

# Yes, Michael

## Reflections on how inclusion can build social skills

by Genan T. Anderson

Michael, a 5-year-old with autism, came into my preschool classroom one summer. He was preparing for a mainstream kindergarten in the fall and needed to practice his social skills.

Experience has taught me that inclusion of children with special needs in our classroom can be a win-win situation. Still, fear creeps in as I review the special needs of children who will be in my care. I wonder:

- Will I have the knowledge and understanding to know what I can do to support the growth and learning of each child?
- Will I be able to keep my focus on where we are going to help me be patient when there are setbacks?
- Will I be able to match the expectations of parents eager to help their child not only function but thrive in a mainstream setting?
- Will I be able to maintain a balance so that the developmental needs of all children are met?
- Will my classroom become a safe place for children to learn positive skills of social interaction?

### ***How social skills impact academic skills***

While all the areas of curriculum are valuable, as an early childhood educator I see firsthand the importance of socialization skills in all young children. Social skills serve as a scaffold, a platform, for learning in all areas. Research affirms our scaffolding of social competence in our classrooms.

Socially competent children who are able to enter

a group and play cooperatively with peers are more successful on measures of academic competence (Rubin, Bukowski, and Parker, 1998). Across a range of studies, social competence and emotion regulation can more accurately predict performance in first grade than children's cognitive skills (Raver and Knitzer, 2002).

Still, politicians try to push academics down into kindergarten and preschool classrooms in misguided attempts to create a generation "ready" to learn. Our experience with Michael argues for a different approach.

### ***Michael joins our preschool***

When Michael came to us, he could already read any book in our classroom. His understanding of math concepts went well beyond first grade curriculum as well. Indeed, he was a child whose cognitive skills would shine.

Still, Michael was learning to attend to the social cues of his peers. He needed to learn how to join a group and sustain interaction for more than a few minutes. He wanted a "friend."

Michael might have been labeled shy and reticent. He could easily be lost in a sea of busy children bustling about and vying for attention. His natural tendencies drew him to the listening center where he repeatedly followed the action of audiocassettes with printed books, or to the library corner where he read books independently.

He did not mind other children joining the listening center if they followed along with their own books and headsets. He was also willing to read a book aloud to a child who joined him in the library nook.

But when he passed by the more active centers, he stood on the fringes. He watched the action with a big smile on his face but made no effort to join the play. Behaving in this way, he was no trouble at all for the teaching staff. He always appeared happy and engaged.

His mother had brought him to us specifically to coach him in skills of social competency. She had a goal in mind and proved to be a valuable asset in providing our staff with ideas for drawing him into the group.

### ***Coaching Michael: How to start***

I felt strongly that Michael first should be given the opportunity to choose one of the centers where he felt most comfortable and where he could watch the play of the other children without pressure to join. This would also provide a transition for the room as a whole. By the time Michael had finished reading a book at the listening center, the other children had finished their check-in ritual and settled into a center to begin their day. This gave Michael an oppor-

tunity to “check-in” each friend in his own mind and register where they had chosen to play. It also gave him an opportunity to see how the other children were manipulating the materials in each center and interacting with one another.

No, Michael did not go beyond a rote check-in of the children on his own. But, with the children busily engaged in center work, a teacher was then free to sit beside Michael and model these observations for him. “Let’s see, where has everyone gone? Jonathan is in the block center. Looks like he is building a road or track of some kind. Andrew has chosen the home center. He seems to be cooking something.”

As the teacher talked about the possibilities of play in each center, Michael then was given a choice of where he would like to work next. Some days he needed that choice to be narrowed to only two centers.

When he chose a center, the teacher further aided his group entry by verbally detailing the behaviors of the other children, including their facial expressions and peer interactions. “OK, you want to play in the block center. Jonathan’s road seems to be finished, and he’s looking for something. What could it be? Jeremy is stacking the long blocks to make an arch of some kind. He’s biting his tongue as though





he's trying to figure out something. And he doesn't want help from Caroline. How could you play in this center?"

