

# Using Invitational Learning to Address Writing Competence for Middle School Students with Disabilities

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Citation

## Abstract

*This study describes the process of creating an Invitational Learning environment to improve the writing competence of middle school students in two special education classes. Teacher-student interactions were coded according to Purkey and Novak's (1996) Intentionality/Invitation Quadrant with levels corresponding to intentionally disinviting, unintentionally disinviting, unintentionally inviting, and intentionally inviting. After only two training sessions, teacher-student interactions were markedly more inviting.*

Students with disabilities and those who struggle academically have lower rates of academic engagement in the classroom (Rock 2005). Academic engagement is affected by the student's ability to effectively (a) initiate interactions, (b) distinguish when help is needed, (c) express ideas, and (d) ask questions (Ornelles, 2007). Students who have difficulty initiating, asking for help, and expressing ideas are consequently at risk for withdrawing from classroom instruction and interactions. Academic engagement in learning contributes to students' academic success (Greenwood, Horton, & Utley, 2002); therefore, it is critical to support students' classroom engagement and provide them with experiences that pique their interests and support their desire to learn.

Ravet (2007) found that students' most common explanation for disengagement was boredom. Boredom was linked to a general disinterest in the curriculum or a dislike of "specific sorts of learning activity such as writing tasks" (p. 349). Many students with disabilities have difficulty with writing (Graham & Harris, 1993). These students are often unfamiliar with the characteristics of good writing, believe that revisions are unnecessary, and assume that teachers alone are responsible for error correction (Kindzierski & Leavitt-Noble, 2010). As a result, many students with disabilities have developed negative feelings about, or an aversion to writing by the time they leave elementary school (Graham & Harris, 1993; Harris & Graham, 1999; Hollenbeck, 1999; Kindzierski & Leavitt-Noble, 2010).

Ravet (2007) found that following boredom, the most common explanation for disengagement was the student-teacher relationship. In the present study, we aimed to increase student engagement by first focusing on building relationships; after which we could focus on content and writing tasks. To address relationship-building, we worked

with one middle school teacher in two separate classes to create an Invitational Learning environment.

According to Purkey and Stanley (1991) an Invitational Learning environment is built on trust, respect and optimism. Trust involves encouraging independence, ownership, and recognizing personal effort. The result of a trusting environment may be increased student initiative and engagement. Respect is shown by integrating students' thoughts and ideas into the requirements of an assignment. Respect may involve students working collaboratively, which requires that the teacher model and reinforce those behaviors that convey mutual respect for opinion and thought (Purkey & Novak, 2008). Optimism is shown when the teacher communicates genuine feedback regarding progress and performance; optimistic feedback is reflected in tone and in verbal praise.

The basis of Invitational Learning environments supports the underlying tenets of inclusive education (Harte, 2010; Tralli, Colombo, Deshler, Shumaker, 1996). Operating under the assumption that inclusive classroom contexts provide an important foundational base for student learning, the authors of the present study examined the process of building a more invitational learning environment for middle school students with disabilities. This study focused on documenting events and dialogue in two classrooms as this process unfolded.

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## Purpose

Teacher-student collaborative dialogue is an under-researched area in special education (Hollenbeck, 1999). We believed that creating a dialogue-rich Invitational Learning environment for students with disabilities would have a positive influence on their writing. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to describe the process of creating an Invitational Learning environment in two middle school special education classes comprised of students with mild to moderate disabilities. We focused our efforts on English Language Arts classes during the time that was devoted to writing. As the Invitational Learning environment began to emerge, we implemented a specific writing intervention, Cognitive Strategy Instruction in Writing (CSIW; Englert & Mariage, 1996), that focused on teacher-student and peer dialogue to enhance engagement with writing. Throughout the process we conducted classroom observations to collect data on teacher-student dialogue. We used the four basic elements of invitational teaching – trust, respect, optimism, and intentionality as a framework (Purkey & Stanley, 1991). Teacher-student interactions were scored as inviting if the teacher exhibited trust, respect, optimism, and provided opportunities for student dialogue and participation. We then coded teacher student dialogue using the Intentionality/Invitation Quadrant (Purkey & Novak, 1996).

