

Chapter One



Getting to Know Sammy

It's the morning of the second day of school. The new third grade students sit in a circle on the floor. Glancing around, I see well-scrubbed children, shining with that beginning-of-school look.

I bring out a “magic shawl,” beneath which is hidden the learning material I’m about to introduce. I use this method to heighten intrigue and student engagement. The children are curious, eager to know what’s under the shawl. They’re using their first-days-of-school best behavior though, keeping their bodies and their wiggles mostly under control. We’re all feeling the power of new beginnings.

I unveil the Cuisenaire® Rods, colorful and inviting. I ask the children what they know about this material and how they think they might use it. Paulina suggests building a tower. Max suggests creating a series of equal groups. Juan mentions that in second grade they made “staircases” with the rods. The children listen carefully. I explain that they’ll each get a chance to try out classmates’ ideas, using just a few rods each. They’re excited.

Walking around the circle, I carefully give each child a small handful of rods. As I come to Sammy, I hand him a small assortment, similar to his classmates'. In a flash Sammy darts his hands into the bin on my arm, pulling out an additional big double handful for himself.

Quietly, I hold out my hand for Sammy to return his double handful. "Just a few each, Sammy," I remind him calmly. As quickly as he had grabbed the rods, Sammy throws them at my face. Rods rain down. The look on Sammy's face shows that he's as surprised as I am. His classmates look stunned.

We all have students who present challenges to their classmates, themselves, and to us. Sammy was such a child. This Cuisenaire Rod incident was Sammy's first major display of teacher defiance that year. There would be many more. As the year went on, I came to see that Sammy's behavior largely grew out of his impulsiveness combined with deep passions and a gripping need to put his ideas into action. Helping Sammy gain control of his behavior so that he could learn—and so the rest of the class could learn—would make that year both challenging and rewarding.

Like all children, Sammy was a complex individual. There was a lot to him besides his challenging behaviors. Even before school started, I got a glimpse of his charms as well as his behaviors that got in the way.

“Dear Third Grade Teacher, My name is Sammy and I am passionate about history.”

In August I clean, organize, and prepare for the students who will be walking through the door in just two weeks. I gather information about the children, preparing myself mentally for the personalities and likely interactions that will make up our group.

As I peruse Sammy's records, I notice phrases such as "ADD," "extremely bright," even "gifted." In Sammy's second grade portfolio is a letter that he wrote to me, his as yet unidentified next year's teacher.

"Dear Third Grade Teacher, My name is Sammy and I am passionate about history," the letter begins. "Have you heard about the Iroquois League of five nations? Will we learn about it in third grade?" His personality is coming through already. I make a mental note to borrow some additional

age-appropriate history books from the public library to add to our classroom collection.

Sammy's letters are large and shaky, the lines wandering over the page. I wonder, "Are his ideas tumbling out so quickly that his handwriting can't keep up?"

Sammy's second grade teacher stops by the classroom. "I hear you have Sammy," she says. "He just can't sit still. He loves to read. Usually I let him sit and read by himself during Morning Meeting and whole-group lessons. He can't listen in those settings."

I'm always glad for information that might help me with my teaching, and I have a lot of respect for Sammy's second grade teacher. Nonetheless, it's hard for me to imagine Sammy as a true member of our community if he doesn't join in at whole-group times. I accept the second grade teacher's information while promising myself to at least try including Sammy in group activities. I realize this goal might not be easily achieved.

As the days before school race past, I talk with the school nurse and the PE, music, and other special subject teachers, as some of them have known my new students for multiple years. I'm beginning to piece together a still-blurry picture of Sammy as a bright, inquisitive child who is always on the move.

Who is still seven in this class? Who is firmly eight?

As part of my preparation, I consider the children's ages and likely developmental characteristics, so important in understanding them and setting appropriate expectations. I begin by listing the students in birthday order. Who is still seven? Who is firmly eight, with a birthday last winter or spring? Who is about to turn nine?

Keeping a list like this often helps me maintain patience with the constant physical aches and pains of a seven-year-old or the single-minded focus on fairness of a nine-year-old. I reread sections of *Yardsticks: Children in the Classroom Ages 4-14* by Chip Wood to review the characteristics of seven-, eight- and nine-year-olds.

From my journal, August 25:

Sammy is still seven, the youngest in our class. I'll keep that in mind as I get to know him. I wonder again about his handwriting. Those large, wobbly letters certainly don't match the small, overly precise letters of the typical seven-year-old.

Glass taxes, square roots, colonial history: Brimming over with interests

It's the day before school, and the children are coming for "meet the teacher," an annual tradition at our school. Name tags are laid out on a table, and a message on the message board asks, "What are you looking forward to in third grade?"

The children arrive, some shy and hanging back, others boisterous and eager to connect with friends old and new. Sammy walks through the door with his mother and older brother. He's carrying a thick book about colonial history under his arm.