Michael would formulate a plan for how he could enter the play. He might offer to help Caroline build another arch, or ask Jonathan about driving a car or truck on the new road. With this coaching, Michael often found that he could enter the group to play. He began to feel successful as he gained access to toys and receptive children.

Repeated coaching on group entry with Michael broadened the vision of my teachers to recognize similar needs of other children in the group. These were children with no identified special needs. Many of them were the 3-year-olds developmentally beginning to learn the skills of cooperative interaction. We learned that they, also, benefited from formal coaching on group entry strategies.

### ***Coaching Michael: How to stay in the group***

Successful group entry and sustained social interaction are quite separate skills. We learned this most clearly on the playground. Michael was most willing in the beginning to enter the game of chase and be the child who tried to catch the other children. He would run until he was exhausted and literally fell to the ground to rest. The other children always

ran away from him or created "safe" places to rest. Consequently, he never actually caught anyone so that he could become one of the children making the rules.

It wasn't long before Michael became the "bad guy" trying to "get" the "good guys." Michael wanted to be a "good guy" and run away from the "bad guy." We tried asking Aaron, the most socially dominant boy in the group, to find a way for Michael to be one of the "good guys," but the game just ended. Without a "bad guy," it was no longer fun to be a "good guy."

At this stage of social development, inclusion in a group coexists with exclusion of others. Cruel as it seems, two children become best friends by not including someone else as their friend. Michael was labeled the child who was no one's friend. Still, he smiled and played, and the other children did not dislike him.

One day Michael was playing alone, having declined an offer to chase a group of boys. He was doing something quite unacceptable, climbing up the spiral slide. But, there were no other children around the slide and his large muscle skills were still developing. This activity was really taxing his strength. Up and down he went, and up and down again and again.

Then, quite unexpectedly, Greg appeared at the

top of the slide and slid down into Michael. His first reaction was to be upset at having his private space infringed upon. No one was hurt, and the jumble of two boys at the bottom of the slide was actually quite comical, so I simply followed my spontaneous feelings and giggled. Soon both boys were giggling too, and it became a game.

Greg ran around to the stairs and tried to reach the top of the slide before Michael could climb up from the bottom. Over and over the race continued. Sometimes Michael even won. His large muscle skills were improving as he practiced his social skills.

When he wasn't all the way up, he was able to tell Greg to wait at the top because he didn't like Greg to meet him part way up the slide. Greg responded and began to wait (if he was first) until Michael touched the top. Then they would slide down in a jumble together.

This behavior was strictly against the rules because it was potentially dangerous, but I stood nearby and let the play happen. Michael had sustained interaction with a "friend" for more than 10 minutes.

The next day Michael wanted to repeat the play on the slide, but Greg was distracted by other activities and declined the invitation. However, Tyler answered the open call for play, and the game continued a second day with a new friend. The game looked a little different, but the same elements of cooperative give-and-take were there.

The third day it was Tyler who invited Michael to repeat their play of the previous day. Michael was willing, and I moved farther from their play. When I looked their way to see how they were doing, they had switched games while continuing to interact with one another—another milestone!

Michael was in my classroom for only five weeks that summer session. One day during the last week I heard his little voice call, "Steven, come chase us." When I turned to look, there was Steven in hot pursuit of Michael and Tyler. Michael had turned the game full circle.

## ***What Michael taught us***

The most valuable part of having Michael in my classroom was what I learned from him. He was always happy and optimistic. Failure never entered his mind, even though I saw him fail repeatedly. He focused on the moment and used his skills to learn new patterns. As we struggled together to learn and to teach, my fears subsided. That summer experience bolstered my faith that all children are capable of learning.

Michael's process of acquiring social skills accentuated each step. Watching his progress helped me to separate the milestones. My ability to see clearly the developmental sequence of emerging social skills helped me in planning ways to scaffold social competency for all the children in my room.

Day by day we learned together. Development was not always steady or even. Still, the assessed progress calmed my fears and built each child's confidence. One more time, the inclusion of a child with identified special needs had resulted in a win-win for all of us.

## **References**

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