FAYE BROWNLIE | JUDITH KING

Learning in Safe Schools

Creating classrooms where all students belong

2nd edition
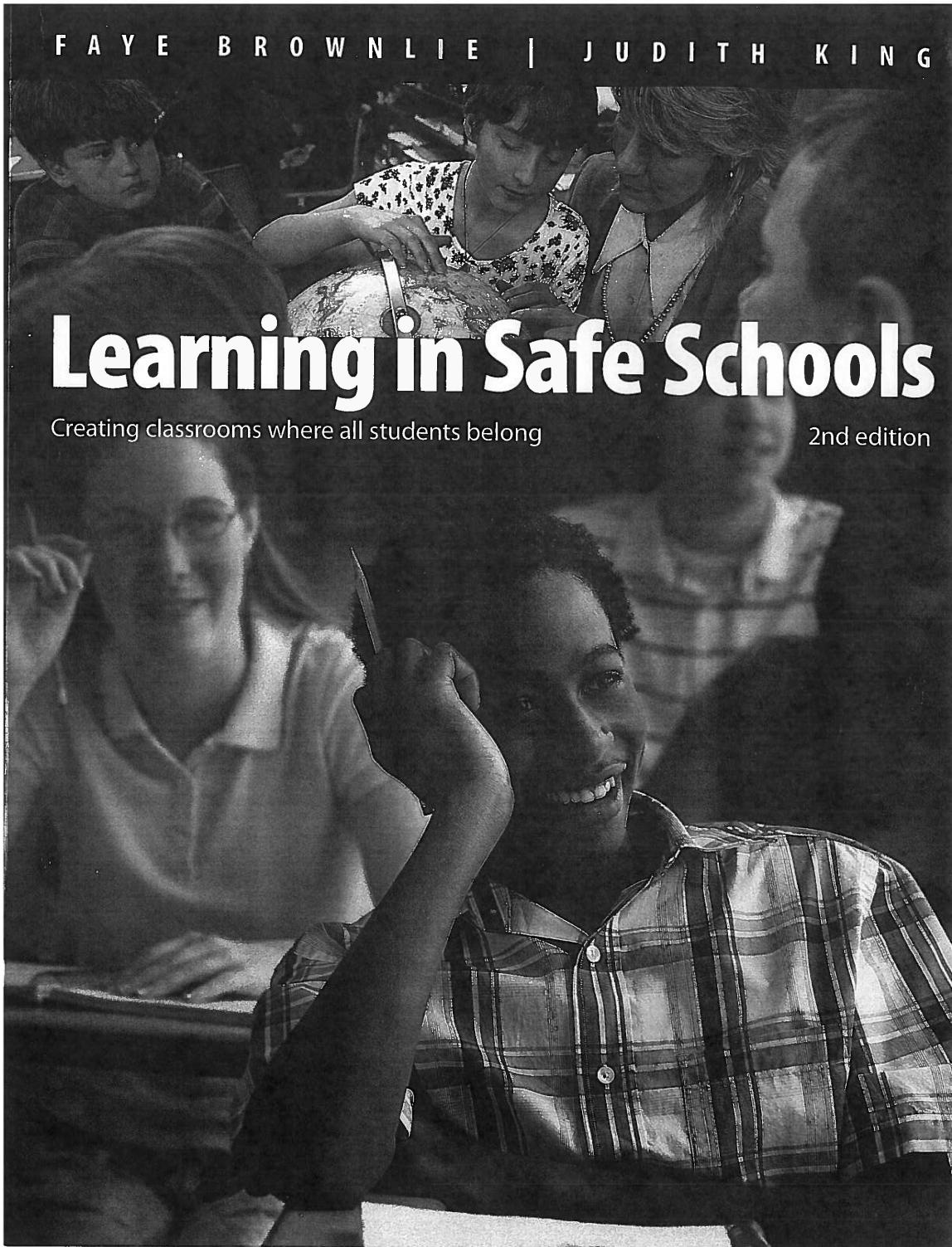
Introduction: Inclusion as We See It

"The whole reason for education is to help create whole people for the future. We build in students what we want in future society. The principles around inclusion are what we are all searching for in our lives. I think if we give a taste of this to children, they will seek it out for the rest of their lives."

