

# How to Develop Social Interest Through a Class Council

*JoAnn Seese*

Social interest is a community feeling that is expressed in terms of behavior. When social interest is lacking, it not only affects the group but also affects the performance and self-worth of each individual. The fifth-grade class I taught this past year presented quite a challenge to me. I began the year with a class which almost totally lacked social interest. To my frustration, they demonstrated it in many ways.

The members of the class fought with each other both verbally and physically. The girls preferred arguments, which ended in tears, hurt feelings, and severed relationships. The boys preferred more physical fights, ending in injuries and often involving intervention by the parents or administration. These disagreements usually occurred before school, at lunch, or in the hallways. They also occurred in the more structured classroom situation, where they were more directly disruptive to the educational process. I tried the usual techniques for ending such disagreements. Usually, I entered in physically; and, after separating the children, I would try to get to the root of the issue and eventually try to force a peaceful agreement. Anyone who has been involved in the process knows how unsuccessful I was.

At recess the children played individually or in groups of twos or threes. The small groups were short-term alliances for the purposes of aggravating one another. When battles occurred I ran to each and broke it up. These daily occurrences were not only exhausting to handle, but the safety factor was a serious concern to me. My co-workers and I commented on the immaturity of this class. We believed they had never been taught how to play team sports, so we organized teams and taught them a game. Before they reached the playing field, however, the teams had dissolved.

In my classroom, rules had always been kept to a minimum. They were rules of safety and consideration, but the class completely disregarded them. I explained the necessity for the rules and the punishments that would result if they were broken. The class and I became involved in a power struggle over this issue. I felt threatened, and I didn't know what else to try.

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The class did not care about the appearance of the classroom. They did not consider it theirs, but mine, an attitude that was totally alien to me. If a classroom decoration fell, they would walk on it as if it were not there. Classroom supplies were often broken or stolen, desks were carved on, and glue was poured inside. I saw all of this as a reflection on me, so I verbally battled with them on this subject.

The class could not work in small groups or teams for academic assignments, which put a cramp in my teaching style. The students who worked hard academically did so only for their own glory and would not help others.

Many articles were stolen; the most common were lunches, money, pens, pencils, and small toys. These missing articles were reported to me. I always asked everyone to check their own areas and then search the classroom; usually we were unsuccessful in locating the missing item. Many accusations were made and nothing was accomplished. The child whose article was taken felt outraged and sometimes involved the parents. I felt helpless in this situation. Since I had many personal items taken also, I shared the outrage of the victims. I felt hurt that they could dislike me so much.

Many injuries occurred because of the fights and disregard for school and classroom rules, and some of the injuries served to gain attention. Every day after lunch I would find 10 or 12 members of my class in the nurse's office. Some students were not injured but presented a variety of ailments—mostly of the digestive system, with true symptoms.

There were no friendships within the class. There were temporary alliances; and, when the alliances were broken, everyone left with hurt feelings and new alliances were made.

The students had no class feeling, something I had always prided myself on developing. I felt I had exceptional ability to develop unity and class pride, but everything I tried failed. They would not cooperate for any reason. They were the only class I have ever had who would not line up for lunch, recess, and physical education. I tried every technique I could think of: humor, speeches, appeals, strict discipline, and my favorite, using the unexpected. They ignored all of my efforts.

I had been taught that if a class misbehaves they are not motivated, so I spent nights dreaming up highly motivating lessons and went into school hopefully, only to have my lessons fail.

It was only October or November, and I had a long year ahead. Since my past experience was not helping me, I consulted our school guidance counselor, who had often helped me handle individuals in the past. Her advice always worked. She listened patiently to me, encouraged me, and suggested a

class council. To be perfectly honest, I couldn't understand how a little class government could possibly solve all the personal problems my class had. However, I did have confidence in her advice and had nothing to lose by trying, so I agreed. Neither of us had ever organized a council, but we decided to base it on the family council described in *Children: The Challenge*. She agreed to help set it up the first time.

### **Steps in Establishing a Class Council**

1. Establish ground rules for the meetings.
2. The teacher acts as a group leader until the class understands how a discussion is held.
3. The group leader and a committee place topics of concern in priority order.
4. Class councils include: problem solving, clarifying, thinking together, and summarizing.
5. The group constructively makes suggestions and tries to find solutions to the problems presented.
6. At the conclusion, members fill out an evaluation rating the productivity of the discussion.

### **Experiences in Beginning a Class Council**

Before beginning the class council, I took extreme measures. Since it is unusual to find a class so lacking in social interest, it would rarely be necessary to declare bankruptcy; but in this case it made a lot of sense. One morning I stood before them and admitted defeat. I told them (and me) that I was an experienced teacher and that I had tried everything I knew to gain their cooperation and reach my goal of educating them. I named a few of these methods to remind them. I told them I didn't know what else to do. They became very quiet and attentive. They were not accustomed to adults admitting imperfection. I told them why I am a teacher, my personal reasons and because of the confidence of the board of education, school administration, and their parents. Then I asked them why they were there. The answers varied: "I like school!" "My mother makes me come!" and "It's the law, I have to come!" We came to an agreement about our separate and mutual goals and our failure to attain them. I saw them as warm, interested people. They saw me as a fallible person with feelings. We stopped seeing each other as the enemy. It was an extremely emotional experience for me. I then presented the

idea of the class council to them. I admitted it was a new idea for all of us and we'd be learning together. I did a real selling job on how it could be what we all wanted.

