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Inclusion and Classroom Membership in Early Childhood

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ABSTRACT *Using qualitative methods, this study examined classroom membership in an early childhood setting which included a young boy with multiple disabilities. Participant observation and interview data were gathered over a 6 month period. Themes emerged and were arranged according to three primary categories: (a) Shared and Meaningful Experiences, (b) Quality of Interpersonal Interactions with Peers, and (c) Practices that Contribute to Building Community. Findings revealed that there were deliberate and ongoing efforts to create a strong sense of community within the classroom.*

Introduction

In early childhood, the inclusion of young children with disabilities in natural settings has been recognised as a preferred means of service delivery for young children with disabilities (Division for Early Childhood, National Association for the Education of Young Children & Association of Teacher Educators, 1994; Odom & McLean, 1996). As more young children attend a wide variety of community-based natural environments such as child care centres, preschools, kindergartens, and playgroups, the knowledge base of providers related to effective practices must also continue to expand.

As interest has grown in the education of young children with and without disabilities together, so has interest in the social aspect of this process. One of the reasons behind the increasing attention is the fundamental role that early peer encounters play in a young child's life. Guralnick (1994) suggested that the process of developing meaningful and constructive peer relationships "continues throughout the life cycle, but it is during the preschool years that peer relations and the beginnings of friendship become so central to young children's daily activities" (p. 45). Since children will encounter peers throughout their entire lives, a variety of positive and rewarding social experiences must be created during the early childhood years.

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The ability to make friends is perhaps one of the most meaningful skills a child can learn, just as keeping friends is one of the most gratifying social experiences a young child can have. The examination of children's friendships is particularly helpful for understanding the processes of how meaningful relationships in early childhood are developed and sustained. There is a small but growing interest in friendships among young children with and without disabilities (see e.g., Buysse, 1993; Guralnick, Connor, & Hammond, 1995; Ramsey, 1991; Richardson & Schwartz, 1998; Staub, 1998). Although an understanding of peer interactions and social interventions sheds light on social competence, a closer look at more meaningful and intimate peer experiences for youngsters with disabilities can yield information on the impact and implications of these early friendships.

Patterns of preschool friendships indicate that although young children have some stable relationships and create core groups, most relationships are brief and precarious (Corsaro, 1985; Howes, 1983; Ladd, Price, & Hart, 1990; Rubin, 1980). In a year-long study of peer networks of 88 preschoolers, Ladd et al. noted that children tend to play with a smaller range of peers over the course of the school year thus suggesting that youngsters may become more selective of their partners as they mature and acquire more refined social skills. Since younger children do not necessarily develop intimate early friendships, then understanding if and how youngsters connect to, or become part of, a larger social group could yield vital information for practitioners and families.

Like friendships, the process of becoming a member of the classroom can lay an essential cornerstone for a young child's later social experiences and self-esteem. A sense of belonging, acceptance, and a positive relationship to a larger social network are all images associated with membership. Becoming a member of the classroom community has been identified as an essential value for general education (Paley, 1992). The small but growing body of literature addressing membership in inclusive primary school settings suggests that membership is based on children's shared experiences as learners (Ferguson, Willis, & Meyer, 1996; Schnorr, 1990), and being a valued member of the group is a significant factor in the development and maintenance of friendships (Billingsley, Gallucci, Peck, Schwartz, & Staub, 1996; Salisbury, Gallucci, Palombaro, & Peck, 1995). If becoming a member of a group is an important aspect in children's lives, it appears logical to ponder the significance of membership for preschool age children who are just beginning to experience peer group encounters.

Belonging to a group can have significant benefits to young children, particularly for those who are with peers for the very first time. Erwin (1996) noted, however, that there is a lack of knowledge specifically concerning membership and inclusion in early childhood. And yet this information can have a profound impact on the way practitioners understand and ultimately structure their classroom environment for young children with and without disabilities. Hartup and Moore (1990) suggested that young children generally include the word friendship in their vocabulary and yet are unable to describe the commitment or reciprocity that are associated with it. Since young children are generally unable to articulate the meaning of friendship,

understanding young children's experiences and perceptions of membership might also be a challenge.

