

# The Inclusion-Classroom Problem Solver

Structures and Supports  
to Serve All Learners

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*To my husband Stephen and my daughters, Stephanie and Julia*



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# 5

## Classroom Climate

This chapter is mostly about practical ways to build a supportive, friendly, interdependent classroom group. But first, let me take a minute to review the way that some students come to us with particular labels—a condition which especially challenges us to include them educationally, socially, and personally in our classroom community.

By law, before you can recommend that a child be evaluated for an IEP, you must discuss the child's challenges at a meeting of other faculty members (sometimes called a *child study group*), brainstorm ways to help him, and try these suggestions in your classroom. (If a parent requests an evaluation, this requirement is waived.) If the child fails to respond, the child study group may (with his parents' consent) refer the child for testing. Over the next few weeks, a battery of standardized assessments will be administered to try to determine whether his problems at school are caused by a learning disability. Sometimes the testing will clearly reveal a significant disability. Other times, the results are not conclusive. A child may be having evident difficulty, but there is no compelling evidence of a learning disability. However, without inclusive structural supports, he will fall further and further behind. So we all have students, both labeled and unlabeled, who need our careful support.

It can be challenging to integrate accommodations into a regular classroom. The accommodations must not only fit many different children's needs but also be applied consistently; if they are simply plopped into an environment not generally supportive of diverse learners, they probably will not work. Both the teacher and the child end up feeling even more insecure.

But when you change your lens—take the attitude that learning must work for all—and build supports into the structure of your classroom, the situation

isn't so tough after all. It is then a relatively easy task to add the accommodations that will make a difference. Here are some suggestions for helping the children with learning needs in your inclusive classroom:

- Repeat directions and important information: tell the class what you are going to tell them, tell it to them, then tell them what you told them.
- Ask children to repeat directions back to you, so you are sure they understand.
- Write directions on the board as you say them.
- Format written directions in a step-by-step list, not as a run-on paragraph.
- Put daily homework assignments on your website or on a recording reachable through your phone extension; children who need a reminder or who were absent will have a quick and easy way to get the information.
- Assign children a homework buddy who will check whether they have recorded the work correctly in their assignment book at the end of the day, and whom they can call in the evening if they get confused.
- Post a calendar in your room that indicates holidays, special assemblies, the starting dates for new units, and due dates for long-term assignments and all intermediary steps.
- Have each child maintain a math notebook containing math aids, math vocabulary definitions, practical problem-solving information, and examples.
- Set up a take-a-number-please or sign-up system for children who need your help while they are working independently, so they can continue to work while they wait their turn.
- Schedule some movement into the day—going from sitting at desks to meeting on the rug, working in small groups, moving from one work station to another.
- Give credit for and feedback on both process and product.
- Send a postcard home telling parents something good their child did that day.

As you incorporate these inclusive routines and supportive habits, you will see positive results. Don't be too hard on yourself or on your class; habits take time to establish, both for you and for the children. Incorporate changes in routines at a comfortable pace. Taking small steps is fine as long as you are still moving forward.

Also, when establishing new routines, it is important to keep trying. When something doesn't turn out as planned, remember you are developing knowledge and skills by attempting, reflecting, adjusting, and trying again. When you habitually think about supporting all types of learners and incorporating accommodations that increase your effectiveness and the likelihood that all children will be successful, the ratio of "good days" to "bad days" will increase, and the severity of the tough ones will decrease for both you and the students.

Understanding what diverse students experience in the classroom leads to new ways of thinking about the curriculum and planning lessons. As you set up your classroom to support all learners and cultivate an inclusive mindset, your efforts will become more and more effective. You will find that within this structure, you can do what you do best: teach and engage children with your own style and your own personality. These are some of the positive results:

- More engaging lessons. You may develop and present interesting, real-life problems and situations.
- More successful group work. Children will be able to work in pairs and in small homogeneous or heterogeneous groups much more efficiently. You will have more opportunities to talk with children about their thinking and perform other types of informal assessments.
- More time in which to plan and assign challenging work and to modify assignments to accommodate those with the highest and lowest skills. Each child encounters tasks with appropriate demands and thus remains actively engaged, experiences success, and makes progress.
- More time in which to provide feedback aimed at helping every child build on what he or she knows in order to understand more and become more skillful.
- A feeling that the class is a special community. Hand-tailored classroom rituals, unique ways to celebrate work well done, special names for classroom routines, all make being in your class a memorable experience and contribute to the feeling of unity.