## Method

### Participants

Participants included one teacher and 16 students with mild/moderate disabilities from two middle level special education classrooms. Eight seventh grade students comprised one class, and eight eighth grade students comprised the other. The seventh grade class included five boys and three girls. We observed that two students frequently required verbal redirection and drew the teacher's attention away from instructional tasks. A few of the other students had bonded with each other and had expressed that they were friends, but there was not a sense of cohesion among class members in general. We did not observe the students engaging in academic conversations. In contrast, the four girls and four boys in the eighth grade class worked fairly well together. They had been together since the seventh grade and had bonded to some degree. We observed the eighth graders to engage socially; however, we did not observe them discussing academic content with each other.

### Measures

We created an observation coding document that combined two existing measures resulting in the Intentionality, Discourse, Engagement Analysis Scale (IDEAS, see Table 1). The first half of the IDEAS coding document was created

using Purkey and Novak's (1996) intentionality and invitation matrix (See Table 2).

As we observed the participating teacher and students, we coded various situations/conversations to document the degree to which the classroom environment reflected the four levels of functioning in an Invitational Learning framework. Purkey and Novak (1996) described classroom situations as intentionally disinviting (+, -, Level 1) when teachers or class members purposefully shut down, or deliberately discouraged conversation thus making students feel incapable, worthless, and irresponsible (Ellis, 1990; Smith, n. d.). The second type of situation was characterized as unintentionally disinviting (-, -, Level 2) where teachers or students made insensitive comments or unintentional slights (Purkey & Novak, 1996). Teachers and students in these situations may be unaware of another's feelings, and thus send inadvertent discouraging messages through interrupting, over-generalization, or condescending language (Ellis, 1990; Smith, n. d.). The third type of situation was characterized as unintentionally inviting (-, +, Level 3) in which the classroom is inviting but the teacher does not know why (Purkey & Novak, 1996). Students in these classes often have inconsistent patterns of behavior and teachers have difficulty sustaining the invitational environment because they do not know the source of their successes and failures (Ellis, 1990; Smith, n.d.). The last type of situation, intentionally inviting (+, + Level 4), was described as teachers (and students) exhibiting inviting language that is purposeful and consistent. There is purposeful effort made to explicitly invite or include discussion and participation by members and the environment espouses respect and trust (Ellis, 1990; Smith, n.d.). The four levels of professional functioning are described as a ladder that progresses from a devaluing *presence* at levels one and two, to a *beneficial presence* at levels three and four (Purkey & Novak, 2008).

The second part of the IDEAS coding document was adapted from the Interaction and Language Analysis Scale (ILAS, Ornelles, 2007). Aspects of the ILAS allowed us to indicate whether the teacher-student interactions were social, task-related, or topic related. Topic-related language was further broken down into whether the interaction stemmed from the teacher making a statement or asking a question that invited interaction from students. See Table 1 for an example of the data collection sheet.

**Interobserver reliability.** Coding and definitions for the measure were based on examples provided by Purkey and Stanley (1991) for the four levels of intentionality. The definitions provided in Table 2 were printed and attached to the IDEAS coding document.

**Table 1.** IDEAS Classroom Observation Coding Instrument

		Intentionality/Invitation Quadrant				Social talk	Task/Organization talk	Topic-related Discourse	
Time & Interval	Who Teacher, group, Teacher - student	1. Intentionally disinviting	2. Unintentionally disinviting	3. Unintentionally inviting	4. intentionally inviting			Statement Declarative, instructive	Question Solicit response, inviting response
1									
2									
3									
24									
25									