Because of the paucity of information about membership in early childhood inclusive environments, this investigation was undertaken in an effort to learn more about membership or belonging in an inclusive setting. By conceptualising the classroom as a community, the purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the experiences and perceptions within an early childhood classroom as it related to Timmy, a 3-year-old boy with multiple disabilities. Actual names of adult participants and the child care centre are used with permission in this article. Children's real names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Method

Participants and Setting

This investigation was conducted at a non-profit child care centre, known as the Family Center, in New York City. The Family Center is located in and affiliated with a college well known for its philosophy and practices in education. The children who attend the Family Center are generally from dual earner families and middle class backgrounds, although private funds are available to assist families who might not otherwise be able to send their child to the program. The centre serves approximately 50 families from diverse backgrounds. The Family Center offers full- and half-day programs throughout the year to accommodate families' needs and preferences.

Children who attend the centre range in age from 12 months to 3 years. There are mixed age groupings at the centre and many children stay with the same teacher for more than one year.

Classes are heterogeneously grouped and class sizes range from 10 to 16 children. Each class has a head teacher who is licensed by the state, one special education teacher who has or is working toward state certification, one assistant teacher, one intern, and additional students or volunteers. The Family Center also serves as a training site for graduate students who are pursuing their careers in early childhood education or related fields.

The Family Center has a clearly defined philosophy which is embraced by the entire staff. At the core of the centre's philosophy is the importance of the interaction between the learning child and his or her physical and social environment. The philosophy, like the curriculum, is visibly grounded in everyday routines and activities. An important aspect of the philosophy is building a strong sense of security. When children first enter the program, the primary focus is on establishing trust and security. Parents are naturally a significant part of this process.

Families play an integral role in the centre's philosophy and practices. For example, during the initial entry there is a gradual transition to the centre so both parents and their children feel comfortable and secure. Parents are welcome throughout the entire day and also take an active part in child-related meetings with staff, advisory committees, and fundraising efforts. Parents provide a valuable and

unique source of information and are viewed by the staff as experts on their own children.

Children with disabilities are included in the general classrooms on a full-time basis. The Family Center provides special education and related services (i.e., speech/language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, psychology) to children with disabilities and their families. There is a Coordinator of Special Education who works closely with the staff to ensure consistency and coordination between services. The Family Center uses a team approach in which the parents are seen as integral members.

Mary's class was selected to be the focus of the study because one of the children in the class, Timmy, was identified as experiencing multiple disabilities which impacted on his learning. This class was staffed by a full-time head teacher, Mary, and a full-time special educator, Scott, who was working toward his Masters degree in special education. There was also a full-time teacher assistant as well as student interns in this class.

There were a total of 15 children on Mary's class roster, although only 11 children attended the centre every day. The children's ages in this group ranged from 1 to 3 years; Timmy, who was 3 years when this study was conducted, was the oldest child in the group. This was his first year in the program.

Timmy had numerous medical and developmental challenges since birth and was characterised as having developmental delays. He lived in a neonatal intensive care unit for the first 9 months of his life and in respite care until he was 16 months old. Timmy, who has a twin brother, experienced twin to twin transference where one twin receives most of the mother's nutrients; Timmy received the least. Timmy was tube fed until he was 16 months old and had only recently begun to eat solid foods. He has severe hearing loss in both ears and wears hearing aids. It is still unclear to the staff and doctors exactly what Timmy's vision is like. He wears glasses and tends to rely mostly on his peripheral vision.

Because of logistical constraints, data collection did not begin until one month after school began. The teachers described Timmy's behaviour the first few weeks as very explorative and active. Teachers indicated that Timmy was mostly interested in dumping and picking up objects, and generally did not stay with an activity for more than 5 seconds. At the beginning of the year, the plan was to use a communication board with Timmy. This mode of communication was never developed because Timmy began to communicate his needs and wants via gestures, signs, and short phrases. Timmy was ambulatory and moved about freely and independently. He received physical, occupational, and speech therapy at the Family Center both within natural contexts, and also on a pull-out basis as needed.

Timmy's twin brother, who also was diagnosed with a disability, attends a different inclusive early childhood program in the same city. Timmy lives at home in New York City with his parents, twin brother, and a younger brother. There was frequent communication between the school and Timmy's parents via a notebook system and meetings.

Data Collection

In an effort to gain a rich and detailed understanding of membership within natural contexts, observational and interview data were collected. The use of qualitative methods in early childhood continues to gain more popularity because there is a need to better understand young children's lives and the world in which they live from a rich contextual framework (Walsh, Tobin, & Graue, 1993) and because "children are not reduced to a set of variables to be manipulated and correlated" (Hatch, 1995, p. 5). Because the intent of this investigation was to capture a contextually relevant picture of classroom membership as it related to a child with disabilities, qualitative methods were chosen. 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, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

Participant observations began in October and were carried out in 3 hour blocks once a week over a 6 month period (excluding breaks for vacation when the school was closed). Observations, which took place across different days of the week, typically began before or just as the children arrived. Generally one of the two authors collected data for each observation, although at the beginning of the study, both authors were present. Researchers collected data via detailed field notes for each observation and in various locations outside the classroom (i.e., playroom, park). Some descriptive field notes were written during observations but the majority of the field notes were written directly after each observation to recreate experiences as accurately and completely as possible. Fieldnotes, which were then typed, yielded over 160 pages of observational data.