## ■ Being Yourself

As you set up your systems and procedures and plan your lessons, what you are really doing is developing your own style as an inclusion teacher. Inclusion teachers come in all varieties. Some are sweet, some are gruff.

I have been going to school now for six years. Some of those school years were soft and gentle, and some were hard, cold years. It de-

pended a lot on the kind of teachers I had. It also depended on me. The best year so far is this year. This year has a good heart. And that's because the heart of this year is Mr. Larson. (Clements, 1999)

If you've read *The Landry News* by Andrew Clements, you know Mr. Larson is not a perfect teacher, but he has lots of good qualities. He is reflective, doesn't hold a grudge, has respect for his students, and he provides experiences that are real, complex, and interesting. There are many jobs to do in the classroom, and all the children take part to the best of their ability. But most of all, Mr. Larson's students understand that their teacher has a good heart. That is what really matters to kids—and that is the beginning of a positive classroom climate.

You do not have to be funny or be an entertainer or know how to play a musical instrument to be a good teacher. When kids know you are on their side and like them for who they are, warts and all, they will like you for who you are, warts and all, right back. In an inclusive classroom, all children, including those with IEPs, feel they are important and welcome and able to succeed every day. The structures and habits you establish will make your classroom safe, collegial, and supportive for all (even the most able children worry about failing). Diverse learners will progress at their own pace, and the typical and advanced children at theirs, all with appropriate support. Your class will run more smoothly, and everyone will be ready to learn.

Teaching is a profession that requires you to be your authentic self, but that can be very hard to do when you are starting out or implementing a new method. While you are finding your way, it is more than okay to replicate the techniques you read about or others give you. Get as much advice and help as you can: it is all valuable, especially when given by talented teachers who have had successful careers and can give you many tips.

Successful teachers have developed a unique style that makes them memorable to the children lucky enough to be in their classes. Some of their ideas may work well for you too, but not all of the specifics may translate. Maybe you're a forty-five-year-old woman who became a teacher after many years in another career, and you're trying to emulate the style of a twenty-eight-year-old man who began teaching right out of college. The ideas make sense, look like fun, and work great for him, but when you try them, the fit isn't quite right. Maybe you adapt them to make them your own, maybe you find other ideas that work better, but you're thankful for the tips.

When you discover a great strategy, use it; then reflect on what worked, what didn't, and how to make it your own. Remember what it feels like to start something new, because that's what changing to inclusive teaching is. It's hard in the beginning, but it gets easier. Keep this in mind as you take courses

and read books, including this one, and begin to incorporate various ideas into your teaching practices.

## ■ Expectations, Tolerance, and Accepting Differences

High expectations have a huge effect on student achievement. We've all read articles or seen movies (*Stand and Deliver* is one) about educators who have accomplished great things in their classrooms because it never occurs to them that their students might fail. I love classroom posters that state the teacher's high expectations for the class or ask children to have high expectations for themselves. But over time I've concluded that while high expectations are necessary, we need to communicate these expectations in the right way. Tolerating and accepting cognitive and learning differences is every bit as important as having high expectations.

Beneficial high expectations result from the following ideals:

- Presenting achievable challenges
- Providing the tools and support students need to meet these challenges
- Believing you can teach all the children in your class everything they are required to learn
- Being willing to use a different instructional strategy and/or develop an alternative assessment of a skill when appropriate

Having high expectations for your students and a commitment that you will do what is necessary to help them meet those expectations shows your students that there are two sides to the pact. They become more actively engaged in learning and begin to understand their role (to construct knowledge for themselves) and their responsibility (to ask for the help they need when they need it), and we provide the support they need. As these subtle messages take hold and children demonstrate their ability to measure up to expectations—their own, their teacher's, and their classmates'—they develop increasing confidence in themselves as learners.