— Kim Ondrik, teacher

There has been a move in the educational community over the past twenty years to full inclusion — the practice of educating students with special needs in the regular classroom as much as possible. We have witnessed the demise of special classes, the trepidation felt by teachers as their classes changed, and the renewed vigor that grows from collaboration in the classroom with a teacher and a support teacher working together to better meet the needs of all students. It is in this setting that we strive for practices that create a safe and productive learning environment for all.

We have moved from "allowing" students with special needs "in" to welcoming all students and working to build classroom and school communities where everyone feels a sense of belonging and makes academic progress.

What is inclusion?

- Inclusion is the practice of welcoming all students to their neighborhood school.
- It is the practice of educating all children in age-appropriate, heterogeneous classrooms.
- It is the practice of including parents when planning for students.
- It is the practice of working together as a staff to better meet the learning needs of each and every student — whether or not a student has been identified as having special needs.
- And it is the practice of designing programs for children with special needs that rely, as much as possible, on the learning objectives and practices of the regular classroom.

Why value it in schools?

- Education is more than an academic process. We need to develop the brain *and* the emotions and use children's strengths to build academic success.
- Schools provide the advantage of a community. We learn to move beyond a collection of individuals searching for their rights to a welcoming community that works and learns and feels together.
- Students with special needs learn a lot from the modeling of their age-appropriate peers — both socially and academically.
- Non-identified students learn about acceptance and respecting differences. Everyone is reminded that we all learn in different ways and at different rates.
- The world is shrinking dramatically and constantly changing. Schools should reflect and prepare students for the best society we know — the one we want to help create. Surely this is one that respects and values all its members.

What are the core values and beliefs of our model of inclusion?

- All children can learn, albeit in different ways and at different rates.
- All children have strengths, and part of our role as educators is to encourage and highlight those strengths in the classroom.
- Learning is a developmental, active, continuous, constructive process, building on the prior experiences of the learners.
- All children can be included, have the right to be included, and may, indeed, challenge us to make inclusion a positive reality in the classroom and school.
- Parents are part of our educational team. We need their input and we respect and appreciate their involvement.
- School should be a place where all students and staff enjoy a sense of belonging and a belief that they contribute. They should also feel valued.
- Teachers, students, administrators, and paraprofessionals will grow personally and professionally by working together to meet diverse needs.
- Successful inclusionary practices are possible, manageable, and happening in a variety of ways in a variety of places.
- Although a change to more inclusionary practice can be threatening to many, it does not mean taking time away from regular students, lowering standards, or allowing identified students to "be there, keeping a seat warm."
- Children are the province of the whole school, not one teacher.

How do we begin to be inclusive?

- *Be flexible!* It is the most important characteristic needed by all staff. This flexibility will be called upon in thinking, in planning, and in designing support models. These models need to be dynamic, changing as learner needs alter. Listen to the voices of a few inclusive practitioners:

  In my first year here I had more resource room intervention, which certainly took less of my energy because the kids left the classroom. Now with the resource support in the classroom, I need more energy but the results are well worth it.

  — Steve Rosell, teacher

  This inclusive school must have a community feel to it. It is a welcoming school, with a problem-solving kind of atmosphere, where, when concerns, issues, problems develop, rather than throwing our hands in the air, we problem-solve in groups of two or three or whatever. Maybe the key is flexibility....

  What has also been critical is our supporting the classroom teacher [re: a Kindergarten student who "loses" control]. We have had to pull time from other kids and teachers in order to intensify the support for this situation. We talk together about supporting one another. Some teachers don't like it at first, but they also know that we'll be there for them when a critical situation arises.