The role of the researcher in qualitative research can best be described as observing what the study participants do and taking part in their activities (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The researchers' roles in the present study can be characterised as moderate to active. Children approached and interacted with them more frequently as the study progressed and in a variety of ways (i.e., asking for help, reading books together, playing games, holding hands on outdoor walks). The second author typically arrived early and talked informally with staff. Later these conversations and interpretations were integrated into the participant observation field notes.

During the final weeks of the study, a semi-structured personal interview with both the head teacher, Mary, and special education teacher, Scott, was conducted at the Family Center. This interview, which was arranged at a convenient time and place for the teachers, lasted over one hour. Informal contact and discussions with these teachers and other staff took place throughout the course of the study which led to a broader picture of classroom dynamics. As described before, these casual exchanges were documented in the participant observation data.

At the beginning of the interview there was a brief introduction in which the purpose of the interview, confidentiality, and consent for the interview to be tape recorded were reviewed. Permission was granted for the interview to be audiotaped. The tape was later transcribed by a qualified professional in an effort to obtain a full

TABLE I. Guiding questions to facilitate semi-structured interview

1. Can you describe the story of Timmy's experience in your class?
2. What strategies have been the most/least successful in addressing Timmy's unique priorities?
3. What have you done to foster peer relationships?
4. What have you done to promote acceptance of Timmy in your class?
5. How have you described Timmy's disability to the class?
6. How would you describe your class?

and accurate account of the interview. There was a set of open-ended questions to facilitate the exchange and to ensure flexibility. These questions are presented in Table I.

Participants, who were asked to speak freely and openly about their experiences and perceptions, were invited to depart from the guiding interview questions. The information gathered from this interview generated over 25 single spaced pages of typewritten data.

Data Analysis and Credibility

Because data analysis in qualitative research is an ongoing process, field notes were continually examined. In an effort to identify themes which were grounded in the data, the researchers met on a regular basis to review data, and discuss questions, interpretations and possible relationships. Informal interactions between researchers and staff were also discussed and incorporated into the data. Themes were not predetermined by the researchers, but rather evolved as the data were analysed.

After repeated and systematic review of the observational and interview data, both sets of data were organised according to similar codes (i.e., community spirit, classroom participation, peer interactions) which were based on emerging patterns in the data. These codes represent one way of sorting the descriptive data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). After re-reading and reflecting on these and other coding categories, additional patterns, also referred to as themes, within each code began to emerge. For example, after careful and repeated reflection of the "meaningful participation" category, specific themes (i.e., "classroom-related routines" and "peer-generated routines") began to emerge.

Because data analysis was an ongoing process, themes and coding categories sometimes needed to be added, combined or eliminated. For example, "classroom community" and "school community" were first identified as one theme but were later separated. Analysis of both sets of data yielded detailed documentation about membership in this inclusive setting.

To ensure credibility, data were gathered over an extended period of time (i.e., once per week over 6 months), and two methods of data collection were used. Additionally, data were gathered and analysed by two researchers. This allowed for multiple perspectives to be examined over time which decreased the potential for bias that might occur if only one individual viewpoint was used.

Taylor and Bogdan (1984) suggested 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. Because the intent of this investigation was to gain as broad and detailed a perspective as possible, combining both data sources, also referred to as triangulation, occurred. This method allowed for two separate sources of data to be examined, thus creating a more credible and rich data source.

In addition, informal and formal interactions with classroom staff provided not only opportunities to "cross check" interpretations held by researchers, but yielded new perspectives and directions as well. As described previously, frequent and spontaneous interactions transpired between teachers and researchers, usually before children arrived, which provided informal opportunities to discuss emerging themes, confirm or differ with researcher interpretations, and to gather new insights.

Lastly, more formalised checks were obtained to verify the accuracy of the data in the present study. Phone conferences were held and a draft of this article was sent to the study participants, as well as the Family Center's Coordinator of Special Education. Unanimous satisfaction and approval were given regarding the content and spirit of the article.