There is another form of high expectation—the “cheerleader” type. This is easier to implement, but it is dangerous, particularly in inclusive classrooms. Teachers who believe in this kind of encouragement are always surprised when it doesn't work. They use it in good faith, believing it will help their students rise to ever greater heights. They tell their students, “I know you can do it!” convinced that this will make the difference. And maybe it will, if all the students have the knowledge and tools to solve a difficult problem and the innate tenacity and confidence to keep trying until they succeed. Otherwise, it is doomed.

Cheerleading is most risky in classrooms that include students with learning differences and challenges, because it is one sided. The implicit message is, *I have presented the material and given you directions. My job is done. You should be able to do this work if you really try.* There is no corresponding expectation the teacher has to meet. When children fail, the blame falls squarely, and only, on them.

The damage failing to meet these expectations does to children's self-confidence and their sense of being part of the class is compounded if the teacher becomes annoyed. This loudly and clearly states that there is one way to learn, and if you are unable to do it, you have disappointed your teacher. Children feel the others in the class see them as a failure, and they begin to see themselves that way as well.

Imagine if it happened to you.

What if the principal of your school gave all the teachers a computer disc containing a tutorial and told you each to create a classroom web page to add to the school Web site, everything to be up and running in time to be unveiled at the PTO meeting the following week? Within a few days, all of your colleagues have installed serviceable web pages that have all the required features. However, you've never done anything like this before and, if you're honest, admit to being a technophobe.

You work really hard on yours, but when you upload your page and click your name on the menu, nothing happens. You ask other teachers for help, but they're busy and tell you everything you need to know is in the tutorial. You keep trying, but the day before the deadline, you have to tell the principal you need more time. He rolls his eyes, and word gets around that the reason the new web pages can't be announced at the PTO meeting is because yours isn't working. Last week, you thought of yourself as an intelligent person who just wasn't good with computers. Now you feel a whole lot less intelligent and competent than everyone else.

What went wrong? The principal's expectation motivated you to try hard, but you started from less than zero. You had less experience and ability in this area than the rest of the faculty. When you ran into difficulty, the principal's expectation didn't help you accomplish the task. You needed *a higher level of assistance*. If he had said initially, "I will make sure you have all the tech support you need to learn how to do it," would that have made a difference? Of course it would, because the responsibility would have been shared, as it should be. Expectations are important, but you also need the necessary tools, instruction, and assistance.

That this kind of experience has the power to make us question our ability and self-worth is something to think about. If this had happened to someone

else, you would have told your colleague it wasn't his fault: "It doesn't mean you can't learn it, it just means you need more help." But none of that mattered when it happened to you. The reaction of the principal and the fact that your colleagues knew about your ineptitude made you feel even worse. You were letting everyone down, including yourself. (And even getting the thing to work eventually wouldn't help very much—too little, too late.)

Children feel the same way, and these feelings have a big impact on how they see themselves and how they feel about school. Having a teacher who is intolerant of cognitive differences can be devastating. A teacher who appears annoyed or upset with a child who cannot do the work or is unable to focus or exhibits any other kind of uncontrollable behavior is making a negative judgment. The judgment is very apparent to the child and to the rest of the class and sends a powerful negative message.

Year to year, children show observable differences in achievement depending on their teacher's tolerance for their learning style and on the accommodations the teacher supplies. In extreme cases, vulnerable children can be made to appear much more severely challenged than they are, a cause for misery all around. Understanding and accommodating disabilities goes a long way toward reducing feelings of impatience and helping us better support our students.

All children want to do well in school. Teachers who believe everyone belongs provide children with individually appropriate expectations and give them the tools and information they need, which when combined with the children's own effort leads to success. They accept children as they are, determine their needs, and supply the supports necessary for the children to be successful. Defining yourself as an inclusion teacher and learning what it takes to make appropriate accommodations gives you the tools to be one of those teachers. It gives you permission to let children progress from where they are. Together, you and your students will then celebrate successes and approach any problems as something to be analyzed and collaboratively solved.

## ■ Self-Assessment

It's easy to read about how to be a great inclusion teacher and become excited about the ideas; it's a lot harder to map a path from where you are to where you want to be. The assessment in Figure 5.1 is based on my observation of a number of educators, all of whom were dedicated inclusion teachers. It's not comprehensive—it's an initial screening meant to help you think about different aspects of your job and figure out where you are on the road to becoming a teacher who uses inclusive practices and is able to connect with and teach



Figure 5.1 *An inclusive-teacher assessment*

Circle the one description in each row that best describes you.