  — Randy Cranston, consultant
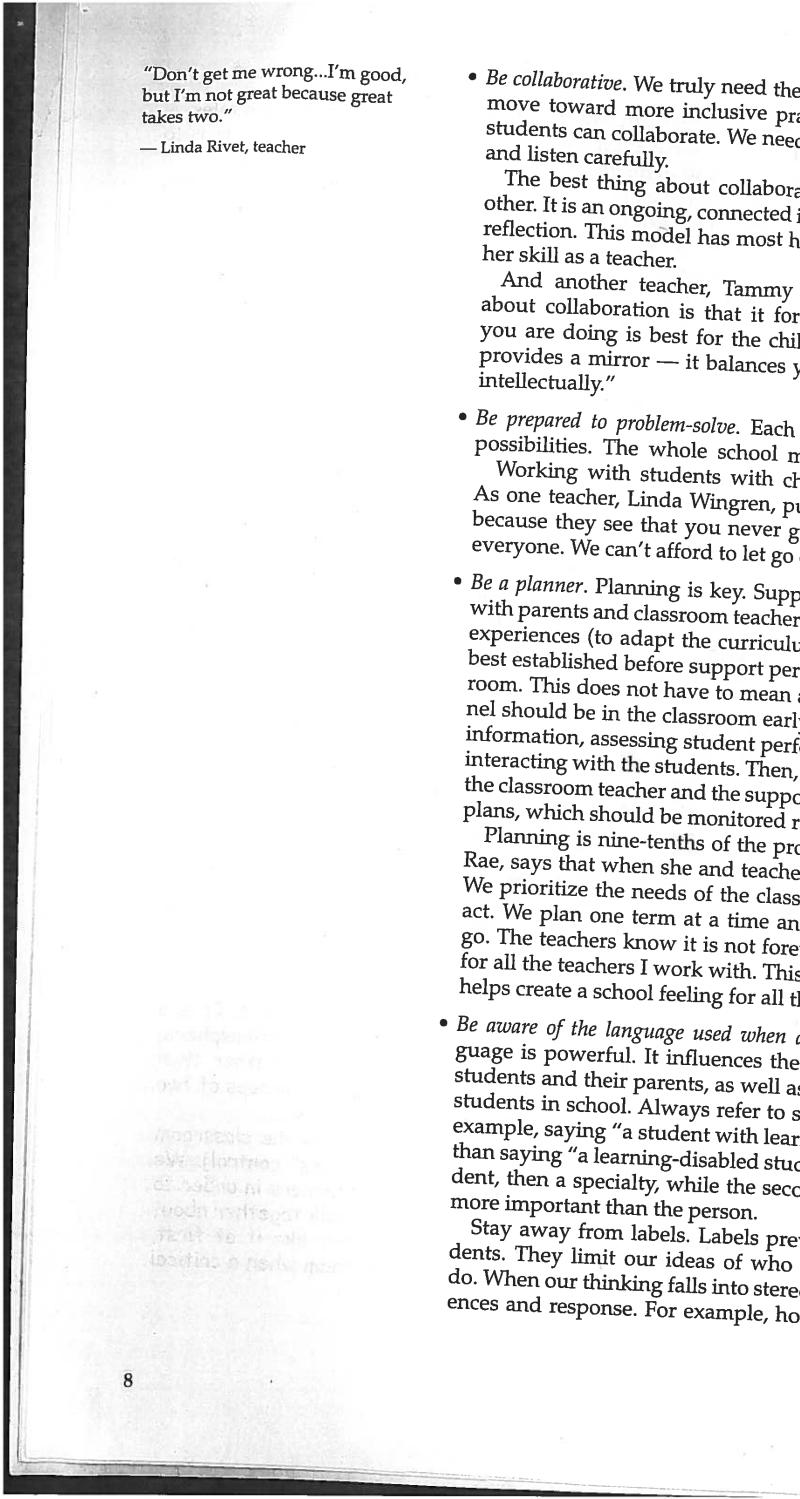
- *Be collaborative.* We truly need the expertise of all in order to make the move toward more inclusive practices work. Teachers, parents, and students can collaborate. We need to share our views, pose questions, and listen carefully.

  The best thing about collaboration is that adults learn from each other. It is an ongoing, connected inservice that involves modeling and reflection. This model has most helped one of the authors here refine her skill as a teacher.

  And another teacher, Tammy Wirick, observes: "The best thing about collaboration is that it forces you to question whether what you are doing is best for the children you are working with, and it provides a mirror — it balances your thinking both emotionally and intellectually."

- *Be prepared to problem-solve.* Each student can open a new range of possibilities. The whole school must be a safe place for everyone.

  Working with students with challenging behavior is worthwhile. As one teacher, Linda Wingren, puts it: "The other kids love you too because they see that you never give up on anyone and you include everyone. We can't afford to let go of anyone."

- *Be a planner.* Planning is key. Support personnel must work carefully with parents and classroom teachers to design appropriate educational experiences (to adapt the curriculum) on an ongoing basis. Plans are best established before support personnel join the teacher in the classroom. This does not have to mean a delay in service. Support personnel should be in the classroom early in the term, observing, collecting information, assessing student performance, scaffolding learning, and interacting with the students. Then, armed with pertinent information, the classroom teacher and the support personnel meet to establish their plans, which should be monitored regularly for service to be effective.

