All amendments must be submitted and approved by the IRB Chair/Designee.

This study is for student Leo A. Zumpetta.

If you have any questions, please contact the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Coordinator Lindsey Taylor at (304) 696-6322 or l.taylor@marshall.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Bruce F. Day, ThD, CIP  
 Director, Office of Research Integrity

## **Appendix B: Interview Protocol**

### **Demographics/General Information**

1. How long have you been a teacher?
  1. If a second career, what did you do before entering education?
2. How long have you taught first grade?
  1. Other grades?

### **Morning Meeting**

1. What is the purpose of the morning meeting?
2. What are your personal goals for the morning meeting?
3. What is the structure of the morning meeting?
4. What “rituals” are embedded in the morning meeting?
  1. How would you define the term or concept of “ritual?”
  2. What rituals exist in the first/second grade classroom?
  3. What is their purpose?
  4. How do these rituals grow or change over the course of the school year?  
Throughout your professional practice as an educator?
5. How does the concept of “role play” factor into the morning meeting?
6. What are the district and building guidelines for the morning meeting?
  1. What elements or items have been required by the district for inclusion in the morning meeting?
  2. Have any conflicts arisen between your personal approach to the morning meeting and district directives?

7. Before leading the morning meeting in your classroom, what training, workshops, or courses did you attend that dealt directly with the practice?
  1. Are you familiar with the Response Classroom and their guidelines for the morning meeting?
    1. *If yes:* How closely do you follow these guidelines?
    2. *If no:* What do you use as a guide for developing and planning your morning meetings?
  2. What type of training or support do you desire or require to improve the morning meeting?

### **Ethical Literacy**

1. Define “ethical literacy” as it pertains to the first/second grade student.
2. What opportunities currently exist in the morning meeting for students to practice ethical literacy?
  1. Describe demonstrations of ethical literacy in the first/second grade classroom, regardless of location or activity.
3. How does one *teach* ethical concepts to primary aged children?
4. How do first grade students *learn* ethical concepts?
5. What moments or glimpses of ethical literacy have you witnessed:
  1. During the morning meeting?
  2. Within the first/second grade classroom?
  3. In unstructured settings (recess, centers, hallway, etc.)?
  4. Expected or unexpected (surprising?)
    1. Have themes emerged from these observations?



6. What scaffolding (support) do you supply (or is ingrained in the design) to encourage acts of ethical literacy in the morning meeting?

### **Open-ended/Overflow Questions**

1. Describe the ideal (your fantasy) morning meeting.
2. What would improve the morning meeting?
  1. For students? For educators?
3. In your own words, what is the philosophy, the deep-rooted belief, behind the morning meeting?
4. What role should educators play in the ethical development of their students?

## Appendix C: Informed Consent

Page 1 of 3

### **Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

#### *Elementary Classroom Ethics: The Emergence of Ethical Literacy Within the Morning Meeting*

*Barbara Nicholson, PhD, Principal Investigator*

*Leo Zumpetta, EdD Candidate, Co-Investigator*

*Marshall University, College of Education and Professional Development*

#### *Key Information*

You are invited to participate in a research study designed to gain scientific knowledge that may help other people in the future. You may or may not receive any benefit from being part of the study and your participation is voluntary. You may leave the study at any time, for any reason. Permission to pursue this research has been granted by district administration and each building principal. I am now seeking your permission to enter your classrooms and sit down with you for an interview. Please take your time to make your decision, and feel free to ask the researcher to explain anything that you do not understand.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the morning meeting for evidence of foundational experiences leading to the development of ethical literacy in the student participants, as well as to examine teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of these experiences. Each participating teacher will host the researcher for a series of classroom observations and will also answer questions during a one-on-one semistructured interview. We expect that you will be in this study for 3 months. The primary risk of participation is a breach of confidentiality. Risks are described in detail later in this form.

#### *How Many People Will Take Part In The Study?*

About 8 teachers and their classrooms will take part in this study. The final number of participants could be as low as 6 or as high as 15, but 8 teachers and their classrooms is the initial goal.

