

A Qualitative study of social dynamics in an inclusive preschool

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Headnote

Abstract. This qualitative pilot study explored social dynamics within a typical preschool classroom that included Ryan, a 3-year-old with severe visual impairments. Observational and interview data were collected in an effort to provide a full and rich portrait of events, experiences, and perceptions. The following themes emerged, which provide new insight about the social dynamics of one early childhood inclusive setting: 1) social encounters, 2) initiations and terminations, 3) communication breakdown, 4) conflicts and negotiation, and 5) social acceptance. The findings indicated that Ryan was an active participant in shared social experiences with his peers, which contributed to his membership and acceptance. Adult mediation and interpretation of the environment are discussed and future areas for research are offered.

Peer encounters are generally one of the first meaningful social interactions a young child experiences outside of his or her family. In

the 1930s, socialization skills and peer relationships received a great deal of attention from researchers, but these topics were of little interest again until the 1970s and 1980s. Rubin (1980) suggested that one reason behind this long period of neglect was the intense concentration on mother-child dyads, which, during that time, was regarded as the primary factor in early childhood growth and development. Rubin maintained that the impact of peer relationships had been rediscovered because of increased opportunities for children under school age to interact with one another in such settings as child care, preschools, and play groups.

As do family members, peers play a critical role in the growth and development of young children. Friendships and other types of interactions with peers are uniquely different from any other type of interpersonal relationships, because children are able to interact and negotiate with equal partners. As such, there has been growing interest in understanding the formation and maintenance of children's friendships and social encounters (Asher & Coie, 1990; Howes, 1983; Odom, McConnell, & McEvoy, 1992; Ramsey, 1991; Richardson & Schwartz, 1998; Rubin & Ross, 1982). Ladd, Price, and Hart (1990), however, noted that little effort has been made to gather information about content- and context-oriented social networks among young peer groups. While the notion of learning about children's peer networks and friendships within natural environments (e.g., home, child care, play groups, preschool) has gained much attention over the past decade, there still remains a need to understand these encounters within a framework that considers both the substance and context of social interactions.

Corsaro (1979; 1985) suggested that one of the most meaningful ways to understand children's interactions and relationships is by examining the peer culture of young children. Peer culture, according to Corsaro (1985), is children's systematic and continual attempts to understand and develop their own social order that was first presented to them by adults. In other words, children create their own culture by establishing a group identity based on their understanding and translation of the adult world. Membership within a peer group can play an essential role in the socialization process, because it provides young children with natural opportunities to connect to a larger social network of their peers. Kantor, Elgas, and Fernie (1993) suggested that children must understand fully what is valued by the group in order to successfully become an integral member of the peer culture.

Although being a member of a peer culture can be one of the most significant experiences in a young child's life, there is a surprising paucity of research on peer culture and membership in typical early childhood settings that include children with disabilities. Even less is known about the inclusion of young children who attend community-based early childhood settings and who are considered to have low-prevalence disabilities (e.g., visual or hearing impairment, severe intellectual disabilities, autism), because of limited accessibility and availability of such programs (Buysse, Bailey, Smith, & Simeonsson, 1994; Wolery, et al., 1993). Experiencing a severe disability or sensory impairment can have a significant impact on a child's social competence and experiences.

Given the growing interest in inclusive early care and education, it was a logical first step to explore social encounters in a typical community-based preschool. The purpose of this pilot investigation was to begin examining the social interactions between peers in an early childhood classroom that included a young child who had a severe visual impairment and medical challenges. The study was carried out over the course of one school year and within a variety of natural school environments (i.e., classroom, playground, music room) within a general education elementary school. Generally, social interactions between peers were most predominant in the play situations.

Method

This pilot study, which was part of a larger study (see Erwin, 1996), was designed to examine the socialization experiences within a typical preschool class that included Ryan, a 3-year-old with disabilities. Qualitative methods (i.e., participant observations and semi-structured personal interviews) were used to gather data for this investigation, in an effort to provide a rich portrait of events, experiences, and perspectives. Data were gathered across daily classroom routines and natural settings within the school such as the music room, playground, hallways, and classroom. Study Participants and Setting

This investigation was conducted in a preschool class within a community-based private school. The school, which enrolled 125 students and ranged in grades from preschool through grade 5, was located in a middle class suburban community approximately 60 miles from New York City. Although children attending the school were mostly Caucasian and from middle class backgrounds, there was a small but growing population of children of color.