  Planning is nine-tenths of the program. One resource teacher, Gina Rae, says that when she and teachers meet "it is a very open process. We prioritize the needs of the class and then make a commitment to act. We plan one term at a time and renegotiate the timetable as we go. The teachers know it is not forever. I keep my timetable available for all the teachers I work with. This helps us be better as a group and helps create a school feeling for all the kids."

- *Be aware of the language used when describing students.* Choice of language is powerful. It influences the thinking of others — that of the students and their parents, as well as that of those who work with the students in school. Always refer to students in positive language. For example, saying "a student with learning disabilities" is more positive than saying "a learning-disabled student." The first focuses on the student, then a specialty, while the second suggests that the disability is more important than the person.

  Stay away from labels. Labels prevent us from understanding students. They limit our ideas of who students are and what they can do. When our thinking falls into stereotypes, we limit students' experiences and response. For example, how can a teacher call a child who

isn't performing a non-reader and a non-writer? The task is to find out what is stopping the child and then figure out what to do about it.

- *Be aware of how you spend your time.* Extensive testing prior to providing a program for a student is costly in terms of time and personnel. Vulnerable students should not be left to flounder with the regular classroom curriculum and expectations pending a formal assessment. With support personnel helping the teacher in the classroom, observations of a student's interactions with others can begin immediately. These observations then become the nucleus of a profile of strengths and needs that lead to the necessary programming adaptations or scaffolding. Although a formal assessment might sometimes be required, most planning for student programming is based on ongoing data collection in a variety of learning situations. It is also tied to the curriculum learning outcomes and to classroom experiences. This planning is interactive and closely monitors a student's progress.

  "When I'm in the class I know I'm connecting to the curriculum that's being taught in the classroom," says principal and resource teacher, Randy Cranston. "I can scaffold for the students and teach them the necessary skills.... I also find the students are more motivated when their support occurs in the regular classroom."

- *If you are support personnel, be prepared to play a key role in beginning and maintaining an inclusive focus.* Accurate record-keeping is a mandate. Ongoing dialogue among staff regarding student needs and the effectiveness of the intervention or scaffolding can often be initiated by support personnel. The modeling of positive language about students helps sharpen thinking. You are in a special position when it comes to influencing the growth of a learning community in a school. Remember: Inclusion is not focused on one population. It is making everyone feel that they are important and a part of the school. Behaviors ranging from welcoming to encouraging and from supporting to problem-solving are all practiced in a strong community. Students can capitalize on the social aspects of learning and, as members of a community, share the highs and lows of the individuals within it.

Why does the connectedness of the group matter?

The importance of inclusion, as advocated here, is that parents, students, and staff all have a voice and feel they are a part of a strong community. It can be seen as being part of a team. Teachers who teach in ways that include all students find that their classrooms change. Naryn Searcy, a secondary teacher, eloquently sums up what she has found: "The community becomes richer and it becomes more inclusive. Many students have strengths and talents that we never see in our classrooms because there is no place for them to show them. Students now take notice of other's strengths, learning things about each other that they never knew before, encouraging and supporting each other, and learning to respect each other in new ways."

Building a Culture Where All Students Belong

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"A seed holds an incredible life force. When conditions are right, the seed bursts, sending forth an embryo root and stem. Each time, the same thing happens with mind-boggling regularity. *But the key to the process is to give the right seed the right conditions — which is the gardener's job.*"

— Gerald Knox, gardening authority

"From my belonging research I have learned that this simple idea is at the core of every person. It's the soil from which a seed grows... belonging is to learning as soil is to a seed."

— Kim Ondrik, teacher

Fostering a culture of "belonging" in a community can help children develop love, friendship, commitment, and caring. This "belonging" moves students to act in an inclusive way, change behavior, go out of their way for others, and appreciate others for who they are.

How deeply these changes happen in the classroom seems to depend on the individual teacher: how much the teacher cares about developing an inclusive culture, how able he or she is at reaching individual students, and how involved he or she allows students to be in developing that community. Teachers who value a culture where everyone feels they belong set it as a priority, and constantly model respect and caring in their behavior and language. Many teachers believe, though, that a strong culture is more easily built when they have same students for a few years.

The "Journey" outlined on page 20 is an example of the work of a teacher who cared about establishing a culture of belonging in her primary multi-aged classroom.

The Need to Belong as the Soil for Learning

The term "belonging" was coined by A. H. Maslow and appears with "love" on his hierarchy of needs. Maslow put forth the premise that human beings are motivated to satisfy needs. These needs are hierarchical and must be at least partially satisfied before a person will try to satisfy higher needs.