#### *What Is Involved In This Research Study?*

This study will feature a nonexperimental, descriptive design to gather data describing the emergence of ethical literacy through the classroom practice of the morning meeting. The research design will include the researcher's observations of kindergarten, pre-first, first, and second grade classrooms within a single district in Pennsylvania alongside semistructured interviews with you.

#### *What Will Be Asked Of Each Participating Teacher In This Research Study?*

You will host the researcher for a series of classroom observations, beginning as the first student enters the classroom for the school day, continuing through the morning meeting, and ending as the classroom transitions to the first academic activity of the day. You will also sit down with the researcher for a one-on-one semistructured interview.

Subject's Initials \_\_\_\_\_

### *What Are Your Rights As A Research Study Participant?*

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or you may leave the study at any time. Refusing to participate or leaving the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. If you decide to stop participating in the study, we encourage you to talk to the researcher first.

The study investigator may stop you from taking part in this study at any time if he believes it is in your best interest; if you do not follow the study rules; or if the study is stopped.

### *Detailed Risks Of The Study*

There may be these risks:

- The presence of another adult in an elementary classroom can lead to discomfort or a sense of unease for the participant teacher and the students. Care will be taken to minimize the intrusive aspect of the field observations; however, the researcher will be placed within the classroom and visible to all. This risk is very low. No interventions of any kind will take place during these observations, and the researcher will remain a nonparticipating observer.
- There is a risk of a breach of confidentiality. This risk is very low. Any report of findings will be done anonymously, with pseudonyms used in place of actual names, and any identifying characteristics removed from the data. Audio recordings of the one-on-one interviews will be destroyed after transcription. A discussion of the development of ethical literacy through a classroom practice should pose no threat to participant employability, or result in any legal consequences.

There may also be other side effects that we cannot predict. You should tell the researcher if any of these risks concern or worry you.

### *What About Confidentiality?*

We will do our best to make sure that your personal information is kept confidential. Findings will be reported anonymously. Pseudonyms will be used, and identifying characteristics will be removed. We cannot, however, guarantee absolute confidentiality. Federal law says we must keep your study records private. Nevertheless, under unforeseen and rare circumstances, we may be required by law to allow certain agencies to view your records. Those agencies would include the Marshall University Office of Research Integrity (ORI) and the federal Office of Human Research Protection (OHRP). This is to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety. If we publish the information we learn from this study, you will not be identified by name or in any other way.

### *What Are The Costs Of Taking Part In This Study?*

There are no costs to you for taking part in this study. All the study costs, including any supplies and procedures related directly to the study, will be paid for by the study.

### *Will You Be Paid For Participating?*

You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

Subject's Initials \_\_\_\_\_

*Whom Do You Call If You Have Questions Or Problems?*

For questions about the study or in the event of a research-related injury, you may contact the researcher, Leo Zumpetta, at telephone number (610) 620-5468, or the study's principal investigator, Dr. Barbara Nicholson, at (304) 746-2094 (bnicholson@marshall.edu). You may also contact the principal investigator if you have a concern or complaint about the research.

- o For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Marshall University Office of Research Integrity at (304) 696-4303. You may also call this number if you have concerns or complaints about the research;
- o the research staff cannot be reached; or
- o you want to talk to someone other than the research staff.

You will be given a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

***SIGNATURES***

You agree to take part in this study and confirm that you are 18 years of age or older. You have had a chance to ask questions about being in this study and have had those questions answered. By signing this consent form you are not giving up any legal rights to which you are entitled.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Subject Name (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Subject Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Person Obtaining Consent (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Person Obtaining Consent Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Subject's Initials \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D: Citizens Advisory of Pennsylvania Opt-Out Notice



CITIZENS ADVISORY  
of Pennsylvania

### PENNSYLVANIA PARENT & STUDENT OPT-OUT NOTICE

**Please take notice that my child is to be excused and exempted for the 2022-2023 school year from the following school instruction, programs, and/or activities. This opt-out applies to all checked boxes below:**