Findings

The data analysis yielded three primary themes which will be presented below. These themes, which emerged from two data sources (i.e., participant observations and the semi-structured interview) include: (a) shared and meaningful experiences, (b) quality of interpersonal interactions with peers, and (c) practices that contribute to building community. Examples of these themes are presented below. In order to gain a contextually rich understanding of membership, data on typical classroom dynamics are presented first, followed by comparisons and explanations of Timmy's experiences.

Shared and Meaningful Experiences

In an effort to better understand what membership looked like, it was important to understand what it meant to be a member or "to belong." Through frequent reviews of the observational and interview data, a pattern of shared and meaningful experiences emerged as one way of conceptualising "belonging to" or "being part of" a group.

Peer culture within the classroom community. Participation in the child-driven culture of the classroom seemed to be an important aspect of belonging. Children in this class, for example, often participated in familiar, child-generated routines. These shared routines, also referred to as rituals, can be characterised as spontaneous and recurring routines that were developed and carried out by the children only.

Observational and interview data indicated that these rituals, which tended to be tied to a specific place or time, were a shared effort by the children which enabled

them to produce a collective identity among themselves. Mary, the head teacher, described one popular routine.

> There is the screaming on the elevator ritual where we would take the elevator to the play deck and the CDR (an indoor play room for children designed for large movement and play) and every time they got on the elevator, they were so excited to be in a closed space and all right next to each other, they would scream. And it was like a routine because every time we got on, they would scream and look at each other and wave their arms up and down.

It was not always clear to the adults what the children were doing or why. Although engaging in these routines was very deliberate on the children's part, not all the adults perceived these occurrences as organised and familiar social routines between peers. In one participant observation, one of the researchers recalled that "It was almost time for me to leave. As we approached the elevator, Carly let out a slight scream and I asked Mary why she did that." In this class, the staff recognised and appreciated the need for children to carry out the familiar "elevator" ritual, however, they still faced the challenge of how to mediate children's efforts.

> We had to stop the elevator ritual because it was driving us crazy as well as the other people in the elevator. We're not the only ones that use the elevator. So we said, "scream outside the elevator" and so that is what they try to do.

Even though some of the routines, particularly the "elevator" one could be perceived as silly and disruptive, the classroom staff recognised the importance for children to continue the ritual and even tried to encourage their efforts in another context.

Figuring out how to support children's rituals was often challenging to the classroom staff. In another classroom ritual, Timmy initiated a familiar routine (i.e., banging on the table before snack) that the other children joined in immediately. The teachers were challenged because on the one hand Timmy was not only participating but initiating a well-liked familiar routine. On the other hand, it was time for snack and the children were "getting rowdy" making it difficult to "organise things." The staff resolved this issue by tolerating the banging for several minutes and then encouraging the children to be calm and peaceful before the snack was eaten.

Not all the children participated in all the routines. Timmy was an active participant in some rituals and, as described above, even initiated one popular routine. While most of the rituals involved all or most of the children in the class, there were some rituals in which the same few children participated. For example, there was a separation ritual that occurred when Andre's parents would leave for the day. Andre would run to the classroom next door and get a sword, and was generally followed by Ethan and Christian. They ran around the room or climbed up to the loft laughing and shouting "sword." There was not a lot of verbal interaction or

cooperative play during this routine although the boys looked as though they were having fun as demonstrated by their smiles and giggles.

The rituals described in this class can be characterised as brief (i.e., lasting only a few minutes) and generally involved limited or no verbal interaction. What is important to note is that these routines were created by the children themselves, and were positive, recurring, and social experiences. Adults played a vital role in recognising and supporting children's rituals.

Active participation within the classroom community. Unlike the shared routines that were generated by children themselves, there were other daily routines that children and adults created jointly. Separation, for example, was an important issue in this class and both parents and staff were highly sensitive to what the children needed during the transition when parents left the classroom. Adults typically took their lead from the children's cues. For example, a unique separation routine was developed in this class in which a child ran up to the loft as soon as his or her parent left the classroom. The child continued to wave goodbye as the parent walked past the window outside. If one child's parent was leaving, often two or three other children would join the child in the loft to wave goodbye through the window. This routine, which occurred almost on a daily basis, was generally but not always initiated by the children. Not all the children participated in this routine, because some of the children, including Timmy, took the bus to school and that particular routine did not have significant meaning to them.