Program goals were clearly listed in the school's brochure and served as the philosophical foundation for their education practices. The overall program goals were to 1) provide a stimulating and creative hands-on program with innovative learning techniques; 2) create a safe, happy learning environment; 3) educate the whole child, emotionally, academically, physically, and socially; and 4) teach respect for humanity and the importance of community service.

Classes can be described as mixed aged and heterogeneously grouped. There were no self-contained special education classes; children with disabilities were fully included in age-appropriate classrooms. Related services and supports were generally provided within the classrooms by therapists who were contracted by the public school system.

Ryan was among 13 normally developing youngsters enrolled in one of the preschool classes. This was the first school experience for Ryan and his classmates. Each preschool class consisted of approximately 13 to 16 three- and four-year-olds, one early childhood teacher, and at least one teacher assistant. Preschool classes operated on a half-day schedule, and parents were able to choose whether they wanted their child enrolled for part or all of the week. Ryan attended the preschool three mornings a week, with the same peers each day. The class followed a typical preschool routine that consisted of group music time with all the preschool classes, circle time, center time, outdoor play, snack, free play, and dismissal. These activities were child-centered and allowed for children to make their own choices and decisions when appropriate. The climate was cheerful, productive, and organized.

Ryan lives in the same community where the school is located. He lives with his mother, a full-time homemaker; his father, an attorney; and his younger sister, who was a normally developing child. At the beginning of the school year, Ryan was 3 years old. He was selected for participation in the present study because he attended a community-based preschool, had an identified disability that was low prevalence in nature, and his parents were interested in participating in this investigation. Ryan was identified as having a severe visual impairment; he has detached retinas in both eyes with no light perception in his right eye and a visual acuity of 20/600 in his left eye. Although there were no cognitive impairments, Ryan has had numerous medical complications since birth (e.g., kidney disease; failure to thrive, which led to a severe eating disorder). At the time of this investigation, Ryan received vision services and occupational therapy after school. His therapists and classroom staff consulted with

one another on a regular basis to address Ryan's individual needs and to monitor his progress and program.

Data Collection

Because the intent of this investigation was to capture a contextually relevant picture of the social climate between peers, qualitative methods were selected. Two methods of data collection were used: participant observation and semi-structured personal interviews. Qualitative research, which enables the researcher to describe events and perceptions in natural environments and from the study participants' points of view, provides a unique understanding of how participants make sense of certain experiences in their lives (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Participant observations began in September and were carried out approximately one time per month across various days of the week until the end of the school year in June. No observation was conducted in January, because Ryan had surgery and remained out of school for several weeks. Participant observations were conducted by the investigator and began when the children arrived; they lasted the full half-day session (i.e., approximately three hours). The researcher gathered data via detailed field notes for each observation including when the class moved to various locations outside of the classroom (e.g., music room, playground).

The role of the researcher in qualitative research can best be described as observing what the study participants do, and as taking part in their activities (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The investigator's participation can be characterized as moderate to active in the present study. Initially, the researcher's role was primarily that of an observer, but children frequently and consistently initiated interactions by asking questions like, "Whose mother are you?" or "Can you play with me?" As the researcher's role shifted to more of an active participant in classroom activities (e.g., holding hands on walks outside, assuming roles during play scenarios), detailed field notes were written during the visit when possible and immediately after each observation, in order to capture a contextually rich and accurate portrayal of events and perspectives.

The other method of data collection was semi-structured personal interviews. Taylor and Bogdan (1984) suggest that in addition to participant observations, other methods of data should be gathered to gain a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the events, people, and environments being investigated. During April and May,

the investigator held four separate personal interviews with the classroom teacher, the teacher assistant, Ryan's mother, and his father. The interviews with the classroom staff took place at school at a convenient time when staff members were not immediately pressured by teaching responsibilities; the interviews with the parents were conducted at their home. Each interview, which generally lasted one hour, was carried out privately and on separate days.

At the beginning of each interview there was a brief introduction in which the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and consent for the interview to be tape recorded were discussed. Each participant granted permission to be audiotaped; tapes were later transcribed by a qualified professional to obtain a full and accurate account of each interview. There was a set of guiding, open-ended questions to facilitate the exchanges and to maintain consistency and flexibility across interviews. Examples of these questions were, "How would you describe Ryan's participation in the class?" and "How would you characterize Ryan's school experience?" Participants were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences and perceptions.

