

From Challenging Behaviors to Caring Classroom Communities:  
Reimagining the Teacher's Role in Classroom Management

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**Abstract**

From Challenging Behaviors to Caring Classroom Communities: Reimagining the Teacher's Role in Classroom Management

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This dissertation project addresses the lack of a clear set of classroom-management strategies in research literature, specifically regarding early childhood teachers' immediate or "in-the-moment" responses to children's challenging behaviors. A case study of three teachers was used to draw out five themes, each of which contributes to implications for professional development supports: 1) A teacher's belief about children's moral growth can influence his/her responses to challenging behavior; 2) A teacher's knowledge of his/her students and of his/her relationships with them can influence behavioral situations; 3) A teacher modeling caring and kind responses to behavior can help build classroom community; 4) A teacher modeling discussion, deliberation, and listening during and in response to challenging behavior can help build classroom community; 5) Flexible student mobility and placement options can support children with challenging behaviors. These themes exemplify the teachers' pedagogical approaches to children exhibiting challenging behaviors. By studying the teacher's role in the classroom, alternative strategies to classroom management and discipline can create caring classroom communities wherein all children, regardless of their behavior, have a sense of belongingness.



## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*“Very few teachers, I think, make a connection between their own rejection of children and the children’s rejection of each other” (V. Paley, personal letter, October, 2011).*

Early in my ten year teaching career, there was a boy named Tommy in my first grade classroom. He seemed unhappy and his actions often escalated into physical aggression—yelling, kicking, and pushing over chairs. He had a starring role in the principal’s office. His small, 4x4 card on the very public, classroom behavior chart was always on “red,” or even worse, “white” (a “white” card denoted a phone call home and a trip up to the principal). The class members’ dropped jaws and gasps always followed him as he walked over to the chart on the wall to change his card from whatever color it was on to “white.” Tommy was constantly banished, both literally and symbolically, from our little classroom of seventeen students. Trying to balance Tommy’s disruptions and classroom learning regularly exhausted me. His behavior also influenced his academic progress and his personal relationships with other students. Over the course of the school year he did not learn how to read, and he made virtually no improvement in other subjects. He wanted friends and tried to make them, but was always rejected. No one ever wanted to play with him, even though he tried to join in play daily. Classmates continually told him he could not play with them or they would run away when they saw him coming. Reflecting back, Tommy was certainly not an accepted member of my classroom community. Although he tried over and over to gain a sense of belonging, including demonstrating disruptive behaviors, all of his efforts were futile.

Before the school year began, Tommy’s previous teacher warned me that he would be my student. In the conversation that followed, it became clear that she did not like him and wanted me to be ready. Over the course of his first grade year in my classroom, I found that stories about

Tommy's misbehaviors, aggressive outbursts on the playground, unpopularity and alienation from teachers and students alike, were common.

One day I was at the front of the classroom teaching a math lesson when Tommy suddenly started to distract the entire group with disruptive behaviors—yelling, poking his desk neighbor, and teetering and falling out of his chair. I got upset. I was frustrated. I scolded him in front of the entire class. My booming voice was firm and unkind. “Tommy! Stop! You need to sit still. Be quiet. You are taking away from the rest of the class's learning. Change your card to ‘white.’” Then, I noticed that Tommy not only hung his head and slumped his entire body over his desk, but Alex, sitting two desks away from him, looked sad and shocked. Alex started to cry. I had scared him. In that moment of clarity, I knew my actions toward Tommy had an incredible impact not only on Tommy, but on the rest of my class as well. My immediate outward response, which looked quite a bit like dislike for Tommy, showed the entire class that he was not accepted by me, his classroom teacher. Looking back, I realized that almost all of my responses to any of Tommy's challenging behaviors looked like they did that day during the math lesson. Often I was calmer but he still “got in trouble.”

Because I had only a few years of teaching under my belt I thought that having a well-run classroom meant I needed to have firm discipline to maintain order. My classroom management was built on rewards and punishments, as were all the management styles of the teachers in my school. On my behavior chart it was always the same kids whose cards were on “red.” My behavior modification strategies for Tommy were simple—point out unacceptable behaviors (sometimes harshly), change his card, and send him to the office. I secretly felt relief when he left my classroom because afterward there were no more disruptions. I now realize that my behaviors and responses toward Tommy contributed to a cycle of rejection from not only me, but

in turn, from his peers. I now realize that my discipline and classroom management strategies for Tommy did not contribute to his social and emotional growth, or the social and emotional growth of the rest of the class. The rest of the class was learning from me that a child with challenging behaviors was not an accepted member of our community.

After the year Tommy was in my class I heard from his subsequent teachers that his schooling was unsuccessful. The stories they shared were not news to me. They indicated that Tommy always struggled to learn, was difficult to teach, was often in trouble, and continued to be rejected by his peers. I now know that I, and other teachers, could have more effectively responded to Tommy's disruptions in ways that would have promoted peer acceptance, helped him to learn, and allowed him to be a member of our classroom and school community—a member that felt he belonged. I understand that there are numerous reasons that some children are less liked than others; however my experiences led me to wonder if the reactions of Tommy's teachers to his challenging behaviors helped to perpetuate his peer rejection and long-term learning difficulties. In my responses to his disruptive, challenging behaviors, I think I may have failed him; in the responses of his subsequent teachers to his disruptive, challenging, behaviors, I think the school may have failed him.

Tommy's story is not uncommon in elementary schools. After having taught kindergarten and first grade for ten years, I began to ruminate about Tommy and others who had similar stories. The following reflective questions continually ran through my mind during these years and laid the groundwork for this project: What alternative approaches to discipline, other than "traditional" authoritative methodologies, could be implemented for children like Tommy? How could my every day, in-the-moment responses to children's challenging behaviors have influenced their sense of belonging and acceptance in the classroom?

From my experience and observations early childhood classrooms are places where children, like Tommy, may exhibit challenging, difficult behaviors and be accepted or rejected by peers. But they are also places where children learn how to become members of a community where, ideally, the aim is to enhance students' social and moral growth (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). Peer interactions, specifically acceptance, are significant in this environment (Boutte, 2008; Paley; 1992). As a result, much energy has been spent researching the reasons for aggressive, challenging behaviors, which often result in poor peer relations, in order to develop ways to respond to it. Responses include creating inclusive strategies for rejected, aggressive children, designing social curriculum, and cultivating support for the individual vulnerable child. And yet a critical component that is significantly under-researched and under-analyzed that I address in this paper is the teacher's role. For this paper, I define the teacher's role as his or her immediate responses and behaviors *in-the-moment* of a child's challenging behavior or heated social conflict. The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the classroom teacher's everyday behaviors in response to some of the most difficult classroom moments.

### **Everyday Responses**

Early childhood classrooms are sites where challenging behaviors occur daily. Numerous social conflicts and misbehaviors occur regularly in these classrooms, and teachers are faced with the challenge of responding accordingly. For example, what does a teacher do and say immediately after a child throws dirt in another child's face on the playground? Does the teacher yell? Does the child committing the offense get automatically put in a time-out? Does the teacher facilitate the child's understanding of the conflict and/or responsive action? A teacher's reactions to these "everyday" social conflicts contribute to what I contend Dewey meant by "learning...rooted in everyday experiences" (1916). These everyday responses are the focus of

this dissertation project. I examine every day pedagogies, like those of educator and author Vivian Paley (1990/1992), for creating an accepting classroom community using discipline and management strategies such as discussions and other methodologies for promoting community and belonging and encouraging a child's emotional and moral development. This work will be of most interest for researchers and educators of young children, but is also informative to other professionals such as policy makers, social skills' curriculum developers, and creators of professional development strategies for teachers and principals in learning communities.

This dissertation emerges from the absence of an in-depth examination in the classroom management, peer rejection, and community literature of the teachers' behaviors at the immediate site of a child's challenging/aggressive acts. There is a lack of detail in the research literature and a lack of teacher tools and supports with a focus on alternative, accepting methodologies, as well as a call for a set of clear principles and skills for classroom management approaches that are alternative to traditional approaches (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). This dissertation's aim is to contribute a clear set of strategies with practical professional development tools, based on data and evidence from exemplary teachers using alternative methods (not time-outs, expulsions, humiliation, behavior charts, etc.), for classroom management and discipline.

### **Locating the Problem**

What can be learned from how teachers and students respond to children who are struggling with their behaviors in the classroom community? "Rawls (1971) has theorized that the moral development of a society may be appropriately gauged by the way in which it treats its most vulnerable members" (Peck, Gallucci, & Staub, 2002, p. 218). As young children engage in school and social communities they begin to construct their social worlds as well as their sense of self through their moral and emotional development. In this social world of early childhood

classrooms, social orders empower children to accept some and reject other peers (Ladd, Price & Hart, 1988; Ladd, Price & Hart, 1990; Paley, 1992; Serriere, 2010). In early childhood classrooms, *belongingness* simply means that students are valued for who they are and accepted in the classroom community. Osterman (2000) suggests that the desire for belongingness is a basic motivational need with significant implications for human growth and development (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci et al., 1991; Ryan, 1995). Not being accepted into the community and being rejected by peers threatens a general sense of belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). On the other hand, “The experience of belonging is associated with more positive attitudes toward self and others” (Osterman; 2000, p. 169). When children feel acceptance in the school community they have more positive relationships toward others (Baumeister & Leary; 1995, Osterman, 2000/2002). Respect and concern is demonstrated toward their peers and teachers, as well as to “their immediate friendship groups, and [they] demonstrate more altruistic or prosocial behavior” (Battistich et al., 1995; Solomon et al., 1996; Watson, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997; Wentzel, 1997) (in Osterman, p. 169).

Vivian Paley argued that play and social interactions are perhaps the most important vehicles for learning. Paley’s career as a kindergarten teacher allowed her to recognize that there was a caste system and that “certain children will have the right to limit the social experiences of their classmates” (1992, p. 3) by not allowing certain classroom members to engage in activities. If a child is not accepted or allowed to participate in play or community activities, that child’s access to his/her social and emotional development is limited (1992). In efforts to diminish a child’s rejection and promote acceptance, Paley (1990/1992) reimagined both discipline and classroom management for her students as she chose to not punish her students. Instead, she favored deliberative dialogue with her students to not only understand their perspectives, but also

for her students to understand one another's perspectives. By facilitating these discussions during a disruptive, challenging behavioral or social conflict, Paley sought to identify her students' viewpoints by observing and/or listening to their "inarticulate sadness" (p. 87), rather than imposing her perspective of how the conflict needed to be resolved. She relinquished the "time-out" chair as a form of punishment because it attributed "humiliation to the child" (V. Paley, informal interview, October 30, 2011) and, she determined, allowed no room for useful dialogue. Paley carries a deep belief that the most significant interpersonal sin would be to shame or embarrass a person publicly, including children. This belief transcended to her teachings and to her positive view of children (V. Paley, informal interview, October 30, 2011). Watson and Battistich (2006) also reminded us that children possess an innate capacity for empathy and social connection and "[p]erhaps the most important commonality of approaches to classroom management centered on community building is a positive, developmental view of children" (p. 258). These two different ideas, children having a capacity for empathy and the necessity for educators to view children in a positive light, are connected. This connection is important for this project because I hypothesize that by viewing and treating children positively, children will, in turn, exhibit empathy for their peers.

Educators and researchers are beginning to understand that punitive punishments such as "time-outs," suspensions, expulsions, and public humiliation in the form of reprimands, simply do not work to change a child's behavior (Fenning & Bohanon, 2006; Stevens, 2013). Kohn (1996) urges teachers to abandon traditional discipline systems that privilege adult control over student behavior for an alternative practice of cultivating "an engaging curriculum *and* a caring community" (p. 118). Weinstein (1999) describes shift in the discipline and classroom management paradigm (as cited in Freiberg & LaPointe, 2006, p. 774):

(a) from management as a “bag of tricks” to management as decision making that necessitates ongoing professional development, expertise in knowledge, practice, and introspection; (b) from an emphasis on obedience and compliance to procedures that advance self-direction; (c) from an emphasis on rules to the social-emotional relationships that include trust and caring; and (d) from management that is teacher-directed work (and sometimes busy work) to an active student-centered learning environment.

The emphasis of this dissertation project centers on the convergence of the discipline and classroom management paradigm shift with an approach that focuses on teachers’ immediate, everyday responses to challenging behaviors to draw out alternative methodologies for promoting acceptance in the community. My work builds on the pedagogical vision of social educators (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Boutte, 2008; Paley, 1990/1992; Shafteel, 1967; Watson & Battistich, 2006) and seeks to describe innovative pedagogies for building acceptance and a sense of belonging for all classroom community members. Particularly, these pedagogies include alternative responses from the classroom teacher that challenge the traditional authoritative discipline methods, such as those implemented in my classroom on Tommy. Similarly, documented accepting approaches to discipline urge teachers to abandon traditional forms of discipline as classroom management approaches (Kohn, 1996) for more socially just forms in early childhood education. At the heart of these approaches lie considerations for professional development and teacher support for developing an emergent inclusive environment.

In order to understand teachers’ non-traditional pedagogical methods and strategies for 1) promoting an accepting community where each child has a sense of belonging and 2) possibly reducing aggressive behaviors that can influence unacceptance and peer rejection, I posed the following questions to guide my dissertation project.:

- *In specific innovative classrooms, what are early childhood teachers' everyday, in-the-moment responses (pedagogies and immediate interventions) to children's challenging/aggressive behaviors? How do children respond to these methods?*
- *What supports or inhibits the teachers to respond (pedagogies and immediate interventions) to challenging/aggressive behaviors in ways that can promote an accepting classroom community where all children have a sense of belonging?*
- *What can be learned from teachers' everyday responses for building curricula, professional development for teachers and other materials that support inclusive, caring classroom communities?*

This dissertation project includes a qualitative case study designed to describe and unpack three teachers' innovative, nontraditional pedagogical approaches to challenging/aggressive behaviors, and classroom management where a child's moral development, peer acceptance, and belonging in a community is not only fostered, but is a primary goal. The dissertation uses the analysis of teachers' work to create a set of clear ideas and sample professional development supports for early childhood educators to build accepting classroom communities by their responses to challenging behaviors.

The following is a brief description of each chapter. In Chapter 2, I present a review of literature that is relevant to this dissertation project, including the teacher's role, classroom management, school communities, implications for children who are not accepted, and beginning to reimagine a teacher's role. Chapter 3 provides a detailed description of my methodology and approaches for conducting the case study which provided the themes outlined in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 develops a set of clear ideas for sample professional development supports that were

created from the data collected in the three classrooms. In Chapter 6, I discuss implications for practice and provide the limitations of this work.

## CHAPTER 2: INFORMING LITERATURES

The informing literatures provide a means to explore current research on the teacher's role in the classroom and the relationship between his/her role and the classroom community, classroom management, school community, implications for children who are not accepted community members and how those children are currently supported. Then, I shift to literatures that contribute to reimagining the teacher's role, which include caring theory, attachment theory, and discourse.

### The Teacher's Role

There is little question in either educational literature or in practice that a teacher's influence can be powerful—either positively (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Noddings, 1992/1996), or negatively (Midobuche, 1999). Teachers, by nature, hold immense power and authority, especially for young children (Laupa, 1991; Weber, 1999). The teacher's influence is critical because the power afforded to them by children is great. Children view teachers as the ultimate authorities in schools and they yield them more power than parents when it comes to school rules and practices (Laupa, 1991; Weber, 1999).

My studies have led me to try to understand the complexities of the teacher's role and its influence on the classroom community, classroom management strategies, and peer rejection/acceptance. This is an interconnected, two-part problem. First, there is the challenging student behavior that requires an immediate intervention by the teacher to both understand and possibly reduce the aggressive behavior. Then, there is the relationship that immediate intervention has on a child's rejection/acceptance in the classroom community. How a teacher immediately intervenes may have a substantial impact on each child in the classroom community.

## Teacher Beliefs and Their Role

Teachers maintain beliefs about how to teach children and what their classroom community should look like. Alexander, Schaller, and Hare (1991) distinguish that beliefs are a category of knowledge that “encompasses all that a person knows or believes to be true, whether or not it is verified as true in some sort of objective or external way” (p. 137). *What* teachers believe about children plays a significant role in *how* they respond and behave in the classroom. Watson and Battistich (2006) write about how beliefs about children can impede a community:

“Give them an inch and they’ll take a yard.” “Don’t smile until Christmas.” Statements like these reveal the untrusting, individualistic view of children imbedded in American popular culture and much educational practices. Such beliefs undermine the development of community. Many teachers believe that children are individually responsible for their own behavior and need to be tightly controlled and externally motivated to learn and behave well. The controlling stance and inevitable power struggles that follow from such beliefs about children will deny students the reasonable support and autonomy they need to function successfully. Neither teacher nor student will feel themselves to be part of a relational community. (pp. 272-273)

The assumption, then, is that it is a teacher’s responsibility to maintain control over his/her students. And yet, “Although no one would dispute the need for classroom order and organization as an essential component of effective teaching, the emphasis on teacher control obscures the role that effective classroom management can have in contributing to students’ moral and social development” (Nucci, p. 711). All classrooms are places that influence a child’s morality and social values (Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993). Children’s moral development entails progressive transformations in their concepts of justice and human welfare. For children, the core of morality is the capacity to engage in moral reciprocity, human rights and fairness (Turiel, 2002).

## **Relationship between a Teacher's Response and Classroom Community**

In early childhood, a child may throw sand in another child's face at the sand table. For this type of challenging behavior, it is necessary for a teacher to intervene immediately in order to promote classroom management. Anything is a response—silence, ignoring, punishing, sending the child out of the classroom, scolding, deliberating. These responses have an impact on the individual child as well as on the classroom community, and it is crucial to explore the relationship between classroom management interventions and the child's acceptance/rejection within the classroom. The following framing statement below shows the possible flow of a teacher's response.

Teacher's immediate in-the-moment response's goal → reduce immediate challenging behavior → that response may impact a child's acceptance in the classroom community.

There is minimal research addressing how the teacher's response and behaviors may influence the environment in which the child is either accepted or rejected by his/her peers. Yet, Asher and Coie (1990) hypothesize that there may be a relationship between a teacher's response and behaviors toward a disruptive child and that child's acceptance by his peers in the classroom community. They state:

Children are apt to dislike those who have hurt them or have interrupted their activities. In addition to this direct effect on peers, aggression and disruption may lead to peer rejection because of their impact on adults. Because caretakers, such as teachers, have the responsibility for maintaining order and seeing to the safety of their charge, they are likely to resent the behaviors of overly aggressive and disruptive children and to spend more time and effort restraining and punishing these children than others. Teachers may have an indirect influence on the rejection of aggressive and disruptive children by calling attention to their misbehavior (p. 245).

Additionally, Osterman's (2002) work on school communities sheds light on the importance of the teacher's response for developing a sense of community. She suggests that the

“quality of interaction between students and teachers has an important influence on the development of positive relationships among students” (p. 178). Osterman recognizes a teacher’s role in a child’s acceptance and rejection in the classroom community. She writes:

Teachers play a major role in determining whether students feel cared for and a welcome part of the school community. Not all students, however, experience teacher support. Research consistently establishes that students receive differential treatment from teachers on the basis of characteristics such as race, gender, class, ability, and appearance, and that differentiation begins early in the school career and increases as student’s progress through school (p. 178).