He looks right at me, smiles, and starts to announce facts about colonial times. "Did you know that in the early 1800s people had to pay a glass tax if their homes had more than ten windows?" he asks me. I smile and express genuine interest, happy to meet him and to begin to connect.

I show Sammy the message board and urge him to think about what he's looking forward to in third grade. "Well," he says, "I'm looking forward to lots of things. It's hard to choose. Will we learn about history? Will we learn about square roots? How do I know what third grade is going to be like?" Seemingly exhausted by the choice, he suddenly writes "Learning" as his response on the message board.

I ask Sammy to show other kids how to answer the message. I have a feeling from my research over the past couple of weeks that Sammy's going to need a specific job to help him connect with classmates.

Five minutes later I look over at the message board and notice Sammy grabbing the marker out of a student's hand, saying, "No, it's not your turn

yet.” I make a mental note to give Sammy more direct instruction next time about what helping other kids with the morning message looks and sounds like.

For now, I go over to intervene with Sammy and his classmates, suggesting that Sammy make a name tag for his locker in the hall.

Here, everyone sits with everyone else; everyone works with everyone else

The all-important first day of school is finally here. The children arrive, in surging waves as their school busses unload. I greet them with the Human Treasure Hunt for finding and talking with all classmates.

Who can you find who lived in another country last year? Who loves hot dogs? Who speaks Japanese at home? The questions are both generic and specific. Lots of children might love hot dogs, but only one speaks Japanese at home. Thus I’ve planned things so that everyone will greet Mitsuke, who’s new in our school.

Who loves history? is also on the list, as I want to make sure children begin to connect with Sammy. I’ve heard that making friends has been hard for him in the past, and this will gently nudge him in the right direction.

In this classroom, children sit in table groups based on playing cards they draw from the well-shuffled pack in my hand. Here, everyone sits with everyone else, and everyone works with everyone else. Throughout the year we’ll discuss why it’s important to get to know all members of our classroom community, and children will pick lunch partners—“someone you don’t know very well.”

The underlying message, implied through our activities and stated directly, is that everyone is a part of this group. Children such as Sammy, who seem a little different to their classmates, can be excluded, teased, even bullied. It’s the teacher’s job to set up an environment where such behaviors are clearly unacceptable.

Our first Morning Meeting

We gather in a circle each morning for a Morning Meeting, a twenty- to thirty-minute period when children greet and get to know each other,

practice social and academic skills through fun activities, and set a positive tone for the day ahead.

To launch our first Morning Meeting, I say to the class, “Every day we’ll start our day with a Morning Meeting. What kind of meetings have you been to?” I’m trying to assess their knowledge and expectations.

“Last year we had a Morning Meeting every day,” says Lori. “We played games. It was fun.”

“We also said ‘good morning,’” adds Paul.

“I go to town meetings with my mom,” shares Sammy. “There’s an agenda. They talk about the topics on the agenda. People listen to each other.”

Next I lead them in establishing some meeting expectations that will allow us to have meetings that are enjoyable and helpful for everyone. When I ask for suggestions, Sammy’s hand goes up right away. “Listen to each other the way they do at town meetings,” he says. I write “Listen” on a small whiteboard I’ve placed near the meeting area.

Other students suggest additional meeting rules, mostly things they picked up from previous grades. “Sit in the circle,” “Raise your hand to speak,” “Control your body” all make the list.

I go on to model greeting a classmate, the first thing we’ll be doing every day in Morning Meeting. After getting a few students to demonstrate this procedure after me, we go around the circle for real, each child greeting a neighbor so everyone gets greeted by name.

Prepped by the careful modeling, most of the children are friendly and attentive to their peers. Sammy, however, is rolling on the floor by the time the greeting has gone a quarter of the way around the circle. Today I let this behavior go. His rolling is quiet, and the other children look like they can still focus on the greeting. I’m still getting to know Sammy and want to watch and learn. Based on information I’ve gleaned from colleagues, I’m actually surprised that he was able to listen to the greeting at all.

When the greeting completes its circuit, we’re ready to share the information that children have gathered about their new classmates from the Human Treasure Hunt.

“Why is it important to listen as classmates tell what they’ve learned about each other?” I ask.

“So that we can find out about each other,” Michele says.

“Because it’s polite,” suggests Jerry.

“Yes,” I say. “In this class we listen to each other respectfully.” My goal is to immediately set the expectation that every group member deserves our attention and respect.

The children enthusiastically take turns reporting on the results of their search. They tell about the many students who like hot dogs, the one classmate who speaks Japanese at home, and the one who loves to play baseball.

Sammy’s still rolling. His legs are under the easel chart stand, one foot beating steadily against the leg of the stand. If I allow it to escalate, his behavior will become disruptive. I touch his foot gently, and he stops the beating.

We’ve been sitting for nearly fifteen minutes now, a long time for children just back from summer vacation. So we switch gears and play a round of *When the Big Wind Blows*, an activity that gets everyone up and moving. Now that we’re in motion, Sammy joins in happily. I take note, thinking about how I’ll handle Sammy’s behavior tomorrow in our second Morning Meeting.