Although the level of participation in classroom activities and routines (e.g., arrival, circle time, snack) did vary from child to child, all the children and adults participated in familiar classroom-based experiences. None of the children, including Timmy, ever received separate or isolated instruction when the class was together for a shared activity.

Timmy's participation during these classroom routines gradually increased as the year progressed as was the case for most of the children. His level of participation during routines can be described as active, meaningful, and generally appropriate to specific routines. He participated just as any other child in class.

> The children all sat in a circle and did the songs they usually do. Timmy was eager to participate in the "Going to Kentucky" song and smiled as he did all the hand motions. He has certainly come a long way since the fall [autumn].
>
> During another routine, clean up time, all children were expected to help put toys away and tidy the room. All the children participated during this familiar routine, although some children worked independently while others needed the physical or verbal assistance of an adult. It did not seem to matter how much each one was cleaning up but what was important was that everyone was actively involved in these shared experiences.

TABLE II. Types of peer interactions

Type of interaction	Description
Play	*One-to-one play* Interactions (i.e., chasing, running around, playing hide and seek) lasting only seconds or a couple of minutes. Engaging in parallel play. *Group play* Interactions (i.e., simple games, follow the leader, rough and tumble play) lasting only a few minutes. Tends to be repetitive and involves gross motor activity. More sophisticated and interactive types of play (i.e., building a tower, pretend play) were usually facilitated by an adult.
Helps	Providing assistance to another peer (usually physical).
Shows	Extending toy for show.
Shares/Trades	Sharing or trading materials or toys.
Shows Affection	Displaying physical or verbal signs of affection.
Confronts	Displaying hostility. Conflict or confrontation. Staking claim or protesting to a peer. Occurs when territory or materials are being threatened.

Quality of Interpersonal Interactions with Peers

Participation in shared routines alone was not enough to describe accurately and fully membership in this class. An examination of the interpersonal dynamics between peers indicated that, although interactions were brief, children were involved in a variety of exchanges with their classmates. Table II provides an overview and examples of the different types of peer interactions in this class. While there were many types of interactions, the exchanges listed in Table II were the most common.

Non-cooperative group play evolved informally and spontaneously among children, and generally occurred during play time in the CDR (an indoor play room designed for large movement and play). This type of group play (e.g., follow the leader, hide and seek, running around together) did not involve much verbal interaction between children and lasted only a few minutes. There were no consistent patterns of playmate preferences or cliques, although there was one group of three boys who played together during free play time, but generally intermingled with the others during the rest of the day.

The kindness and caring of classmates. Even though peer interactions tended to last only moments, it was the quality of the exchange not the quantity of time that was striking. Peer exchanges were generally caring and kind. Peers demonstrated frequent and spontaneous displays of affection (i.e., a hug, an arm around another, or a kiss) toward each other even though these interactions were typically nonverbal. Timmy, who did not usually initiate displays of affection, was a willing recipient when a peer put an arm around his shoulder or hugged him.

Other ways kindness was demonstrated was when children would recognise when a classmate needed assistance and would help out without being asked to do so. While Timmy sometimes received help from classmates (i.e., holding his hands as he

jumped off a small bench), assistance was also provided to other peers by classmates themselves.

> When the class sang "Going to Kentucky" during circle time, Ida went around and around and then fell as called for in the song. Jordan did what she did but did not seem to understand "fall down." So Ida, without being asked, got up and took Jordan's hand gently and pulled him down.

The often spontaneous displays of kindness and caring were a natural and frequent expression in this class.

Conflict resolution as a process and an outcome. There was a strong emphasis on resolving conflicts equitably in this classroom and children were active participants during negotiations. The way that adults talked about and addressed conflicts in the classroom demonstrated their belief that the process to conflict resolution was just as important as the outcome. Particularly at the beginning of the year, teachers had a much more active role in showing children how to apply appropriate social rules (i.e., trading, taking turns) when needed.

When confrontations or conflicts did occur, it was the result of children protecting their toy, material or space which was being threatened by a peer. There were no displays of aggression or hostility other than those related to territorial issues. Confrontations generally lasted a short time (i.e., a few seconds) and children did not hold grudges or resentment toward one another.

If one child was playing with a toy and a peer came over and tried to take it away, the child who had the toy first would generally protest by hitting, pushing, yelling, or growling. For Timmy as well as the other children, more physical aggression was used when protecting their territory at the beginning of the school year. Timmy would generally pull, grab, or hit a peer at the beginning of the year when his property was threatened. He eventually learned to apply the social tool of trading and would often use it without adult prompts. As the year progressed, more children also used verbal strategies to protest such as "no," "mine," or "I need that" and relied less on physical contact. By December, many children including Timmy were able to apply the social rules of trading or taking turns appropriately with little or no adult intervention.