Osterman also recognizes that no studies establish causality. She writes about the related research literature:

...embedded in most is an assumption that teacher and peer acceptance are predictably contingent on student behavior. Either because of inadequate social training or impulse control, students are unable to develop satisfactory relationships with adults or peers. In fact, behavior does play an important part in peer acceptance (Coie, 1990; Taylor, 1989); but, in light of other research and theory, one could easily interpret the correlation data in a different way: that student behavior is a predictable response to teacher and peer acceptance. (p. 179)

Furthering the analysis of the problem, Bierman’s (2004) review of peer rejection literature begins with the emergence of the teacher’s responses. She writes, “Despite their professional training and experience, teachers are not immune to entrapment in coercive cycles of interaction with problem students that can fuel both the continuation of problem behaviors and the escalation of negative peer interactions” (p. 37). She recognizes that teachers can be “worn down” by disruptive, off-task behaviors of peer-rejected children, making it difficult for teachers to “maintain a positive attitude toward children who constantly disrupt their classrooms.” Thus, “they begin to resort to more frequent and more intense criticism and punishment as a method of gaining control over the children’s behavior” (p. 37). Those that have begun to research this

issue clearly suggest that aggressive, “inappropriate,” and/or challenging behaviors often directly influence a teacher’s classroom management style and use of discipline.

Looking at classroom management as an educational endeavor that requires teachers to examine and “engage in...critical analysis of [his/her] practice” is pertinent. When considering classroom management and approaches to children with challenging, aggressive behaviors that can result in problems like peer rejection, it is important to recognize the relationship and interactions between the child’s characteristics and the teacher’s behavior (Pianta, 2006, p. 694). In a summary of the relationship between child and teacher, Pianta (2006) writes:

An interesting line of recent research with considerable implications for classroom management has focused on teachers as social agents of information and the role that their interactions with a given student serve as sources of information about child-teacher relationships for other students in the classroom (Hughes, Cavell, & Willson, 2001).

Although there are no studies that establish a direct correlation between a teacher’s response to challenging behaviors and a child’s rejection by his/her peers, hypotheses can be made about a teacher’s interactions that do not show care and empathy toward the child struggling with challenging behaviors. Studies repeatedly demonstrate that teachers direct more of their attention to children with behavior problems and peer-rejected children often are teacher targets for corrective responses and feedback (Brophy & Good, 1974; Dodge, Coie, & Brakke, 1982; Goodenow, 1992).

### **Classroom Management**

“Classroom management” is a term used regularly in education. This over-arching concept includes “the set of behaviors and strategies teachers use to guide student behavior in the classroom” (Evertson & Emmer, 1982, p. 2). Misbehaviors, classroom disruptions, and social conflicts are inarguably challenging for some teachers. Therefore, traditionally, classroom

management has been referred to as way of adults controlling students with punitive measures (i.e. “time-outs,” suspensions, expulsions, etc.). Scholars are re-envisioning the concept of classroom management. Evertson & Weinstein (2006), for example, draw on educational theorists to “define classroom management as the actions teachers take to create an environment that supports and facilitates both academic and social-emotional learning. In other words, classroom management has two distinct purposes: It not only seeks to establish and sustain an orderly environment so students can engage in meaningful academic learning, it also aims to enhance students’ social and moral growth. From this perspective, *how* a teacher achieves order is as important as *whether* a teacher achieves it” (p. 4).

Evertson and Weinstein hypothesize that the lack of attention to research on classroom management is because the term itself is often understood as a way of “controlling students” (McCaslin & Good, 1992). Professors of education have tended to view classroom management as teachers having a “bag of tricks” (Brophy, 1988), and some authors note that there is simply a “lack of national standards to prepare teachers in the area of classroom management” (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006, p. 4). Unfortunately, there is little consensus as to what classroom management strategies need to be taught or emphasized in pre-service and in-service classes (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). Evertson & Weinstein conclude that teacher preparation, trainings, and professional development simply are not based on “a comprehensive, coherent study of the basic principles and skills of classroom management” (p. 4).

There are classroom management supports for educators in the form of handbooks, guides, curricula, and policies for whom the audience is the classroom teacher (Evertson & Emmer, 1982). These materials tend to focus on “preventative” strategies and information for avoiding mismanagement or for setting up an effective classroom. However, based on the

possible connections between a teacher's response and the child's acceptance, there is a need for research-based approaches to classroom management where there is a set of methods for pre- and in-service teachers that address a teacher's immediate response at the challenging site.

Classroom management literature calls for more proactive alternatives to traditional disciplinary consequences. However, these traditional approaches are *still* widely used for most "unacceptable" behaviors and, even more troubling, there is no evidence to determine if these methods are successful at reducing or eliminating problematic behaviors (Fenning & Bohanon, 2006). Data also suggests that these methods/procedures may actually exacerbate unwanted behaviors and peer rejection (Mayer, 1995; Bierman; 2004). Nucci (2006) conceptualizes classroom management as not simply adult control over student behavior, but as a phenomenon with larger stakes. He writes:

All classrooms, no matter how they are run, constitute social environments that impact students' construction of morality and social values... The issue, then, is not whether classroom management affects social development, but rather how classroom management may contribute positively to students' moral and social growth. Viewing classroom management as an educational activity requires teachers to engage in the same kind of critical analysis of practice as would be directed to the teaching of subject matter. This includes not only an awareness of available options or strategies for how to handle classroom situations, but also a compendium of knowledge about the "subject matter" of social and moral development and how it relates to a given set of practices.

Researchers, then, must explore and clearly document successful classroom management approaches that promote acceptance and foster moral and social growth. Educators must then engage in critical analyses of their own practices. Research shows broad implications for restructuring an approach to classroom management intended to contribute to a child's moral and social growth. For example:

- 1) Classroom management practices should engage students in active reflection to promote social knowledge construction.
- 2) Classroom management strategies need to attend to the domain of the social issues being addressed.

- 3) Classroom management needs to be coordinated with the students' levels of development (Nucci 2006, p.714).

What needs to be in place for this restructuring to happen? What does classroom management that contributes to a child's moral and social growth look like? As educators we need to reimagine the teacher's role and behaviors where these outcomes are the focus.

### **School Communities**

There are different approaches and ways to define *community*, but the concept of belongingness is common to most descriptions (Solomon et al, 1996). Furman (1998) explains that until members feel a sense of belonging, trust in others, and safety, a community is not established. The focus of my dissertation project is observing and establishing caring classroom and school communities where educators lead through the emotional experiences of caring and being cared for (Basstistich et al., 1997, Noddings, 1992/1996; Watson & Ecken, 2003). In this kind of community, caring relationships are the foundation of the community and form the groundwork for classroom management (Watson & Battistich, 2006). This approach to classroom management centers on the teacher, and the community, building a positive view of children. For example, DeVries and Zan (1994) state, "A moral classroom begins with the teacher's attitude of respect for children, for their interests, feelings, values and ideas" (p. 58). With this positive view of children, "it is natural to abandon a controlling autocratic approach to community and to think of teaching and classroom management as working with, rather than controlling, children" (Watson & Battistich, 2006, p. 258).

### **Implications for Children who are not Accepted Community Members**

It is important to address peer rejection in early childhood not only because many children with challenging behaviors are often rejected, but also because the evolution in research

on this topic is shifting. Whereas the primary focus of the research used to center on changing the challenging child, it is now looking at other dynamics in the classroom such as causes, outcomes, and interventions. Understanding research on the outcomes and causes of peer rejection, the relationship between peer rejection and the classroom teacher, and developed interventions is a starting point to move us toward practical approaches to promote peer acceptance and building a community where each child experiences a sense of belonging.

This phenomenon has also caught the attention of educators, parents, and psychologists for the past two decades. The peer rejection literature shows us what is at stake for children who experience prolonged and stable rejection, and provides insight into the complexity of the phenomenon. First, in the short term, rejected children experience loneliness (Asher, Hymel & Renshaw, 1984), an inability to focus, and poor academic performance (Ladd et al, 1990; Ladd & Price, 1988). Second, peer rejection may seriously impact later social and emotional development of those experiencing it (Coie & Dodge, 1990; Bagwell, Schmidt, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 2001; Hartup, 1989; Ladd, 1990; Parker, Rubin, Price, & DeRosier, 1995). Mueller & Silverman determined “that childhood peer relations have been identified as one of the most powerful predictors of concurrent and future mental health problems, including the development of psychiatric disorders” (1989, p. 529).

Although there is agreement about the possible outcomes associated with stable and prolonged peer rejection, there are complexities that influence agreement on the underlying causes of these problems, as well as the most effective practices, interventions, and pedagogical approaches to reduce them (Bierman, 2004; Furman & Robbins, 1985). The reasons for peer rejection are multifaceted thereby making the “problem” difficult to diagnose. Research on this problem crosses disciplines. For example, the problem is studied in fields such as education,

developmental psychology, and social psychology. Across perspectives, scholars have identified numerous factors contributing to child rejection. For many rejected children their social behaviors and temperaments play a key role as they tend to irritate, annoy, and disturb their peers and fail to engage in friendly and enjoyable ways (Bierman, 2004; Coie, Dodge, & Kupersmidt, 1990; Dodge, 1989). Often a label is attached to a rejected child exhibiting uncooperative, challenging behaviors, which may further contribute to the complexity of a child's rejection. These can include labels associated with a learning disability (Mishna, 2003), social withdrawal or anti-social behavior (Furman, Rahe, & Hartup, 1979), autism or ADHD (Barkley, 1996), or an emotional/behavioral disability (Gresham, Cook, Crews, & Kern, 2004).

In response to the abundance of research identifying the underlying causes and/or reasons for the individual child's peer rejection, researchers have developed interventions for educators to implement with the individual rejected child. Thus, the assumption about effective interventions is that they must address the undesirable behavior(s) that are contributing to peer and teacher dislike in an effort to norm the child, as well as to promote positive social skills and behaviors to hopefully encourage positive peer response (Bierman, Miller, & Stabb, 1987).

**Aggressive behavior in peer rejected children.** An overarching, well documented factor across the breadth of research is the presence of aggressive behaviors in the rejected child. This is significant because children with varying dynamics of aggressive behaviors are more likely to experience peer rejection (Asher & Coie, 1990; Bierman, 2004; Ladd, 1990).

Research shows that "students who are both aggressive and rejected by peers are among the *most* aggressive and least liked in school settings" (Long & Morse, 1996, p. 347). Again, the response to minimizing these aggressive behaviors has been interventions which focus on the individual child (Bierman, 2004; Bierman, Miller, & Stabb, 1987).

From my experience in early childhood education, the interventions are typically “time-outs” in or out of the classroom, detaining the child during recess, sending the child to visit the principal’s office, or sending the child home. A child’s aggressive, “inappropriate,” challenging behaviors had a direct impact on my response and behaviors toward children, regardless of the interventions that were designed to provide support for my role as the teacher.

**Teacher supports for aggressive/challenging behavior.** There are limited supports for a clear set of responses and approaches for immediately dealing with everyday challenging behaviors in pre- and in- service teaching programs or professional development opportunities. Long and Morse (1996) provide useful strategies in their book designed for working with at-risk youth, *Conflict in the Classroom*. They outline approaches to promote responsible student behavior and effective classroom discipline. Their viewpoint is advocated by Glasser’s “10 steps to good discipline” (1977). The following are suggested strategies for teachers to reduce “undesirable behaviors” (Long & Morse, 1996, p. 277):

- 1) The skill of planned ignoring.
- 2) The skill of stating expectations.
- 3) The skill of signaling.
- 4) The skill of restructuring the situation.
- 5) The skill of conferencing.
- 6) The skill of warning.
- 7) The skill of enforcements of consequences.
- 8) The skill of life space intervention. (*For a more extensive summary, see Long & Morse, 1996*)

However, the focus of these teacher strategies is for dealing with the individual student. It is important to also emphasize curricula has not yet honed in on the relationship between the teacher’s response to the individual child with aggressive behaviors and the possible influence on the classroom community (thus the potential for peer rejection).

### **Beginning to Reimagine a Teacher's Role: Alternative Teacher Practices**

*The nature of the connection between kindness and teaching rests in the fact that both kindly acts and pedagogical acts require the actor to identify with the concerns of the other. In serving the needs of the student, the good teacher attempts to see things from the student's perspective.*

~Stephen Rowland, *Kindness*

Research is shifting to better understand the teacher-student relationship and to reimagine classroom management approaches that promote social and moral development (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). In an effort to understand the construction of a classroom community, researchers have found that trust and care are basic components to prosocial behaviors in the classroom (Battistich, Solomom, Watson, & Schaps, 1997). Nucci (2006) reminds us that, “for some educators the establishment of a caring environment and an overall ‘ethic of care’ is the most essential component of moral education (Noddings, 2002)” (p. 716).

### **Caring Theory, Trust, and Teacher-Student Relationships**

Noddings’ (2002) work regarding ethical and moral foundations of teaching, schooling, and education argues that care is a basic human need; therefore, caring should be a foundation for ethical decision-making (p. 11). Fundamentally, children learn to *care-about* (caring for others in the public realm which is the foundation for social justice) by first being *cared-for* (face-to-face encounters where one person directly cares for another) (p. 22). Therefore, Noddings argues that educators have to show in their behavior what it means to care.

Literature on care and moral and emotional growth contributes to establishing pedagogies and approaches for mediating a child’s challenging behaviors that influence the development of an accepting community. Elementary children that report an emotional closeness and warm relationship with their teacher view the school environment more positively (Murray & Greenberg, 2000). For Noddings (2002), the notion behind an ethic of care in the classroom environment is to establish a relationship between the student and teacher based on trust

(Watson, 2003). After all, “A trusting environment is not only emotionally warm, but also one in which children are treated fairly by teachers and protected from exploitation and harm by classmates” (Nucci, p. 117). Therefore, in constructing an overall sense of classroom community that establishes prosocial conduct, trust is a basic component (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997).

### **Attachments and Positive Interaction with Children with Aggressive Behaviors**

When a child sees and feels that he or she can rely on his/her primary caregiver for the fulfillment of his/her needs, the child is emotionally secure (Bowlby, 1982). He or she has a sense of attachment. He or she can adapt more easily to new social situations (Elicker, Englund, & Sroufe, 1992). Furthermore, Elicker et al. “found that children with secure attachment relationships showed higher levels of empathy than did their peers with insecure attachments” (1992). The desire to form secure attachments is not limited to infants, toddlers, and children; it continues to motivate social behavior throughout a human’s life span. Research has documented associations between insecure attachments and aggressive behavior problems (Elicker, et al, 1992). Drawn from research by Furman, Rahe, and Hartup (1979), children who had avoidant, insecure, withdrawn, and anxious behaviors, and who felt negatively about themselves, would benefit from interventions providing them with “confidence-boosting, assertiveness-training” experiences. Osterman (2002) reminds us:

The need for belongingness is so powerful that people will develop social attachments very easily and strive to maintain relationships and social bonds even under difficult circumstances...The primary condition necessary for the development of relationships is frequent and affectively positive interaction. Theoretically, then, students’ sense of community should be directly related to the availability of opportunities for frequent and supportive interactions. In schools, students develop a sense of community through their interaction with adults and with peers; and school and classroom policies and practices affect the quality and frequency of these interactions. (p. 175)

When a classroom becomes a safe and nurturing place, children can form attachments and learn regardless of home or other external circumstances.

### **Discourse/Dialogue in the Classroom**

Vivian Paley's stories and Dewey's (1938) philosophies identify social interactions as a basis for learning. Paley (1992) facilitated conversations with her kindergartners about rejection and documented them in her book *You Can't Say You Can't Play*. She instilled the rule that children could not tell another child that they were not allowed to play. She spoke with her students as a class daily and encouraged them to share their feelings with each other. She told her students, "We're talking about it [the social problem], getting opinions, thinking about it, wondering how it will work" (p. 56). Her emphasis was on listening to her students, deliberating, and then considering all sides to deal with issues of fairness as a means to develop ways to promote acceptance. Paley's discourse and moral discussions are a model for creating a space for decision making and seeing another's viewpoint (Parker, 2003). These discussions are places where diverse discourse can exist because "people who come from numerous private worlds and social positions are brought together on common ground... These are mutual, collective concerns, not mine or our but ours" (Parker, p. 77). This type of "talk" generates the development of ideas. It "helps students to develop a better appreciation of others and to experience themselves as part of a supportive community. Explaining their rationale for emphasizing collaborative discussion as a strategy to enhance prosocial behaviors..." (p. 176). When children are guided and encouraged to participate in discourse in their classrooms, it "is a critical indicator of the extent to which school offers membership" (Gamoran & Nystrand, 1992, p. 40). Furthermore, "Deliberation is a discussion in which several viewpoints are set alongside one another so that, as Bridges (1979) states, 'our own view of things is challenged by those of

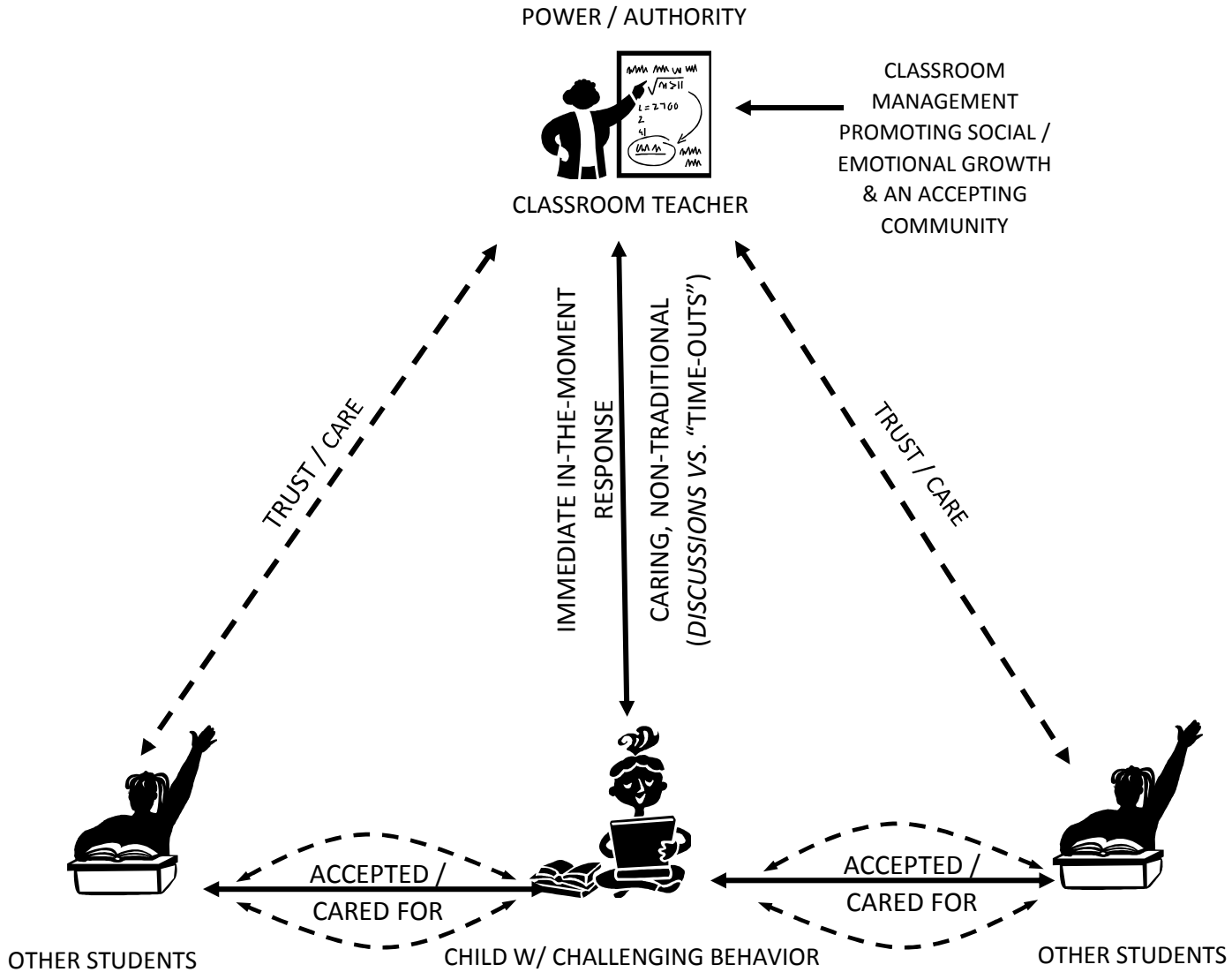
others' (p. 50)" (in Parker, 2010, p. 2820). The intention of deliberative discourse then is to make a collaborative decision about what to do. What is most fair and effective? Deliberations encourage discussants to think together, but now the discussion is aimed at *deciding*. This type of discursive engagement educates young people in the "liberal arts of speaking and listening to other members of the democratic public—people with whom they may have little in common and whom they may not like but with whom, nonetheless, they are politically joined" (Parker, p. 2820).

