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You are listening to Supporting Supporters, a ChangetoChill podcast. This is a free mental well-being resource offered by Allina Health. My name is Tonya Freeman. I'm a licensed psychologist and regional lead psychologist with Allina Health.

These podcast episodes are aimed with the goal of providing quick, tangible resources and information from Allina Health mental health providers on a range of mental health topics relevant to day to day lives of the listener. We invite you to join us in any way you please, whether you sit back and kick your feet up, or as you engage in movement, your daily commute, or as you prepare for your day. However you choose to join us, we welcome you and we honor your time.

Today we are talking about inclusivity in the classroom with Dr. Heather Crabtree, who serves as a primary care psychologist for children, adolescents, and families, and is a supervisor for our post-doctoral trainees. Please join us in understanding more about how to foster inclusivity in your classroom.

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Hello there. I'm Heather Crabtree and I am a psychologist who works primarily with children, adolescents, and their families. In my work with clients and families I often partner with schools and also hear a lot from my clients about the impact that school personnel have on their lives. This is such an important and valued contribution to these children's lives and society as a whole. By listening to this podcast, it is obvious how much you care about your students and that you want to continue to develop your understanding and skills. Thank you for all you do. I hope this will be helpful.

Today we will be talking about inclusivity as a whole within the classroom. So first of all, I want to touch on why inclusion works. Supporting and celebrating diversity and inclusion in school works because it gives all children the potential to achieve, and creates an environment where those with additional needs are not segregated and seen as 'other'; they are part of the same community of learners. Inclusion addresses negative cultural attitudes and misconceptions about people with disabilities or those who are members of minority communities.

I really like [this statement](#) that was made all the way back in 1994, but I think it really sums up inclusivity very well. It says, "inclusive, regular schools... are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all." And I know all of you know this, right? And that's why you're thinking about inclusivity and why I'm sure all of your schools have probably rules and regulations around inclusivity at this point.

So let's talk about some benefits of inclusion. Research has shown that when students are part of schools as a whole that practice inclusion, it is shown that **students gain social and community skills**. Isolating students in special education classrooms limits their full range of educational opportunities, including learning and practicing important social skills. Additionally, inclusion promotes diverse friendships and interactions, enriching the lives of all students. So this is true for those students that would get pulled out for special education, but is also true for the students that would be in regular education classrooms because they get those interactions

with the students with different abilities and then have the interactions with those students that they wouldn't normally get as well.

Another benefit is that **inclusive schools experience fewer absences and behavioral issues**. Students included in the general education classroom develop better self-esteem. The social skills and behavior they build around their peers help to minimize behavioral challenges and disruptions. When students from all walks of life feel included and that they are important members of the school community, they are typically more invested in their own education, which helps them have less behavioral issues and more engagement in the classroom.

Inclusive schools also lead to greater overall acceptance and tolerance. Students not traditionally excluded in education also benefit from inclusion. They learn valuable lessons about tolerance, patience, and the benefits of diversity; those are really helpful lessons, as we all know.

And then lastly, **all students (and teachers) benefit from a great support system**. This creates an opportunity for teachers to get to know their students with lesson plans tailored to students' needs.

Okay, so now that we know some benefits of inclusion, let's talk a little bit about how to start to get towards an inclusive classroom. So one really important thing is that collaboration with families and other key members of a student's support system is really essential.

So when a school year is starting, it's really important to **begin the school year by getting to know students and their families**. Aim to make contact within the first two weeks, whether it's through email, by phone, or in person.

Use the type of communication the family prefers and try to communicate with families in their native language whenever possible; so try to have an interpreter if possible. That means any written documentation, including flyers, reading materials, etc.

Ask parents and family members to get involved in school and classroom activities. Encourage them to actually visit the classroom, especially during special events or classroom activities.

And then **offer a chance for families to share their ideas**. Let them know how they can communicate with you as teachers or other school personnel. Ask them to provide feedback about their student and discuss areas of strength, as well as areas in need of improvement. And this really helps with that communication so that you know as much as you can about the family unit and the student so that you can really know how to create an inclusive environment for that student.