- Instruction regarding prevention of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and other life-threatening and communicable diseases**  
– Pursuant to 22 Pa. Code § 4.29, this serves as notice that my child is to be exempted from participation in instruction regarding prevention of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and other life-threatening and communicable diseases.
- Dating violence education program**  
– Pursuant to 24 Pa. Stat. § 15-1553, this serves as notice that my child is to be exempted from participation in dating violence education program.
- Courses in the literature of religious writings**  
– Pursuant to 24 Pa. Stat. § 15-1515, this serves as notice that my child is to be exempted from participation in courses in the literature of religious writings.
- Course of instruction that involves dissecting, vivisectioning, incubating, capturing or otherwise harming or destroying animals or any parts; education projects or tests that involve harmful or destructive use of animals**  
– Pursuant to 24 Pa. Stat. § 15-1523, this serves as notice that my child is to be exempted from participation in the course of instruction that involves dissecting, vivisectioning, incubating, capturing or otherwise harming or destroying animals or any parts and any education project or test that involves harmful or destructive use of animals.
- Private information**  
– Pursuant to 20 U.S.C. § 1232h, absent my written consent, none of the following may be undertaken regarding my child. The administration of any survey, analysis or evaluation that reveals:
  - (1) political affiliations or beliefs of my child or me,
  - (2) mental or psychological problems of my child or his or her family,
  - (3) sexual behavior or attitudes,
  - (4) illegal, anti-social, self-incriminating, or demeaning behavior,
  - (5) critical appraisals of other individuals with whom respondents have close family relationships,
  - (6) legally recognized privileged or analogous relationships, such as those of lawyers, physicians, and ministers,
  - (7) religious practices, affiliations, or beliefs of my child or me, or
  - (8) income (other than required by law to determine eligibility for participation in a program or for receiving financial assistance under such program).
- Medical or dental examination or treatment**  
– Pursuant to 24 Pa. Stat. § 14-1419 and 28 Pa. Code § 23.45, this serves as notice that my child is to be exempted from regular or special medical examinations or treatments because such examinations or treatments are contrary to the religious beliefs of the parent or guardian of the child and even when parent consent is given, must be done in the presence of the parent or guardian.
- Scoliosis screening**  
– Pursuant to 28 Pa. Code § 23.10, please take notice that my child is to be exempted from scoliosis screening.

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**Immunization**

– Pursuant to 28 Pa. Code § 23.84, please take notice that my child is to be exempted from immunization on the following grounds:

- Immunization may be detrimental to the health of the child.
- The parent, guardian or emancipated child objects on religious grounds or on the basis of a strong religious, moral or ethical conviction.

**Gender Identity/Transgender**

– Pursuant to 20 U.S.C. § 1232h, absent my written consent, please take notice my child is to be exempted from any activity, communication (written or oral), and curriculum that includes; gender identity, gender fluidity, gender as a social construct, gender binary, gender spectrum, gender non-conforming, gender queer, gender variant, gender expression, drag queen/king, transgender identity, transgender affirmation, gender/preferred pronouns, cisgender, gender change, gender transition, gender surgery, gender affirmation surgery, puberty blocking hormones, cross-sex hormones, “sex assigned at birth,” sex change.

**Sexual Activity**

– Pursuant to 20 U.S.C. § 1232h, absent my written consent, please take notice my child is to be exempted from any activity, communication (written or oral), and curriculum that includes sexual activity of any kind (sexual intercourse, vaginal/oral/anal/group sex, masturbation), sexual relationships (polysexual, pansexual, polyamory, swinging, relationship anarchy).

**Sexual Orientation**

– Pursuant to 20 U.S.C. § 1232h, absent my written consent, please take notice my child is to be exempted from any activity, communication (written or oral), and curriculum that includes any sexual orientation, including homosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, two-spirit, “LGBT” or any acronymic variant thereof.

**Abortion/Contraception**

– Pursuant to 20 U.S.C. § 1232h, absent my written consent, please take notice my child is to be exempted from any activity, communication (written or oral), and curriculum that includes abortion methods/drugs/devices, how to get an abortion without parental knowledge, contraceptive methods/drugs/devices, how to get contraceptives without parental knowledge.