Active listening is a type of listening that requires being heard and also hearing from others. In a deliberative conversation, discourse includes listening to and building on one another's comments, hearing all sides equally, and speaking one at a time (Parker, 2010). Deliberation is often referred to as a part of the school curriculum and as an instructional method for discussion during a guided, teacher directed lesson. I would add to that notion and assert that if there are deliberative components in a teacher's everyday response to disruptive and challenging behaviors or social conflict, that response promotes acceptance in the classroom community as the members develop an understanding of that child's point of view.

Researchers are beginning to examine new approaches to classroom management that encourage students to develop self-direction and social and moral growth through an active student-centered learning environment. Accepting methodologies that develop a more holistic approach for promoting acceptance in a classroom community where all children, even the children exhibiting challenging/aggressive behaviors, have a sense of belongingness.

In summary, Figure 1 below illustrates the literatures drawn upon in this review to provide a context for this dissertation project. The triangle picture shows all the factors that play a part in a teacher's response to a child having a challenging behavior and the possible effect it

has on the vulnerable child and the other children in the classroom and the classroom community.



### **CHAPTER 3: METHOD**

This work would not be possible without knowledge gained in my own practice. Various literatures provided me with the information to select a framework, guide my inquiries and observations and collect data, but without my ten year early childhood teaching experience I would not have been able to conduct this research. As an educator highly attuned to classroom dynamics I was able to continually observe that some children were not accepted as valued members of the classroom community. I repeatedly noticed that an aggressive, disruptive, behaviorally challenged student was often not included by his/her peers. Another noticeable phenomenon was that this child responded to traditional discipline and classroom management strategies (behavior charts/time-outs) with increased aggression and this aggression led to further isolation and rejection in the classroom community from both the classroom teacher and other children. It was a painful cycle for that child. As Asher and Coie suggest, if a child enters a classroom and exhibits aggressive behavior with his or her peers, he or she is more likely to experience peer rejection (1990). My experiences and exposure to relevant peer rejection led me to become deeply interested in how teachers approach children's disruptive, challenging behaviors in the classroom.

#### **Project Rationale**

Scholars have called for proactive alternatives to traditional disciplinary consequences due to the lack of evidence proving that such consequences reduce challenging behaviors (Bierman, 2004; Fenning & Bohanon, 2006; Mayer, 1995). Additionally, these scholars see a need to provide educators with basic, coherent principles and skills of classroom management (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006). This study describes innovative pedagogies and strategies of three early childhood classroom teachers working to construct classroom communities that promote

belonging. In investigating early childhood teachers' alternative approaches to classroom management I examined their everyday pedagogies, responses, and immediate interventions to challenging and aggressive behaviors. Then, based on data, I created a sample set of professional development supports for teachers. This project therefore advances ideas about how teachers can manage children's aggressive behaviors before they lead to a disconnected classroom community where children may experience peer rejection.

### **Project Design**

This project is a basic, descriptive qualitative case study (Merriam, 2009). Since attention was on the classroom teacher's behaviors, responses, and pedagogies, I employed qualitative case study strategies to compose rich, "thick" descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of accepting methodologies and practices that promoted community building. Case study design allowed me to conduct an intensive, in-depth (Merriam, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994) examination of three different teachers' pedagogies for classroom management and their non-traditional responses to challenging behaviors.

Merriam (2009) captures the essence of my qualitative research intentions best when she explains "qualitative researchers *are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed*, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 13). With this case study design, I looked for themes that emerged and the meaning negotiated and practiced relative to each set of contextual factors (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Although this was not a traditional ethnographic study, I employed ethnographic methods (Wolcott, 2005) of research, such as interviews and observations, to construct a narrative qualitative record detailing and describing three teachers' non-traditional methodologies and pedagogies. These in-depth descriptions uncovered important insights (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

about the relationship between a teacher's responses and approaches to a child's challenging behaviors and the development of an accepting classroom community. I triangulated my data collection to promote validity and reliability for this project. According to Merriam (2009) triangulation encompasses "multiple sources of data and data collection methods to confirm emerging findings" (p. 229). Thus, I conducted and analyzed observations, interviews and documents.

### **Research Questions**

Research questions developed for this project were designed to get at the complex relationship between a teacher's response to challenging behaviors, her classroom management strategies, and the influence of those responses and strategies on the classroom community and children's sense of belonging in that community. By way of reminder, the following research questions provided the basis for inquiry:

- *In specific innovative classrooms, what are early childhood teachers' everyday, in-the-moment responses (pedagogies and immediate interventions) to children's challenging/aggressive behaviors? How do children respond to these methods?*
- *What supports or inhibits the teachers to respond (pedagogies and immediate interventions) to challenging/aggressive behaviors in ways that can promote an accepting classroom community where all children have a sense of belonging?*
- *What can be learned from teachers' everyday responses for building curricula, professional development for teachers and other materials that support inclusive, caring classroom communities?*

## **Project Participants and Settings**

All participants were identified prior to data collection and made aware of the scope and nature of the project. In order to develop an “information-rich” (Patton, 2002, p. 230) platform for teachers implementing non-traditional classroom management pedagogies that promote acceptance, I used purposeful, theory-based sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002) to identify three teachers that met the following criteria for selection: (1) experience of at least 5 years as an early childhood teacher (preschool through grade 3); (2) philosophical views, like those of Vivian Paley, where the teacher stated an effort or primary goal to build an accepting classroom community; and (3) evidence of non-traditional pedagogies for classroom management and discipline (i.e. no “time-out” chairs, negative behavior charts, or banishment to the principal’s office).

Through informal conversations with colleagues in early childhood education I was able to identify three early childhood teachers that filled the above criteria. After an original pilot study of one teacher, I was able to shadow the remaining two teachers in a school community that employed a non-traditional model for children with challenging behaviors. Although the teachers at the second site received training for how to deal with challenging behaviors of children who have experienced trauma (both physical and emotional), the school has been known for their different perspective on children struggling with these behaviors. I will address the school community in detail in Chapter 4. Identities for all participants are protected by the use of pseudonyms.

First, I collected data in Isabella’s classroom from a previous, related study (see below). For organizational purposes, I will first provide the setting and data collection from the pilot

study, then I will provide the setting and data collection of the second school site, followed by my data analysis.

**Pilot study: Isabella.**

I immersed myself in Isabella's kindergarten classroom of seventeen students over a period of four weeks. The small classroom was unique in that it was in a lab school located on a major university campus. It served as a comprehensive learning environment for children from infancy through kindergarten. The school's basic principle emphasized inclusive community with a strong focus on membership, relationships, and development. The school served both children with disabilities and children who were developing typically. The school was exceptionally family centered—parents, siblings, and family members were in the hallways and classrooms every day. Isabella's students were six years old with a diverse range in abilities.

Data was collected from three interviews with Isabella and four weeks of observations over a two-month period of whole class instruction, transition times, recess, and in-class play. Artifacts about the school philosophy and the research being done at this educational center were collected.

**Interviews.** Prior to entering the classroom to observe I conducted an initial, semi-structured interview with Isabella that lasted approximately an hour in length. Guiding this interview were detailed protocols that I developed to understand her pedagogical strategies regarding challenging behaviors, building classroom community, building peer acceptance, and teaching methods for understanding issues of fairness, justice and equality. Isabella easily shared her thought processes and gave numerous examples of her experiences with these topics. Two follow-up interviews were conducted after collecting observational data to more deeply

understand the occurrences that were observed. I was particularly interested in Isabella's thinking and her responses to the data-collection observations.

**Observations.** During the data collection period, I observed with little participation. As outlined by Merriam (2009), my role was "observer as participant." Handwritten field notes in the form of running narratives were gathered during sessions of in-class play time (lasting approximately an hour) and instructional periods focusing on social education (lasting approximately an hour). I recorded ten observations during the school day. An attempt was made to document what occurred during social conflicts that arose during this designated time. I was looking specifically for social conflicts or misbehaviors and the teacher's response to them and I was able to observe Isabella's response to a social conflict and its impact on her students.

**Documents.** Multiple artifacts were collected to analyze. These included social skills curricula used in the classroom, instructional materials, and school philosophy and mission statements.

Based on insights and observations taken from this small pilot study, Isabella's responses suggested that there was a connection between her classroom management strategies and alternative approaches to addressing social conflicts and challenging behaviors, which seemed to create an accepting community. I thus sought out two other teachers to continue this work.

### **Additional Case Study: Lucy and Frances**

The choice to observe two teachers at one school in a large school district in Washington was due to the diverse setting and the school's national reputation for their alternative approaches to discipline. The site was a regular, general education Title 1 elementary school. Ninety percent of the students were on free and reduced lunch. The school had over six hundred students. There was little involvement by parents throughout the school day. This site was

important because it showcased the accepting approaches to challenging behaviors that took place in this diverse setting.

Each teacher in the school, as part of a larger study to reform discipline policies, had received training specifically for dealing with students who had experienced varying traumas (a parent in jail, abuse, drug or alcohol addicted parent(s), homeless) and therefore, were more likely to present challenging behaviors. The elementary school site had two teachers who shared some of the same philosophical views and methodologies of social educators like Vivian Paley. Therefore through their daily use of non-traditional classroom management strategies they actively sought to build an inclusive classroom community that emphasized and promoted acceptance as a priority. I made a theory-based decision to select the two teachers for further study (Patton, 2002).

**Observations.** I formally and informally observed (Wolcott, 2005) the focal early childhood teachers' classrooms over four weeks to explore how their responses, pedagogies, and immediate interventions to challenging behaviors influenced the acceptance of children. I observed the entire seven hour school day, four days a week for four weeks splitting my time evenly between the two teachers. Therefore, a total of approximately one hundred and twelve school hours were observed. In this learning environment, I was able to gain an understanding of the students, overall classroom space, and the teacher's instructional style. I paid particular attention to moments of disruption, conflict, and challenging behaviors to understand how the teacher responded to her students. During challenging behaviors I observed the entire interaction between the teacher and student/students and focused on the discourse/verbal language used as well as the nonverbal language, such as teacher's positioning and physical proximity, etc. I wrote detailed field notes in the form of running narrative records (Merriam, 2009).

**Interviews.** Interviews are one of the most common and important methods in qualitative studies (Merriam, 2009). I conducted semi-structured and open-ended interviews (Patton, 2002) with Lucy and Frances to understand their perspectives and viewpoints about building an accepting classroom community, as well as their approaches to classroom management and their everyday pedagogies for addressing challenging/aggressive behaviors. Initial semi-structured interviews (30-45 minutes) were conducted on the first day at the school site to build rapport, to learn about their background and experiences, and to gain an understanding of the issues pertaining to my research questions. For instance, I asked questions such as:

1. What strategies do you use to help build peer acceptance? Can you give me an example?
2. Given the context of your ideas about building community in your classroom, what do you do when there are misbehaviors/challenging behaviors? Can you give me an example?
3. How do you think your response to a challenging behavior influences the classroom community?
4. What supports do you have for dealing with misbehaviors/challenging behaviors, specifically from children that are not accepted? (See Appendix A for the full initial semi-structured interview guides.)

I also engaged the teachers in numerous informal conversations each day when there were instances where I needed to better understand what happened during my observations. Those informal conversations were recorded in my field notes journals.

One 60-minute, semi-structured follow-up interview was conducted with each teacher to gain any insights to further my understanding of their pedagogies. All interviews were transcribed by the researcher.

**Documents.** Multiple artifacts were collected to analyze. These included social skills curriculum used in the classroom, instructional materials, and school philosophy and mission statements.

### **Data Analysis**

I brought to my analysis of this project ideas regarding the components of a caring classroom community. These included envisioning classroom management and discipline toward the positive development of social and moral growth, and caring theory. My aim was to generate themes about teachers' discourse and responses to children's challenging behaviors and social disruptions to determine how those influence the classroom community. Those themes were then used to guide the creation of tools for teacher professional development.

I first began my analysis of data by reading through transcribed interviews, field notes, and short narrative vignettes of classroom events to get a general sense of the teachers' practices and their students' responses. Next, I developed a list of descriptive codes based on my initial notes of what seemed relevant and important in the data sets. Subsequent steps taken for this analysis included (1) initial coding and open coding of all relevant data (transcribed interviews and field notes) during which I noticed instances of the teachers' "talking," "close proximity," "listening," "affirming," and "care" within the classroom discourse as well as before, during, and after a challenging behavior or social disruption; (2) a development of categories which were influenced by my classroom knowledge and literatures on caring theory, classroom management, peer rejection, and deliberation; (3) and focused coding about teacher beliefs (their role, demeanor and behavior function), discourse (deliberation and positive affirmations), care-for and care-of (between both teacher and students), and creating attachments.

Using transcribed interviews, field notes, and artifact data, I was able to construct themes and short vignettes about three teacher's responses to their respective student's behaviors. The data types informed one another in this analysis. For example, when Isabella spoke in an interview about remaining calm and modeling her calmness when misbehavior happened, my observational data verified this. This was congruent with all three teachers. Throughout this study, I used a systematic approach to ensure validity to minimize my biases, such as using a detailed observation protocol, having all classroom teachers read field notes, running records, and transcriptions to assure accuracy. They verified that they were accurate, and did not alter them. Also, as a final step I emailed them a copy of this project to check validity of my descriptions and findings.

In summary, this case study report is intended to draw out themes taken from three teachers who used innovative strategies for challenging behaviors. The next chapter outlines the themes which, later, contributed to a set of ideas and sample professional development tools.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter presents themes based on data gathered from classroom instruction and activities, teacher interviews, and formal and informal observations of the school and classroom communities. The deeper I delve into this research, the more I realize that the thrust of my argument centers on individual children—children who struggle, for various reasons, with challenging behaviors. However, I find it is not what the child does but how the classroom teacher responds toward that child with accepting behaviors and beliefs that ultimately influences the child’s membership in the classroom community (Bierman, 2004; Osterman, 2002). Children not only learn from modeling; they learn from their experiences and social processes (Vygotsky, 1978). Children in the classroom learn from their teacher’s behaviors and responses to vulnerable children with challenging behaviors.

My findings concentrate on how three teachers’ everyday, in-the-moment responses to challenging behaviors, for the purpose of classroom management and discipline, can influence and build a classroom community where all children have a sense of belongingness. It is important to note that these findings and the breadth of these claims are specific to these three teachers, their school and classroom communities, and the children they taught. Before presenting my findings on the teachers’ responses, I detail some key contextual-environmental observations concerning Isabella, Lucy, and Frances’ classrooms, as they are important to paint a clear picture of classroom community.

### Classroom Context

On my first day in Lucy’s first grade classroom, I noticed the windows had bars on the outside, and there was a patched bullet hole in one window. Lucy candidly said: “Yeah, every year we have a lock down because someone that shouldn’t be on campus, is on campus.” For the

weeks I followed both Lucy and Frances throughout the school day, Lucy's class was nevertheless warm and inviting. She described her group as "academically low, but very caring." Frances' classroom was very unique, as she has a double classroom of forty-four third graders, which she team taught. Both classrooms had numerous children who received special services or interventions. However, no child in the school was pulled out for these services; instead, the specialists (ELL teacher, Speech Pathologist, Occupational Therapist) came into the classrooms. Frances had two students who were homeless and four children received a backpack full of maintainable food every Friday, so they could have food over the weekend. In short, these children were presented with outside personal challenges; however, the school is a public, general education school and these teachers were general-education classrooms. Isabella's classroom was also unique because it was a lab school with a higher population of children with various disabilities. However, the techniques and strategies these teachers used could be useful in any general-education classroom.

### **In-the-Moment Response Findings**

On a daily basis, the teachers in this study demonstrated, in their choices to in-the-moment responses, that constructed social environments "contributed positively to students' moral and social growth" (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006, p. 12). Through their actions and strategic responses to a particular social conflict or difficult student behavior, they revealed the possibility of creating an inclusive classroom community where every student was valued. Furthermore, through these responses they taught their students how to value, interact and listen to each other. It is important to note that these findings are by no means cause and effect; they explore under what conditions (i.e. philosophies, behaviors and responses) acceptance as a unique member of a classroom community may be promoted. Themes presented in this chapter

are: 1) A teacher's belief about children can influence their responses to challenging behavior; 2) A teacher's knowledge of their students and relationships with them can influence behavioral situations; 3) Modeling caring and kind responses to behavior can help build classroom community; 4) Modeling discussion, deliberation and listening during challenging behavior can help build classroom community; 5) Flexible student mobility and placement options can support children with challenging behaviors.

In these highly diverse classrooms, numerous challenging behaviors and disruptions happened daily, which included but were not limited to: social conflicts between students during class time, social conflicts between students during free time, disruptions during whole and small group instruction, and disruptions during transition periods. Oftentimes when children exhibited or engaged in disruptive behavior inside the classroom, the disruption was engaged by both the teacher and students. Within this study, this type of disruption is referred to as an "event." For example, if a child threw sand in another child's face (event), how did the teacher respond? An event may also be less intrusive or less aggressive: for example, a child who pushes another student in order to edge her way to the head of the line.

In the paragraphs that follow, after a brief introduction to a particular theme, I present a vignette as a way to invite you into the teachers' classrooms. These short vignettes reflect insights gained as to how each of the three teachers practiced innovative reactions and responses to classroom "events," demonstrating their commitment to creating a caring community in which *every* child is accepted and felt a sense of belongingness. Then I provide further evidence of each theme using the teachers' own words (derived from interview data). These examples, drawn from all three teachers, indicate a consistency regarding the teachers' in-the-moment behaviors and

language. In the next chapter, I present these themes as components to guide a teacher professional development seminar.

### **Teacher's Beliefs Guide their Responses to Challenging Behaviors**

A teacher's belief about children can influence their responses to challenging behavior. Each teacher shared with me their beliefs and philosophies about *how* and *why* they responded to a particular event. This data was used to analyze their everyday, in-the-moment responses to an event.