**Table 2.** Intentionality/Invitation Quadrant (Purkey & Novak, 1984)

	Invitation positive	Invitation negative
Intentionality positive	<b>Level 4</b> <b>Intentionally inviting</b> = Language that is purposeful and consistent. The class is characterized by the use of inclusive pronouns such as <i>us</i> and <i>we</i> . The atmosphere including the physical environment is motivational and invitational. The teacher reads body language, knows and connects with the students. At this level the <i>plus factor</i> is present. The teaching looks like a well-orchestrated performance.	<b>Level 1</b> <b>Intentionally disinviting</b> = Purposefully shutting down conversation. Conversation that is meant to demean, dissuade, discourage, and defeat. Verbal messages that imply the other person is unworthy, incapable, irresponsible; unpleasant and deliberately discriminatory language.
Intentionality negative	<b>Level 3</b> <b>Unintentionally inviting</b> = Inviting language that isn't purposeful. This kind of environment just happens. The teacher serendipitously stumbles into ways that encourage interaction. <i>Natural teachers</i> fall into this category; friendly and charismatic individuals. They don't know WHY they are doing what they are doing. This approach lacks consistency and dependability.	<b>Level 2</b> <b>Unintentionally disinviting</b> = Insensitive language with unintentional slights about disability, gender, or ethnicity. This category includes language that is condescending or has a paternalistic tone; thoughtless language, offhanded comments or sarcasm. Body language that indicates the teacher does not want to be in the situation (e.g., looking at the clock, waiting for the bell to ring). While not intentional, a disinviting message is sent.

We gathered data concurrently using a frequency count during two-minute timed intervals. Specifically, each observer recorded a tally mark each time the teacher made a statement or posed a question. Interactions were documented and coded as inviting or disinviting, and as intentional or unintentional. After the first day of observation, we compared our scores to determine reliability. There were some slight differences in how we scored some of the interactions. Although our scores were in agreement as to whether an interaction was inviting or disinviting; our scores varied slightly in recording whether an interaction was intentional or unintentional. We then discussed how we coded events and dialogue in the classroom and reviewed our definitions on what constituted an inviting or disinviting interaction. During the second observation session, our scores were closer together, as we had refined our understanding of definitions of the types of interactions that were being observed. Our scores remained close together in subsequent data collection sessions. Whenever both observers were present, an average of our two scores was recorded.

### **Procedures**

After obtaining consent from the university's Institutional Review Board and the State Department of Education, the principal and teacher of a particular middle school were contacted. Both agreed to the study and parent consent and student assent forms were distributed. Upon return of the signed consent forms baseline observations began.

#### **Baseline**

Both researchers observed two class periods for each of the two grade levels during the baseline condition. The baseline data (reported in the Results section) reflects the average of our scores for each of the observation sessions. Baseline data indicated lower levels of intentionally inviting statements as compared to intentionally and unintentionally disinviting statements. From these data, we determined that we should start the training and subsequent intervention phases.

#### **Training**

We gave the teacher the book *Invitational Teaching and Learning* (Purkey & Stanley, 1991) and asked her to read the first three chapters, which presented the foundations of Invitational Teaching and the Four Levels of Functioning, which correspond with the Invitation/Intentionality Quadrant. Additionally, part of the training phase involved the classroom teacher observing two class sessions taught modeled by the second author of the present study. The Cognitive Strategy Instruction in Writing (CSIW) intervention was introduced along with invitational methods

such as asking for student input, giving choices, expressing confidence in the students, and expressing optimism.

Three key features modeled by the second author included (a) Trust: Using questioning techniques to solicit student responding; (b) Respect: Structuring assignments to facilitate students' engagement with each other—emphasis was on respecting students' ideas and valuing peer support; and (c) Optimism: Encouraging and validating students' contributions. The first feature, trust, involved encouraging students to trust and take risks in responding. Part of establishing a trusting environment was being receptive to students' ideas by withholding judgment or critique. For example, during initial phases of writing, students generated a number of ideas. Some of the topics were viable while others were not ideal for the writing assignment; however, all topics were recognized and their potential discussed. Discussing and evaluating the potential topics led the students to making stronger decisions as authors. During the training session, the second author modeled a trusting environment through use of questioning techniques to solicit responses from students who may not typically contribute. The example statements in Table 3 illustrate how drawing upon the 'culture of adolescents' was used to engage the students in the writing assignment. Students were encouraged to write about topics with which they had direct experience. Additionally, the second author validated a student's contribution of sending text messages as a form of writing. We discussed with the teacher the value of recognizing and valuing students' ideas because we believed this approach would encourage students to be more willing to take academic risks and volunteer responses.