So this goes into the importance of knowing that student and their family and how that can come into play in the foundation of inclusion. So really knowing the student and their background is very important. Find out their preferred name, pronouns, any other languages they speak, their favorite hobbies and activities, and other relevant information that they'd like to tell you.

For students with IEPs, get to know their accommodations and meet with their special education teachers. Push to collaborate with those teachers so you can provide better instruction.

Okay, so let's talk about inclusive language, because I think this is a really important topic and something that I think can be confusing sometimes. As a general rule, language can be exclusionary, even if you don't mean it to be. Everyone has implicit biases and their own cultural perspective. To be more inclusive with language requires conscious and consistent effort.

So let's give some examples about exclusive versus inclusive language. For example, some exclusive language use could be "Guys, ladies, girls, boys." More inclusive examples would be "Everyone, all, friends, learners." I see a lot of schools going to using winter and spring break instead of Christmas and Easter break and that's a really great chance to move to more inclusive language use. Instead of using the word "disabled," we now suggest using "people with disabilities." As a general rule, we want to really use the person first and then the thing that they struggle with. So instead of a "disabled person," we switch it around to a "person with a disability," so the person comes first. When we talk about a minority group, instead of saying "minority," we want to be specific. So instead of grouping it as a larger group, we would be very specific like "Black" or "Asian American," whichever group we're speaking of.

Talking about gender is another big topic that has a lot of labels that can be confusing. So I wanted to spend a few minutes going over some of the terms. And this is certainly something you can find online as well, but I just thought it would be helpful to go through some of these things too.

Cisgender: refers to "a person whose gender identity aligns with sex assigned at birth." So if you were born female and you identify as female, you would be cisgender.

Transgender: "an umbrella term used to describe the full range of people whose gender identity and/or gender role do not conform to what is typically associated with their sex assigned at birth. We do not use the term "transgendered" because that gives the idea that something is done to a person and is like a choice, right. So we use "transgender," instead of "transgendered." We also do not use the term "tranny," because that's considered a slur as well, same with "hermaphrodite."

So the alternatives that we use in addition to "transgender," would be "LGBTQ+." The term "queer," used to be considered a term that we did not use. We have to consider our audience when we use that term. Some people have reclaimed it as an okay term to use, but sometimes it's not appropriate; so you have to use your best judgment and ask.

One other thing I wanted to mention to is that we don't really want to use the term "birth sex," we want to use the term "assigned sex" or "sex assigned at birth." We try to avoid the terms "born female," or "born male." Instead, we say "assigned female at birth" or "assigned male at birth." So just a few things to keep in mind; they may not come up a lot, but it's good to know those kinds of things.

When it comes to pronouns, which I'm sure comes up a lot in classrooms, we try not to use the term "preferred pronouns" because this implies a choice about one's gender. Use the term "pronouns" or "identified pronouns" instead. So when you're talking with your students, just ask what their pronouns are or what their identified pronouns are. They usually already thought about it and will be able to tell you. So you can use that as a general question at the beginning of the year. I like to just let them know that if these things change throughout the year, they can let you know so that there's open communication for that; I think that's a very nice way, because we know that these identity things can shift, so it's important to have that open communication.

Okay, so those are some examples for using inclusive language. It's really helpful to keep that communication open because language does change over time, and just to keep up with the language of the day.

So moving on to a few other things you can do to continue having this culture of inclusion in the classroom. Another option is to **vary examples for diversity and representation** that you use in the classroom. Whether you're reading books or having examples in lessons, making sure that the people that are in the lessons or examples are diverse, whether it's cultural, religious, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds. When talking about famous scientists, for instance, include women, people of color, and scientists from other countries.

Next, really making sure that you're **establishing rules for respect and inclusion**. As the teacher, it is your role to model and set the tone in your classroom, regardless of what is happening in the rest of the school. Set rules and expectations from day one that maintain inclusion and respect diversity and differences. Take a strong stance against bullying, which often arises when certain students are excluded. Rules should be specific and have specific consequences.

