

Building Community in the Inclusive Classroom

Setting the Stage for Success

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Mrs. Jackson, a kindergarten teacher at a public elementary school, has 26 students in her class, all with different strengths and areas of need. The class includes two students with identified disabilities: Andre, who has difficulty communicating and sometimes acts out when others don't understand him, has autism spectrum disorder, and Sarah, who rarely shares or shows concern for her classmates' feelings, has emotional and behavioral disorder. Mrs. Jackson is excited about having a diverse class but is worried about how she will meet all of the children's needs.

During center time one afternoon, Mrs. Jackson carefully observes the children and makes notes about their social interactions. She notices Andre in the construction area building with blocks. He is creating intricate buildings but is not interacting or making eye contact with any of his peers. She sees Sarah taking a pizza kit out of another student's hand in the dramatic play area and the other student starting to cry. Grabbing items from others is something Sarah does often, and Mrs. Jackson is beginning to see children shy away from interacting with Sarah.

Andre and Sarah are not the only students she observes struggling. She also sees two children arguing over tools to use at the sensory texture table and others



not understanding personal space and boundaries. Mrs. Jackson is disheartened by the students' difficulties with social interactions. She is also concerned that the children seem to lack understanding and acceptance of one another. Mrs. Jackson, who is currently taking a graduate course in classroom management, decides to apply some of the strategies she has learned to restructure her classroom, both physically and socially, in hopes of creating an inclusive, caring community of learners who support each other's social development.

Young children with and without disabilities may struggle to develop relationships with their peers. For students like Andre, difficulty sharing thoughts and feelings with others creates challenges in developing relationships (APA 2013). Despite challenges, many children with disabilities enjoy and desire friendships (Calder, Hill, & Pellicano 2013). In educational settings, high-quality inclusion features “a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning” (DEC & NAEYC 2009, 2).

While children with disabilities are increasingly being included in the general education setting, physical proximity alone does not result in friendship development, acceptance, and belonging. In fact, children as young as 3 years old begin experiencing rejection by peers (Hay 2005). This is problematic because peer acceptance during early childhood is a predictor of peer relationships later in life, and positive peer relationships and friendships during early childhood have been found to protect children from psychological problems later in life (Hay 2005).

Fostering friendships and promoting social competence is important for all young children. It is particularly important for youth with disabilities, as research suggests that they interact with peers less often and have lower social status than peers without disabilities (Meyer & Ostrosky 2013). Young children with disabilities may have difficulty interacting with peers because of slower growth in social communication skills and behavioral characteristics. For example, children with autism spectrum disorder, like Andre, may have difficulty initiating and responding to social interactions and understanding nonverbal behaviors, such as facial expressions and gestures, all of which can make engaging in reciprocal communication difficult (APA 2013). Similarly, students with emotional and behavioral disorder who tend to act out, like Sarah, may misinterpret peers’ interactions as having a hostile intent and feel justified in using aggressive strategies to obtain items (Smith & Tyler 2014). In contrast, other children with emotional and behavioral challenges may avoid peer interactions; such children can become so socially withdrawn that they too miss out on the benefits of friendships (2014).

Research has documented improvement in social outcomes of young children with disabilities through the

use of evidence-based practices, such as determining the events or interactions that trigger inappropriate behaviors and teaching children replacement behaviors (Wong et al. 2014). However, the success of these interventions in promoting social interaction and friendship development is contingent on students feeling safe to take risks and initiate conversations with peers, and on peers being accepting of one another. With the overall goals of fostering friendships and developing a caring community of learners, teachers can create an atmosphere where all children feel comfortable taking risks and are accepting of one another.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children developed guidelines on developmentally appropriate practices for teachers of young children (NAEYC 2009). Below we outline the five key components of creating a caring community of learners, as defined by NAEYC; provide examples of activities early childhood educators can incorporate through the year to build community; and highlight how the activities benefit all students.



1. Each member of the community is valued

In a caring community of learners all members value one another, recognizing that everyone is different and all children have their own strengths, interests, and perspectives (NAEYC 2009). To help children realize

the value of each member in the classroom community, the class can celebrate uniqueness throughout the year. Two strategies that we have found beneficial are to develop a classroom directory and to facilitate discussions prompted by children's literature.

A classroom directory is a small book that the children collaboratively create; it allows children to outline their strengths and offer their special skills as a service to other children (Jones & Jones 2004). Before creating the classroom directory, the teacher can facilitate a discussion on how everyone has strengths and everyone has areas to work on, emphasizing how wonderful that is because we can use our strengths to help our friends. Then, the teacher can introduce the classroom directory as a way to help one another.