Great (3 points for each one circled)	Good (2 points for each one circled)	Needs Improvement (1 point for each one circled)
You have a great deal of tolerance for different learning styles and special needs.	You are tolerant of different learning styles and special needs.	You have little tolerance for different learning styles and special needs.
You believe accommodations are necessary for some and good for all.	You are willing to use an accommodation when a particular child needs it.	You believe some accommodations give children an unfair advantage.
You use paraprofessionals to help children advance their skills.	You use paraprofessionals to help children complete assignments.	You use paraprofessionals to keep the classroom running: control behavior, organize materials, etc.
You have a clear and detailed knowledge of each child's strengths, weaknesses, and learning needs.	You know where each child falls in the class hierarchy. You know the needs of the lower third of the class.	You know the weaknesses of the poorer performing students in the class.
You analyze curriculum in relation to a continuum of knowledge and what you know about the children in your class, then plan your lessons accordingly.	You sometimes adapt some lessons for some children in the class.	You use the curriculum as it was written and seldom make changes for a particular student.
All kids—typical and those with special needs—hope to be in your class.	Children are happy to be in your class.	Special-needs children and their parents may find being in your class difficult.
You really like every child in your class; while you see similarities to other children you have taught, you view each one as a unique and interesting person.	The children in your class are great; you get a handle on them quickly because you have had similar children in your class in previous years.	Most of the children in your class are great, but there are some who definitely rub you the wrong way.
All children in your class are successful every day.	Children in your class are successful at least half the time.	There are some children in your class who are rarely successful.

Highest score = 24

all types of learners. It's also meant to help you see that small changes in outlook, added together over time, make a big difference in how you define yourself, how you do your job, and how effectively you function in a classroom of diverse learners. When you implement inclusion practices—and the habits that go along with them—in your classroom, you will see automatic changes in your profile. Keep in mind that all habits take time to establish but once established become automatic and are effortless to maintain.

While your score on this quiz is certainly not scientific, it might be a good way to start thinking about where you are on the path toward becoming a full-inclusion teacher. It can also be useful to take this quiz with a group of colleagues and talk through the questions and implications together.

## ■ The Classroom Community

Accommodations that are well integrated into the classroom structure become invisible. In a classroom set up for inclusion, children with diverse needs do not stand out; the supports help children succeed academically without making them appear different and possibly getting in the way of collaborative learning relationships. Children who succeed socially as well as academically are invested in being a part of the class, which is the best motivation to behave well and exert themselves. Children who feel supported, who know the tasks they are given are appropriate and attainable, and who have warm relationships with their classmates and their teacher like school and enjoy learning. In contrast, a child who feels like an outsider will not like school and may either shut down academically or be disruptive.

Making sure children form friendships and are accepted by their peers is as essential to their academic success as giving them preferential seating, step-by-step instruction, or extra time to finish a task. The proof is all around us. Adults who enjoy their work and their peers are much more likely to be successful than those who hate their job and count the minutes.

Part of our responsibility as teachers is to make sure every child in the classroom is safe, both physically and emotionally. While all children (and all adults too, for that matter) need help with relationships now and then, some children have more difficulty forming friendships than others do. Most teachers and parents agree that if a child is friendly with all her classmates (that is, if no one is bullying or teasing her, and she is not bullying or teasing anyone) and has one or two good friends to sit with, talk to, and play with, she is on firm ground socially. As teachers, we need to take notice of children who are being teased or bullied. These children may be introverted and have a hard

time making social connections, or they may have learning differences that make their behavior seem different or odd.

Classroom rules are the first step in establishing a positive culture in which students are safe and friendships can flourish. These rules, based on the golden rule (treat others as you would like to be treated), should be discussed with and agreed to by the children. Indeed, many smart teachers negotiate classroom rules and procedures with students, rather than posting teacher-made regulations at the start of the year. With bigger kids, you can make a project of writing a Classroom Constitution—a nice combination of social studies content and group development (Beane, 2005). Whatever process you use to ensure student cooperation, it's important to post the resulting rules in the room: often, disputes can then be settled by the children themselves, who use the poster to determine when a transgression has occurred.