The first class council meeting was one I'll never forget. I thought I knew how to treat students as equals, but I was not aware of the subtle ways adults express inequality. I had everyone seated in a circle in the corner when the counselor arrived. She pointed out to us how some of us were in chairs, some on the floor, some seated slightly behind others. We discussed rotation of leadership and recording minutes. The leader's job was only to call on people when they wished to talk. The recorder took notes of our discussion. The time period was to be kept strictly to 30 minutes, so we set a timer. Equality was stressed. The children were impressed with their equality to me. They asked if they could call me by my first name. I was shocked by the counselor's positive reply. This privilege would be allowed during class council meetings only. We discussed the fact that everyone was not required to attend. Each week whoever wished could join the council. Anyone who didn't join would give up his/her right to contribute, but must abide by the council's decisions.

When the counselor left, the students returned to their seats and discussed their feelings. They were excited and impressed by their equality. I expressed a hope that perhaps this equality would spread beyond the council meetings eventually. The students hoped for this, too. One called out, "Yeah, when we were over there, it was like you were one of us!" Another replied, "No, it was like we were like her, an adult." Everyone responded to this positively.

The next meeting was my first "solo." It was also the time they decided to test the system. I decided that I would not discipline anyone who remained in the group, nor would I force my ideas on them. Anyone who chose to be out of the group would be treated autocratically. I exaggerated both roles to make the contrast obvious to everyone. Everyone chose to be a part of the group the first time. They accomplished nothing except testing the system. People called out, danced in the center of the circle, and talked among themselves. I reacted by sitting quietly, waiting to go on. Generally, everyone was disgusted with the lack of accomplishment.

In the weeks that followed, they tried many things. Everyone tried sitting out of the group occasionally. When they did, they often sat close and listened. Sometimes they even forgot themselves and tried to contribute. I found anything I contributed as an idea was often accepted with extra weight so I had to stifle myself in order to let them develop their own ideas. Later, after they had more confidence in their own ideas, they accepted mine more equally. We were all learning hard lessons. I met with our counselor occasionally to seek advice about my role in the class council and to be encouraged.

A strange thing occurred. We all began to look forward to our favorite half hour of the week, even before we were accomplishing much. On the day we met I could count on everyone being lined up and ready to go when I came to pick them up.

They gradually began to subordinate themselves for the sake of the group. Our first project was to be one that would be fun, a treat for all. Since all decisions had to be unanimous, not majority, it was very difficult to agree on an idea. The most popular idea was a bubble gum party, which was against school rules. This idea went around for 2 or 3 weeks until they finally consulted the administration and went on to another plan. (They had an unofficial gum party one day when I was absent and found out the meaning of logical consequences.) The second plan was a popcorn party, which was a moderate success. They learned the meaning of interdependence and what it is like to eat unsalted popcorn.

The class council gained confidence in themselves and decided to tackle some of their problems. They had so many topics they felt important, they wasted time discussing which was most important. Eventually they decided on the cafeteria problem and had a complaint session. They finally decided to meet with the principal, who was aware of our class council and the idea behind it, to discuss their concerns and make suggestions. He agreed to sit in on our next council meeting. The students were shocked by the way he listened to them and treated them as equals. He listened to their suggestions; changes were made; and, when they couldn't be made, the students understood why. Their feeling of unity grew, and they began feeling good about themselves.

In February I was assigned a student teacher, and she was accepted into the group. She suggested that the students place topics of discussion in a suggestion box and post a printed agenda the day before each council meeting. The class liked this idea and assigned each item a specified time. Now things were becoming efficient. The council decided the last 10 minutes should always be allocated for discussing personal problems. They often helped each other with peer problems. They became skilled at this process and employed such methods as role playing.

The class found solutions to many of their problems throughout the year. They developed a list of rights and responsibilities of class members. They even discussed another class where they could not relate to the teacher and her program. They also determined how jobs would be assigned. They planned many fun activities for themselves. They had the popcorn party, a pizza party, and a surprise baby shower for me. The pizza party required detailed arrangements and came off without a fault in spite of illnesses, etc. They took their responsibility to the group seriously.

## **A Group Attains Social Interest**

At the end of the year, the class felt good about themselves. They felt unity, and they displayed it in many ways. Everyone commented on the change in the class. All three special area teachers mentioned how they looked forward to the class and their cooperation. The cafeteria aides got to know and like them. My co-workers began to ask me about the change. Parents began to request conferences, and they always asked, "What is this class council my child keeps talking about?" A few parents were even tempted to try a family council. All parents noticed a change in their own child's sense of responsibility.