Prior to reacting to a students' challenging behavior, these teachers spoke about their underlying, philosophy of (1) how their responses influence children's moral growth and development (2) remaining calm (voice, body language, overall demeanor) during behavioral events and (3) understanding that all behaviors have a function. These beliefs were expressed during formal and informal interviews, as well as during casual conversations.

### **Belief that Responses Influence Children's Moral Growth**

One of the challenges faced by each of the teachers was to not allow their own frustrations and their own affect to be triggered by undesirable behaviors from students (Asher and Coie, 1990). For Isabella, Lucy and Frances, beliefs about how to respond to difficult classroom social conflicts or behaviors was guided by a priority to let their students develop into "kind, and caring human beings" (Lucy). Likewise, they were committed to their students' moral growth—that is, accepting and valuing each other—regardless of a student's less desirable behavior. A short moment in Lucy's classroom demonstrated this.

**Vignette.** As the first graders were gathering on the rug in Lucy's classroom,

Maddie was trying very hard to get to the front of the rug by the Smartboard because she wanted to be picked to begin the morning calendar routine. In the process, she pushed other students who were in her way, raising and flailing her hand. Eventually, she climbed over another student, unintentionally hurting her. Teacher Lucy spoke calmly and with a gentle tone to Maddie.

Teacher Lucy: “I know you are excited about sharing for calendar, but I don’t like it when you push that hard. I need you to watch your body because you just hurt your buddy. Getting to the rug is not as important as our friends.”

Maddie immediately responded by hugging her friend on the rug and patting her shoulder.

Maddie: “Sorry.”

Her friend responded by smiling and leaning her head towards Maddie. Teacher Lucy casually glanced over to me.

Teacher Lucy: “You get what you give.”

Lucy made a strategic choice to handle this everyday, seemingly-small undesirable behavior with a response that showed the value of the student being toppled over. During the time I spent in Lucy’s classroom, she often said, “you get what you give,” and smiled when her students responded in respectful ways to one another during events. Her students were learning from her behaviors how to value one another.

**Teacher responses.** Each teachers’ reasoning behind their calm responses and choice of words surfaced in the data during both interviews and observations, in which I asked the following questions: 1) What are your primary goals for your students? 2) How do you accomplish those goals during challenging behaviors? 3) How do you set up a community? The

following statements illustrated the teachers' beliefs about their role as a teacher and how those beliefs guided their responses with the aim of influencing their students' moral growth:

I just think about education and education is a moral endeavor. These classes are places we can really teach kids how to be and, you know, how to behave and interact with each other and how to appreciate each other. That is why I focus so much on this "stuff" because I feel like it makes a huge difference for kids and that when they leave my classroom, you know, they carry it with them. They remember how it felt. (Isabella)

My primary goal really is to make sure that they are learning, but I care more about the people that they turn into after they leave me, than what they are learning content wise during the day. My main goal is to make them kind and caring human beings first of all and then when that is happening, to teach them the first grade content that they need to know. (Lucy)

In an informal conversation following the above event, where Maddie pushed her way through other students, Lucy said:

Everything is gray, not black and white unless they are physically hurting each other with aggressive punches and stuff like that. It all depends on the situation and the kid. I want them to see how what they do can effect another person. (Lucy)

Isabella talked about her belief about the importance for students to feel like members of a community, no matter what behaviors they are displaying:

So, my first goal in kindergarten is that all of the kids in my class feel included and part of our community and that we are working together to achieve goals as a class. So it is really important to me. (Isabella)

Oftentimes, these responses are less than a minute and so brief, yet effective, that only a few words demonstrated the teacher's belief being modeled to her students. An event in Frances' classroom showed this.

**Vignette.** In Frances' third-grade classroom, the entire group was playing a spelling game in a circle. After three boys were not paying attention and acting silly, Teacher Frances calmly walked over to them, put her arm around two of the boys' shoulders.

Teacher Frances: “I’m concerned. I’m concerned about showing respect to all our classmates when we are playing a game together.”

Then she simply walked away. The game immediately continued, and Frances showed her enthusiasm when all forty-four students were actively engaged.

Teacher Frances (to the entire group): “I like it! I like it! Active listening! Active listening! This is what serious students look like. This is how we show each other respect.”

In that brief moment, Frances responded to the boys, emphasizing respect as the reason for participating and paying attention to their classmates’ answers during the game. In her response, she was explicit in showing how behaviors can show respect to one another. Respect and concern were demonstrated towards the boys, and therefore, in turn, the boys were able to demonstrate more altruistic or pro-social behavior towards the group (Battistich et al., 1995; Solomon et al., 1996; Watson, Battistich, & Solomon, 1997; Wentzel, 1997). It would suggest that even within their responses to an event, a teacher’s core belief about the development of his/her students’ moral character helps guide his/her response to students’ behaviors.

### **Remaining Calm**

Remaining calm poses challenges for teachers in the moment of a difficult event. The ability to separate emotion and approach behavior by channeling frustration into an understanding of the student’s perspective has the potential to diffuse behavior when “all engines are firing” (Frances).

**Vignette.** In every event, all three teachers offered calm, caring sentences such as: “Look at his face. How do you think that makes his heart feel? I think his heart is hurting. Let’s try and help it.” (Frances), “Does everyone make mistakes? That is why we practice and practice.” (Lucy), and “How can we help Evan feel good?” (Isabella). Furthermore, these sentences often

included an opportunity to add a moment of learning about or reflection on moral and emotional growth by pointing out how a child's behavior was effecting another class member, how a student might be feeling, or how the classroom community might contribute to a child's struggling.

**Teacher responses.** Each teacher expressed during their interviews their philosophies about their calm demeanors and responses. Both Lucy's initial and exit interview illustrated her reasoning behind modeling kind, calm behaviors for her first graders—she wanted them to develop those same kinds of responses to each other.

I really firmly believe that whatever you put out to the kids they give back. So I try to be the person I want them to be during the day. So, whatever I say or model, they do back. So I try and show and be a kind, calm, rationale human being that I would want them to be. (Lucy: Initial interview)

I really do, I really care more about the people they turn out to be then if they are at academic grade level. If they are giving it 100 percent and being kind and considerate human beings along the way, that is really all I care about. (Lucy: Exit interview)

In Isabella's exit interview, I reminded her of some of her responses to her students and how she was able to remain calm and facilitate a sense of care and love for all her students. Her response and her pedagogies both exemplified her core belief in helping students develop a sense of belongingness in a community by valuing and caring for one another:

I think to myself, this is the year when we can work on these things and I don't know, we can get that sense of community and sixth sense of responsibility into kids and help them build that framework for themselves and it isn't always perfect and it is constantly something you are working at and trying to get to, um, but that by listening to them and being responsive to them and what they feel and think, you are able to tailor that to each kid and what each kid needs and how they can see the needs of each other. (Isabella)

Osterman (2000) reminds us, "The experience of belonging is associated with more positive attitudes toward self and others" (p. 169). Isabella, Lucy and Frances' calm words and

demeanors subtly show all their students that they are members of the community, regardless of their challenging behaviors.

### **All Behaviors Have a Function**

To reiterate, a salient theme was that teachers' in-the-moment responses were never angry or upset reactions. No teacher was frightened by unruly behavior. Instead these events became opportunities for each teacher to model calm responsiveness as well as to understand their students in order to draw out possible triggers for the behavior or the reason behind the behavior.

**Vignette.** Two boys from Frances' classroom came in from recess, flushed red in the face, and immediately started to talk simultaneously about their conflict on the playground. Teacher Frances bent down in order to face both of the boys at eye level.

Teacher Frances (calmly): "Wow, I can see you both are very upset. Let's try and figure this out before we head into class so it doesn't disrupt the rest of your day."

Both boys were still upset and speaking in loud voices, barely catching a breath while trying to talk over each other. Teacher Frances rested a hand on both of their shoulders.

Teacher Frances (calmly and her body was in the same position): "Alright, you two are visibly upset and we will get to the bottom of this, but let's just get a sip of water, sit at the back table and wait until we can come up with a solution."

Both boys headed into the classroom with Teacher Frances in the middle, her arms around each one of their shoulders. They grabbed water and took a moment to calm down. Teacher Frances sat down with them to discuss the conflict.

In this moment, Frances never lost her patience and spoke with the boys calmly, even as they themselves struggled to remain calm. Her primary goal was to calm them down so she could help them through their conflict.

**Teacher Responses.** The following statements illustrate trends in the data that suggest these teachers understand, prior to an event, that a child's challenging behavior often has nothing to do with the teacher or even with classroom occurrences. Lucy said with a smile, "I just don't take it personally." She also shared, at numerous times during informal conversations, the school's belief that "there is no such thing as a bad child; all kids are good":

A natural response [to a challenging, sometimes aggressive behavior] would be to get frustrated and heated and let your frustration get the best of you. I sometimes find myself laughing because when they get frustrated, it has nothing to do with me or a situation. They have an underlying volcano and the second someone takes a crayon or sits in their chair, they erupt. I constantly tell myself to not have a reaction, but to be empathetic or sympathetic. (Lucy)

Lucy continued to reflect about what works and what doesn't work when responding to a child's explosive behavior and how she came to realize that reacting with anger or frustration toward a child is simply counterproductive:

You learn from trial and error. Even with adults. When someone is in that heated moment, you know, you can't fight fire with fire. There's no putting the fire out when you use fire. It's being calm but also knowing the kids and what works. What can you do in the moment to calm them to have a rationale conversation to find out what is really happening with them. To really find out what is going on. So I guess, I've had plenty of trial and error and all the kids that are exploding inside and have explosive behaviors, you just can't put that fire out with fire. It just won't work. (Lucy)

To further illustrate her strategy, Lucy observed that her calm and quiet responses were very consistent. She informally remarked to me during math instruction, "I'll say things twenty different ways before losing patience." Her belief about staying calm and striving to understand the behavior's function was expressed in an interview:

All you can do is love them in the moment. When they escalate and get into that moment, you can't escalate and create this high stress moment. Because it is not going to do anything but make your sanity go right down with them . . . and it also just doesn't even work. The best thing you can do for them is be in that moment what they can't be for themselves. No matter what that is. To fill in the gaps for what they can't be for themselves. Helping them with something or talking to them about what is going on in a fight or what is going on at home, I try and be calm and rational. I want them to see that in that situation so they can be that way to others. And you know what, they do. It's funny because I can have a kid losing it and the rest of these little guys are trying to help him or her. (Lucy)

Lucy demonstrated that her behavior during an event influenced the rest of the children in the classroom and their treatment of the student displaying a challenging behavior. (This was also demonstrated in the above vignette involving Maddie, the little girl who pushed her way to the front of the rug, in which Lucy remained calm).

Further evidence suggested that Isabella's calm demeanor during events served to flush out the function or reason behind the behavior. She strongly stated in an interview, "It is my job":

I believe that all behavior has an underlying function. I try to not take things personally and I try to see that kids are behaving as a method of communicating. I think knowing that helps me stay calm, take myself out of it and figure out the best way to handle the situation. I also really like to model for them staying calm when things go awry or when they get really upset... I stay calm and say, "Oh, wow, let's think about this, let's talk about what happened." Then they are more likely to do that again in the future and think about it from that perspective. So, I guess those two things—modeling that calm approach and then understanding that deeper reason why that behavior is happening and trying to use that as a clue to help solve it, rather than me being reactive to it. (Isabella)

Watson and Battistich remind us that, "It is the teacher's responsibility to try and ferret out the causes of student's failing to behave well and to provide students with additional support or to adjust the environment to better meet the students' capabilities" (p. 259). Similarly, Isabella's belief that "all behavior or misbehavior has an underlying function," allowed her to figure out what those behaviors mean for each instance and for each child. She stated:

So I try to think of that when something comes up. It is really my job to find that out and then help them figure out the best way to deal with it. Does that make sense? So, for each kid it can be different, depending on what it is and where they are coming from. (Isabella)

Taking responsibility for understanding the function of the behavior was Isabella's way of knowing her children. This leads to the next key theme derived from the data set—knowing your students and creating attachments. Knowing your students implies that a “one-fit” model of classroom management and discipline does not work for every student.

### **Knowing Kids and Creating Attachment Relationships**

A teacher's knowledge of their students and relationships with them can influence behavioral situations. Knowing the students who make up a school community is complex and was a priority for the teachers in this study. It was through knowing their students' home lives, values, abilities, behavior triggers, and individual interests that these teachers were able to tailor their instruction and responses to their students' individual needs, especially during challenging behaviors.

Each teacher made efforts to know her students' needs in order to build relationships in almost every interaction, thus facilitating the formation of trusting attachment. This is important considering that Watson and Eckon state, “the qualities of the adult-child relationship leading to positive child outcomes are the same whether the adult caregiver is a parent or a teacher. From the perspective of attachment theory, building trusting, supportive, collaborative relationships with children should be at the heart of our approach to discipline and teaching” (2003, p. 280). Children need to feel physically and emotionally safe in a classroom community.

**Vignette.** For Frances, because of the high level of poverty and the number of homeless children in her classroom, she made sure children's basic needs were met even prior to teaching. Her knowledge of the struggles contingent upon her students' home lives allowed her to provide

for their needs, thus creating attachments whereby her students developed trust for her. Although it may seem simplistic, these small attachments allowed her students to trust her during social conflicts and challenging behaviors. This evidence showed in both interview and observational data. During math instruction, Jacob B. (a child with autism who came down from another classroom for math instruction) walked in late into Teacher Frances' class during the math block.

Teacher Frances (to Jacob B.): "Better late than never."

Jacob sat down. He looked sluggish. He was not participating and sliding out of his chair.

Teacher Frances: "Jacob B., you alright?"

She leaned down to his eye level and rested her hand on his back.

Jacob B.: "Just tired."

Teacher Frances brought over a few jellybeans and put them in front of Jacob B.'s notebook. Teacher Frances determined and worked with Jacob B. to develop a reinforcement system.

Teacher Frances: "Well, we've got to get you woken up."

She then helped him get his coat off.

Teacher Frances: "Let's continue to wake you up."

She then gave him a gentle hug and shoulder shake. He smiled a huge smile. No one made a fuss or responded when Jacob B. got jellybeans.

A few minutes later, when Jacob B. was off-task again, Teacher Frances simply and gently asked, “Hey buddy, what are you doing? Can you get back to your work?” He obliged and was given one jelly bean. In Frances’ exit interview, she told me how Jacob B. was mesmerized by the jellybean jar on her desk, and therefore she knew immediately that the jelly beans would be a positive reinforcement for him. Having varying reward systems or strategies for each student was a norm, and that norm was emphasized to the classroom. This norm may defy traditional beliefs, but what these children were learning was that these reinforcement systems were fair because of their varying abilities, and they were necessary for each individual child to be successful. Also, when Jacob B. got up from his table during math instruction, Jay, another boy from another table, quietly walked over to him and gently guided him back to his table. Frances said, “Oh, thanks Jay.” Because of the understanding about children’s different needs in this community, I often saw the children helping one another without being asked by their teacher.

**Teacher Responses.** Because these teachers strove to know each individual child’s needs, they treated each child differently based on those needs. That is the meaning behind “fair is not the same.” They also took this a step further by making sure the rest of the class understood that philosophy. The following interview segments illustrate this point:

See, you have to know, absolutely have to know each kids’ individual [needs]. It is super important to us that fair does not mean the same. For any kid. For anyone. From the first day we tell them that I promise you that I won’t treat anyone else the same. I need to treat each one of you totally different. I’m not going to give Ryan this, because that is not what Ryan needs. He may actually be offended if I give him one jellybean. Our treatment of these kids will be totally different because this is what a kid needs. These guys know, they *know*. Sometimes people think it is not fair, but they look at these kids over there across the table, they look at D in the corner and they go “Oh. Is he okay?” They know it is not typical and they know D needs what D needs. (Frances)

Isabella also shared the philosophy that “fair is not same.” Her interview data illustrates this theme:

Well, for example, one of my kids might be on a token system and they might get a Skittle for sitting up big, or having a quiet body, or raising their hand. So, kids may say, “Well, that’s not fair, he gets a Skittle and I don’t.” And it is true, I mean for a five year old, how is that fair? But, what we talk about is that this is what he is working on and you are working on something different, so you might not get a Skittle for this, but you might get a different sort of reinforcement or a high five. Something for what you’re doing and we can talk about that for something that is really hard for you. But, it is fair, because it is hard for him and it is not hard for you. We can set a goal for yourself and we can try to come up with a plan for you and what is fair for you. We use the word fair a lot. What’s fair and what is not fair. Globally and at their level and my kids actually get that. They are like, “of course he gets a Skittle for sitting up, yeah I get it.” They know that there might be a kid who is putting toys on his head or dancing around and they are like, “Yeah, he’s sitting still. That is awesome friend. You get a Skittle.” Ya know. They figure it out (Isabella).

Frances’ philosophy that “fair does not mean the same” also factored into her in-the-moment response to explosive behavior. In the example below, her immediate, in-the-moment response showed her knowledge of what each child needed. For each child, the approach and technique was something different:

Two students who were very explosive, their first gut reaction would be to throw something, hit somebody. Very visual meltdowns. We are very open about stuff. We don’t hide from stuff. Like David. He has autism. And so, his first reaction is to go to that corner and cry. That tends to be his emotional response. They know, *our kids know*, they have an understanding. They may not know exactly why, but they have an understanding. So, when David would throw something, they know it is not about them. We make sure and we are very clear about that. We say things like, “David doesn’t do that because he doesn’t like you. This is what happens to David. And we need to adjust.” They also need to know that we are going to keep them safe and that we are also going to keep David safe. Then we use different techniques for him. What techniques we can learn from his counselor, etc. He’s not a kid you can take off to the side and wrap up and rub his back and console. He is very volatile, so we know what will work with him. He’s not Jacob B. I can rub his back, put his hand on my hand. First thing is to make sure that the rest of the group understands that this is not something they created. (Frances)

When I asked Frances, “Where did you learn how to deal with challenging behaviors?” she shared her philosophy about knowing children:

Watching people who make kids who aren’t typically successful, be successful. My philosophy is first you’ve got to listen. You have to *know* their story. Everybody has got a story and you have to *hear* that story and I know that just sounds like in the whole cultural competence (and everyone is like I’m culturally competent), but, even though we are in the same zip code in the same district, every kid has a different story. I just try and look at, um, to approach every kid differently. You just have to do that. There can’t be a this-is-how-it-is . . . You can’t have this “you can buy this and it works for everybody” because there isn’t a canned system that works. (Frances)

Also, Frances’ philosophy that, “They also need to know that we are going to keep them safe and that we are going to keep David safe,” showed the rest of the class that David was a cared-for community member.

The following evidence is also insightful, as it allows us to see how Frances created attachments by also providing basic human needs to her students:

One little guy sits at my desk every morning. I ask him if he was at childcare Saturday because that tells me that they, uh, him and his sister, were fed over the weekend. (Frances)

We keep a few sets of coats for the kids because some come in and don’t have the proper attire when it is like fifteen degrees. (Frances)

Whoa, your hands are so dry. Go to my desk and use some lotion. That will help you. (Frances)

Isabella expressed the need for children to understand that each student has different needs and her philosophy regarding children’s disruptions shows her awareness that her response will influence the rest of the children in her class. In her exit interview she said:

Everyone seems to know and understand that everyone is working on different things, everyone is at a different place. Like Evan is working on sitting still, so no one minds [when he is rolling on the rug during Circle Time, it is not a big deal. Why point out something that someone is working on? Ya know? It would make it worse if I point out what kids are struggling with and working on. (Isabella)

Isabella's knowledge of her students and how that knowledge influences her responses not only targeted what works best for that child, it also showed the rest of the class an understanding for that child's struggles. Based on data presented, it would seem that the notion of treating children differently based on their individual needs allows the classroom community an opportunity to understand and accept differences.