Data Analysis

Observational and interview data were arranged initially according to the same coding categories. Because data analysis in qualitative research is an ongoing process, field notes and interview data were continually examined by the authors of this article. After careful and systematic review of the field notes and interviews, data were arranged and coded based on predetermined categories including "relationships and social structure," "events and activities," and "strategies and methods" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Data then were coded further as specific themes emerged.

Because this was an ongoing process, themes sometimes needed to be simplified, expanded or merged with other themes. Some of the themes that emerged were "conflict resolution and negotiation," "how children interact," and "membership and acceptance." Themes were not predetermined by the investigator, but rather they evolved as the data were analyzed. Because the intent of this investigation was to gain as broad and detailed a perspective as possible, combining of both data sources, also referred to as triangulation, occurred. This process involved examining both observational and interview data for similar themes or emerging questions.

Member checks were obtained to verify the accuracy of the data. Phone conferences were held and a copy of this article was sent to the director of the school, as well as to the four study participants who were interviewed. Unanimous support and approval were received regarding the substance and intent of the article.

Findings

The following section presents findings from the data gathered through observational and interview data. Specific themes will be discussed within each area.

The Nature of Peer Interactions

It was first useful to examine how peer interactions were established and maintained. An interaction was defined in this study as any intentional verbal or nonverbal behavior which engaged two or more peers in conversation, activity, or encounter.

Although there were numerous opportunities throughout the day for children to interact with one another, children did not always seek out another peer and often were engaged in solitary or parallel play. When interactions did occur spontaneously between classmates, they were relatively short (i.e., a couple of seconds or minutes), simple, and involved little or no verbal communication.

Laurel and Reggie are at the table examining the play dough with magnifying glasses. They giggle as they look at each other through the glasses. This is momentary. Reggie just leaves to go into the house area. Ronald and Christian read a book together on the floor. Both boys face each other and turn a picture book that is between them. They label the pictures in the book and giggle. They talk in bursts of 1-2 words (i.e., cat, whiskers) as they take turns turning the pages. They do not go in order, but read together for approximately 3 minutes.

It appeared that children interacted with each other in a variety of ways. Similarly, interactions between Ryan and his classmates resembled interactions between sighted peers. For instance, the interactions were also short, and simple phrases or physical contact seemed to be the preferred mode of communication.

The children are waiting for music class to begin. The teacher

assistant, Kima, who had Ryan seated on her lap, tells Ryan she will be right back. He sits on the rug and Amanda scoots closer and looks at Ryan, although she does not say anything. Amanda moves her fingers lightly and playfully over Ryan's leg. Another little girl, Melissa, moves closer to him and says, "Hi, Ryan." He responds, "Hi." When Kima returns, she lets Ryan know that she is back. Mma lifts him onto her lap, and Amanda inches closer and also tries to sit on Kima's lap. In between songs, Melissa and Amanda tickle Ryan. They move their hands as if to the song "Eensy, weensy spider." Ryan smiles.

Laurel comes over. Kima says, unobtrusively, "Laurel likes your tall car, Ryan." Laurel wheels it back and forth. Ryan touches it and pushes it towards her playfully. Laurel continues to wheel it back and forth and they engage in a brief, whispered verbal exchange. Ryan says, "What'd ya say?" but Laurel continues speaking in a low voice. Ryan reaches out and hugs her with both hands, and she reciprocates by putting one arm around him.

There were also classroom rituals or routines that children repeated day after day. For example, the "Burger King drivethrough routine" was a class favorite. Ryan and Bill are playing the Burger King game at the plastic playhouse. Ryan gives Bill money and says, "Can I have some service, please?" Bill gives him something in return. There's not a lot of verbal interaction, but it appears they've done this before and are really enjoying themselves. Bill and Ryan giggle. It almost seems that Ryan is the organizer of the play scheme, which just consists of Ryan banging on the window and Bill opening it.

This routine occurred almost every day on the playground; often, different peers would play and repeat a similar scenario (i.e., placing an order at Burger King and exchanging money or food).

Ryan, like most of the children in his class, did not have any previous encounters with classmates prior to this school experience. Kima, the teacher assistant, suggested he tended to interact more with the girls than boys in his class because

the girls are more physical. They are not afraid to be physical and he is very physical with them. He goes right up to them and touches them. The boys tend to shy away, but the girls don't. Ryan tended to have more interactions with girls, perhaps because the girls were more gentle in their play and because they tended to stay in one place as opposed to often moving around like many of the boys did.