The second feature, respect, is essential in establishing an Invitational Learning context. Respect was supported through statements, actions, and the way in which activities were structured. As shown in the example in Table 3, the second author incorporated guidelines for peer feedback. Students were encouraged to find ways to contribute ideas that added to the existing piece of writing versus critiquing what was deficient or lacking in their partner's writing. Building respect was modeled and discussed as a method for establishing positive working relationships in which students felt validated for their work as well as supported by their teacher and peers in further developing their ideas.

Lastly, optimism was modeled in a number of ways. The examples provided by the second author included specific verbal feedback to students that recognized behaviors that contributed to the task as well as to the group process. One goal was to seamlessly and meaningfully integrate all three aspects in instruction to intentionally promote an environment that invites participation by learners.

**Table 3.** *Aspect of Invitational Learning Modeled During Training*

Descriptor	Modeled	Example Statements
Trust:	Using questioning techniques to solicit student responding	How many of you have played a sport? An instrument? A video game? When you play a sport, you need to practice skills.... Writing is very similar. Have you ever heard of this? <i>"You only have to write every day that you eat."</i> S: I didn't write yesterday. Does texting count? I was just getting to that! Yes, texting is writing.
Respect	Structuring an assignment to facilitate students' engagement with each other—emphasis is on respecting others' ideas and the valuing peer support	The idea when you work with a partner is that you're giving to your partner...adding to...you're not correcting...You're <b>giving</b> something to your partner. Write it [ideas] right on their paper. Write at least two things that would add to their paper. The idea is to "add to"—"help your neighbor."
Optimism	Encouraging and validating students' contributions	You're going to write about music...How to make music...fantastic. Those are great suggestions! Way to go! I liked the way you helped your friends.

The first author of this study took anecdotal notes during these sessions to provide examples of specific invitational dialogue and activities. The classroom teacher also observed and took notes during these sessions. Following two training sessions, the teacher expressed that she felt confident to implement invitational strategies.

### Intervention

Following the training period, we collected data again on the type of teacher-student interactions in the classroom. Six class periods were observed for the seventh grade group and five class periods for the eighth grade group across a six-week time period. At least one of the authors debriefed with the teacher following each session. After three intervention sessions, the teacher was concerned that the seventh grade students were still not talking with each other about academic work. Therefore, she devoted two class sessions to bonding activities based on the TRIBES philosophy and framework (Gibbs, 2001). The first activity was a Newspaper Scavenger Hunt. Students were purposely assigned to groups comprised of three individuals. Each group had different objects to find. Cooperation within and between groups was needed for any team to be able to find all of their objects. The second activity involved the newly-formed groups generating a team name, which the teacher stated she would use when referring to each team.

Students were initially asked to have a member of the team draw anything on a piece of paper with a marker for 30 seconds. After 30 seconds, the marker and paper were passed to the next member and that individual continued the drawing from the point where the first team member had ended. After all members had the opportunity to draw, they were directed to examine their final piece and generate a team name based on their illustration. Students were engaged, focused, and willing to discuss and come to mutual agreement on their team name.

### Analysis

We compared our quantitative data and qualitative observation notes after the first and second baseline sessions. We combined and averaged our scores for the type of interaction that took place in each two-minute interval. A percentage was then calculated. During intervention, we followed the same procedure. If only one observer was present, the score was tallied and percent was calculated. If both observers were present, we counted tallies, calculated a percentage and used the average of the two scores. Scores were very close with fewer than 5% of the intervals being scored differently. Each week we discussed what we had observed with the teacher. The quantitative and qualitative field notes are summarized and presented in the next section.