**Human Sexuality Education**

– Pursuant to 20 U.S.C. § 1232h, absent my written consent, please take notice my child is to be exempted from any activity, communication (written or oral), and curriculum that includes; all classes or instruction pertaining to comprehensive human sexuality education, including family planning; human sexuality; the emotional, physical, psychological, hygienic, economic, and social aspects of family life and/or reproductive health; and any subject matter related to gender identity and/or expression. This shall be considered continuing written notice that my child will not be enrolled or participate in Human Sexuality/Gender/Identity education or activities without my prior written authorization.

**Mental Health Screening/Education**

– Pursuant to 20 U.S.C. § 1232h, absent my written consent, please take notice my child is to be exempted from any activity, communication (written or oral), and curriculum that includes all health care, mental or social programs and screening, whether directly by the school or through an affiliated resource.

Concerns by school staff relating to my child’s mental health are to be brought to me for my attention and assessment. School staffs are not to take it upon themselves to obtain a diagnosis or provide mental health



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treatment, analysis, referral, or labeling of any nature. Assessment and testing are to center on academics and physical fitness only. This includes, but is not limited to:

- 1) School or school-based counseling related to mental or physical health.
- 2) Behavioral, mental health, depression/suicide, or psychological/behavioral screenings of any nature and/or diagnostic screenings, instruments, or surveys.
- 3) Anger management, self-esteem, conflict resolution courses; group or family counseling.

**Social Emotional learning (SEL) and Diversity Equity Inclusion (DEI)**

– Pursuant to 20 U.S.C. § 1232h, absent my written consent, please take notice my child is to be exempted from any activity, communication (written or oral), and curriculum that includes advocating for the ideology of SEL and DEI. This includes any and all core/elective classes, at assemblies/presentations, school events, on field trips, by guest speakers, surveys given/offered, during extra-curricular activities and in conversation with school system employees and agents in any setting, on or off campus, while my child is in the care of the school.

**Research Based**

– Pursuant to 20 U.S.C. § 1232h, absent my written consent, please take notice my child is to be exempted from any activity, communication (written or oral), and curriculum that includes all research based, data driven, data collection educational programs that have not had full approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and parents/guardians that have not had complete transparency and access to the entire research project. All apps that have privacy policies which indicate personal identifiable information can be shared with partners and/or third parties.

**Masking**

- Pursuant to 21 USC § 360bbb-3 (a) (2)(A), Masks and Test Kits are unapproved Emergency Use Authorized medical devices. My child(ren) is hereby exempt from masking without my expressed written consent as it otherwise violates 24 Pa. Stat. § 14-1419 and 28 Pa. Code §23.45.

(\*) See, e.g., *Troxel v. Granville*, 530 U.S. 57 (2000)(the Constitution “protects the fundamental right of parents to make decisions concerning the care, custody, and control of their children”); *Santosky v. Kramer*, 455 U.S. 745 (1982)(recognizing “fundamental liberty interest of natural parents in the care, custody, and management of their child”); *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205 (1972)(recognizing “liberty of parents...to direct the upbringing and education of children”); *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, 268 U.S. 510 (1925) (parents have the right “to direct the upbringing and education of children under their control.”)

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**Freedom from harassment, suspension, or expulsion**

In addition, it is understood that refusal to take part or participate in any class, course, survey, assembly, or school-sponsored activity on these matters **shall not be reason for harassment, suspension, or expulsion of a student.**

I expect all school officials to treat our all children opted out of any lesson, with dignity and respect. If the requests in this letter are not honored, or if our child experiences discrimination or any other mistreatment, I will pursue any and all legal and equitable remedies available to us through state, federal, and constitutional law. (\*)

Keep this signed, written notice on file in my child's permanent, cumulative record. This notice supersedes any prior consents or notices.

Child's Name \_\_\_\_\_ Grade Level \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian's Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian's Signature(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian's Address \_\_\_\_\_

Daytime/Evening Phone Number(s) \_\_\_\_\_

School Name \_\_\_\_\_ School District \_\_\_\_\_

Received By (Print Name) \_\_\_\_\_

Received By (Signature) \_\_\_\_\_ Date Received \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_

*End of Document*