The data indicated that when children in this investigation did interact with playmates, regardless of whether one of the playmates was sighted or visually impaired, the social interactions were short, simple, and often nonverbal.

Peer Initiations and Terminations Because of his limited vision, Ryan did not have immediate information about his surroundings, so he needed an alternative way to gather contextual information that his sighted peers acquired naturally through vision. An adult often provided key information to assist Ryan in understanding his immediate environment. This naturally had an impact on how social interactions were initiated:

It is snack time and the children are seated around the two circle tables, depending on where the assistant, Dan, put their placemats. Ryan asks Dan, "Who is sitting here?," and Dan tells him all the children who are present at the table.

It is outside play and Ryan is knocking on the shutter of the play house. He continues knocking for several minutes and repeats, "Hello, is anyone home?" Randi is in the house watching him through the window but does not respond verbally. Melissa comes over and stands closely to him but does not say anything. Ryan keeps knocking and then feels Randi's shirt. He continues saying "hello" but neither Randi or Melissa respond. Kima then comes over and asks, "Who do you think that is? Who is in the house but is usually very quiet?" Ryan correctly guesses that it is Randi.

Ryan's father expressed some concern about Ryan's ability to initiate social encounters with sighted peers because

Ryan does not know how to physically respect other people's space, and he will have to learn that. Right now he comes very close to other children and I think that scares them a little bit, because kids at that age are used to other kids coming close to them only to take away their toys. I guess they hug once in a while, too.

Kima, the teacher assistant, remarked that the class has learned over time to understand that social interactions are initiated in unique ways with Ryan.

Then, eventually, the children came to understand that he was putting his face right into theirs because he needed to. And I would say to

Ryan, "This is so and so." And now, I would say 80% of the children will say their own name if Ryan does not know who it is. They will just tell him. Kima also noted that Ryan "loves children and always wants to know what is going on," so he does respond to peers when they call him by name.

The limited access to immediate and full information about the environment not only had an impact on how Ryan initiated an encounter with a peer, but also on how social interactions ended. Because of Ryan's limited vision, the opportunity to move about as freely as sighted classmates was significantly restricted. Ryan, who did not usually terminate an interaction with a playmate, tended to remain stationary at an activity. Whether playing with sighted peers or with Ryan, classmates usually left a play area without any warning or notice that they were finished. Both Ryan and his sighted peers tended not to use a formal termination signal or withdrawal when ending an interaction.

Ryan seems content under the slide. He crawls through the door and opens and closes it. As Ryan sits on the floor, Melissa, who is smiling, crawls in back of him and taps him. Ryan swipes gently, but she persists and taps him and whispers in his ear. By the time Ryan turns around, she is up and off to the next activity.

It is outside play time and Randi and Ryan play a game in which Ryan knocks and Randi opens the playhouse door. Randi abruptly runs off and Bill, a third child, goes into the house. He tells Ryan "come in," but when Ryan doesn't do so, Bill comes out of the house to tell Ryan to come in. Ryan walks around to the front door to enter, but then Bill runs off. Ryan seems content to keep knocking.

Ryan had limited knowledge during social encounters about who was present, what the nearby environment was like, or when a peer left the immediate play area. Ryan's "typical" peers tended to move about freely and quickly, and often left the play area without warning or closure. It seems that children were more likely to formally join or initiate a social interaction, and less likely to bring closure to an interaction,

Communication Breakdown

Communication breakdown, within the context of this study, was characterized as messages that were not received as they were

originally intended; it also meant the interference of a communication attempt. Ryan, as well as his classmates, often tolerated communication breakdown when attempting to interact with another child. Efforts to repair the breakdown were sometimes initiated, but not always successful in creating a peer interaction.

Ryan, who now is under the slide, swings the door open and shut. Reggie says, "Ryan, I'm going up," but Ryan does not respond. (Reggie is not sure that Ryan heard him.) Reggie climbs up and says, "Ryan, look at me. I'm up." No response from Ryan. Reggie calls again, but Ryan is occupied. Reggie goes down the slide and calls out to an adult nearby to watch and she does. Reggie goes back up the slide and calls out, "Ryan, come up here." It does not appear that Ryan hears him. Reggie goes up and down the slide once more.