In the following excerpts from participant observation data which took place on the same day, Timmy was beginning to understand and generalise the concept of trading from one situation to another.

> Timmy came down the stairs and saw Kaitlen playing with his Barbar doll. He protested and Scott intervened by saying, "Maybe you could give her something in return." So Timmy got another doll and gave it to her in exchange for his Barbar.

> Timmy saw Cindy playing with his plastic toy. He tried to take it from her but she would not let go. He made a sad face and started to get tears in his eyes. Delores [assistant teacher] came over and said to Cindy, "Look how sad Timmy's face is. He brought that toy into school and wants to play with it. Can you give it back to him now?" Cindy went over to Timmy and

> handed him the toy and said, "Here Timmy." Then Timmy went over to the activity ball and gave it to Cindy without being told to do so.

Children in this class, even at a very young age, were beginning to understand and follow through with classroom social rules.

Missed opportunities in naturally occurring peer interactions. Although the staff were very supportive of children's decisions and choices, adults may have unintentionally prevented naturally occurring opportunities for peers to interact. There were countless choices for children to make, and respect of children's feelings were always acknowledged. There were, however, some situations when adults told children where to sit for snack or made decisions about who would participate in a particular activity. These missed opportunities for children to decide with whom, where, or what to play with might have further promoted certain friendships or interactions.

Unintentional interference of interactions between Timmy and a peer sometimes occurred when an adult was trying to provide assistance (i.e., adult sitting down between the two children during snack; adult breaking in between children holding hands during a walk). As was the case for some but not all the children, Timmy did not have preferred playmates or one special friend, and interacted briefly with a variety of children. Timmy also knew and used all of his classmate's names appropriately as well as the names of the classroom staff.

Timmy's peer interactions were characteristic of those described in Table II. Although he did not typically initiate peer interactions such as affection, helping or play, he was a willing recipient when peers approached him. Timmy, like many of his classmates, had more conflicts during the first few months of school as compared to several months into the school year. He tended to play alone which was not unusual for children in this class. Limited cooperative play was observed but he was an active and enthusiastic participant in rough and tumble play and other activities, particularly during gross motor or musical activities.

Practices that Contribute to Building Community

Membership could not exist if there was not a context from which to exist. The idea of building community was perceived as an important outcome in this setting.

On becoming a classroom community. As one way of better understanding membership in this classroom, it was necessary to discover what was important within the classroom network. All the members of the staff shared a vision of what the classroom climate would look like, and actively pursued the vision as an ongoing and very deliberate process. Mary, the head teacher, clearly articulated the idea that promoting membership within the classroom community was intentionally and deeply embedded into daily classroom practices.

> I think our class is remarkably cohesive. I think the children are a group more than a lot of classes are. They know who each other are, they play with each other, they are respectful of each other. This is our curriculum—figuring out how to make everybody valuable, how to bring out the best in

> everybody. We talk about it a lot. We congratulate them, praise them, and encourage their ideas and interactions all the time.

The staff worked consistently to ensure that a spirit of community was reflected in a variety of ways in the classroom. Values were repeatedly and intentionally embedded into daily practices, curriculum, and activities. Respect for children as individuals was consistently demonstrated in the ways that adults talked **to** and **about** children. Children were given a variety of choices but, perhaps more significantly, adults consistently honoured those choices. When children did not want to share a toy or come to the group circle, adults did not force or coerce children, but rather honoured children's decisions with respect.

A climate of caring and kindness was also visible by the genuine concern for others demonstrated by both children and adults. Support of others was expressed on a consistent basis. One day in particular Timmy, who faced very serious challenges with eating, would not touch his lunch.

> Finally, he would take a bite and I would clap and say, "good job Timmy!" Then all the other kids probably thought "great, Mary thinks this is great, I'll do it too." So every time Timmy took a bite, they would clap and say "yeah!" And so Timmy ate all of his lunch. He would look at the children after each bite to see if they would applaud and they did. They were recognising his specialness, validating it and supporting it.

Adults were very conscious and deliberate in modeling supportive behaviour and compassion to the children.