## Results

### Baseline

The teacher was an expert in classroom management. She was considered an effective teacher who kept her students “in line,” and kept disruption to a minimum. However, there were not many opportunities for the students to contribute and to interact with each other. In general, questions and comments from students were not solicited. At times, the teacher would ask and answer her own questions. For example, in one baseline session she stated, “And where does the opinion go?”

Yes, at the beginning.” She did not wait for, or invite students’ responses. Another example was when the teacher stated, “Does this look hard to do? No, it’s just one paragraph. . . . Clearly you can add more.” These types of statements were coded as unintentionally disinving. The teacher did not seem to intentionally curtail student responses. However, her tone and word choice seemed to restrict rather than encourage student discussion or debate. Figures 1 through 4 display baseline data indicating that in both the seventh and eighth grade classrooms, approximately 50% of the two-minute intervals had unintentionally disinving dialogue, and only 25% of the intervals were coded as intentionally inviting.

### Intervention

There were noticeable changes between the baseline and intervention phases of the study.

Following the training sessions, the teacher’s tone of voice and instances of asking for student participation were markedly different. Unintentionally disinving (Level 2) statements dropped from an average of 55% in baseline to an average of 14% (8<sup>th</sup> grade) and 17% (7<sup>th</sup> grade) in the intervention phase. At the same time, intentionally inviting (Level 4) dialogue increased from an average of 21% during baseline for both classes to 68% (7<sup>th</sup> grade) and 52% (8<sup>th</sup> grade) during intervention. Figures 1 through 4 provide a visual display of these data.

One change from baseline to the intervention phase was that prior to training, the teacher *stopped* students were engaging in off-topic conversations. During intervention she *redirected* students’ comments to encourage conversation. For example, on one occasion the teacher asked students to write something their partner did well. One student started a story that was only remotely related to the topic. Instead of closing down the conversation, the teacher smiled, laughed and said, “That’s a crazy, crazy story. Thanks for sharing.” Afterwards this student and her partner worked together well and examined each other’s writing.

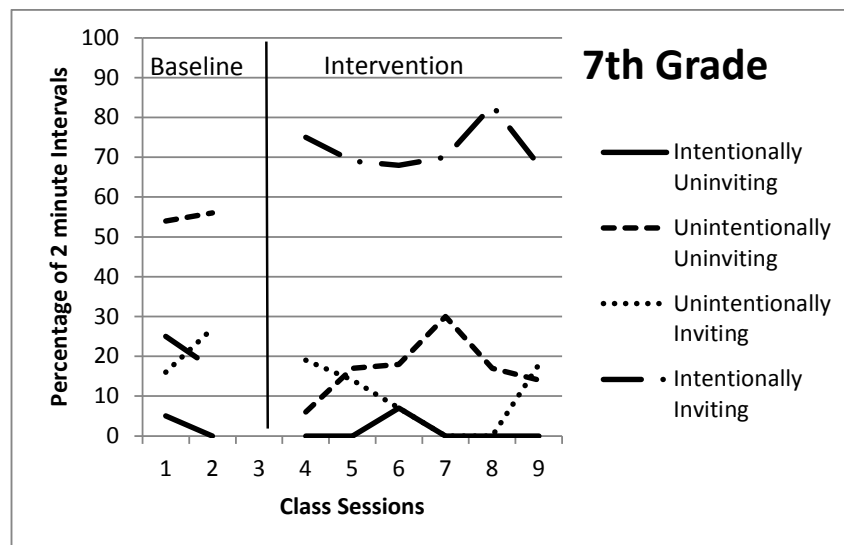
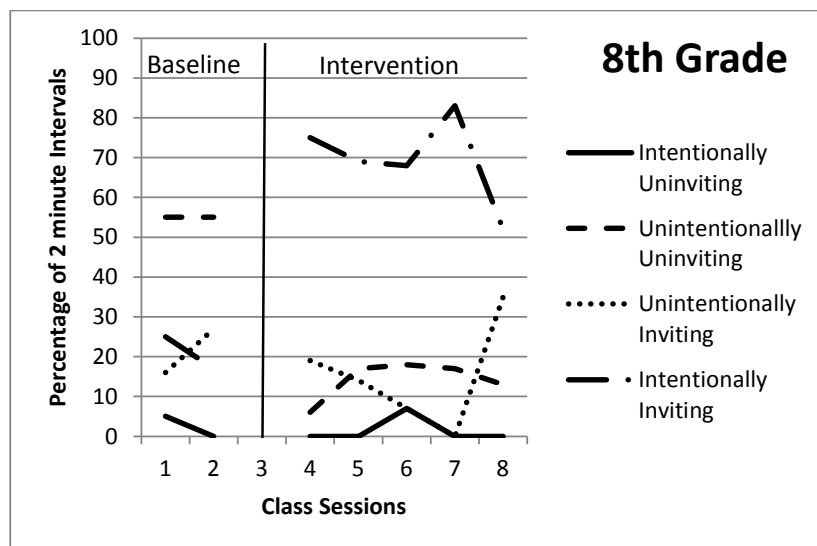