Bill and Ryan begin putting blocks together. They seem to be engaged in parallel play and doing their own thing. Bill sits on Kima's lap as he builds a tower and Ryan builds a car. Amanda, who is nearby, plays by herself with the farmhouse. "Let's get Amanda over here to play," says Ryan to Bill. Then Ryan calls out, "Amanda" twice, but she doesn't answer. He continues building anyway. Children are arriving. Ryan enters the class. Several children watch and they greet him. Ryan says, "Hi," and smiles as he enters. Clearly, he is happy to be here. Ryan talks about a bingo game he played at home and brought to school today. His mom listens at the doorway, smiling. There is a lot of laughter. Kevin comes closer and says "Ryan." Ryan leans towards him and says, "Yeah," but Kevin doesn't follow through.

Communication breakdown was also observed between sighted peers.

Kevin is on the slide and Christian is under it. Christian calls out, "Kevin, Kevin," but Kevin does not seem to hear. Christian keeps calling out "Kevin" and then tries to tap his hand to get his attention. No response. Kevin goes down the slide and Christian seems to move on to something else. Even when Kevin comes near him a moment later, Christian does not try to engage him.

Corey comes over to the toy clock, picks it up and says "I need this" to no one in particular. She then walks over to Melissa and says, "Can I play?" Melissa does not respond. "She not talk to me," says Corey to a nearby adult, who then responds, "Then talk more to her." "Why do you not talk to me?" asks Corey, but Melissa continues playing with the farmhouse and does not even look up. Corey does not seem to

mind and walks away.

The data supported the idea that not only does communication breakdown occur between Ryan and his classmates, but between sighted peers as well. Children will use several strategies in order to gain the attention of another playmate, but if their attempts prove unsuccessful, they eventually give up and either continue with the same activity or move on to another one.

Conflict Resolution and Negotiation

How children dealt with problems or conflicts that occurred during specific peer interactions was another theme to emerge from the data. Conflicts are a natural and frequent occurrence between young children, as they are a natural part of the adult's world. In this study, conflict resolution generally took place within the context of play episodes, and for the most part, the children in this preschool setting were able to deal with conflict without the need for adult intervention. Mma, the teaching assistant, suggested that while conflicts may occur frequently in the class, these issues were resolved quickly and forgotten by the children involved:

Conflicts happen a lot. We rarely let them go-- even if it means that we just sit where we are and say, "What could you do to stop that?" or "What could you have done differently?" Once you put an end to it, it is over and forgotten. That's what I love about this age--they never get angry with a person and then hold it. Within two seconds, it is forgotten and they are fine.

Typically, conflicts were resolved quickly and without resorting to physical and/or aggressive contact. Classmates did not seem to hold a grudge toward the peer involved in the conflict, and they often played with the same peer shortly after the conflict ended.

Randi has the hose to the gas pump and Melissa comes and picks it up. Randi grabs it out of her hand with no verbal interaction. Melissa just walks away.

Christian has loaded blocks onto a car and begins to drive. Bill comes over and reaches for one. Christian: "No, I'm taking dinosaur bones." Bill: "You taking dinosaur bones." He watches. The blocks fall down and Bill reaches for one. Christian: "Noooo." Bill leaves the immediate play area, picks up some Legos and begins to play.

Conflicts generally occurred when a child's toy or territory was being invaded or threatened. Conflicts that arose between Ryan and his peers were resolved in a manner similar to the resolution of conflicts between other classmates. Ryan reacted and responded in a way that is consistent with his sighted peers. Their protests did not result in physical violence, and the children continued playing with each other or moved on to other activities.

Ryan finds a baby carriage and Christian puts a baby doll in it. Ryan protests verbally, "No," and even tries to take it out. He succeeds and the children continue playing as if nothing happened.

It is play time and children are playing at various centers around the room. Ryan is building with Legos. Bill comes over and messes up Ryan's building and Ryan verbally lets him know he is not happy about this. Kima interjects, "Bill just wants to play," and Ryan responds, "I don't want him to break it." Just before play time Ryan had told Bill on the playground, "I don't like when you push me." They continue playing side by side.

Clean up time is called. Most of the children need direction about what to do. Ryan is still playing with a maze game, but Heidi comes over and wants to put it away. She pulls it and he pulls it back and says, "No." But Heidi pulls the game away from him. Ryan seems to adjust and does not seem sad or distressed that he no longer has the toy.