Community spirit and school culture. Not only was there a strong sense of community in the classroom, but it was observed throughout the entire program. The Family Center resembled a close knit family. Community spirit was demonstrated consistently by the willingness among school staff to share their resources and provide support whenever needed. There was no formal policy about "sharing the wealth," but it seemed like there was an unspoken rule concerning a shared commitment to the well-being of everyone within the school environment. Resources (e.g., staff members, materials) were freely shared among professionals as well as children. If one classroom was short staffed for the day, it was not unusual for different staff members from a variety of disciplines to "check in" to make certain that the classroom had adequate coverage. The culture of the Family Center reflected the value of genuine kindness toward others just as it was evidenced in Mary's class.

The physical environment of the Family Center can best be described like a home and the people within that home resembled a close knit family. Not only was this more evident in the name of the program (i.e., The Family Center), but also in the printed material about the centre:

> The events of everyday living provide the overall framework for our curriculum. Children who are at home with their parents spend the day doing errands in the neighbourhood, performing household tasks, and

> playing with toys and the caregiver. Similarly, we at the Family Center try to create this "homelikeness."

In order to create a "homey" feeling, the physical organisation of the classrooms and overall school environment were arranged to resemble a real life home. The furniture was comfortable for adults as well as children (e.g., rugs, couches, rocking chairs, large pillows, accessible kitchen areas). Children were also encouraged to visit or wander into other classrooms (with supervision) just as they might explore other areas in their home. This home-like atmosphere contributed to the positive feelings of "community."

Just as families are a necessary part of a home, families were very much an integral part of the program as outlined in The Family Center's program brochure. Parents were encouraged to spend time regularly in their child's class, particularly to ease the separation process between parent and child. As a result, there was a familiar and comfortable rapport between parents, teachers, related staff, administrators and, most importantly, children. Children recognised and interacted frequently with classmates' parents. Administrators, who visited the classrooms often and knew each child by name, were also familiar to children. All the members of the community were known to one another, interacted regularly, and approached one another with kindness.

The understanding and mediation of Timmy's disability. The role that adults played was highly instrumental in creating membership in Mary's classroom. How teachers viewed Timmy and how they translated their perceptions to other children emerged as additional themes related to membership. To better understand how teachers translated their views about Timmy to others, it was first necessary to examine how teachers perceived Timmy. It became very clear that the teachers in this classroom community were very interested in meeting each and every child's individual needs, not solely those of the child with disabilities. Timmy was described as "just another kid" in this classroom who had unique needs just like all the other children had needs unique to them.

Even with a clear commitment to community, two distinct challenges related to Timmy's membership emerged. The first challenge was the need to enhance Timmy's social skills. The second challenge, which was closely linked to the first, was the need to use less adult intervention. The head teacher, Mary, pointed out that Timmy had received so much therapy and individualised instruction that he had limited information about playing with other children without adult intervention.

> He has gotten so much one on one attention that it took him a long time to figure out how to play without an adult, without someone trailing him and commenting on every single thing he did.

Although Timmy had ample opportunity to play alone and was not always followed by an adult, he often turned first to adults for help or to show them something before he turned to his classmates.

Clearly, adults played key roles in fostering social interactions such as interpreting a peer's behaviour to another (i.e., "it was just an accident," "Timmy did not mean

to knock it off the shelf"), or inviting one child to join another during play. As mentioned previously, however, there were other times when an adult may have prevented children from engaging in naturally occurring peer interactions (i.e., adult sitting next to a child during snack or circle time). This issue of balancing adult presence or intervention was an issue not only for Timmy but all the children.

The staff were very committed to addressing each child's individual personality and learning styles. Because Timmy was viewed as just another member of the class, adults addressed questions about Timmy as classmates initiated them. Observational and interview data demonstrated how teachers took advantage of naturally occurring questions and events to foster learning about Timmy's disability.

> Carly was inspecting Timmy's hearing aids by gently touching them. Scott said, "We can't touch Timmy's hearing aids because they help him hear us."
>
> One little boy pointed to Timmy's hearing aids and asked what they were. Scott explained that they help Timmy hear better.
>
> We talk about very specific things that the children do. We don't talk about Timmy specifically. The children might ask "What's that on Timmy's ear" and we'll say "it's a hearing aid that helps Timmy to hear better." We don't suddenly offer information. We try to make sure it is reflected in the books and within our classroom. When Timmy came in with glasses you can bet that I rushed out to find toy glasses for the dolls. I made sure all the doll babies had glasses that the children and Timmy could play with. And we frequently pointed out eyeglasses to Timmy.

The classroom staff used spontaneous events during the day to share information in a way that naturally prompted children's curiosity.