One critical concept introduced by Maslow was the distinction between deficiency needs and growth needs. Deficiency needs (physiological needs, safety, love, and esteem) are those that are critical to physical and psychological well-being. These needs must be satisfied, but once they are, a person's motivation to satisfy them diminishes. In contrast, growth needs, such as the need to know and understand things, to appreciate beauty, or to grow and develop an appreciation of others,

can never be satisfied completely. In fact, the more individuals can meet the need to know and understand the world around them, the greater their motivation may become to learn more.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs
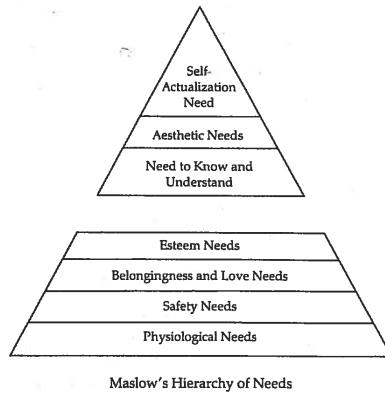
At school, we generally focus too narrowly on satisfying growth needs, developing children's intellectual skills. The problem is that children who are hungry or who come from abusive situations will have very little psychological energy to put into learning. They have many more basic needs to satisfy before they can grow intellectually. Similarly, if children do not feel accepted or included in a classroom, they are unlikely to have a strong motivation to achieve the higher growth objectives — the search for knowledge and understanding for their own sake, or the creativity and openness to new ideas. A child who is unsure of his or her acceptance in a class may feel sad or rejected, make the cautious choice, go with the crowd, or study for a test without any interest in learning the ideas.

If a teacher can create a classroom where all children feel they belong, in Maslow's view, the students will become eager to learn for the sake of learning. Children will also open themselves to new ideas and take creative risks. If they are to become self-directed learners, children must feel that they are loved, that the teacher will respond to them fairly and consistently, and that they will not be ridiculed or punished for honest answers or risk taking.

Classrooms built on the philosophy of belonging have caring, safe environments where children support and help each other. Such a philosophy promotes an "I can" attitude in all children. When children feel they belong, they feel safe and secure and good about themselves. As a result, they become tolerant of others, more accepting and forgiving.

Classrooms that foster a sense of belonging provide an environment that encourages risk-taking, allows for a cooperative spirit, models acceptance, encourages divergent thinking, promotes appreciation of others, practices empathy, and recognizes the unique contributions that each individual makes to the group. Safe classrooms provide for effective

"If you belong, you learn more... you won't be worried."

— A primary student

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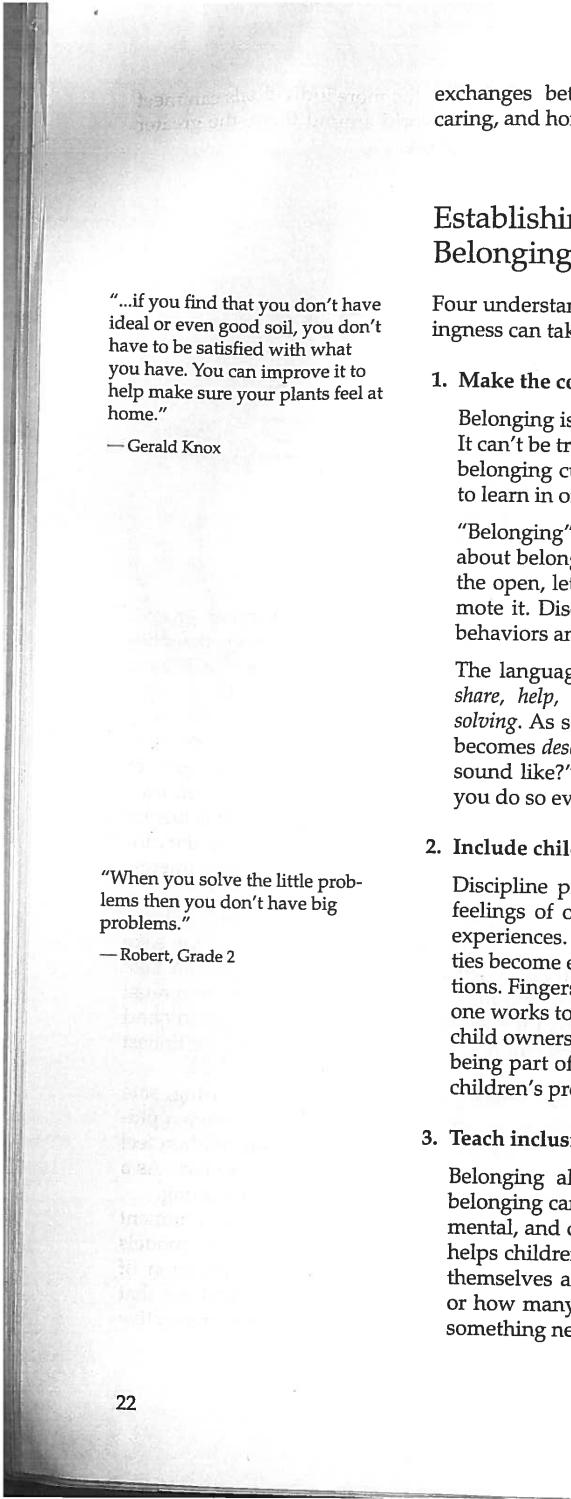
exchanges between individuals. Safe classrooms are warm, loving, caring, and honest.