Ryan reacted and responded to conflicts in a way that was similar to his sighted peers. Kima, the teaching assistant, reported that

Ryan has his own conflicts. He hates it when he is playing on the piano, for example, and someone will come over and start playing the piano. He does not care who it is, he will just take their hand and move it out of the way because it is his turn. He is assertive. He lets them know that this is what he is doing right now.

It seemed that the nature of the conflicts that arose during the course of the school day were similar for Ryan and his sighted classmates. Conflicts were short in duration, did not always demand teacher intervention, and did not result in physical aggression.

Social Acceptance

Over the course of the year the children became more aware of Ryan's

uniqueness. They accepted him as just another member of the class the same way the teaching staff did. During parent-teacher conferences, the staff were highly complimentary of how Ryan had been nicely integrated into the class-and that was in October or November, when he had been in school just a few months.

I think Ryan feels accepted and has not indicated to us in any way that he feels different. And, as best as I can say, [the] reports back from the teachers are that he is also treated pretty much as all the other kids are.

I feel as though Ryan is a member of the group. The children know when he is not there and they ask for him. They know he is part of the class. If it really didn't make any difference, I don't think they would notice if he was here or not. But they notice if he is sick.

While Ryan may be viewed and treated as a valued member of the class, there may have been some apprehension from classmates at the beginning of the year. Once the school year progressed, these issues quickly disappeared. Kima remembered,

At the beginning, the children would not come very close to Ryan. They looked from afar. I don't think they knew that he had trouble seeing. His movements were a little different at times, and they would just watch him. Now they just accept everything he does-it's great!

Classmates eventually came to realize he was just another member of the group. Likewise, it appeared that Ryan enjoyed being part of this classroom network. He demonstrated great enthusiasm about school from the beginning. Ryan's mother noticed that he had a strong interest in school.

I don't know if any of the other kids feel this way, but from day one he just loved school. His teacher says that when he missed six weeks during the winter because of his surgery, he went back to school and it was as if he was never gone. Ryan didn't need any time to readjust. Ryan enjoyed being an integral part his preschool classroom. This sense of belonging may account for why Ryan had such a favorable attitude about school.

Discussion and Implications

This pilot study provided firsthand information about the social

dynamics in one typical preschool environment over the course of a school year. This investigation documented the experiences of one inclusive preschool class that may or may not be representative of other early childhood settings. It is unclear, for example, to what degree Ryan's type of disability had an influence on the social dynamics of the classroom. It did seem to have an impact on certain aspects of social encounters (e.g., his ability to initiate an interaction).

Several aspects of social dynamics (e.g., initiations, terminations, breakdown, conflict resolution) emerged in this early childhood setting. The social encounters among peers was a vital part of the classroom culture because it provided an inside view as to what is important and practiced among young children in this particular setting. As noted by Kantor, Elgas, and Fernie (1993), understanding what is valued is a critical part of becoming part of the peer culture. Children in the classroom studied participated in a variety of interactions, even though the encounters were generally simple and short. Ryan was treated as an integral member of the class, perhaps because he was able to participate in similar social encounters as the other children in class. Ryan participated in a way that was meaningful for him, but also in a way that was consistent with the social climate in the classroom. Ryan's active participation and obvious interest in school and his peers indicated that he perceived himself as a member of the classroom culture.

Adults were very intentional about translating Ryan's behavior so that the other children could understand him, and ultimately accept him as a member of the class. Social acceptance and membership, which are goals for any young child, are often viewed as a dominant goal for youngsters with disabilities because of the challenges they may experience, including those that may prevent or inhibit peer interactions from occurring naturally. The participation of children with disabilities in valued roles, activities, and settings has been considered an important, if not central factor, in inclusive environments (Billingsley, Gallucci, Peck, Schwartz, & Staub, 1996; Janko & Peck, 1996). In this study, Ryan's active participation in socially valued and shared dynamics within the classroom played an important role in how children ultimately accepted him.

An important aspect of membership within the classroom culture is the ability to interact with classmates. Before children can interact with one another without adult intervention or facilitation, they must be able to first enter into a social encounter. This step posed unique

challenges for Ryan, because before he could initiate a peer interaction, he needed to first obtain and interpret information about his immediate environment (i.e., who was present, what the immediate environment was like) without relying on visual information. Ryan, who gathered contextual information about his immediate environment through the use of questions, often directed them to an adult ("Is that Randi to my left?"). Perhaps Ryan did not rely on his peers for contextual information because he realized they were not as consistent as adults were. He may have been keenly aware that peer interactions ended abruptly and his initiations were not always acknowledged.