To create the classroom directory, each child identifies one skill (e.g., spelling, drawing, or playing soccer) that they are willing to help their peers with. They draw a picture of this skill (or something that represents the skill, such as 2 + 2 to indicate the child is willing to help others with addition) on a sheet of paper. The teacher compiles the papers and binds them into a classroom directory. This activity not only assists in bringing attention to children's strengths and individuality but also demonstrates respect for everyone by having each child offer a special service for the classroom. Using the directory, the teacher selects children for specific roles, such as organizing the costumes in the dramatic play area, thereby encouraging children's full participation in classroom duties and responsibilities. The teacher affirms the value and worth of the children and demonstrates for the children how to do the same. A classroom directory allows each member of the community to take pride in a skill and to offer support to their peers, thus moving toward establishing a collaborative community.

For the classroom directory, Andre chooses building towers as his special skill—a skill he can use to aid his peers. Before center time, Mrs. Jackson refers to the directory and says to the children, "Friends, while you are playing at centers today, if you want help building towers, please remember to ask Andre. If you want help with drawing, please see Jessica."

Mrs. Jackson is excited when Simone asks Andre for assistance building a tower. Andre is unsure how to respond, so Mrs. Jackson prompts him: "Andre, Simone remembered that your special

skill is building towers. She would like you to help her build a tower. How should she start her tower?" Mrs. Jackson gradually fades her support for the interaction between Andre and Simone. Over the next couple days, Mrs. Jackson observes Andre building towers with other children and helping them during center time.

Another strategy to honor diversity is through children's literature (Gavigan & Kurtts 2011). Many children's books provide opportunities for thoughtful discussions about individual differences. *The Rainbow Fish*, by Marcus Pfister, is a great example of a children's book that extols uniqueness and friendship. Selecting books that portray positive images of people with disabilities can favorably impact children's attitudes and perceptions about these individuals (Price, Ostrosky, & Santos 2016). (See "Suggested Children's Literature for Building Classroom Communities" and Ostrosky et al. [2015] for examples of books that promote acceptance and collaboration.)

Mrs. Jackson uses children's literature to support a deeper understanding of individuals cooperating. *Swimmy*, by Leo Lionni, demonstrates how everyone can work together to solve a problem. After Mrs. Jackson reads the book to the children, she guides a discussion on collaborating and working as a team. She gives each student a blank puzzle piece (precut puzzle pieces from poster board, one for each student). Individually, the children decorate their puzzle pieces with something unique about themselves (e.g., a hobby, favorite book, or picture of their family). Working as a group, the children put the puzzle together while discussing their unique contributions and Mrs. Jackson displays it on the bulletin board.

Suggested Children's Literature for Building Classroom Communities

A Splendid Friend, Indeed, by Suzanne Bloom (2005)

The Ant and the Elephant, by Bill Peet (1972)

Chrysanthemum, by Kevin Henkes (1991)

Farmer Duck, by Martin Waddell, illus. by Helen Oxenbury (1992)

The Rainbow Fish, by Marcus Pfister (1992)

Swimmy, by Leo Lionni (1963)

Thank you, Mr. Falker, by Patricia Polacco (1998)

In Mrs. Jackson's classroom, the puzzle and the book *Swimmy* served as reminders throughout the year that everyone in the community is needed to make the community complete. Lacking one puzzle piece, the puzzle is not complete; lacking one member, the classroom community is not complete.

2. Relationships among children are important

Children need opportunities to interact, collaborate, and learn about one another. The first weeks of school are critical for facilitating relationships and helping students get acquainted. This can be done by facilitating getting-to-know-you activities early in the school year to help prevent students from settling into familiar social groupings. The following activities highlight connections and similarities between students, benefiting those with and those without disabilities. Children recognize what they have in common, which can be a starting point for developing friendships.

- › Student Bingo: Students move around the classroom to find others who have interests corresponding to those displayed in bingo card squares. For example, one square might say *Find a student who likes pizza*.
- › Yarn Web: The teacher holds a ball of yarn and shares something about herself, such as "I have a pet cat." A child makes a connection, saying "I just got a pet—a puppy!" The teacher tosses the ball of yarn to that student while holding on to one end, so she and the child are connected by a long strand of yarn. Once another child connects to the pet puppy, perhaps noting that her grandmother has a pet too, that child holds the string and shares the ball. Soon, all of the children have shared and all are connected by the web of yarn.