Although the change was gradual, it could be seen everywhere. The fights disappeared. True and lasting friendships developed among students, and friendships crossed sex lines (something rare for this age). One of the most noticeable changes was that they began to enjoy team sports. They planned games and tournaments and played peacefully. When disagreements occurred they settled them. They knew I wouldn't get involved. The team playing was particularly noticeable since the rest of the grade still played as they had. The class invited them to join with them, and, gradually, individuals from other classes began to enter, too. The school nurse noticed that injuries and complaints were now rare and made special comment of the matter.

The class turned out to be very artistic. They took responsibility and pride in decorating the room. Jobs were chosen in a unique manner that they developed. If someone didn't do their job, the class felt the consequences. Once someone forgot to requisition ink paper so the class wrote on primary paper until the situation was corrected.

The rules I made were removed, and the rights and responsibilities were proudly posted. These applied equally to all and I admit they were sometimes as hard for me to live up to as for them.

We began using many methods to accomplish our educational goals. Students worked in small groups and large committees. They tutored each other, and sometimes a student acted as teacher to the whole class. They became aware of each other's talents and used this knowledge in planning projects together. I was able to try new techniques I'd been wanting to try. They were always brutally honest about what they couldn't work with. They often helped me adapt an idea to fit them.

Stealing was almost totally eliminated. The students became good at finding "lost" articles, and tattling stopped when it fell on deaf ears. We had discussed the responsibility of each person to keep valuables away from temptation. Every item I ever "lost" turned up by the end of the year.

The most rewarding part was seeing the class feeling grow. We felt and acted as a group. The group was accomplishing things. Individual members of the group were satisfied and growing. We each felt equal. We had a responsibility to the group, and we each felt we gave to it and gained from it. A gratifying result to me was not only their recognition of what they had developed but also their desire to make it grow and spread. Many discussions revolved around how they could help the rest of the grade and the school. Twelve children volunteered for the safety patrol and were accepted. Many children asked about starting a family council at home. Their social interest was no longer confined to this group, it was for all groups to which each of them was a member.

### **Summary**

All classes are not lacking social interest to the degree that this class was. Since social interest is an ability that must be developed, it is often found in varying degrees. Within classes a teacher may find individuals at various stages of development. A class council is the best means of giving students the courage to take responsibilities and develop social interest. A class council will be successful if the teacher and students are aware of the common purposes of the class council.

1. It teaches everyone (including the teacher) to listen.
2. It helps children to understand themselves and each other.
3. It stimulates each child to help every other child.
4. It gives everyone the opportunity to discuss problems that really matter to them.
5. It encourages coordinated effort of all members to seek solutions to problems.
6. It produces pupil-pupil and pupil-teacher cooperation.
7. It teaches children to take the responsibility of solving their own problems.

Some ground rules must be established to make the meetings run efficiently.

1. Be polite. No insults, fighting, or rudeness is acceptable.
2. Only one person may speak at a time.

3. Raise your hand or be recognized if you wish to speak.
4. Listen carefully.
5. Think together.
6. Stick to the point.
7. Don't clam up.
8. Make sure you understand by giving feedback and a summary.

The leader of the group should stop the discussion if any of these ground rules are broken and wait to proceed. Many of the ground rules listed above were broken in our early meetings. Only as the class developed social interest were they able to subordinate their own desires for the sake of the group purpose. At the end of the year all of us could agree that our meetings would accomplish more if everyone followed these ground rules.

The class developed a list of their rights and a list of their responsibilities. The process of thinking these through and developing their own was important. They are listed below to show the high degree to which children can assess their own responsibilities to the group.

### **Our Rights and Responsibilities**

1. We have the right to be heard without interruption.
2. We have the right to feel safe in our classroom.
3. We have the right to a neat and attractive classroom.
4. We have the right to keep personal belongings without fear that they will be tampered with.
5. We each have the right to speak when it is our turn and expect everyone to listen to our ideas.
6. We have the right to come here and learn without anyone interfering.
7. We are each responsible for keeping our own belongings safe.
8. We are each responsible for our own behavior.
9. We are each responsible for keeping the classroom neat.



10. We are each responsible for keeping our personal belongings neat and orderly.

11. We are each responsible for contributing to our own learning by listening to instruction and doing assignments.

12. We are each responsible for contributing to the feeling of friendliness and cooperation in the classroom.

A class council can be an effective means of developing social interest. It can help students to understand their part in the whole. It is a very effective teaching technique because it accomplishes the most important goal of education: teaching children to be responsible for their own actions. They view their education as their own responsibility and the teacher as a resource. Combining the class council with encouragement and the use of natural and logical consequences makes a very effective educational technique.

The class council was useful in developing a concern for all groups to which each member belonged. The children found the feeling of belonging and giving was something they wanted to have as a part of their lives and so they are carrying this experience with them.