Figure 1. Percentage of Intervals in the Four Levels of Intentionality, 7th Grade



**Figure 2.** First and Last Session Comparisons for the Seventh Grade Class



**Figure 3.** Percentage of Intervals in the Four Levels of Intentionality, 8th Grade



**Figure 4.** First and Last Session Comparisons for the Eighth Grade Class

The teacher also asked questions that solicited student dialogue. On several occasions we observed the teacher working with individual students engaging them with questions. She stated, "How does this support that?" "Who are you trying to persuade?" "I have a question. Why would it be a good idea to...?" "Think about your audience. Are they decision-makers?" The difference between the questions asked in baseline and during intervention involved not only wait time, but also a sincere request for student input.

Table 4 provides an overview of the changes observed in dialogue regarding the three critical aspects of trust, respect, and optimism during baseline and intervention phases. To note, there was evidence (e.g., increase in questions posed by the classroom teacher) that the classroom teacher was framing questions in more open-ended ways and this resulted in more sustained interactions between the teacher and the students. Descriptive data were organized to reflect the three aspects that characterize intentionally inviting environments.

Narrative examples of changes in the teacher-student interactions during the intervention phase reflected three additional themes: (a) increased opportunities for students to share and reflect upon their ideas, (b) opportunities for students to use reasoning skills to support their point of view, and (c) support for students' independence. All three aspects contributed to establishing a learning environment that invited students to engage in thinking and interactions with the teacher as well as with peers.

### **Sharing and reflection**

The teacher structured situations to encourage students to share their ideas. She had students read others' written drafts and then posed questions to encourage reflection. For example, when students were working on persuasive essays regarding tap water versus bottled water, the teacher asked, "What is it that you have heard that you don't have in your own paragraphs?" "Why is it [tap water] not like bottled water?" Students were also observed to discuss and reflect upon related ideas, such as whether seeds would grow better with tap or bottled water. One student commented that she had seen tadpoles in her pool at home. Another student commented that tap water comes from open sources and that tap water may be possibly contaminated.

### **Reasoning and logic to support point of view**

To engage students in thinking about their point of view, the teacher posed a question and presented a student with a hypothetical situation upon which to reflect: "What else could you use as support? Think about this: Estimate how many people are in an average family. How many people/families go to the beach? What if four members of each family drank a bottle of water each? How many bottles

would be emptied? Trashed?" The student with whom the teacher was conversing seemed genuinely amazed at implications of using disposable bottles. This teacher-student conversation further explored how sea creatures could be affected. The teacher stated, "If plastic bottles end up in the ocean..." The student replied, "Bigger fish will think its food and choke on it." Presenting students with situations provided them with potential consequences on which to reflect and build a stronger case.