While using activities to create community early in the school year is important, it is equally important to nurture relationships throughout the school year. One way to do this is by designating a Student of the Week (being sure to explain that all of the children will get a turn). The special student creates a poster about herself to be displayed. The poster might include photographs, drawings, and written statements by the child about her unique attributes. To ensure that the children learn about each other, set aside a few minutes each day for children to ask the student about herself and give children time during the week to write a positive comment on a sticky note and attach it to

the poster. At the end of the week, the student takes the poster—and all of the positive notes—home to share with her family. This activity benefits all of the children, but particularly those with low self-esteem and those who tend to avoid social interaction. During the week and at home, the poster reminds the child that her classmates care about her.

3. Each community member respects and is accountable to the others

In a caring community of learners, teachers set clear expectations for student behaviors and support children in meeting those expectations. Children must be respectful of one another, accountable for their own actions, and contribute to the group valuing friendly, appropriate interactions (NAEYC 2009). Teachers clarify these expectations by establishing classroom rules, practicing classroom routines, and reinforcing prosocial behaviors.

Teachers set clear expectations for behavior and support children in meeting those expectations.

At the beginning of the school year, teachers and students can collaboratively decide on classroom rules. Classroom rules should be stated positively and clearly tell children what they are expected to do. For example, one classroom rule may be "Listen when the teacher is talking," rather than "Don't shout out." Create approximately three to five classroom rules; young children will have a hard time remembering more than five. Once the rules have been decided, the children should signify in some way that they agree to them—by signing their name or initials or gluing their photo on the poster board where the rules are displayed. Visually displaying the classroom rules is useful for all children, but especially for students with disabilities, because it offers concrete reminders of appropriate behaviors. With the poster nearby, the teacher can point to the positive rule, explain to a child why her behavior is not meeting expectations, and discuss what she could do instead (Wong et al. 2014).

Setting expectations and providing rationales for prosocial behaviors are also important. Providing



ongoing, specific feedback for using the target behavior sets the tone for the community and reminds students of the expected behavior.

In addition to creating and reinforcing expectations throughout the school year, teachers may select read-alouds to teach prosocial behaviors, such as acceptance, belonging, empathy, and collaboration. Understanding other's feelings helps all children in the classroom be more empathetic. For example, if Sarah is playing alone at recess, her peers might be more likely to approach her and invite her to play with them if they have listened to and discussed stories about belonging and empathy.

In Mrs. Jackson's classroom, one of the rules the children decide on is "Be a caring friend." Mrs. Jackson asks the children, "What does being a caring friend look like?" Students' answers include reading to each other, sharing crayons, sharing toys, playing together at recess, and helping each other tie shoes.

Throughout the day, Mrs. Jackson gently reminds students about the rules. For example, before recess she says, "Okay, everyone, remember to be a caring friend. How can you be a caring friend at recess?" Later, Mrs. Jackson notices Andre playing by himself. She says to another child, "I notice Andre is playing alone in the sandbox. Could you please be a caring friend and ask if you can join him?"

Mrs. Jackson also refers to the class rules to remind specific children of behavioral expectations before activities. For example, after she observes Sarah grabbing a toy from a peer during center time, Mrs. Jackson makes a point

of reminding Sarah about the rules before the next center time. She says, "During center time it is important to remember our classroom rules. Let's review them together, Sarah." Mrs. Jackson walks through each rule, providing examples specific to center time. She describes to Sarah what it looks like to keep your hands to yourself during center time and how to ask to share toys, and she checks Sarah's understanding by asking Sarah to show her what she will do.

4. The physical environment supports all children's health and safety

It is critical that the teacher create an environment where children feel physically safe (e.g., children can move around freely without obstacles; materials are easily accessible), and that supports "young children's physiological needs for activity, sensory stimulation, fresh air, rest, and nourishment" (NAEYC 2009, 17). Teachers can meet these needs through centers—play and sensory centers encourage movement and activity as well as social interaction. Research suggests social interactions among peers occur most frequently in water, computer, and dramatic play (e.g., house or dress up) centers where adults are not consistently present (Brown & Bergen 2002). Solitary or parallel play occurs most frequently in art, creative expression, and woodworking centers (2002). To help children learn through their senses and become more perceptive, teachers can incorporate sensory stimulation into centers that will allow them to explore on their own and with others. For

