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# RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM® Newsletter

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## What Teaching Matthew Taught Me

**From the classroom of fourth grade teacher and  
NEFC senior consulting teacher Andy Dousis,  
as told to Roxann Kriete, NEFC executive director**

Matthew! Get away. You're not sitting with us!" Libby hissed the words, her voice oozing with contempt as she stuck her leg out to keep Matthew from joining the small group gathered for silent reading.

I whipped around. The vehemence in Libby's voice shocked me. Libby generally treated her classmates with kindness and seldom spoke sharply to anyone.

Disturbed by this exchange, I observed the interactions between Matthew and his classmates closely for the remainder of that mid-December day. I did not like what I saw and heard. At midday outside, Matthew was standing by the wall, crying. When I asked what was wrong, he replied through sniffles, "The boys won't let me play. They said I'm not good enough." After I spoke with the students he meant, they called for Matthew to join their Four Square game, but he no longer wanted to.

Later in the afternoon, when Matthew returned from his visit with a reading teacher, he approached a group of children and asked to join their activity. "No, we've already started," one child said in an unfriendly tone. The child's words were not the issue. It was her tone.

There were several more instances of children speaking sharply and negatively to Matthew.

I left school that day feeling discouraged. From the first day of school I had worked hard to help the students build a caring classroom community. I had seen it taking hold, but it sure was not flourishing today. What was going on?

### **Not an easy child to be around**

Puzzling through this, I reminded myself that I had known all along that making Matthew a full member of the classroom community would be an uphill climb, for Matthew was not an easy child to be around. He had entered fourth grade saddled with more challenges than any one child should have to bear. He often came to school unwashed and in ill-fitting clothes. His shirt never covered his big belly; his pants never reached his ankles. He struggled with academics, barely reading at first grade level. He dissolved into loud sobs at the least frustration. Finding the right words to make his way into a conversation or to ask for something was a struggle. So Matthew frequently poked and pushed and grabbed. His chronic outbursts wore his classmates—and teachers—out.

Before school had even started I knew that I would have to work especially hard to make sure Matthew had a respected place in the room. I called on him for answers when I knew he had them. I partnered him with students who could be counted on to work patiently with him. In the first few months things seemed to go pretty well. Matthew was at least tolerated and well-treated, if not yet a cherished class member. Not so today. When did the students' treatment of Matthew erode? What brought it on? And why had I not

noticed?

## Turning my observer's eye upon myself

My inner voice said that if I wanted the answers, I had to first look at myself. Over the years I've learned that good teaching involves having a willingness to look at your own behavior and ask what part you might be playing in what's going on in your classroom—the good and the not-so-good. So the next day I turned my observer's eye upon myself and began to note my own behavior. Before Morning Meeting started Matthew was butting his head into Tyler's shoulder. "Matthew! Stop!" I snapped. As students moved from Morning Meeting into math groups, I heard myself barking, "Matthew! Sit down now!" I seemed unable to speak the child's name without an exclamation point behind it.

I reflected. In September I would have redirected Matthew with a gentle hand on his shoulder or a quiet "Matt, move over here now." In September I made sure to welcome him warmly at the beginning of each day. Today I did not check in with him before Morning Meeting. In September I made it a point to use Matthew's name in positive comments. Today I was loudly and frequently calling attention to his awkwardness.

I realized how very tired I was. Tired from the intense energy that the first phase of the school year requires and hungry for the late December week off that marked the first substantial break of the year. In addition to this predictable energy dip, the effort required to help the intensely needy Matt navigate daily classroom life added to my fatigue. As my exhaustion grew, my alertness to our classroom interactions diminished. I managed to overlook the rough tones and edgy words creeping into the children's—and my—interactions with Matthew until they had escalated to an undeniably attention-grabbing level.

But now I was noticing. Moreover, as I continued to notice, it became clear that I was contributing to Matthew's mistreatment. But wait, let me be more precise: I wasn't just contributing to his mistreatment. I was teaching it. When I snapped at him, I gave permission to twenty-three others to snap at him too. I was using a surefire teaching strategy: modeling. I knew well the power of modeling and used it often and intentionally: "Watch how I lift Matilda out of her cage." "Watch while I dribble the soccer ball around Jen." "What did you notice? Now you try it this way."