### **Care and Kindness**

A teacher modeling caring and kind responses to behavior can help build classroom community. In the literature on classroom communities, approaches to classroom management stress the importance of developing caring relationships. Then, the foundation of classroom management rests on communities that focus explicitly on a child's social and moral development throughout the day by using an ethic of care (Noddings, 1992/2000). In these environments, children thrive on forming attachments where caring relationships construct the basis of community (Bowlby, 1973; Watson & Battistich, 2006). Freiburg also describes authentic caring as "listening, reflecting, trusting and respecting the learner" (1996, p. 83).

**Vignette.** In Isabella's kindergarten classroom, the following vignette involving AJ, observed in the classroom during "Choice Time," illustrates Isabella's caring approach to challenging behaviors. This event began with a group of five boys playing outside.

A conflict erupted between Matt and AJ. They were kicking a ball into a goalie cage. Without warning, Matt became visibly upset and pushed the goalie cage into AJ, his friend. AJ shouted loudly and began sobbing while grabbing his swollen, bloody lip. Isabella, standing in the doorway, walked over to the boys, remained calm, bent down to AJ's face and began a gentle conversations.

Teacher Isabella: "Come with me."

She motioned for Matt to come with her as well. Her body language and facial expression were calm. Hanging his head, Matt walked with his teacher and his friend to the sink area. Isabella asked Matt to have a seat at the table close by while she retrieved an icepack for AJ's lip. The entire time AJ was sobbing loudly. Matt was sitting at the table with art supplies and, while he waited, he began to make AJ a card. He asked me how to spell, "Sorry AJ." When Isabella returned with AJ, holding a small icepack on his lip, she asked Matt to look at AJ's lip.

Teacher Isabella (calmly): "Let's talk about what happened. Remember how we talk about being safe and careful with our bodies?"

She turned to Matt, squatting down so her face was at the boys' eye level.

Teacher Isabella (to Matt, Pointing at AJ's lip): "How does this make you feel?"

Matt: "Sad. So sad."

AJ is just standing still whimpering a little. AJ walked over to Matt.

AJ: "It's okay. I forgive you."

AJ then hugged Matt, and Matt gave AJ the card and read it to him. Both boys smiled.

Teacher Isabella: "We can solve small problems by staying calm and talking about them. Matt, why did you get so upset?"

Matt: "I just, I just wanted the ball."

Teacher Isabella: "Matt, is that a big problem or a little problem?"

Matt: "Small."

Teacher Isabella: "What else could you have done? What do we do with our books?"

Matt: "We take turns. I could have taken turns."

Teacher Isabella: “I think that would work and then your friend wouldn’t have gotten hurt.”

Both boys hugged and walked out arm-in-arm to the outside area again. After a few minutes they started to play again. There were no further conflicts during the rest of the game.

In this event between AJ and Matt, Isabella’s in-the-moment response demonstrated key elements of showing care, while also demonstrating the previous themes (remaining calm, getting to the function of the behavior, knowing AJ, etc.) discussed in this chapter. She guided her students to not only take on another child’s perspective (showing her care for the hurt child), but also helped them to see how their actions could make another child feel. Moreover, she guided Matt to be self-reflective and to understand why he reacted by hurting his friend—before discussing a better solution using discourse and questions. By asking Matt, “why did you get so upset?” Isabella not only helped her students to understand how their actions impact another child, she also tried to instruct the child causing the event to understand why he or she had gotten upset and consequently to try to find a better solution to the problem. Her display of care for both of the boys, showed their value in the community.

**Teacher Responses.** The data collected shows that in every instance where a teacher responded to an event or engaged in discourse with her students, she maintained care and kindness. This was observed in teachers’ actions, voice, and body language. Following Noddings’ patterns of care-theory, teachers repeatedly modeled “care-for” their students, which allowed all the students to begin to “care-about” one another. This theme is illustrated in both my interview and observational data. For example Lucy stated:

All you can do is love them in the moment. For some of these kids, nine times out of ten all they need is a hug or affirm that they are having a hard time to reel them back in. I call

it giving them lovies. I know it sounds so simple, but that is all they need. All they need. What can I do to help you? (Lucy)

Lucy illustrated this further in an interview by discussing a student, Isaiah, whom she had last year and her knowledge of what he needed. This student had developed a clear attachment to Lucy. Therefore, adding to her knowledge of Isaiah's needs, she also was able to show him care:

His dad was dying. And his dad was in the hospital so much last year and his mom worked long, long hours. Sooo, lots going on with him. For example last week, he was in the hallway and I heard this scream and I knew right away it was Isaiah. He was just melting down. My immediate reaction was to just go to him and within one minute of me holding him and hugging him, he calmed down. He just needed that from me because I have a relationship with him. He just needed those lovies. His classroom teacher will have him come down to read a book with me as a reward. The intentionality with him at school is to allow him to be able to do that and his second grade teacher knows that and we work together on it. (Lucy)

This collective, caring culture was evident in all three of these classrooms and the result was a group of students who cared about each other. Every adult who entered the classroom showed a level of care. As Isabella reflected about her classroom in our first interview:

It is important to me that all of the adults in the classroom genuinely care about and value all the kids in my classroom and I think that kids see that . . .it is like through osmosis or something, they know. Also that we value each other as teachers in the classroom and are respectful to each other. (Isabella)

In my observational data, I coded teachers' care for their students by observing their proximity to the students as they talked and listened to them, instances where they explicitly showed a student how another student was responding, and showing an overall appreciation for each child. For example, as previously shown, Frances always moved her body right to a student's eye level. She often had her arm around them or on their shoulder, especially if they were in duress.

## **Discourse During Challenging Moments**

Modeling discussion, deliberation and listening during and in response to challenging behavior can help build classroom community. To encourage pro-social behaviors, adults can communicate “pro-social norms and values by providing opportunities for children to work collaboratively with one another, and participate in group problem solving and decision making” (Osterman, 2002, p. 182).

Vivian Paley, an author and skilled teacher who used innovative strategies for challenging behaviors, understood that ways of talking and listening to children during a social conflict had a powerful impact not just on the children involved but on the entire classroom community. As a result, her pedagogical approaches shifted from immediate punishment to the discourse surrounding the misbehavior or social conflict. In her book *The Boy Who Would be a Helicopter* (1990), she reflects, “How could ‘locking up’ a child, even in a centrally located chair (time-out chair), be a substitute for reason and discourse? My chair offered silence, anger and no way out” (p. 86). Much like Paley’s discourse with children, which demonstrated the workings of a caring community, these teachers not only listened to children in order to understand their perspectives, they also facilitated discussions in which their students were engaged in decision-making based on how they were treated and how they felt, thereby ensuring equity and fairness for all.

## **Deliberation for Problem Solving**

In both interviews and observations the data clearly showed that all three teachers shared a norm of “stopping and talking about it” when an event occurred (Isabella). In each observation, teachers facilitated discourse around the problem or behavior and guided her students to the best solution. These solutions were shared solutions that affected all the

individuals involved. Often the content of the discussion would be revisited later in their teachings. For example, in Lucy's classroom, a brief, recurring conflict over sharing toys occurred during her afternoon in class Choice Time. Lucy brought all the children to the front rug, and they talked about different solutions that would work for everyone.

**Vignette.** In the following vignette, previous themes from this chapter are present; however, the use of discourse and deliberation is evident and reveals the possibility of a caring classroom community where a boy is accepted, regardless of his disruptive, challenging behaviors.

During free choice-time (in and outdoor play in the classroom) AJ, looking for Teacher Isabella, ran inside the classroom from bowling outside in the open play area with a group of four boys; he was visibly upset. He walked up to Teacher Isabella, trying to explain the problem through sobs and tears. Teacher Isabella put her hand on his shoulder. After a few minutes and a few deep breaths, he was able to articulate that Nick "was not playing fair while bowling," having taken the bowling ball away and yelled at him. Teacher Isabella was silent as AJ gave his explanation. She listened patiently while he tried to find his words. Then, she put her arm around AJ, guided him outside while her voice remained gentle and caring.

Teacher Isabella: "I am super proud of you for using your words to find me and ask for help. Remember, we can solve problems by remaining calm and talking about it."

After praising and affirming his pro-social behaviors, the two walked outside and approached the group where Nick was playing. As Nick noticed them, he started walking toward his teacher and his friend, hanging his head.

Teacher Isabella: "Let's figure this out and talk about it. What happened? Let's talk about working hard to be good friends."

Nick: "He took the ball. I told him 'No!'"

Teacher Isabella (speaking very gently and with care to Nick): "Nick, look at how upset he is. Look at his face. When you scream and say 'no,' how do you think that makes your friend feel?"

Nick: (Pause) "Not good. Sad."

Teacher Isabella: "We try to make our friends feel better."

Nick goes over to AJ and puts his arm around his shoulder.

Teacher Isabella: "Can we decide on a way to play where everyone feels like it is fair?"

AJ: "I have a problem; I want to steal the ball."

Nick: "You can't STEAL the ball."

Teacher Isabella: "What should we do?" (Long pause) "Is this a big problem or a little problem?"

The class was working on a social-skills curriculum that intentionally addressed "big" and "little" problems and the appropriate responses to each.

Nick: "We can take turns. We can steal the ball later."

Teacher Isabella: "Will that work?"

AJ: "Sure."

Both boys ran off to corner of the outside play area to bowl.

Teacher Isabella (Cheering and clapping when another boy rolls the ball and the pins fall down): "Yeah! We try and make our friends feel better!"

Nick (Excitedly): "That was goooooood." (Chanting after lots of pins fell down) "Go AJ, go. Go AJ, go."

Teacher Isabella: "AJ, how does that make you feel when your friend chants for you?!"

AJ: “Good!”

Teacher Isabella: “Nick, how does that feel cheering for your friend?”

Nick: “So good!”

All four boys cheered as the next boy started to bowl: “Go, go it’s your birthday, it’s your birthday. Go Jin, Go Jin. Go Jin, it’s your birthday.”

In the brief description of AJ’s event, the use of discourse can be seen. When AJ sought Isabella out and was very upset, she actively listened to him without interrupting, then she praised him for using his words to explain his problem (implying communication is a better solution than aggression), and she explicitly reminded him that “we can solve problems by remaining calm and talking about it.” Deliberatively, she did not initiate a solution for AJ, she wanted to hear all sides equally, have the boys hear all sides equally, and listen well enough to respond and build off of one another’s ideas in order to decide what would be a fair solution. Genuine questions in an inquiring manner included: “What happened?” “What should we do?” “Can we decide on a way to play that makes everyone feel like it is fair?” “Will that work?” Isabella actively listened to each child’s response to guide him toward a fair solution. AJ and Nick each expressed their give-and-take for how the rules of the game should go and then came to a mutual decision to take turns and steal the ball later. The point is that these were the boys’ decisions, not Isabella’s. Her discourse was not authoritative or prescriptive, it was deliberative and empathetic.

Isabella had worked with her students since the start of the school year on developing an inclusive classroom where no topic was off limits and where children’s words were valued. She continually worked with AJ to teach him that by remaining calm, he could effectively solve a problem. In tandem, she built a strong rapport with and attachment to AJ, whereby he felt

comfortable letting Isabella help him resolve problems, rather than responding with dissident behavior that could have elicited rejection from his peers. Isabella *knew* AJ's needs.

**Teacher Responses.** To further illustrate this theme, the following excerpts, taken from interviews, illustrate teachers' beliefs in the importance of not being reactive (traditional response) and in using discourse to find out why a behavior is happening (non-traditional response). Addressing in-the-moment discourse, these teachers explain how deliberating with their students to come up with the best solution to a social conflict enables the students to take on another child's perspective. Even when the class was heading to another activity, the teachers stopped and discussed the conflict with their students. Teachers recognized the significance of how facilitating discourse around problems teaches the children to talk about what the problem is and how it can be solved, while keeping the group ("we") and each other ("our friends") in mind. In these events, rather than authoritatively telling students what to do, teachers discussed the conflict as a group. The following interview excerpts illustrate their general approaches:

Things don't always work out as planned and so big things happen and you have to be sort of touch-and-go and my policy is that the more open you are with kids and the more you talk about things as they happen, the better off you are. You know? You may not always know the right things to say to answer their questions and that's okay too. Sometimes I say to them, "well I don't know, let's think about this together, what could you have said when he did this?" (Isabella)

Isabella, Lucy and Frances reflected about social conflicts that happened and explained their discourse strategies for their respective in-the-moment response:

Um, but it does happen. And they are grabbing on something back and forth and I walk over to see them and get them to stop. I ask gently, depending on the situation and get them to freeze, or stop and then at that point we think of some solutions together. (Isabella)

And then you come out and you talk to kids about that solution. Just giving kid . . . um, when our engines are all high and, or they are really wanting something in a conflict, if

you stop and think about it, and evaluate, that is a better way or solution to the problem. And then when we come up with a solution we think, is it fair, is it safe? And how will people feel after that solution. We talk about that as a way to problem solve, and especially when the teacher is there to problem solve with you. If we decide that it is safe and fair and how people will feel and if they feel okay, then that is a good solution. We use that, and if it not safe, we will talk about another solution, if it is not fair, we talk about, well you know, how would so-and-so feel with this solution? How would you feel if the tables were turned? That sort of thing. (Isabella)

It doesn't matter what is happening or what we are supposed to be doing. We are going to solve the problem first and find ways to work things out. I'll spend the time doing that, then get to the content. They won't even be able to think about the content if they are all upset. (Lucy)

We talk about things very openly. Like we had a kid who used to hit all the time. So we talk as a group about your body being a temple and you don't allow anyone to do that and you get help if you need to. And these talks are with the kid who is struggling with hitting in the group. (Frances)

Rather than pushing through their daily schedules, these teachers spent time to talk about social issues and behaviors. This leads into another piece of this theme: difficult topics are talked about. For example, in Lucy's classroom, a few children came down with lice. Having lice could allow for numerous social stigmas as well as negative reactions from other children. However, Lucy talked about it in a very caring, open way. As a result, the children showed empathy towards the few students who had it, rather than avoiding or ostracizing them. The following excerpt, taken from Isabella's interview, illustrates this further:

I want my kids to know that they can talk to me about all sorts of things. That no topic is off limits. That we need to have boundaries and be respectful of each other, but that you know, they can ask me questions about race, gender, ability. Those things that I think sometimes people react to and are like "Oh, we don't talk about that." I don't want them to get that. I want them to know we can talk about things respectfully and kids can really do that. For them it is a lot of talking about how would you feel if that happened to you or how do you think so-and-so feels? Sometimes they say something that makes someone else cry and you can see it on their face. They are like, "Oh my gosh, I made this kid cry. I know what it is like to cry. I must have really hurt their feelings." Ya know, they learn from those experiences with each other. (Isabella)

We talk a lot about what kids are working on so we are very open about... we have a lot of kids with disabilities. So we are very open about what so and so is working on learning how to talk. You're working on learning how to read. What can you do to help them? What can they do to help you? How can you support each other? So, I really want them, my primary goal for them is that they leave the classroom knowing that there are things to appreciate about everybody, not only do they accept each other's differences but they appreciate them and they see the value in each other. That is the primary goal. (Isabella)

These teachers confronted difficult topics that arose in their classrooms; no topic was ever off limits. They did not shy away from talking with their students about issues such as race, discrimination, hate, and oppression: issues, which, according to Boutte, come up at a very early age (2008). To reiterate, "Teachers play a major role in determining whether students feel cared for and a welcome part of the school community" (Osterman, 2002, p. 178). This would suggest that the ways in which teachers talk to their students about any topic gives children a feeling of acceptance in the school community. When this happens, they have more positive relationships towards others (Baumeister & Leary; 1995).

A teacher's reaction and discourse regarding challenging behaviors in the classroom is significant because a teacher's authoritative status can shape the way children in a classroom act toward each other. These in-the-moment responses to a student's behavior can alter the space in which children connect with one another. This *connecting* space, which is shown above through discourse, is one in which a child may begin to take on another child's perspective, as well as one in which children may collectively begin to value each other as classroom and school community members.

### **It Takes a Village: Flexible Student Mobility Can Support Children**

Flexible student mobility and placement options can support children with challenging behaviors. A finding in Lucy and Frances' school was discovering a school community norm where the faculty members knew the students, regardless of classroom assignment, and cared for

them in supportive ways. Teachers in these schools had established that flexibility with the placement and transitions of students could support challenging behaviors. While walking in the halls at this school, students from all different classrooms would stop and hug other teachers, even if the teacher was not their homeroom teacher. Lucy illustrated this best in an interview:

The school community in relation to the kids is a very consistent calm environment with a lot of continuity between classrooms. So kids flow from classroom to classroom. From teacher to teacher without boundaries during the day. (Lucy: Initial interview)

Therefore, a child may move to another classroom because of a relationship or attachment he/she has to a teacher. No children were ever pulled out for special services. The following vignette illustrates the norm of sharing students.

**Vignette.** The first day I observed Teacher Lucy's classroom, I immediately noticed Isaiah. He had showed explosive behaviors in the hallway, and on that day he came down to Teacher Lucy's classroom with a red face; he had been visibly crying. Lucy quietly walked over to him and asked him to sit at her back desk. He slumped his head and cried in his arms. The rest of the class didn't even seem to notice. Teacher Lucy gave him a few minutes to collect himself and then pulled up a chair next to him and gave him a hug.

Teacher Lucy: "What's up? How are you feeling and how can I help?"

Isaiah: "I just want to go home. I'm done with school."

Teacher Lucy: "Mr. D wants you to be in math and finish your work; can you do that for me and then we can have some time to read this afternoon?"

Isaiah wiped his tears and thought for a moment.

Isaiah: "Yeah."

Teacher Lucy: “Okay, what can you do next time before getting so upset?”

Isaiah: “I don’t know.”

Teacher Lucy: “I’ll talk with Mr. D, but I need you to show that you aren’t going to get angry over learning math and when you show that, you can come down during free time and read with me. How does that sound? We will figure this out.”

Isaiah went back to his classroom and finished his work, returning to Teacher Lucy’s classroom later in the day to read a book the librarian had brought him because she thought he might enjoy it.

**Teacher Responses.** In Lucy’s initial interview, when asked about explosive behaviors and the norm to share students, she explained this dynamic further:

The first responder here is the classroom teacher, then my response would be to see how we can branch out. Like get someone who has worked directly with that student and knows that student. Is there an intervention teacher? Or, um, a specialist who has seen them grow over time or the previous year’s teacher. To help them. A kiddo can just get calm when someone that has a relationship with them is there to help. Or even another student. Like if a kid is having a bad day. (Lucy)

Therefore, the community norm is that another teacher, although he/she may not be the student’s home-room teacher, will help when a child is struggling. This is based on the child’s need to receive comfort and care from a teacher with whom he/she has an attachment, just as Lucy was able to reach “out” to help Isaiah. Lucy explained this further:

Like with Isaiah, he will come down to see me if he is frustrated or exploding. He has an explosive temper. There are no consistent triggers. He gets very angry. He is not malicious, but is he gets to a place he will lash out verbally and physically to teachers and other kids. It could just come out of nowhere. Until you can calm him out of it, he is angry and then starts to cry and becomes emotional. (Lucy)

Another example illustrates the community knowing all the students. As Lucy and I walked through the office, the librarian gave her four books that she thought Isaiah might like to read when he would go to Lucy's classroom for a reward or "a break." There was a connectedness and fluidity among children and teachers at this school site. Other teachers knew what was going on with other students.