Unfortunately, we can't assign a friend as we can assign a reading buddy, but there are many things we *can* do. Dr. William Glasser (1992), whose work is the foundation for the Creating the Peaceable School program, states that all behavior is motivated by four basic needs: (1) the need to belong, which is fulfilled by caring, sharing, and cooperating with others (in the higher grades this is manifested by dressing in similar ways and liking the same music); (2) the need for power, which is fulfilled by achieving, accomplishing, and being recognized and respected; (3) the need for freedom, which is fulfilled by making choices; and (4) the need to have fun, which is fulfilled by laughing, playing, and experiencing enjoyment. An inclusive classroom makes steps toward meeting these needs.

Cooperative learning projects are a very effective way for children to interact, work together, and get to know one another. Ensuring that every child in the room at some point works with every other child fosters the feeling that the class is a group in which everyone is an equal member. Establishing classroom routines and unique celebrations and activities make the classroom feel like a family or special club.

The need for freedom is satisfied because there is no one right way to solve a problem or do the work. In the inclusive classroom, children can show what they know and share their strategies and thinking in a variety of ways. This adds to the feeling of being a community of learners who work together, listen to one another, and learn from one another.

The need for fun is met when lessons are engaging and interesting: incorporating many styles of giving and receiving information.

But an inclusive classroom makes the biggest difference in satisfying the need for power. Typical learners usually have no trouble feeling recognized for

a job well done, but diverse learners don't experience such recognition unless structures are in place to support their needs and guarantee their success. When children aren't successful academically, Glasser states they may try to fulfill their need for power in the following ways:

- Bossing other children around, always insisting things are done their way in the classroom and on the playground
- Taking enjoyment from pointing out someone else's mistakes
- Monopolizing conversations and/or bragging about what they have or things they've done
- Teasing, bullying, or starting rumors about other students

Looked at this way, this sort of inappropriate behavior can be seen as what it is: children's attempt to satisfy their need for power and feel better about themselves—a futile attempt that is bound to fail and quite possibly harm other students.

When students are recognized for making progress at their own rate and moving forward, several things happen. First, they are no longer motivated to satisfy their need for power in undesirable ways. Second, they begin to work harder on assignments and value the progress they make toward achieving their personal goals. Third, their image, in their eyes and the eyes of their classmates, changes from that of a troublemaker and a slacker to that of a learner. When the need for power is fulfilled, children can begin to form relationships that turn into friendships.

## ■ Promoting Friendships

Since we have established that friendly relationships are important to children's academic success, it follows that teaching children how to form productive and satisfying friendships is something we should spend time on. From the beginning of the year on, it helps to have a class meeting every week or two. (These meetings don't have to be long; fifteen or twenty minutes are usually sufficient.) At the first meeting, the class should establish the rules for their classroom, as discussed earlier. The rest of the meetings become forums in which to address conflicts and discuss what it means to be a friend and a member of a learning community.

A good way to begin a discussion of friendship is to dispel some of the myths surrounding it. Ask your students to take the quiz in Figure 5.2. When you discuss the results, emphasize that making friends takes time and that many people need only one or two good friends. Sometimes children worry that they

**Figure 5.2** *Friendship, true or false*

It is easy for most people to make friends. T F  
It is important to have a lot of friends. T F  
People can always tell right away if they are going to be friends. T F  
True friends never disagree or argue. T F  
If you have friends, you never feel lonely. T F  
Being best friends means you are always together. T F  
It is important to have friends that are popular. T F  
Your friends should like you for who you are. T F  
You can have more than one good friend. T F  
Some people like having a lot of friends. T F  
Some people are happy with just a few friends. T F  
Making friends takes time. T F

Answers: F, F, F, F, F, F, F, T, T, T, T, T

Based on information at The United States Department of Health and Human Services Web site at <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/SMA-3716/making.asp>.

are the only ones who have difficulty making friends, and it is reassuring to know that others face the same problem.