I realized that my interactions with Matthew were a powerful unintentional modeling. When I stopped seeking Matthew out to say a friendly hello in the morning, the students stopped too. When I snapped commands at him, they snapped too. I was treated to a painful refresher lesson about the strength of modeling.

## Determined to turn things around

Having seen and acknowledged my role in what was going awry, I needed to make some changes. It wasn't easy, given how tired I was. But my determination was greater than my fatigue. I decided that I needed to see Matthew with new eyes, to look again for the positives in Matthew. And then, through intentional modeling, I needed to help the class see the positives in him as well. I found five specific ways to do this:

*I did everything possible to use words and tone with Matthew masterfully.* There was no room for slippage with him. I would call him "Matt," his preferred nickname. I would speak quietly.

*I looked for—and publicized—instances of positive behavior from Matthew.* This was tougher than it might sound, because the things I noted had to be real. Students can spot any phoniness right away. But I was able to see real positive efforts on Matthew's part when I worked at it—every single day. And it got easier. The more I watched, the more I noted how hard Matthew was working. And the more I noted, the harder he worked.

*I sought help from the whole staff.* I asked the principal if I could bring my struggle to our faculty meeting. "I've screwed up," I stated to the group, "and I need your help." I asked everyone to be especially patient

and positive with Matthew so that he would receive consistent treatment from us all. Every colleague agreed to help.

*I looked for some area in which Matthew could be the class expert.* I found it quite by luck. One day I brought in several discarded appliances gathered from friends—an iron, a couple of hair driers, an old-fashioned alarm clock—and created a Take-It-Apart station in the room.

It turned out that Matthew excelled in this area. He could take apart virtually anything and reassemble it. A pile of screws and odd-shaped metal objects that left his classmates baffled were an engrossing 3-D jigsaw for Matthew. I added more and more complex objects as the weeks went by, and I put Matthew in charge of the area. Students would come to me for help, and I'd furrow my brow, shrug, and say, "Ask Matt." And ask Matt they did. "Thanks, Matt," I began to hear routinely when I walked by the Take-It-Apart station.

*I made sure the class also saw Matthew being competent in learning academics.* This was challenging not just because of his beginning reading skills, but also because of his limited participation in the class's academic program due to being pulled out often for intensive academic support. But remembering that he had once talked with some excitement about a TV show on wolves, I suggested that he learn more about them.

With help from his special education teacher, Matthew researched the topic, relying on videos and magazine articles with lots of pictures and captions, and planned a presentation to the class. He worked hard on an accurate drawing of a wolf with painstaking labeling. He created a set of posters with pertinent vocabulary words: endangered, predator, carnivore, hunter. He drew a map to depict where North American wolves live. He practiced his presentation in the resource room. On the day of the presentation to our class, his parents came in for the occasion. School was clearly not a comfortable place for them, but they were there, and they were proud.

I can still hear Matthew's high-pitched voice and see him rocking back and forth, heels-to-toes-to-heels as he began, "I'm gonna talk about wolves. First I'm gonna show a little bit of a video ... " His presentation was well received. The class was genuinely interested and their questions were many and real. "Where do red wolves live?" "Are there wolves around here?" "How much does a wolf weigh?" "Why are wolves endangered?" Matthew had an answer for every question. He had acquired another area of expertise. In small solid increments, Matthew's classroom currency was growing.

## **A lesson that served me very well**

The rest of the year had its ups and downs, but it's safe to say that it was a good year for Matthew and for the rest of the class. Although he didn't have friends in the typical ten-year-old way, he had a respected place in the class. One colleague who knew Matthew came up to me one day in the spring and said, "You know, I think this is the best year that Matthew's ever had."

As I followed Matthew through the subsequent years, I was pleased to see him make continued progress. His path was not an easy one, but I think the lessons he learned in fourth grade served him well. I know that what I learned about teaching—courtesy of Matthew—has served me well in all the years since.

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