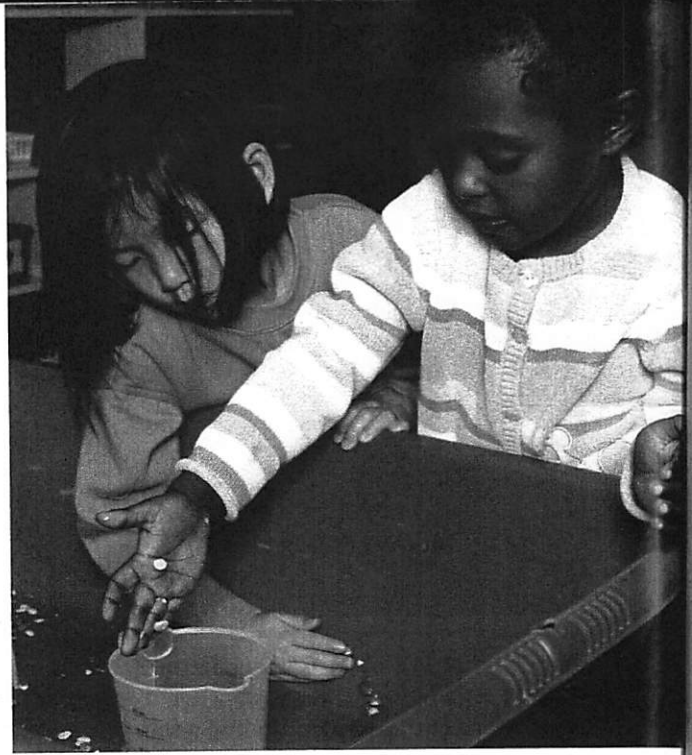
example, a teacher may create a sensory table containing materials such as sandpaper, felt, leaves, sand, Silly Putty, and playdough. Another center might have a treasure box (made from a shoebox or plastic container) with objects of different sizes, colors, and textures, such as cotton balls, pipe cleaners, ribbon, and rocks.

Mrs. Jackson has a sensory table in her classroom. She decides to begin scaffolding sensory experiences by having the children describe what they experience to each other. Mrs. Jackson says to the small group at the table, "Andre and Tabitha are squishing the sand. I wonder how it feels. Andre, Tabitha, tell us how the sand feels when you squeeze it between your fingers." Tabitha quickly responds, saying "It feels scratchy between my fingers." Andre needs support to verbalize what he is sensing. He holds one hand up, saying "Hot," and pushes the other hand to the bottom of the sand box, saying "Cold." Mrs. Jackson smiles and says, "Andre has noticed that the sand at the bottom of the box is cold, but that sand warms up quickly when he holds it."

5. Teachers ensure that children feel emotionally safe

Students need to feel psychologically safe in their classrooms. Teachers need to create a classroom space and schedule that are inviting but also structured and predictable. Perhaps most importantly, by modeling acceptance, risk-taking, making mistakes, and scaffolding children's ability to do so, teachers foster curiosity, motivate children to learn, and minimize children's fear of being wrong. Differentiating instruction is also essential for creating a psychologically safe environment in which children are respected for what they can do and supported in building their knowledge and skills. Each child deserves to be challenged, without any assumption that current ability in one area is a strong indicator of potential in another.

Students are keenly aware of how teachers feel about them; therefore, teachers need to demonstrate that they value and respect all children. As part of this, children's home languages and cultures should be represented in the classroom and integrated in activities throughout the year (NAEYC 2009). Teachers can



- › Interview families to promote collaboration and connectedness between home and school, including better understanding the child's home language practices.
- › Integrate children's home languages by labeling supplies and areas in English and in children's home languages; integrate children's home cultures by inviting family members to share unique items, such as a dreidel or maracas.
- › Invite families to the classroom to share stories about their cultures; send home audio recorders for family members to read books or tell stories in their home languages that children can use during centers.

Overall, building on a child's home life and culture allows the child to feel emotionally safe and welcomed in a learning environment.

Conclusion

A caring community of learners creates the foundation for supporting positive peer relationships in inclusive early childhood classrooms. Developing an environment where students feel they belong, are valued, and care about one another will set the stage for them to form positive peer relationships and acquire social skills, and will reflect a successful inclusive environment (Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou 2011). Promoting children's social development, encouraging children to interact, and

providing guidance to support children are reflective of the DEC Recommended Practices in early intervention/early childhood special education (DEC 2014). While students with disabilities may need additional support to become socially competent, the strategies listed above will set the foundation for a socially inclusive environment for all children.

Mrs. Jackson is pleased to see that after implementing the suggested strategies she learned in her graduate class, her kindergarten classroom feels like a community. She notices peers are more accepting of Andre and Sarah and are inviting them to play during centers and recess. She observes that all of the children have benefited from the strategies—more children participate in class, offer assistance to one another, and play together. Mrs. Jackson will continue to integrate these strategies throughout the school year to maintain a sense of community.

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