### **Supporting independence and use of resources.**

Students were provided with opportunities to use peers as resources. Some peer partner combinations were productive with comments and questions posed that were constructive and purposeful to the writing task. However, other peers were not as productive. Some students needed direction in how to use language that supported their peers in different aspects of the writing process. The teacher modeled how the students could support their peers and worked with them in doing so. We also observed the classroom teacher encouraging a student to seek information from online sources. A student had posed a question: "Can this (milk carton) be recycled?" The teacher responded, "I don't know...Can you Google it?" The teacher encouraged students to use multiple sources of information to support their ideas in developing their written pieces. This type of response was quite different from the characteristic directive responses exhibited by the teacher during baseline.

### **Discussion**

The authors of the present study have observed that special education classes are often more directive and less participatory in nature. Students with disabilities are often in learning environments that involve passive seatwork with rote practice and worksheets (Rock, 2005). This characterized the two classes in this study during the baseline phase. However, during intervention, intentionally inviting dialogue increased in both classes while unintentionally disinventing statements decreased. This may have been a result of the classroom teacher being more consciously aware of her statements and actions, and how she structured class activities.

The teacher who participated in this study began using much more invitational language, especially when she worked individually with students. The change was not as dramatic with whole group instruction; her tone was more positive, but the content was still more directive rather than facilitative. We did observe, however, more social talk in the classroom. Prior to the intervention, baseline data revealed that many teacher-student interactions were unintentionally disinventing. The class could be characterized as teacher-led,



non-participatory, and directive. After the intervention, however, the classroom teacher was observed to ask students

questions more frequently and engage them in discussion on various topics. The data indicated there was a shift in the

**Table 4.** *Narrative Examples of Change in Dialogue from Baseline to Intervention*

	Trust	Respect	Optimism
<b>Baseline</b>	Questions posed that directly reflected the assignment: What is the writer's main opinion? What is the first reason? Second reason?	No formal opportunities for students to interact about academic content. Spontaneous discussion between students about uniforms in school. Teacher stopped the conversation.	General statements made (positive verbal reinforcement non-specific); For example, "Nice job." "Good."
<b>Intervention</b>	S: Can this [milk carton] be recycled? T: I don't know. Can you Google it? S: I found out that it can be recycled so that's one benefit. A group conversation about the pros and cons of schools providing an iPad for all kids. Trusted the kids to discuss and invited their comments. The process was to learn the difference between pros and cons.	What is it that you have heard [from peer partner] that you don't have in your paragraphs? Why is it [tap water] not like bottled water? "Refresh my memory. I know you do this frequently." "I bet you have strong feelings about one of these. Please choose a topic." "Wow, you are coming up with reasons I never even thought of."	Increased use of specific, positive statements conveying what student had down well; For example, "I like that you wrote about change and backed it up." "What would be a really good support?" "Yes, that would be a huge support." "Look at what you've accomplished in such a short time."

classroom that reflected a decrease in unintentionally disinviting interactions and an increase in intentionally inviting statements/interactions. The data and themes that emerged from this study support that the learning environment exemplified three key aspects of intentionally inviting environments: (a) trust, (b) respect, and (c) optimism.

Trust was promoted among students by encouraging them to engage in discussion. When trust is established students may feel more confident to share their personal questions and interests related to a topic. After the training session, the classroom teacher in this study provided students with more opportunities to reflect on material from different vantage points. She encouraged students to seek out information through online sources and examine sources of information (e.g., reading labels and critically reflecting on how products were advertised). The teacher also guided students to gather data to support their point of view. For example, she suggested that students collect data as evidence to substantiate their persuasive argument, in this case for chocolate milk versus white milk in school. The teacher

stated, "You brought in a carton (milk) to use. Our class decided to take a survey... You can take a sampling, not the whole school. That would be counted as part of your research." The classroom teacher encouraged the student to support her claim by gathering data through a survey. As students acquire the tools to support their thinking, they may feel more confident as learners. And as they acquire a sense of trust in their skills and abilities, they may be more willing to take academic risks.