Frances showed similar "sharing" of kids throughout her school day. She explained the school-community's philosophy about this norm in an interview:

We started sharing kids, like when I came on and we talked about that shift . . . We needed to start looking at the student that needs you most, the most needy kid. And, so, we started looking at that we are all better when we do not teach alone. There is safety in numbers and when we share kids, they are all of ours. All of our responsibilities.  
(Frances)

She went on to say:

If the resource room teacher has some magic dust that she can sprinkle on and she knows what works for this kid or that kid, then we need them. We need to know those things. We need those skills. So if she can do something in the classroom with a kid with a serious need, imagine what she can do with another kid in the classroom that doesn't have the label and is just as low. We need that. That was a philosophy shift we did here. We don't do pull outs. (Frances)

Like with D. She helped us see how he needed to have success in the moment. Did you see her? He needs to be successful in the moment. We're going to make D successful in the moment because he needs that because six hours in the day he needs to be successful in the moment. He may not pass the big test, but he had success and he knew what it looked like to be a student and he has strategies to save himself in the moment. That is what regular life is. (Frances)

For Lucy and Frances' school community, there were no pull-outs for children receiving special services. That means, instead, that any intervention teacher who provided any services to students would come into the classroom community. No child was ever pulled out to a separate space or classroom. The school belief, continual discussed, was that "no kid is a bad kid." There

was a belief that all children are good and the school community's behaviors should mirror this belief. When teachers were discussing students and their parents, there was no blame or eye-rolling about the lack of involvement. There was an understanding that when their students come to school, it was the school community's job to provide for them and to make them feel safe. During my time in Lucy and Frances' school, I did not witness anyone speaking poorly about any child. For example, even if Isaiah was struggling, for whatever reason, teachers (Lucy, the librarian, and Mr. D) never spoke negative words about Isaiah. They accepted him as a child who was "having a hard time."

Each morning in Frances' room, children from previous years and other children from different classes would come down to help either Frances or other children in her classroom. The second morning I was observing, Francis said, smiling to me, "Luckily I have personal assistants." She then asked two older students from another classroom to help one of her students send an important message to her older brother. Frances said to Lisa, "I want you to get that message to him so you won't be thinking about it all day, and you can concentrate on your work in here." She knew Lisa would be worried. Students helping other students from different classrooms and moving fluidly between classrooms was a norm.

Additionally, both Lucy and Frances felt there was a level of constant care and support, among the staff, for each other in regard to caring for their students. Lucy reflected in her exit interview:

Most people on the outside looking in say "How can you teach there? The kids are so rough." Don't you want to get out of there? But I've been in buildings where the kids were magnificent, but there was tension and conflict within the staff and among teachers. Here, the kids are rough and hard, but the support and just having someone there that says let me try and do what you can't do or let me try something to take the weight off you or let me just pat you on the back. The support from the staff and adults far outweighs what struggles and difficulties you have with the kids. (Lucy)

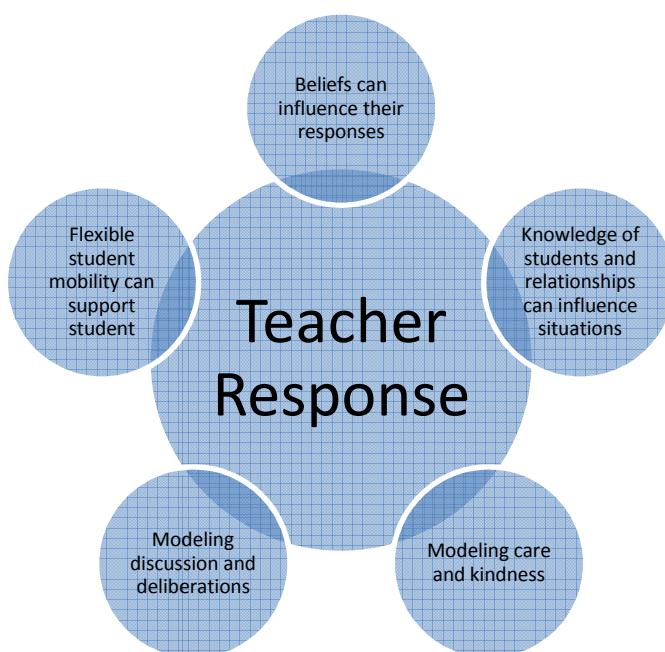
When asked how this community became this way, Lucy said:

I don't have any idea. This is my third year here. But I've heard that it has always been this way. The adults that are here make it far easier to be here. I love it here. Maybe we don't have another choice because if the kids are so hard, who else do we have? So we support each other. Like a survival thing. And I guess we'll all feel like we are making a difference. (Lucy)

The community's shared beliefs about children being able to freely go to any adult for care or help resulted from this community's norms and beliefs about children. This current norm was reinforced through adult-child interactions in which the challenging behavior was diffused by care given to the child by an adult where an attachment had been established, as in the case of Isaiah's attachment to Lucy.

### The Possibilities

In summary, when the previous themes are present in a classroom, the possibility of an inclusive caring community can be seen. Figure 2 below is a compass depicting these three teachers as they navigated their responses to challenging classroom behaviors.



Sometimes a teacher's aim was to have an undesirable, challenging behavior stop immediately and the result was to have a child sent out of the classroom, or scolded publicly. These three teachers' classroom environments showed us the possibilities of creating spaces where inclusion, acceptance, friendship, and development of their moral growth flourished.

For example, in Isabella's classroom, I wanted to know about AJ: whether or not his challenging behaviors had changed since the beginning of the school year. She happily responded, "there has been a huge shift in him. Huge. Like at the beginning of the year, he was really aggressive and defiant, he didn't participate in any of the classroom activities throughout the day. I mean none. He now participates in everything." She also shared that he has numerous friends and is well-liked member of the community.

It can be quite powerful for a classroom community to witness teachers exhibiting these behaviors. Although these teachers were dealing with one child's challenging behavior during respective events, their responses toward that child showed the rest of the children that no matter what, that child was a valued community member. These teachers were thus setting up social norms for the other children. These students, regardless of where they live, their academic achievement, or their social or ethnic background, were caring, thoughtful, concerned young people who longed for relationships, respect, and a sense of belongingness in their school communities. For example, we saw that Frances' responses to Jacob B's disruptions allowed the other children to quickly take care of him or to help him, without being asked by Frances. While Frances reflected about her students, she emotionally said:

Boy oh boy, they sure are caregivers and they take care of each other. They all have different trauma and stuff. They have lots of serious hidden trauma, but they sure do care for each other. We are full mainstream so it is amazing to see how they take care of each other. Their core feeling inside is I want to do the right thing. Academically the lowest, but internally they have a good internal compass.

It is possible that Frances' forty-four students care, simply because Francis cares. I would attribute this dynamic to her using the themes in this chapter and ultimately, using accepting pedagogies during challenging behaviors.

More importantly, a teacher's response also has the potential to affect how the children felt about themselves. Based on the extensive literature and research on school community, it would seem that if a student does not sense his/her importance and value in a school community, he/she cannot rely on members of that community to meet particular needs, whether it be from a teacher or from students. The essence of a community is where all its members feel a sense of belonging (Furman, 1998).

## CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SUPPORTS

*Nothing within a school has more impact upon students in terms of skills development, self-confidence, or classroom behavior than the personal and professional growth of their teachers. When teachers examine, question, reflect on their ideas and develop new practices that lead towards their ideals, students are alive. When teachers stop growing, so do their students. (Barth, 1981, p. 145)*

Classroom management, especially when it involves responding to challenging behaviors, can be particularly difficult for teachers because of a teacher's deep beliefs and norms, time constraints throughout the teaching day, curricular and assessment pressures, and a lack of training. The demands on teachers today can be overwhelming. "Behavior" and "classroom management" are terms used regularly in the teaching profession. Teachers, at some point in their careers, will serve students with challenging behaviors; therefore, having effective classroom management skills is important. Implementing evidenced-based classroom behavioral management practices improves student results (Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, & Sugai, 2008). From a "behavioral perspective, effective teacher instruction should be designed to promote socially significant behavior changes" (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007). For example, using praise as a teaching strategy has been examined and "research indicates that delivering contingent praise leads to an increase in both academic (e.g. correct responses, work productivity, and academic performance) and social (e.g. on-task behavior, compliance) behavior" (Simonsen, Myers & DeLuca, 2010, p. 303). While professional development opportunities on classroom management are limited, there are seminars available. For example, The Classroom Organization and Management Program (COMP) is a research-based professional development program. This program's goal is to help teachers with their craft through creating and managing effective and successful learning communities in their classroom.

COMP seminars were designed to advance learning-centered classrooms that focus on four premises for classroom management. As outlined on their website, the premises are: 1) Effective classroom management is proactive, not reactive; 2) In effective classrooms, management and instruction are interwoven; 3) Students are active participants in the learning environment and; 4) Teachers working together synergistically help one another. This program has shown effectiveness in improving student achievements and student behavior. The seminars and modules, designed for the start of the school year, outline a variety of methods which include: organizing the classroom, planning and teaching rules and procedures, developing student accountability, maintaining good student behavior, planning and organizing instruction, conducting instruction and maintaining momentum, and getting off to a good start (detailed modules can be found at [www.comp.org](http://www.comp.org)). In response to conflicts which inevitably arise in classrooms, COMP's creators, Evertson & Harris (1995), recognized that "even in the most efficiently organized learning communities," conflicts are inevitable and need to be addressed. They provide examples which "illustrate three strategies teachers in learning-centered classrooms use for handling conflict: teaching students how to participate in handling the conflict, leading discussions among students to resolve conflict, and holding private discussions with individual students" (Evertson & Harris, 1995, p. 5). They continue by stating, "These strategies are for students to "play a greater role in supporting the academic, moral, and social norms of the classroom" (p.6).

In my review of the programs addressing classroom management, the literature does not look specifically at a teacher's in-the-moment response to misbehavior with a development of specific strategies for those teacher responses. As the current research suggests, aggression is a

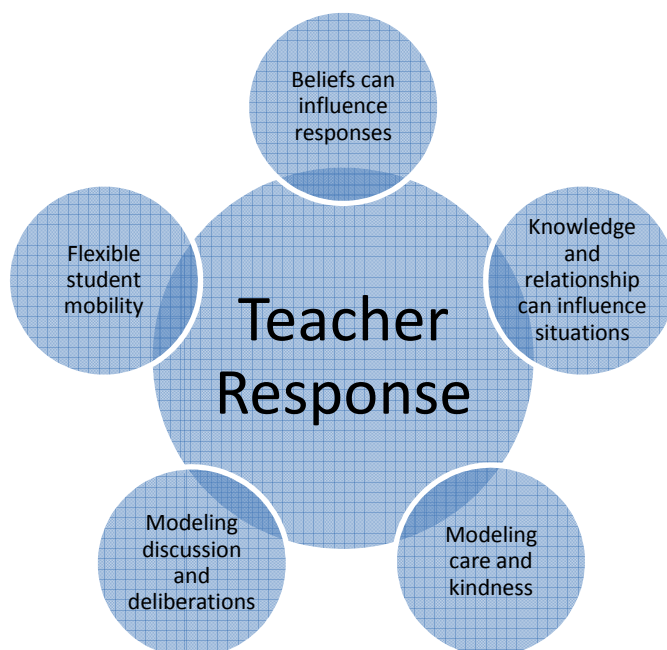
typical behavior that elicits peer rejection and the following activities can engage teachers in thoughtful ways to respond.

Therefore, professional development opportunities, in which teachers may engage one another in critical discussions about how to effectively deal with challenging behaviors can offer support (Nucci, 2006). Research shows us that traditional methods (such as “time-outs,” suspensions, expulsions, and/or public humiliation in the form of reprimands) simply do not work for behavior modifications and instead often create harmful effects for vulnerable children. (Fenning & Bohanon, 2006; Stevens, 2013). Although the teachers featured in this work received specialized training in either Special Education (Isabella), or as participants in specific professional development seminars on the effects of childhood trauma on behavior (Lucy and Frances), their beliefs, strategies and practices can contribute to how teacher’s respond in all general education classrooms.

In an effort to move from the individual teachers’ in-the-moment findings presented in the last chapter to practical applications of their strategies, the professional development tools presented in this chapter strive to instruct and facilitate productive discussions about responding to challenging behaviors in ways that engender a sense of belongingness in the classroom. These tools respond to the themes derived from three teachers’ philosophies and practices collected and presented in Chapter 4. They therefore comprise five components: 1) A teacher’s belief about children can influence his/her responses to challenging behavior; 2) A teacher’s knowledge of his/her students and of his/her relationships with them can influence behavioral situations; 3) Modeling kind and caring responses to challenging behavior can help build classroom community; 4) Modeling discussion, deliberation and listening during and in response to

challenging behavior can help build classroom community; 5) Flexible student mobility and placement options can effectively support children with challenging behaviors.

These components were at the heart of each of the classrooms in Chapter 4, each of which created a caring, accepting community through everyday responses to the challenging behaviors of vulnerable students. The goal, then, is for teachers to be able to incorporate these components into their everyday responses and practices. These components function as a compass for choosing how to respond to a challenging behavior. The task, then, lies in putting them into action, which is what these sample professional development tools serve to do. Sometimes a teacher may incorporate one of these components or all five, depending on the behavioral situation. As a way of reminder, the diagram below illustrates these components so teachers may navigate their way through thinking about and responding in-the-moment to challenging behaviors.



These professional development supports incorporate classroom vignettes, each inspired by the three teachers' methods for responding to students' most difficult behaviors—methods

that differ from traditional classroom management methodologies. They aim to help teachers create classrooms wherein social conflicts or challenging behaviors are engaged in ways that help students see themselves as valued members of the community, no matter how severe their behavior.

The sample supports were created by using the data collected from the three teachers' classrooms as well as my own professional experience and knowledge as a teacher, district math leader, and nationally board-certified teacher, positions through which I have provided numerous professional development seminars. Their intended audience is teachers, principals, and any educators who work with student populations where challenging behaviors interfere with children's academic growth and overall schooling experience.

Professional development for teachers, principals, and school staff is an essential component for any kind of school reform (Ball & Cohen, 1998; Wilson & Berne, 1999; Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2008). Research on professional development has guided and influenced the development of these tools.

In the sections below, the components created are focused with the aim at addressing — 1) teacher beliefs and 2) teacher reflection on practical strategies for in-the-moment responses. The components are designed to help guide teacher's decision-making during and in response to a challenging behavior, vignettes as a means to allow these components to be seen in context, and examples of activities and tools to help navigate through the complexity of dealing with challenging behaviors in the classroom. It is my hope that this combination will help teachers to envision what is possible, reflect on their current strategies, and fine-tune their own practice. Developing an entire curriculum for teachers is beyond the breadth and scope of this paper; therefore, the following tools are a sampling of how the themes previously presented can

contribute effective supports for teachers. Each professional development component is organized into three pieces: 1) Content 2) Procedures/Activity and 3) Outcome. The rationale for the design of these components is based on research outlining what effective professional development opportunities contain to result in a change in practice and a transfer to teachers' professional knowledge. Therefore, for there to be education reform, "teachers would need the opportunities to reconsider their current practices and to examine others, as well as to learn more about the subjects they teach" (Ball & Cohen, 1999, p. 3). A teacher survey on opportunities to learn revealed that direct classroom experience had the most valuable impact for teacher learning (Wilson & Berne, 1999).

Therefore, the following tools created are meant to be facilitated in a number of ways: by incorporating participants reading and discussing vignettes about classroom experiences; by exploring the components through activities; by sharing and discussing teachers' own experiences with students; by having teachers write case studies drawn from their own experiences; by analyzing practices already in place at their school; and by reading pieces of related research (Schifter, 1998). These participatory experiences are aligned with the belief that for professional development to be meaningful and beneficial to teachers it has to include these elements (Abdal-Haqq in Wilson & Berne, 1998):

1. Includes training, practice, and feedback; opportunities for individual reflection and group inquiry into practice; and coaching or other follow-up procedures.
2. Is school based and embedded in teacher work.
3. Is collaborative, providing opportunities for teachers to interact with peers.
4. Focuses on student learning, which should, in part, guide assessment of its effectiveness.
5. Encourages and supports school-based and teacher initiatives.
6. Is rooted in the knowledge base for teaching.
7. Incorporates constructivist approaches to teaching and learning.
8. Recognizes teachers as professionals and adult learners.
9. Provides adequate time and follow-up support.

10. Is accessible and inclusive.

The use of protocols taken from The National School Reform Faculty are used as a means to facilitate rich discussions for participants as they address the components in the research literature on effective teacher professional development.

### **PD Introduction: Beliefs about Challenging Behaviors and the Classroom Community**

#### **Content: What Does Empirical Research Already Say?**

**Brief Summary.** Early childhood classrooms are sites where challenging behaviors occur daily. What do teachers do in the immediate moment of the behavior? For example, how does a teacher respond when a child throws sand in another child's face? How a teacher responds to the challenging behavior positively or negatively affects the space of and influences membership in the classroom community. The desire for belongingness is a basic motivational need with significant implications for human growth and development (Osterman, 2000; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci et al., 1991; Ryan, 1995). Not being accepted into the community threatens a general sense of belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Teachers typically receive little pre- or in-service training in classroom management, including how to respond to challenging behaviors (Begeny & Martens, 2006; Markow, Moessner, & Horowitz, 2006; Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adomson, 2010). Educators and researchers understand that punitive punishments such as "time-outs," suspensions, expulsions, and public humiliation in the form of reprimands, simply do not work to change a child's behavior (Fenning & Bohannon, 2006; Stevens, 2013). I believe how teachers talk and respond to their students' challenging behaviors in the classroom plays a critical role in determining how students learn to treat one another.

## Process/Activities

**Activity 1.** This is a means to prompt conversation about how to deal with and feel about challenging behaviors. These questions will guide a twenty-minute discussion/brainstorming session that focuses on how teachers typically respond to challenging behaviors:

### Everyday Response to Challenging Behaviors

Early childhood classrooms are sites where challenging behaviors occur daily. For example, what does a teacher do and say immediately after a child throws dirt in another child's face on the playground?

Please spend twenty minutes to discuss.

Facilitator records responses visually for the group to see.

**Activity 2.** The following activity's aim is to target a teacher's own understandings, philosophies, and beliefs about how challenging behaviors should be addressed in the classroom. First, the facilitator will hand out the following sheet of quotations, taken from early childhood author and educator Vivian's Paley's books. As I've discussed in previous chapters, Paley's disciplinary methodologies are often referenced because they are innovative and non-traditional:

### Excerpts and quotes taken from Vivian Paley's Stories

The following is an exchange with Trish, Paley's student teacher, about labeling children and Jason's disruptions:

"Speaking of judgments, how come you let Jason interrupt all the stories today?"

"I didn't *let* him. I simply couldn't prevent him from doing it. The children saw that. They know I'm not willing to get nasty just to prove my power."

