

## Inclusive Classrooms: Achieving Success for All Students

by Kathleen G. Winterman

First grade teacher, Mrs. Sheridan, announces, “Let’s start meeting.” The children quickly gather in the front of the classroom, on the rug where their morning meeting is held. She says, “Let’s start with a song.” Mrs. Sheridan stands in front of the children, who instantly form a circle, standing shoulder to shoulder, around the perimeter of the rug. A familiar song begins to play on the CD player. Eric is to the right of Matthew, and Rachel is to his left. The children follow Mrs. Sheridan’s lead as together they perform the motions for the song. They dance along and laugh as the song progresses. Matthew, however, jumps up and down and makes noises in-between motions, a behavior that is off-task and self-distracting. Rachel helps him regain his focus by demonstrating the motions that Mrs. Sheridan showed them earlier, standing in front of Matthew just as Mrs. Sheridan had done in front of the class. She also taps him on the shoulder to redirect him when he turns away from the group. The song ends. Rachel puts her arm around Matthew’s waist in friendship as they wait for the next song to begin. The song begins and Matthew and the other children begin to make the song’s motions.

This classroom scene illustrates what has been learned from numerous studies: Simply placing children such as Matthew who have disabilities into the school’s mainstream is not sufficient in bringing about their integration and social inclusion. Federal mandates (IDEA, 2004) require that public schools serve all children. Often students with special needs can be physically included with their peers, but their limited social skills hamper their true inclusion. Mere placement of students with disabilities within a general education classroom does not necessarily promote the growth and development of their social skills. For children with disabilities to

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### Figure 1. Guiding Principles of the Responsive Classroom® Approach

- The social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum.
- How children learn is as important as what they learn; process and content go hand in hand.
- The greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction.
- There is a set of social skills that children need to learn and practice to be successful academically and socially: cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control.
- Knowing the children we teach – individually, culturally, and developmentally – is as important as knowing the content we teach.
- Knowing the families of the children we teach and inviting their participation is essential to children’s education.
- How the adults at school work together is as important as individual competence: lasting change begins with the adult community.

Source: Northeast Foundation for Children, Inc. (2011).

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be successful members of their classroom community, a carefully planned intervention strategy that considers the educational and social-emotional needs of all members must be incorporated, ideally starting prior to the inclusion of students with disabilities that affect their social inclusion. Using the example of Matthew’s experience, this article suggests one such intervention strategy that can support social inclusion: the Responsive Classroom® approach.

### Supporting Social Inclusion for Students with Disabilities

One of the key factors in Matthew’s successful inclusion in his first grade classroom is the school’s implementation of the Responsive Classroom® approach. Because of this approach, his classroom provides a trusting, caring environment in which all children learn social and academic skills; all educational professionals and parents collaborate; and peer partners support Matthew’s participation in group activities and specific projects. The Responsive Classroom® instructional approach integrates the teaching of academic and social skills as an aspect of everyday classroom life. Teachers and students work together

to establish a trusting, caring environment as they build a social community through routine events. While this curricular model was not specifically designed to support students with special needs, if we see children with disabilities as children first, we can use this approach to build an emotionally secure school community in which they will risk showing us their world, and be more likely to experience social inclusion and school success.

One tenet of the Responsive Classroom® is that the social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum (see Figure 1). As teachers embrace this learning philosophy, they typically use the following 10 classroom practices (Northeast Foundation for Children, Inc., 2011):

- Morning Meeting
- Rule Creation
- Interactive Modeling
- Positive Teacher Language
- Logical Consequences
- Guided Discovery
- Academic Choice
- Classroom Organization
- Working with Families
- Collaborative Problem Solving

Although many of these practices are used by Mrs. Sheridan, Matthew's favorite is the Morning Meeting. The Responsive Classroom® model utilizes daily routine events to help further students' social interaction and growth. Morning Meeting is comprised of a time for greeting, during which all children welcome each other; sharing, in which children discuss events in their lives; group activities, in which all participate; and a more teacher-directed aspect of news and announcements. This time allows all children to hear clearly what is expected of them, participate with all their peers in the group, and internalize the expectation that all students participate equally as members of the classroom community (Winterman, 2003; Northeast Foundation for Children, 2011). It is a time to build unity and friendships as well as specific skills training (Winterman & Sapon, 2002). Once students enter the classroom door, they are beginning to learn. Those first few moments set the tone for learning and accentuate what is valued in the environment. By joining together as a cohesive group, students are empowered and everyone's contributions are valued. Students learn to take risks that help them grow socially when they feel their thoughts will be respected, and Morning Meeting helps to create a climate of trust and respect (Kriete, 1999).

In Mrs. Sheridan's classroom, it is during Morning Meeting that she establishes expectations and teaches the students how to model appropriate behaviors to each other. This modeling is then repeated in actions such as Rachel's demonstration of the song's motions to Matthew to help him stay focused and in sync with his classmates. Although peers are rarely considered as a foundation of support for students with disabilities in the public schools, effective interventions require adults to look beyond the child's own world to see how they fit in their peer culture and school community. Within the Responsive Classroom® framework, a primary goal for educational team members supporting students with special needs is to work

together to create an optimal climate for the children to learn social concepts that enhance their attainment of social skills. And in Matthew's experience with Rachel we see that partnership in action. The Responsive Classroom® philosophy states that every child can contribute care for others in many ways – by listening, responding with relevance and attention, by showing concern for feelings and viewpoints, and by developing a capacity for empathy (Charney, 1991). Creating community means giving children the power to care. Rachel is confident in expressing her caring for Matthew as she helps him to participate in the song in the same way as his classmates, and he benefits by further developing his social awareness and skills, and participating as a valued group member.

### ***The Impact of Responsive Classrooms® for All Children***

The social curriculum and predictability established in a Responsive Classroom® affords students the context for effective social partnerships. All classroom members learn together how to become part of a social community that welcomes all. This approach provides both adult-mediated and peer-mediated strategies to assist in the social inclusion of students. Responsive Classroom® activities get everyone participating and help them internalize the expectation that all students are valued members of the classroom community.

In a study of Mrs. Sheridan's first grade classroom (Winterman, 2003), 19 out of 20 students within the class who were interviewed could provide examples of how their teacher made everyone feel included. Mrs. Sheridan stated in her interview, "...all students benefited from the social experiences of the Morning Meeting. Social behaviors were taught and modeled for all...The humor, songs, and positive statements created a 'campfire' atmosphere where they could be successful. Everyone received the same amount of respect at our Morning Meeting. Everyone was treated fairly –

not equally. All the students got what they needed to be successful."

### ***Conclusion***

When exploring best practices for teaching and learning, it's important that educators consider models that place social, emotional and academic development on equal footing and do so by making use of social learning programs such as the Responsive Classroom®. While much attention has been given to the teaching of reading and mathematics, most educators have had far less exposure to strategies directed at creating a classroom community where children learn to celebrate their own unique contribution to the learning environment. Simply implementing major behavioral approaches to deal with children with special needs fails to examine the underlying need of all children to be recognized as a contributing member of their peer group. As educators we need to maximize the benefit of the natural motivation peers provide. Successful inclusive classrooms should set forth a vision where all children are not only welcomed, but challenged and supported to be their best.

**Note:** The names Mrs. Sheridan, Matthew, Rachel and Eric are pseudonyms.

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