Respect among individuals was facilitated by providing students with opportunities to interact with each other for the purposes of providing feedback on academic work. There were several instances when the classroom teacher encouraged interaction between students. She asked students who had completed an early draft to share their writing in pairs. She requested that students read others' writing and determine if points had been supported. Although there were opportunities, students did not provide critical analyses and feedback to their peer partners. This is an area that may need to be scaffolded to support students' dialogue about the content of their pieces. Students may need to be taught how

to help their peers (e.g., knowing what kinds of questions to ask that support their peers, using conversational skills to extend thinking on a topic).

Opportunities to encourage interaction that supports students' respect for each other may occur in planned or spontaneous ways. In one situation, a peer was listening in on a conversation between the classroom teacher and a student as the teacher was encouraging the student to generate evidence to support his point of view. The teacher was simulating a debate by taking the opposing perspective. The peer commented, "If you want an argument for chocolate milk, I can give you an argument." This interjection presented an opportunity to solicit an example of opposing viewpoint from a peer.

Optimism is directly affected by the way in which teachers provide feedback to students. Inviting environments welcome innovative thought and value different ways of approaching and solving problems. Recognizing specific behaviors provides students with feedback about choices and actions that are valuable. Although more general praise contributes to a positive environment, recognizing individual skills and abilities allows students to view themselves as both novice and expert and move between roles. This validates the unique strengths of students with disabilities who have experienced considerable difficulty in school situations.

In addition to supporting an environment conveying trust, respect, and optimism, the classroom teacher also initiated activities with the seventh grade class to promote their cohesiveness as a group. She recognized the students' need to develop relationships and had them engage in group process activities. It is important to recognize that more productive working partnerships are forged when individuals are not only familiar with each other but have established aspects of trust, respect, and optimism, all of which contribute to an environment that invites learning.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to the current study. The first of which is the voluntary nature of the study. The teacher wanted to participate and learn more effective ways of building classroom community. She was a veteran teacher who was not threatened by outsiders coming in. She had solid classroom management skills and knew the students well. She had a desire to improve her students' writing and agreed that encouraging dialogue may be a good first step in supporting her students' academic progress.

Second, our evaluations were subjective. We used definitions of the four levels of intentionality from the literature. But, our interpretations of whether the teacher was intentionally or unintentionally inviting were based on individual

judgment. It was easier to determine if an interaction was inviting or disinviting than it was to determine whether it was intentional or not. It was difficult to know what was going on in the teacher's mind. We gave her the benefit of the doubt in many situations. After training, we assumed that many of her more encouraging actions and words were intentional. But this could not be verified in each situation. In the future, we recommend that the teacher is asked specifically about his/her intentions in various interactions, as opposed to a more general debriefing as was done in the present study.

### **Directions for Future Research**

This study reports changes that were observed in the way one classroom teacher engaged and interacted with students in one seventh and one eighth grade special education class. Future research could examine creating invitational environments with more teachers in more classrooms and determining the effects on students' learning.

Future research may address how the dynamic of classroom interactions affects the learning experience of students with disabilities. It is important to determine if and how a more intentionally inviting environment affects student performance in areas such as math and language arts (reading, writing, oral expression). One premise is that inviting students' participation will support their academic engagement; thus, their performance may be bolstered. It would be important as a follow-up to this study to determine if an invitational approach has effects on individual student performance as well as on group performance.

Classroom environments that invite learning have the potential to support students' active engagement and critical thinking. The data reported in this study represents the first stage in a larger research project. Our next steps include analyzing student conversation more thoroughly. At the conclusion of our current analysis, most of the students were not yet discussing qualities of writing, or providing helpful feedback to their peers. Therefore, we intend to work with small groups of students modeling and facilitating conversations to support their thought processes. We would like to expand on the idea of creating inviting special education classrooms and to determine how instructional conversations can support student writing.

In addition, students themselves are a highly underutilized resource in the classroom. As teachers use invitational strategies to elicit student responses, future researchers may analyze students' use of invitational strategies. One specific area that could be explored is the nature and quality of student interactions over time and how those interactions affect student learning.

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