"But what if other children start doing the same sort of thing?" Gail asks. "I worry about that."

“They don’t. The one child who *has* to disrupt, does it. The rest watch. And especially, they watch the teacher to see if that unsettled child is safe from harm. That’s all they want to know.”

Trish and Gail look doubtful. “Okay. You two will figure these things out for yourselves when you have your own classrooms. But for me, Jason’s behavior in the story room was annoying but in no way harmful. Had I moved in with force—separating him from the group, punishing him in some way—*that* would be harmful to the group. For then I would have admitted to a lack of faith in the power of reason and good will to solve problems, not necessarily on the spot, but eventually.”

“Sometimes it’s not the kind of problem that can be solved by good will,” Trish says.

“Such as?”

“Well, wouldn’t some people call what Jason does ‘perseveration’?”

“I can’t tell you what someone who uses that label would say about Jason,” I reply.

“Look, Trish, I’ll admit I’ve little faith in your lists of so-called learning disabilities. But, in any case, none of these labels apply in my classroom . . .”

“...aside from all else we try to accomplish, we have an awesome responsibility. We must become aware of the essential loneliness of each child. Our classrooms, at all levels, must look more like happy families and secure homes, the kind in which all family members can tell their private stories, knowing they will be listened to with affection and respect.” (taken from *The Boy Who Would be a Helicopter*)

“The teachers defined us as obedient or naughty, fast or slow, popular or invisible, according to their preferences, and we accepted the roles we were given... Those of us who became teachers adopted the conventional wisdom that teacher knows best and fashioned our classrooms in the manner of those who went before us.” (taken from *White Teacher*)

**Protocol.** To support the above excerpts and to facilitate rich discussions about teacher’s own beliefs regarding challenging behaviors, the following protocol may be used:



## Three Levels of Text Protocol

*Adapted by the Southern Maine Partnership from Camilla Greene's Rule of 3 Protocol, 11/20/03.*

### **Purpose**

To deepen understanding of a text and explore implications for participants' work.

### **Facilitation**

Stick to the time limits. Each round takes up to 5 minutes per person in a group. Emphasize the need to watch air time during the brief "group response" segment. Do 1 – 3 rounds. Can be used as a prelude to a Text-based Discussion or by itself.

### **Roles**

Facilitator/timekeeper (who also participates); participants

### **Process**

1. Sit in a circle and identify a facilitator/timekeeper
2. If participants have not done so ahead of time, have them read the text and identify passages (and a couple of back-ups) that they feel may have important implications for their work.
3. A Round consists of:
  - One person using up to 3 minutes to:
    - LEVEL 1: Read aloud the passage she/he has selected
    - LEVEL 2: Say what she/he thinks about the passage (interpretation, connection to past experiences, etc.)
    - LEVEL 3: Say what she/he sees as the implications for his/her work.
  - The group responding (for a **TOTAL** of up to 2 minutes) to what has been said.
4. After all rounds have been completed, debrief the process.

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## Outcome

To give a teacher the opportunity to be reflective and for the facilitator to understand the participants' beliefs about how they respond to challenging behaviors, the following questions can be posed.

### Reflective Questions

1. What are my own beliefs and norms for how I respond to challenging behaviors?
2. How can my responses influence the rest of my students in the class?
3. How do responses influences the classroom community?
4. In the next few weeks, where do I see opportunities to reflect on my responses to difficult behaviors?
5. What challenges have I encountered when I try to manage disruptive, challenging and undesirable student behaviors?

### Targeted Component: A Teacher's Beliefs Can Influence Their Response

#### Content: What Can We Learn From Teachers' Beliefs?

**Brief Summary.** Before I begin with practical strategies for in-the-moment responses to challenging behaviors, an important reflection by the teachers practicing alternative pedagogies was the need to understand their own personal beliefs and norms. A teacher's belief about children can influence their responses to difficult behavioral situations. This includes their own philosophies about *how* and *why* they respond to a particular behavior. Approaches to classroom management that center on the community and that build a positive view of children allow for a natural response to abandon a "controlling autocratic approach to community and to think of

teaching and classroom management as working with, rather than controlling, children” (Watson & Battistich, 2006, p. 258). DeVries and Zan (1994) state, “A moral classroom begins with the teacher’s attitude of respect for children, for their interests, feelings, values and ideas.”

A key strategy for responding to a challenging behavior for the featured teachers was to remain calm and to understand that the behavior often isn’t about you. They strived to understand the function (reason, triggers, and underlying factors) behind a behavior. It is helpful for teachers to know that the challenging behavior is often not about them, but a child’s internal volcano. Furthermore, when a teacher remains calm, the student sees that behavior allows for the possibility to diffuse the behavior. Let’s look at these teacher’s philosophies through the activities below.

### **Process/Activities**

**Activity 1.** This instructional activity’s purpose is for teachers to engage in a conversation after reading teachers’ philosophies. This task was designed to highlight explicit reasons behind a teacher’s response to a child’s challenging behavior. The facilitator will hand out the following vignette and quotes taken from classroom teachers who practiced alternative pedagogies.

#### **Remaining Calm During a Challenging Behavior**

Two boys from Frances’ classroom came in from recess, flushed red in the face, and immediately started to talk simultaneously about their conflict on the playground. Teacher Frances bent down in order to face both of the boys at eye level.

Teacher Frances (calmly): “Wow, I can see you both are very upset. Let’s try and

figure this out before we head into class so it doesn't disrupt the rest of your day."

Both boys were still upset and speaking in loud voices, barely catching a breath while trying to talk over each other. Teacher Frances rested a hand on both of their shoulders.

Teacher Frances (calmly and her body was in the same position): "Alright, you two are visibly upset and we will get to the bottom of this, but let's just get a sip of water, sit at the back table and wait until we can come up with a solution."

Both boys headed into the classroom with Teacher Frances in the middle, her arms around each one of their shoulders. They grabbed water and took a moment to calm down. Teacher Frances sat down with them to discuss the conflict.

In this moment, Frances never lost her patience and spoke with the boys calmly, even as they themselves struggled to remain calm. Her primary goal was to calm them down so she could help them through their conflict.

"A natural response [to a challenging, sometimes aggressive behavior] would be to get frustrated and heated and let your frustration get the best of you. I sometimes find myself laughing because when they get frustrated, it has nothing to do with me or a situation. They have an underlying volcano and the second someone takes a crayon or sits in their chair, they erupt. I constantly tell myself to not have a reaction, but to be empathetic or sympathetic." (Lucy)

"You learn from trial and error. Even with adults. When someone is in that heated moment, you know, you can't fight fire with fire. There's no putting the fire out when you use fire. It's being calm but also knowing the kids and what works. What can you do in the moment to calm them to have a rational conversation to find out what is really happening with them. To really find out what is going on. So I guess, I've had plenty of trial and error and all the kids that are exploding inside and have explosive behaviors, you just can't put that fire out with fire. It just won't work." (Lucy)

**Protocol.** To support the above excerpts and to facilitate rich discussions about teacher's own behaviors during a student's challenging behaviors, the following protocol may be used:



## Four "A"s Text Protocol

*Adapted from Judith Gray, Seattle, WA 2005*

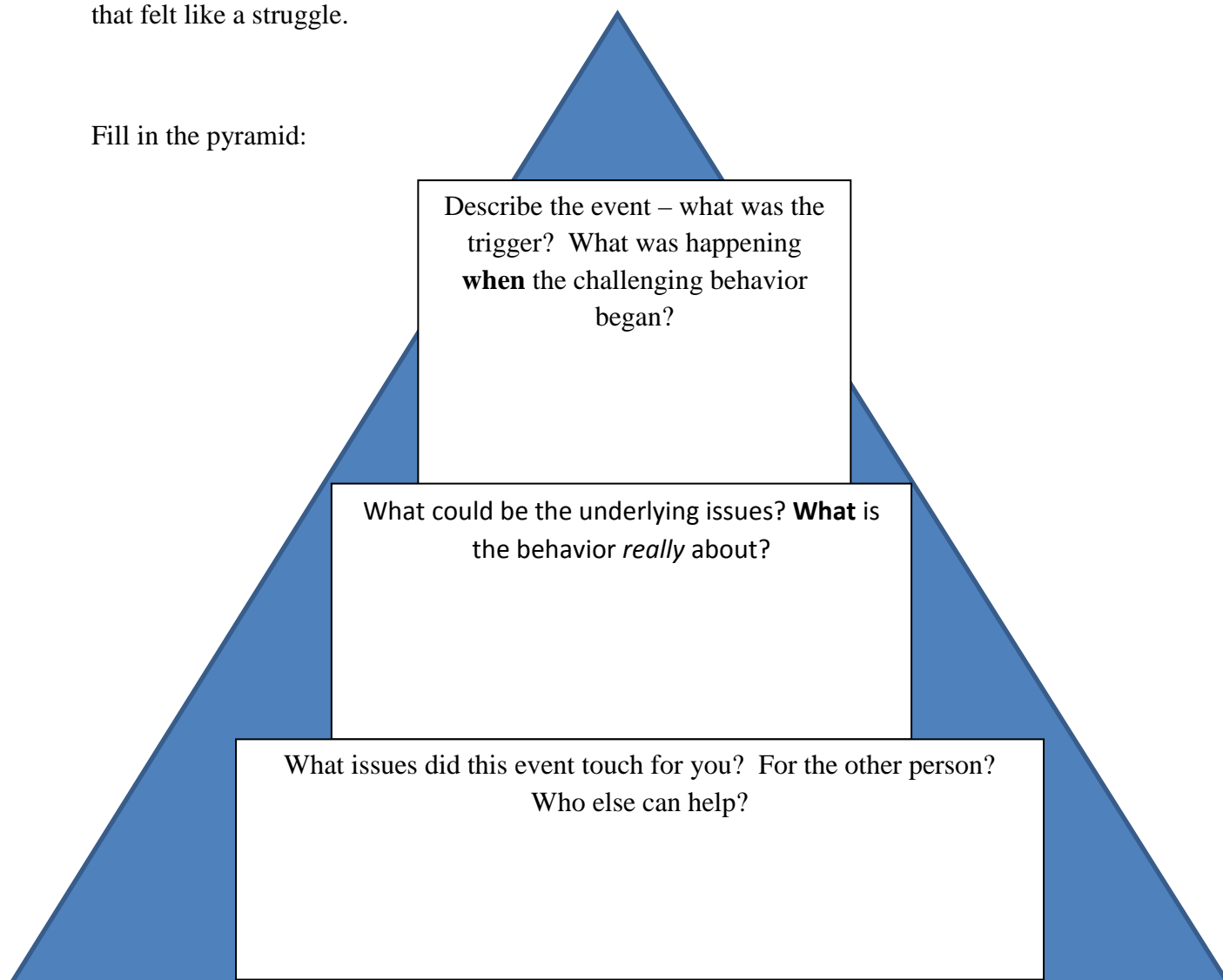
1. The group reads the text silently, highlighting it and writing notes in the margin on post-it notes in answer to the following four questions (you can also add your own "A"s)
  - What Assumptions does the author of the text hold?
  - What do you Agree with in the text?
  - What do you want to Argue with in the text?
  - What parts of the text do you want to Aspire to?
2. In a round, have each person identify one assumption in the text, citing the text (with page numbers, if appropriate) as evidence.
3. Either continue in rounds or facilitate a conversation in which the group talks about the text in light of each of the remaining "A"s, taking them one at a time – what do people want to argue with, agree with, and aspire to in the text? Try to move seamlessly from one "A" to the next, giving each "A" enough time for full exploration.
4. End the session with an open discussion framed around a question such as: What does this mean for our work with students?
5. Debrief the text experience.

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**Activity 2.** Having teachers reflect on a particular student that has presented challenges and their own experience with that student can be powerful (Schifter, 1998). The facilitator will hand out the Challenging Behavior Pyramid sheet. The goal of this activity is for teachers to reflect on and filter out why a student may be responding or having the challenging behavior.

Event Pyramid: Think of a challenging behavior or an interaction with a student you had recently that felt like a struggle.

Fill in the pyramid:



**Outcome**

To give a teacher the opportunity to be reflective and for the facilitator to understand the participants' beliefs about how they respond to challenging behaviors, the following questions worksheet will be handed out for the participant to answer.

Where do I encounter events over and over that never seem to be resolved?

Where do I sometimes react quickly and strongly which may not match the event?

Are there interactions or experiences that tend to happen with certain students but not others?

Which conversations or interactions do I work hard to avoid having to deal with?

Who else in the school can help?

**Targeted Component: Knowledge and Relationships Can Influence Situations****Content**

**Brief Summary.** Knowledge of your students is a simple, yet incredibly important concept. How that knowledge influences a teacher's response helps the teacher target what works best for that child, it also shows the rest of the class an understanding for that child's struggles/needs.

**Process/Activity**

**Activity 1.** This instructional activity's purpose is for teachers to engage in a conversation after reading a case study. This task was designed to highlight explicit reasons behind a teacher's reward system for one particular student. How can that be a fair concept? The facilitator will hand out the following vignette and quotes taken from classroom teachers who practiced the philosophy "fair does not mean the same."

**A Teacher's Case: Fair Does Not Mean the Same**

For Frances, because of the high level of poverty and the number of homeless children in her classroom, she made sure children's basic needs were met even prior to teaching. Her knowledge of the struggles contingent upon her students' home lives allowed her to provide for their needs, thus creating attachments whereby her students developed trust for her. Although it may seem simplistic, these small attachments allowed her students to trust her. During math instruction, Jacob B. (a child with autism who came down from another classroom for math instruction) walked in late into Teacher Frances' class during the math block.

Teacher Frances (to Jacob B.): "Better late than never."

Jacob sat down. He looked sluggish. He was not participating and sliding out of his chair.

Teacher Frances: "Jacob B., you alright?"

She leaned down to his eye level and rested her hand on his back.

Jacob B.: "Just tired."

Teacher Frances brought over a few jellybeans and put them in front of Jacob B.'s

notebook. Teacher Frances determined and worked with Jacob B. to develop a reinforcement system.

Teacher Frances: “Well, we’ve got to get you woken up.”

She then helped him get his coat off.

Teacher Frances: “Let’s continue to wake you up.”

She then gave him a gentle hug and shoulder shake. He smiled a huge smile. No one made a fuss or responded when Jacob B. got jellybeans.

A few minutes later, when Jacob B. was off-task again, Teacher Frances simply and gently asked, “Hey buddy, what are you doing? Can you get back to your work?” He obliged and was given one jelly bean. In Frances’ exit interview, she told me how Jacob B. was mesmerized by the jellybean jar on her desk, and therefore she knew immediately that the jelly beans would be a positive reinforcement for him. Having varying reward systems or strategies for each student was a norm, and that norm was emphasized to the classroom. This norm may defy traditional beliefs, but what these children were learning was that these reinforcement systems were fair because of their varying abilities, and they were necessary for each individual child to be successful. Also, when Jacob B. got up from his table during math instruction, Jay, another boy from another table, quietly walked over to him and gently guided him back to his table. Frances said, “Oh, thanks Jay.” Because of the understanding about children’s different needs in this community, the children helping one another without being asked by their teacher.

Frances often said “fair is not the same.” She also took this a step further by making sure

the rest of the class understood that philosophy. She said:

“See, you have to know, absolutely have to know each kids’ individual [needs]. It is super important to us that fair does not mean the same. For any kid. For anyone. From the first day we tell them that I promise you that I won’t treat anyone else the same. I need to treat each one of you totally different. I’m not going to give Ryan this, because that is not what Ryan needs. He may actually be offended if I give him one jellybean. Our treatment of these kids will be totally different because this is what a kid needs. These guys know, they *know*. Sometimes people think it is not fair, but they look at these kids over there across the table, they look at D in the corner and they go “Oh. Is he okay?” They know it is not typical and they know D needs what D needs.”

“Well, for example, one of my kids might be on a token system and they might get a Skittle for sitting up big, or having a quiet body, or raising their hand. So, kids may say, “Well, that’s not fair, he gets a Skittle and I don’t.” And it is true, I mean for a five year old, how is that fair? But, what we talk about is that this is what he is working on and you are working on something different, so you might not get a Skittle for this, but you might get a different sort of reinforcement or a high five. Something for what you’re doing and we can talk about that for something that is really hard for you. But, it is fair, because it is hard for him and it is not hard for you. We can set a goal for yourself and we can try to come up with a plan for you and what is fair for you. We use the word fair a lot. What’s fair and what is not fair. Globally and at their level and my kids actually get that. They are like, “of course he gets a Skittle for sitting up, yeah I get it.” They know that there might be a kid who is putting toys on his head or dancing around and they are like, “Yeah, he’s sitting still. That is awesome friend. You get a Skittle.” Ya know. They figure it out.”

### **Protocol**

To support the above excerpts and to facilitate rich discussions about teacher’s own beliefs regarding the idea that “fair does not mean the same,” they use the prior protocol titled The Four “A”s.

### **Outcome**

Participants spend thirty minutes to write about their own experience with a vulnerable child and a possible behavior system for that child based on need. The following questions will help guide this writing.

## Targeted Component: Modeling Discussions and Deliberations

### Content

**Brief Summary.** Teachers might already have some experiences facilitating discussions during challenging behaviors or during social conflicts to come up with a solution that is agreed upon by the entire group. To encourage pro-social behaviors, adults can communicate pro-social norms and values by providing opportunities for children to “work collaboratively with one another, and participate in group problem solving and decision making” (Osterman, 2002). Discussing a problem in an open, accepting way is a good example for showing that a student’s ideas are valued and they are a valued member of the community. Teachers being able to learn to listen to children in order to understand their perspectives, and then facilitate discussions engaging their students in decision-making, ensures equity and fairness for all.

### Process/Activity

#### Activity 1. Two cases:

It can be quite powerful for a classroom community when students in conflict share their feelings and ideas about the reasoning behind the conflict as well as coming up with a solution to decide what is best for everyone involved. A student seeking to understand what the conflict is about and the possible outcomes, while contributing to a common solution is valued for his/her ideas. Let’s drop in on two teachers’ classrooms. The facilitator passes out the two very different, short case studies, followed by a protocol.

#### Tommy’s Case

There was a boy named Tommy in my first grade classroom. He seemed unhappy and his actions often escalated into physical aggression—yelling, kicking, and pushing over

chairs. He had a starring role in the principal's office. His small, 4x4 card on the very public, classroom behavior chart was always on "red" or even worse, "white" (a "white" card denoted a phone call home and a trip up to the principal). The class members' dropped jaws and gasps always followed him as he walked over to the chart on the wall to change his card from whatever color it was on to "white." Tommy was constantly banished, both literally and symbolically, from our little classroom of seventeen students. Trying to balance Tommy's disruptions and classroom learning regularly exhausted me. His behavior also influenced his academic progress and his personal relationships with other students. Over the course of the school year he did not learn how to read, and he made virtually no improvement in other subjects. He wanted friends and tried to make them, but was always rejected. No one ever wanted to play with him, even though he tried to join in play daily. Classmates continually told him he could not play with them or they would run away when they saw him coming. Reflecting back, Tommy was certainly not an accepted member of my classroom community. Although he tried over and over again to gain a sense of belonging, including demonstrating disruptive behaviors, all of his efforts were futile.