Establishing a Framework for Teaching Belongingness

Four understandings must be in evidence before the teaching of belongingness can take hold.

1. Make the concept explicit

Belonging is a curriculum on its own. It has to be taught as life skills. It can't be treated as a theme that can be covered in a few weeks. This belonging curriculum has its own vocabulary that the children need to learn in order to communicate effectively.

"Belonging" should become a classroom word. Teachers need to talk about belonging with their students and bring the subtleties out into the open, letting the children become aware of what they do to promote it. Discussions centred around belonging make implicit social behaviors and feelings *explicit*.

The language of belonging is striking — *love, care, value, important, share, help, encourage, friendship, support, freedom, choices, problem-solving*. As students begin to understand the concept, their language becomes *descriptive* — "What does belonging feel like, look like, and sound like?" Their language also becomes *prescriptive* — "What can you do so everyone belongs?"

2. Include children in problem-solving

"When you solve the little problems then you don't have big problems."

— Robert, Grade 2

Discipline problems are minimized when children understand the feelings of others and can better relate those feelings to their own experiences. In a classroom where belonging is emphasized, difficulties become everyone's problem. Everyone is responsible for the solutions. Fingers are not pointed and children are not singled out. Everyone works together to re-establish the feeling of belonging, giving the child ownership over the problem and a sense of empowerment from being part of the solution. By discussing belonging in the classroom, children's problem-solving skills are enhanced in a meaningful way.

3. Teach inclusion — and celebrate diversity

Belonging allows for and celebrates diversity. A strong sense of belonging can transcend any unease created by diversity — physical, mental, and cultural. Talking about belonging and what is important helps children realize that it's their "heart condition," how they treat themselves and others, that matters, not how many toys they own, or how many different clothes they have, or how quickly they learn something new.

4. Establish a relationship with each child

Children need a relationship with the adult in the classroom to get their bearings, to understand what is acceptable and not acceptable, to observe and emulate. They need to be able to transfer the relationship they have with their parents to their teacher, to know they are accepted, *safe*, and cared for. "Once there is a strong connection between adult and child, the child will respond to the tiniest cues from the adult," says child psychologist Gordon Neufeld. Penelope Leach, in *Children First*, writes that "Children depend on parents or their substitutes not only to maintain their self-esteem but also to build it." She believes that teachers need to play the role of the "parent substitute" and not be detached from students. She says further that teachers must be "involved in reciprocal interpersonal relations" with students, not see students as "objects to be taught if they will listen, controlled rather than consulted if they will not."

Concrete Ways to Create a "Belonging" Classroom

You can begin to create a genuinely inclusive classroom through discussions and activities, such as are outlined below. The examples here deal with younger children, but can easily be adapted for students through middle school and, in some cases, for secondary students. For other ideas for middle and secondary grades, see chapters 5–7, where the ideas presented here are pursued in a variety of ways for use with older students.

1. Brainstorm "What is belonging?" We prefer to begin with whole-class brainstorming, moving to individual responses, which honor each child's contribution. An example appears below.

A place where I belong
is _____
because_____
A place where I don't belong
is _____
because_____

I belong outside with my friends.

2. Ask students to reflect on where they feel they belong and why — and where they don't. This activity can be done using various formats at any grade level or using cross-grade buddies. One option is to provide open-ended sentences such as those in the margin at left.