As we wrap up for this podcast, I would like to touch on a few specific examples. First of inclusion specifically for gender differences, and then inclusion for cultural differences, and then we'll talk about a few takeaways.

So in regards to gender, some of this might be a little bit repeated from some of the more general things that we already talked about earlier in this podcast. But when we're talking about gender differences the first thing is to **use inclusive language on all forms**. When you're looking at your handouts, other forms and communications that you use in your classroom or are given to families, make sure that they're inclusive of all family structures and gender identities. For example, using phrases such as "families and caring adults" in place of "moms and dads."

The second thing to think about is **stocking your library shelves with diverse books**. Make sure students have access to books that reflect not only their lives but also identities and perspectives outside their experiences so they have the ability to see those things in real life.

Third is thinking about your **welcoming bulletin board**. So this is something that's common to have in classrooms, right? So thinking about how you can use the bulletin board to display diverse family structures and people of different races, gender expressions and abilities. Maybe using slogans that encourage respect for all people on that bulletin board.

Develop clear classroom and/or school agreements. So coming back to that bullying piece, making sure there's policies in place that specifically looks at groups that are disproportionately bullied or harassed, and then make it clear to students that this means no put-downs about who someone is or who their family is.

Prepare for teachable moments. Educators can practice how to respond when they hear students say things like "That's gay!" or "You act like a girl!" or "You're not a real family because you don't have a dad!" Really be prepared to interrupt teasing like this when it comes down to a child's identity or their family.

Next, think about **modeling inclusive language**. Instead of addressing classes as "boys and girls," try using inclusive words like "students" or "friends," like we talked about before.

Think about **grouping students according to something other than their gender**. So instead of “all the boys line up here and all the girls line up here,” maybe do it by numbering off or by birthdays, odds and evens, where it’s not necessarily focused on gender.

Think about **trying lesson plans about how kids can be allies and learning about what makes each child special**.

Lastly, consider **holding an event where all families are celebrated**. Provide information about LGBTQ+ and gender topics.

So those were some ideas about gender specific inclusion activities, and now let’s touch on a few culturally responsive teaching strategies. Some ideas to think about would be to **have positive attitude toward students’ families**. This could be encouraging students to talk about their families, share stories, encouraging families to be a part of what’s going on in the classroom.

Next, **having a welcoming environment promotes getting to know students and their backgrounds**. So as we had talked about before, asking questions, being curious about their backgrounds.

Curriculum materials must represent a diverse array of cultures, which we talked about before. So again, when you’re providing examples or books to read, making sure that there are a lot of different cultures and races that are shown.

Instructional strategies allow for a student’s first language but also promote development of English language skills.

Allow students some choice in topics and content so they can choose things that speak to them and resonate with their background.

And then lastly, I think it’s really important to **take time to reflect on our own implicit biases**. We can consider taking an online quiz about implicit cultural biases to improve self awareness. Be aware that you may have to consciously “overpower” your unconscious biases, especially in the classroom. Be aware also of privilege (or lack thereof) and how that affects yourself and your students.

Thank you for sticking with me through this great conversation about inclusivity within the classroom. Let’s talk about three takeaway points that I think are really important:

1. Inclusivity is beneficial for students and leads to improvements in social skills, acceptance, and greater support systems.
2. You can create a culture of inclusivity in the classroom by demonstrating that everyone’s uniqueness is not only accepted but valued. Ask questions and be curious about everyone’s differences; let them guide the conversations about their differences.
3. Be aware of group-specific bullying and biases (some even unconscious or microaggressions that other aren’t necessarily fully aware of). Try to address these as soon as possible to create a culture of inclusivity in the classroom.

Thanks so much, I hope this was helpful!

---Outro---

On behalf of Allina Health and Change to Chill, we thank you for taking the time to listen to our podcast. We do hope you enjoyed this episode and we hope that you join us in other episodes covering even more interesting topics with mental health providers. As always, you can find the show notes and any accompanying research and tools at the change to chill website at www.changetochill.org. In health and wellness, take care and see you next time!