Before the school year began, Tommy's previous teacher warned me that he would be my student. In the conversation that followed, it became clear that she did not like him and wanted me to be ready. Over the course of his first grade year in my classroom, I found that stories about Tommy's misbehaviors, aggressive outbursts on the playground, unpopularity and alienation from teachers and students alike, were common.

One day I was at the front of the classroom teaching a math lesson when Tommy suddenly started to distract the entire group with disruptive behaviors—yelling, poking his desk neighbor, and teetering and falling out of his chair. I got upset. I was frustrated. I

scolded him in front of the entire class. My booming voice was firm and unkind. *Tommy! Stop! You need to sit still. Be quiet. You are taking away from the rest of the class's learning. Change your card to "white."* Then, I noticed that Tommy not only hung his head and slumped his entire body over his desk, but Alex, sitting two desks away from him, looked sad and shocked. Alex started to cry. I had scared him. In that moment of clarity, I knew my actions toward Tommy had an incredible impact not only on Tommy, but on the rest of my class as well. My immediate outward response, which looked quite a bit like dislike for Tommy, showed the entire class that he was not accepted by me, his classroom teacher. Looking back, I realized that almost all of my responses to any of Tommy's challenging behaviors looked like they did that day during the math lesson. Often I was calmer but he still "got in trouble."

Because I had only a few years of teaching under my belt I thought that having a well-run classroom meant I needed to have firm discipline to maintain order. My classroom management was built on rewards and punishments, as were all the management styles of the teachers in my school. On my behavior chart it was always the same kids whose cards were on "red." My behavior modification strategies for Tommy were simple—point out unacceptable behaviors (sometimes harshly), change his card, and send him to the office. I secretly felt relief when he left my classroom because afterward there were no more disruptions. I now realize that my behaviors and responses toward Tommy contributed to a cycle of rejection from not only me, but in turn, from his peers. I now realize that my discipline and classroom management strategies for Tommy did not contribute to his social and emotional growth, or the social and emotional growth of the rest of the class. The rest of the class was learning from me that a child with challenging behaviors was not an accepted

member of our community.

After the year Tommy was in my class I heard from his subsequent teachers that his schooling was unsuccessful. The stories they shared were not news to me. They indicated that Tommy always struggled to learn, was difficult to teach, was often in trouble, and continued to be rejected by his peers. I now know that I, and other teachers, could have more effectively responded to Tommy's disruptions in ways that would have promoted peer acceptance, helped him to learn, and allowed him to be true member of our classroom and school community—a member that felt he belonged. I understand that there are numerous reasons that some children are less liked than others; however my experiences led me to wonder if the reactions of Tommy's teachers to his challenging behaviors helped to perpetuate his peer rejection and long-term learning difficulties. In my poor responses to his disruptive, challenging behaviors, I think I may have failed him.

After that year, I knew there had to be a better way and I never sent a child to the office again. I no longer used any form of a public behavior chart to discipline students.

**AJ's Case**

During free choice-time (in and outdoor play in the classroom) AJ, looking for Isabella, ran inside the classroom from bowling outside in the open play area with a group of 4 boys, visibly upset. He walked up to Isabella trying to explain the problem through sobs and tears. Isabella put her hand on his shoulder. After a few minutes and deep breaths, he was able to articulate that Nick “was not playing fair while bowling,” and took the bowling ball away and yelled at him. Isabella was silent as AJ gave his explanation. She listened patiently while he tried to find his words. Then, she put her arm around AJ, guided him outside while telling him in a gentle, caring voice, “I am super proud of you for using your words to find me and ask for help. Remember, we can solve problems by remaining calm and talking about it.” She praised him by affirming his prosocial behaviors. The two walked outside and approached the group where Nick was playing. As Nick noticed them, he started walking toward his teacher and his friend, hanging his head.

Isabella: Let's figure this out and talk about it. What happened? Let's talk about working hard to be good friends.

Nick: He took the ball. I told him “No!”

Isabella (speaking very gently and with care to Nick): Nick, look at how upset he is. Look at his face. When you scream and say “no,” how do you think that makes your friend feel?

Nick: (Pause) Not good. Sad.

Isabella: We try to make our friends feel better.

*Nick goes over to AJ and puts his arm around his shoulder.*

Isabella: Can we decide on a way to play where everyone feels like it is fair?

AJ: I have a problem, I want to steal the ball.

Nick: You can't STEAL the ball.

Isabella: What should we do? (Long pause) Is this a big problem or a little problem? (*The class was working on a social skills curriculum that intentionally addressed “big” and “little” problems and the appropriate responses to each.*)

Nick: We can take turns. We can steal the ball later.

Isabella: Will that work?

AJ: Sure (Both boys run off to corner of the outside play area to bowl.)

Isabella: (Cheering when another boy rolls the ball and the pins fall down). Yeah! We try and make our friends feel better!!!

Nick: (Excitedly) That was goooooood. (After lots of pins fell down) Go AJ, go. Go AJ, go. (Chanting)

Isabella: AJ, how does that make you feel when your friend chants for you?!

AJ: Good!

Isabella: Nick, how does that feel cheering for your friend?

Nick: SO good!!!!

*All 4 boys are cheering as the next boy starts to bowl. “Go, go it’s your birthday, it’s your birthday. Go Jin, Go Jin. Go Jin, it’s your birthday.”*

## Protocol

The facilitator will pass out the following protocol with discussion questions to unpack the critical difference in the two vignettes (the personal story piece of this protocol is representative by the two vignettes):



## A Change in Practice

*Developed by Gene Thompson-Grove.*

The purpose of this protocol is to provide a structure for analyzing the process participants have used to make changes in their practice, and for linking that process to Inquiry. This protocol highlights the changes educators constantly make in their practice, and gives them a way to think more systematically about the questions and data they use to inform those changes. Key to this protocol is the discussion in step 4, when the group talks in such a way that they broaden the presenter's thinking about how s/he generally approaches making changes in his or her practice.

### Roles

- A facilitator (who also participates) should be assigned for each round. The facilitator's role is to keep the conversation moving through each phase and to facilitate the final conversation. The facilitator should also keep time.
- The presenter shares his or her writing about a change s/he has made in his or her practice. This becomes the text for professional learning within the group.
- Groups of three seem to work well for this process, as it allows every group member to present, and the conversation builds and deepens. If, however, a presenter prefers to hear multiple perspectives, a group of four or five could be used.

### Time

Approximately 75 minutes for triads.

### Process

#### 1. Writing (10 minutes)

Each member of the group writes about a change he has made in his practice, with as much detail as he can muster (see prompts, below). This writing should tell only what happened, like a snapshot. The writing should be crisp and succinct, but it should be clear that the group's discussion will be about what happened, not about the quality of the writing.

Describe a significant change you have made in your practice:

- What were you teaching/doing?
- What change did you make?
- Why did you think you should make a change? How did you know you should be doing something differently? Was there a question that led to the change?
- How did you decide what to do? Was there data or evidence of some sort that made you think you should make a change?
- How did you know whether the change was successful/was working?
- Who else played a role?
- Now, what are you wondering about?

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**Outcome**

To give a teacher the opportunity to be reflective about their own discourse with students and for the facilitator to understand the participants' possible change in thinking about how to talk to students during a conflict, the following reflective questions are posed:

**Reflective Questions**

How do I talk to children when we are presented with a challenging behavior?

What are my students learning from how I talk to them?

In the next few weeks, where do I see opportunities to reflect on the ways I talk to my students?

What challenges may I encounter when I try to manage disruptive, challenging and undesirable student behaviors?

What kinds of questions can I ask to help understand a conflict or challenging behavior?

In summary, this chapter presented sample professional development tools for teachers to learn about strategies for dealing with challenging behaviors in accepting ways—ways that help promote a caring community.

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

### What I Found

The purpose of this study was to develop a working framework and a set of clear ideas concerning classroom management—particularly involving responses to challenging or disruptive behavior (events)—for use in the creation of supportive professional-development tools. This framework was derived from a two-part method: 1) interviews with three teachers (Isabella, Lucy, and Frances), in which they discussed their philosophies regarding response to events, and 2) close observations of these teachers’ and students’ experiences inside the classroom community. My findings were descriptive in nature and offer the teachers’ perceptions of their approaches to dealing with students’ challenging behaviors. The findings were categorized into five themes, which, taken together, constitute a sample set of professional development supports: 1) A teacher’s belief about children’s can influence his/her responses to challenging behavior; 2) A teacher’s knowledge of his/her students and relationships with them can influence behavioral situations; 3) A teacher modeling caring and kind responses to behavior can help build classroom community; 4) A teacher modeling discussion, deliberation, and listening during and in response to challenging behavior can help build classroom community; 5) Flexible student mobility and placement options can support children with challenging behaviors.

These themes exemplify the teachers’ pedagogical approaches to children exhibiting challenging behaviors. These approaches resulted in the development of caring classroom communities wherein students who displayed behaviors that generally would result in rejection, were accepted. Children like AJ, Jacob B., Isaiah, and David, despite their disruptive and difficult behaviors, were ultimately accepted because of the ways their teachers responded. These

classroom stories suggested the possibility that a child who struggles with challenging behaviors—behaviors that often get a child banished from the classroom to the principal’s office or publicly embarrassed—can be accepted nevertheless. Although these teachers each dealt with instances where one child’s or a few children’s challenging behavior events, their responses toward that child showed the rest of the children regardless of circumstance, every child was valued. In other words, these teachers were (re)establishing social norms for the other children. For example, simply because Jacob B. became off task easily, he was never portrayed or treated as if he was a “bad kid” by the teacher, and therefore, he was never seen as a “bad kid” to the rest of his classmates. Moreover, he was accepted and cared-for by the entire classroom community.

I believe these teachers’ beliefs, discourse, and responses to children exemplified the workings of a caring community for a variety of reasons. First, Isabella, Lucy, and Frances listened to the children in order to fully understand their perspectives. Secondly, they facilitated discussions in which their students were engaged in decision-making. Third, the decision-making was based on how the children felt and how they felt they were treated. Studying teachers who employ responses like those of Isabella, Lucy, and Frances, can further empirical data on the classroom teacher’s role in imagining alternative strategies for classroom management. Perhaps the most meaningful work in this regard focuses on how the classroom teacher’s everyday behaviors function to construct an accepting environment through the implementation of alternative strategies for classroom management.

### **Implications for Practice**

The implications from this work show us that because of a teacher’s power and its influence on children, either positively (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Noddings, 1992/1996), or

negatively (Midobuche, 1999), they can create classrooms where children feel a sense of belonging (a fundamental need) by providing an environment where “the need for relatedness involves the need to feel securely connected to others in the environment and to experience oneself as worthy of love and respect” (Osterman, 2002, p. 168). Early education classrooms are where children first learn to consider others’ feelings and perspectives and are therefore a potentially formative space for moral and emotional growth. In this space, social conflicts and disruptive and challenging behaviors and events happen daily. And yet the teachers in this study responded to these events in ways that demonstrated their intention to create an accepting, caring community wherein all students felt like members. These responses are often undercut by societal norms, such as how children ought to behave and how teachers ought to discipline, as well as by the increasing demands placed on teachers, such as constant curricular strains and assessment. However, on a daily basis a teacher has the opportunity to effectively (or not so effectively) mediate the consequences of classroom disruptions. How teachers respond can impact a student’s acceptance or rejection by other students. Effective mediation not only helps to reduce the likelihood of peer rejection, it can also help lay the groundwork for a child’s moral development.

A teacher’s response can also affect how children feel about themselves. Based on the extensive literature and research on school community, it would seem that if a student does not sense his/her importance and value in a school community, he/she cannot rely on members of that community, whether it be a teacher or students, to meet certain needs. The essence of a community is that all its members feel a sense of belonging (Furman, 1998). If a child feels as if he or she does not belong, there is not a community.

One final note—abandoning the “that-is-how-it-is” and/or “one-size-fits-all” punitive approaches to school discipline takes tremendous courage. It means that educators must reject beliefs, upheld for generations, about traditional punishments for stopping unwanted behavior. Once teachers, principals and school staff start believing that all children are good, they can begin to create a space wherein all children feel safe to experience their emotions and behaviors and will be accepted.

### **Rationale for Professional Development Supports Proposed**

As presented in the Chapter 2, there is a call for a clear set of ideas regarding classroom management and discipline methodologies. This dissertation project is just the beginning of that discussion. Creating professional development opportunities that promote a discussion about how teachers handle aggressive and difficult behavior is a challenging task. However, Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2008) remind us that, “Whatever your situation, remember that starting small is better than not starting at all” (p. 17).

The professional development tools outlined in Chapter 5 present components that were derived from three exemplary teachers. This dissertation’s purpose was to take those themes and develop a set of ideas regarding a teacher’s in-the-moment responses that can be communicated to teachers.

Changing a teacher’s beliefs is very difficult. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2008) remind us that, “Translating new strategies, approaches, and pedagogy from theory to practice within individual classrooms is rarely a simple task for teachers, and it is natural for dilemmas to emerge when implementing as innovation” (p. 3). Asking teachers to address and reflect on traditional methodologies for dealing with challenging behaviors can often prove difficult because the topic embodies teachers’ beliefs and behaviors toward children, which can be a

sensitive topic. Blaustein & Kinniburgh (2010) reveal that a caregiver (teacher) may have feelings of ineffectiveness, guilt, shame, and/or anger toward a child, which may factor into their approaches to discipline. These feelings therefore also impact the sensitive nature of talking openly about how teachers deal with challenging behaviors. Thus, it is necessary to address this topic in a trusting, safe environment, like models of professional development can provide.

### **Limitations**

The purpose of “qualitative research is to study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). With this in mind, I attempted to make connections between a classroom teacher’s responses to challenging or disruptive behaviors (events) and the formation of a community in which all children were true members. As this is a descriptive study to gather innovative pedagogies, I do not make any claims about the causality of a teacher’s response or peer rejection. The following are the limitations and assumptions to this small study.

Part of this study took place in a lab school where Isabella’s training is in special education in an inclusive setting. Also, Lucy and Frances had been trained in how to work with children who have experienced intense emotional traumas. This is a descriptive study which contributed to teacher supports and therefore generalization beyond the study, without further replication, would be inappropriate.

In Isabella’s case, the study was conducted toward the end of the school year, by which point Isabella had laid extensive groundwork for an inclusive classroom. My data set revealed many of her strategies; however, observations conducted over an entire school year would add depth and breadth to a similar study.

Additionally, qualitative research defines the researcher's role as being the primary "instrument" for conducting, analyzing and reporting findings of a study (Merriam, 2009). However, being the primary instrument, my biases and assumptions influenced my thinking. In Chapter 3, I outlined my systematic procedures to limit my biases.

In my ten-year, early-childhood teaching career, I continually observed the phenomenon and problem of peer rejection, and those experiences impacted my thinking and understanding about this topic (Wolcott, 2005). I repeatedly noticed that an aggressive or misbehaving child was likely a child who experienced rejection. Rejected children often responded with increased aggression, and this aggression led to further peer rejection, leading to a painful cycle for the rejected child. My experiences and exposure to relevant peer rejection led me to become deeply interested in how teachers approach children's misbehaviors in the classroom. I found that a teacher's immediate reaction to a student's misbehavior could alter the space in which children connect with one another.

Therefore, my "stance" on children's acceptance, classrooms as community, and inclusion/exclusion is this—I believe that a focus on relationships and "belonging" should be at the center of school reform and improvements. I am joined by other scholars in this effort (Mitchell, 1990, Furman, 1998).

Finally, as previously mentioned, to change a teacher's norms and beliefs is difficult. The purpose of this work is to challenge how teachers and educators think of themselves and their role in creating acceptance, which may in turn change their behavior. The assumption is that a child's challenging behaviors are not about the teacher; they are about the meaning of the behaviors. Moreover, this work is not only about producing working models; it is about knowing the outcomes for peer rejected children and the connection between peer rejection and classroom

management. It means we are talking about shifting attitudes and perspectives—shifting normative beliefs that have been historically constructed. This shift, however, is necessary because much is at stake.

## APPENDIX A

### Teacher Interview Protocol

*The following interview questions guided the interviews Theory-based classroom teachers:*

#### Building Rapport and Understanding Pedagogical Approaches (30 minutes)

*I truly appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule to be interviewed by me. As you know, I am conducting a study to understand more accepting methods for classroom management and discipline. I am here to learn from you. Your identity will be kept completely confidential, and if at any point you feel uncomfortable in answering any questions, feel free to let me know, and we can move on to the next one. Before we begin, do you have any questions?*

1. Could you describe your current role and your responsibilities?
2. Can you please tell me how long you have taught, what grades and what locations?
3. Tell me a little about the school community here at \_\_\_\_\_?
4. What are your primary goals as a teacher of Kindergarten/first grade?
5. How do you set up your classroom to accomplish those goals?
6. Can you talk to me about the strategies you use to help kids build a sense of community in your classroom?
7. What strategies do you use to help build peer acceptance? Can you give me an example?
8. Given the context of your ideas about building community in your classroom, what do you do when there are misbehaviors/challenging behaviors? Can you give me an example?
9. How do you think your response to a challenging behavior influences the classroom community?
10. Given the context of your ideas about building community in your classroom, what do you do when a child is rejected by his/her peers or told they can't play?
11. How do you go about helping a child who is typically rejected become accepted and included by his peers?
12. What supports do you have for dealing with misbehaviors/challenging, specifically children that are not accepted?
13. Where did you learn these strategies for dealing with misbehaviors/challenging behaviors?
14. What do you do immediately during an aggressive behavior? For example, when a child throws sand at another child angrily?
15. In what ways does the school deal with misbehaviors/aggressive behaviors?
16. What support you in dealing with challenging/aggressive behaviors?
17. Can you talk to me about a situation you have had in the past with a child who has had difficulties being accepted/included, what are your thoughts of that child's experience of school?
18. What methods, curriculum, or strategies do you implement so your students deal/learn about rejection/acceptance?

19. How do you talk to your class about community?
20. How do you ensure all students feel a sense of belonging to the community?
21. How, if at all, do your students socially reflect and tackle issues of peer rejection during play?
22. How, if at all, do you facilitate this?

*Is there anything I didn't think to ask you about these topics of peer rejection/acceptance and community building that you think is important for me to understand?*

## APPENDIX B

### Classroom Observation Guide

I collected field notes during observations of a two Kindergarten/first grade classroom where the teacher employed accepting practices for community building and responding to challenging behaviors. Particular attention was paid to features or aspects of the teacher's behaviors/interactions that could be connected with what was discussed in the teacher's interview. Also, particular attention was made to moments with challenging behaviors. Field notes were recorded during observation, with a focus on the following information:

#### *Classroom Environment*

- Is the learning atmosphere a welcoming one?
- Wall postings
- Arrangement of furniture and materials—draw picture
- Student seating
- Small group and whole class work areas
- Display and posting of student work

#### *Teacher's Overall Behaviors*

- How is the teacher building an accepting classroom?
- Language and tone of language used by the teacher
- Student responses and nature of student responses
- Teacher talk
- Student talk
- How time is structured during the time block – activities, lessons, student-student interactions, etc.

#### *Teacher and Children Interactions during Challenging Behaviors*

- Tone inflection during the conversation – particularly in times when there is a challenging behavior.
- Nature of the interaction
  - What are children's interactions and conversations during unstructured play?
  - What does the teacher do during aggressive/challenging behaviors or problems during play?
  - What are the teacher's interactions with the children during a conflict/misbehavior during play or classroom instruction?
  - Which children are accepted/rejected

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