Next, ask your class what they think makes someone a good friend and record their answers on chart paper, sharing the things you value in your friends as well. Here are some possible responses:

Good friends:

- Smile at each other and have a positive attitude
- Have a good sense of humor
- Have similar interests
- Share their things with each other
- Give honest compliments
- Show that they like each other by listening to each other and sharing things about themselves
- Invite each other to do things or go to each other's house
- Spend time with each other

After you talk about this list, ask the students what kind of person they would *not* want to be friends with. Here are some possible ideas:

People who would not be a good friend:

- Are mean or bullies
- Always have to get their way, are too bossy
- Make jokes about others and laugh at them
- Exclude people from games or groups and try to get others to do the same
- Brag and show off
- Have a negative attitude and bother other people when they are trying to work
- Are copycats, try to act like you instead of being themselves
- Lie, cheat, or steal

To have a friend, you must be a friend. During your periodic class meetings throughout the year, continue this conversation about relationships. You can talk about problems as they arise, and the children can discuss solutions in a neutral, nonthreatening atmosphere and in general terms, no names mentioned. Many activities and suggestions for promoting friendships can be found at The United States Department of Health and Human Services Web site at <http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/SMA-3716/making.asp>.

Although you can't just tell children to be friends, if you see a friendship beginning to blossom or feel two children would be compatible, you can arrange for them to work together in the classroom a bit more than usual, thus giving them more time together to interact and to get to know each other. You can also let parents know whom their children are friendly with in school; the parents might then arrange after-school or weekend activities with their children's friends.

Some children simply may not know how to broach friendship and may need more help. Perhaps they are very shy and need encouragement. Or perhaps they have some degree of autism or have difficulty interpreting nonverbal communication. If children are being treated by the school's speech and language pathologist, perhaps the pathologist can set up periodic "lunch bunches" to help these children increase their social skills. During a group meeting, talk about how to approach someone you would like to know better. One of the simplest ways to show you would like to be friends with someone is to smile at them. Have children turn to the person next to them and say, "Hi, can I join your game?" first with a scowl, then with a neutral expression, and finally with a smile. Ask them how they felt after each invitation—did the person's facial expression make a difference?

Asking children what they like to do to relax and have fun can help them figure out what they want in a friend. It's also good for them to think about

which activities are more fun with another person and which are better done alone, and what possessions they may not want to share. Thinking about the things they enjoy doing may also prompt them to come up with new activities they would like to try.

Speech and language pathologists or guidance counselors often use the following approach to teach children how to start conversations:

- *Give a compliment:* “That’s a cool t-shirt” (perhaps it has a picture of a sports team or a musical group).
- *Then ask a follow-up question:* “Have you ever gone to one of their games (concerts)?”
- If the child responds yes, *make a positive statement:* “That must have been fun. I’d like to hear about it.”

This strategy should prompt several back-and-forth exchanges, and practicing it with the teacher can make it easier for a shy student (or one with a non-verbal learning disability) to approach another child.

During your class discussions on how to be a friend and keep a friend, make the following points:

- You mustn’t take friends for granted. You need to show your friends you care about them.
- Friends listen to what they say to one another and share things about themselves: what they like, what they think, what is happening in their lives.
- Close friendships develop when you like other people for themselves, not for their possessions or because they are popular.
- You need to spend time with friends. Try to think of fun things to do with your friends outside school.
- It takes time to make a friend; friendships get stronger over time.
- It’s okay if your friends spend time with other people; you have to give them space.
- It’s great to make new friends, but be sure you keep your old ones too.

Discussions like these provide a basis for dealing with relationship difficulties in general and those between specific children. Having an established framework will help you determine whether the problem can be alleviated by changing the way you deliver your instruction (giving students more opportunities to experience success, for example) or by reminding specific children how friends behave with one another.

## In Summary

Establishing the habits and routines of generosity and acceptance in a classroom is essential. They take time to develop, but once they are established, they are easy to maintain.

The supportive and inclusive climate and accommodations established in a classroom will help all children, not only those with an IEP.

We need to have high expectations that our students can succeed and correspondingly high expectations for ourselves as teachers who are able to help them succeed.

Friendships are essential if children are to be successful in school. As teachers we must provide an environment in which all children are emotionally safe and where friendships can grow.

Ongoing discussion of and work on friendship issues is an important part of the classroom culture.





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