Not surprisingly, this ability to approach and enter activities with peers has captured more attention than any other social skill (Putallaz & Wasserman, 1990). Putallaz and Wasserman maintained that this skill is crucial because it serves as an initial step before the child can engage in a social encounter with another. While initiating or entering into peer interactions is an important skill for all young children to acquire, there are certain considerations that are unique to youngsters who are visually impaired. Erwin (1994) suggests that young children with visual impairments should be taught and encouraged to use a variety of strategies to initiate a social encounter as one way of increasing the likelihood of successfully entering and maintaining an interaction.

In addition to teaching children with visual impairments multiple strategies to gain access to existing or new peer interactions, it also would be reasonable to decrease children's level of tolerance for communication breakdown. Although both youngsters with and without visual impairments in this investigation experienced communication breakdown, Ryan was at greater risk because of his limited ability to move freely to another place or situation. By teaching Ryan to be less accepting and more persistent when his initiation attempt was not returned, he would be able to assume a more active and independent role in getting his needs addressed. Even though tolerance of communication breakdown might be typical for children at this age, perhaps practitioners need to explicitly teach both children with visual impairments (or other disabilities) and their sighted peers specific strategies to decrease the tolerance for unsuccessful peer initiation attempts or communication breakdown. This would be particularly helpful in building competence and confidence in those children who need consistent and immediate feedback. Teaching young children with visual impairments how to specifically initiate, maintain, and terminate interactions in a variety of social contexts can serve as

valuable, lifelong tools, since the fear of strangers is one of the most often-cited fears among children and adolescents with visual impairments (Wiemer & Kratochwill, 1991).

The presence of a skilled adult who can help mediate and interpret the environment for a child with a disability is vital. Although the need for adult mediation and interpretation may seem like an obvious type of support, the balance of providing responsive and nonintrusive support to a child with a disability can be a serious challenge. Unintentional problems resulting from well-meaning, but ineffective, adult support, can lead to children being overly dependent on adults, can interfere with children's naturally occurring peer interactions, and may keep children isolated and separated from classmates (Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997). In addition, adults may unwittingly misinterpret the child's signals, limit the child's range of choices and decisions, interfere with the child's autonomy, or not provide him or her an accurate representation of the environment.

In the present study, Kima, the teaching assistant, seemed to be an important part of the classroom community; she was not viewed solely as Ryan's aide. Kima was observed with children other than Ryan, whether it was mediating a conflict between peers or embracing children as they sat in her lap. She was also extremely responsive to what Ryan needed by following his request for assistance. This is crucial, because self-determination—the ability to exercise control over one's life—can be seriously limited for children with disabilities, particularly if a well-meaning but unknowledgeable person is providing unwanted assistance. The adults in this class were very methodical about interpreting the environment to Ryan as he needed it, as well as interpreting Ryan's unique needs to his peers so that they would better understand him. Adults were deliberate about creating membership and acceptance within their classroom community. The value of membership was the key intention behind interpreting and mediating the environment for Ryan and his classmates.

In summary, Ryan's participation in social dynamics was an important factor in his becoming a member of the classroom culture. The social dynamics that emerged in this study included brief and simple social encounters, peer initiations and terminations, communication breakdown, and conflict resolution. Ryan participated in social dynamics within classroom routines and rituals along with his sighted classmates. Even though, at times, he needed different support than his classmates did, Ryan was still considered a member of the class

and accepted by his peers. Some of these dynamics (e.g., communication breakdown) did not necessarily produce positive social outcomes; however, they all contributed to a shared vision within the classroom.

Future Directions

This investigation brings to light more questions than answers when examining social dynamics in an inclusive early childhood setting. The critical importance of adult mediation, interpretation, and support in creating successful experiences suggests that a logical topic for future research might include investigating the kinds of skills and knowledge practitioners need in order to provide competent and responsive support. In addition, it would be helpful to better understand how teachers could best promote both children's autonomy and selfdetermination in young children with disabilities.

As discussed earlier, the knowledge base on membership within inclusive early childhood settings is limited. Examining factors that contribute or hinder classroom membership, as well as documenting specific practices that promote belonging and acceptance, would be valuable. Another area of inquiry might include identifying why and how children are at risk for being rejected from the classroom culture. In light of all the attention on inclusive, diverse early childhood environments, these and other areas of inquiry can further the dialogue on how to create settings where diverse young learners accept and celebrate one another.

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