Shared laughter helps us begin to bond

The children are writing letters to me about themselves, their families, their interests, and what they’re looking forward to in third grade. I have students do this first-day activity almost every year.

As the children write, I circulate, stopping at each child for brief but personal conversation. I comment on Jenny’s description of her cat and Garret’s fascination with bears. I ask about siblings and favorite television shows. I smile, listen, and look at each child: all behaviors that begin to build connections. A strong, positive teacher-student relationship is so important to a child’s school success.

“Ms. Crowe, Ms. Crowe, what’s purple and 5000 miles long?” Sammy bounces up and down on his toes while waiting for me to answer. “I don’t know,” I answer. “What?”

“The grape wall of China,” he crows with excitement. Our shared laughter helps us begin to bond.

It’s important that I find what’s likeable in each student. I need to like

students in order to be a good teacher to them. It's not about pretending to like them, which they would surely see through, but genuinely liking them. I try to see things from their point of view so I might understand what they're thinking and feeling. I make it a priority to listen to them. I try to find something we have in common, whether it's loving to read or being slow to wake up in the morning. All these things help me like the students. Often it's the child who's initially a little hard to like, the one for whom I had to make extra effort, that I become most attached to as the year goes on.

Our second Morning Meeting

Day two. It's time for our second Morning Meeting of the year. I know from yesterday that sitting in the circle listening to classmates is going to be hard for Sammy.

I whisper quietly and privately to him, "How can I help you listen to the other kids?"

His face wrinkles with distress. "I don't know. It's hard for me."

"I wondered about that," I reply in a nonjudgmental tone. "Sit next to me and I'll help you."

The strategy of "proximity" is a time-honored teacher move to encourage attention in children who have a tough time sitting still and listening. As I use it with Sammy, I'm also establishing that I can be his ally around things that are hard.

By the time the greeting makes it halfway around the circle, Sammy has crawled into my lap. The physical contact calms him, and he listens almost the entire time his classmates are greeting each other.

"You did it," I whisper to him after the meeting. "You listened for most of the greeting." In reinforcing this positive behavior, I'm careful to name what he really did do—listened for most of the greeting portion of the meeting—rather than what I might have wished he did—listened for the whole Morning Meeting. In any relationship, honesty is important.

From my journal, September 4:

There's a lot to like in Sammy. He has passionate interests, a sense of humor, a sunny smile, and a way with words. We'll be fine as long as I don't take his out-of-control behavior personally. Those behaviors aren't about me, although I know that my own behaviors might exacerbate his. If I get wound up, his intensity will increase. My job is to be his ally in gaining more control of himself. I'll do that best if I stay calm and positive.

Fair isn't the same as equal

One of my colleagues, a special educator, joins our class for a Morning Meeting. Later in the day, as we discuss what she noticed, she mentions how active Sammy was during the meeting. "It might help him to have some therapy putty to manipulate during the meeting. Lots of kids concentrate better when they have something to do with their hands," she suggests. "Therapy putty might help Marie, too," she adds. Marie is a student in the class who has a diagnosis of autism and often has difficulty focusing during group sessions.

I ask Sammy what he thinks. "Sammy, would it help you pay attention in Morning Meeting if you had something to do with your hands?" I ask.

"Yup," he says. "I've had putty before. You can roll it or pinch it."

"You're right Sammy, putty is for rolling and pinching only. Let's try it tomorrow," I say. "Mrs. O'Rourke said that she'd get some for you and for Marie."

Later on, the class sits together for a brief end-of-the-day closing circle. I use the opportunity to explain why Sammy and Marie, and no doubt many other students at different points in the year, will get to have some things or get to do some things that not every member of the class will. "We all need different things in order to be successful," I say to the class. "Pua needs glasses in order to read. What are some other things that individual students need in order to be successful?"

Hands go up. “When I broke my foot, I needed crutches,” says Jerry.

“Last year I needed reading help from Mrs. Lane,” says Jenny.

“So,” I say, “it would be pretty silly if we all wore glasses because Pua does, or if we all used crutches when Jerry did. In this class, things are fair. But fair doesn’t always mean doing exactly the same thing. It means everyone getting what they need, as much as possible.”

I continue, “What are some things that everyone needs?”

“Everyone needs the teacher to listen to them,” says Michele.

“That’s right,” I say. “Part of being a fair teacher is that I do my very best to listen to everyone.”

“Everyone needs a turn to share in Morning Meeting,” adds Frankie.

“So in this class we’re fair and we make sure that everyone gets to share once before anyone has a second turn,” I confirm.

“Some of the things that we need are the same, but some are different,” I summarize. “Tomorrow at Morning Meeting, Sammy and Marie are going to have some putty to roll and pinch. It’s to help them pay attention. The putty is just for them because they need it.”

I know this issue of fairness will come up throughout the year. I want to be explicit with students that they each need different things and that my job as their teacher is to provide each with what they need. Fair isn’t always equal.