Supporting all children's individual priorities. Staff members learned how to accommodate Timmy's unique learning needs by learning from Timmy himself about what he needed. Not only did adults become highly sensitive and conscious of Timmy's individual priorities, they were also keenly aware about every child's individual personality, learning, and needs. Understanding what children needed and what was happening in their lives (i.e., new baby in the family, divorce) were important experiences that were necessary for the staff to acknowledge. The staff consistently shared information about the children with one another thorough informal and formal channels. Careful observation and frequent discussions with children were also important strategies that the staff used to understand and respond more accurately to the unique priorities of all the children.

The adults' commitment and ability to read and explain children's behaviour were key factors in meeting children's individual needs and learning styles. Learning about what the children needed from the children themselves was practiced consistently in this class even though it was a challenging task. The ability to identify and interpret children's signals was a process that evolved over time in this class, and understanding the behaviour was directly linked to interpreting children's behaviour

correctly. Mary described a situation in which she became suddenly aware of the reason behind Timmy's behaviour.

> One thing Timmy started doing in December was that every time he came to circle time, he was right in front of the person who was leading the circle. And originally I said "no, move back. You need to be part of the circle." But then I realised that he was orienting to the person so he could see and hear better. So now we consciously find Timmy a place where he can be directly in front of the person.

There was a clear commitment in this class to understand children's behaviour in ways that encouraged adults to be open-minded and flexible. The classroom staff made very practical adaptations and accommodations so that Timmy would be able to participate in activities like any other child. The adults, however, viewed these accommodations as being helpful for all the children in the class.

> For all the kids we make sure that the toys are accessible so it is easy to see where everything is. I think it really helps Timmy to see one thing on each shelf so it does not look like a jumble. But that is for everybody, not just for Timmy.

> We make sure that Timmy has equal opportunity. We make sure we're alert and aware of what Timmy is doing like communicating to the other kids about what he is doing. For example, we say "look at Timmy when you talk to him" or "use a loud voice when you talk with your friend." But I do that with all the kids to help them to communicate with each other.

The accommodations or supports implemented by the staff were simple, nonstigmatising, and potentially beneficial for many children. There were deliberate strategies that the staff used to promote social interactions between children. One strategy included the use of less direct adult intervention as one means of encouraging Timmy and the other children to "learn how to self-cope, self-soothe, and negotiate without any adult." As discussed previously, adults also encouraged the use of specific social tools (e.g., sharing, trading, taking turns). Another social tool was to encourage children to use specific communication skills such as looking at each other when speaking, or using a loud or soft voice depending on the situation.

Building community was a deliberate and continuing process which occurred within Mary's classroom and across the entire program. Perceiving that every child had unique needs and being highly aware and responsive to those needs reflected the assumption that every member of the class was important and valued.

Discussion

This study provided a unique perspective on membership within an inclusive preschool classroom by identifying several factors that contribute to understanding membership and how it was expressed within a classroom community. This study, however, focused only on one classroom and school environment in which the

children and staff represented a unique set of relationships, interactions, and dynamics. Even though the researchers conducted systematic and frequent observations, it is unclear what effect, if any, their presence had on classroom dynamics. Although the researchers worked closely together during all stages of the research process, it is also unknown what biases each researcher may have brought to the analysis or interpretation of data.

Meaningful Participation in Shared Experiences and Interactions Influences Membership

Children's use of child-generated, familiar and repeated rituals which form a group's collective identity, is a necessary part of becoming a member of a peer group or culture (Corsaro, 1985; Ramsey, 1991). Even at a young age children were able to construct a meaningful and shared identity. The rituals observed in this study, which tended to be nonverbal, were created and carried out by children in a meaningful, consistent, and collective way. Having a disability did not prevent Timmy from participating in these shared routines.

The importance of children with disabilities participating in valued roles, activities, and settings has been considered an important factor in understanding membership (Billingsley et al., 1996; Janko & Peck, 1996). Meaningful and active participation in familiar and recurring classroom routines is not only possible for young children but an essential component of belonging to a group. A critical outcome emerging from this study, which is consistent with other research (Wolfberg et al., 1999), is the need for adults not only to understand but actively support the peer culture within the classroom community.

The nature of peer interactions also contribute to an understanding of how membership was expressed in this setting. Peer interactions in this study were characterised as brief, spontaneous, and typically involved little or no verbal communication, although children did interact with one another in a variety of ways. Even given these brief interactions, children's exchanges were typically positive and friendly.

The Quality of Adult Support and Mediation is Critical

Children in this study generally participated in prosocial interactions (i.e., displaying affection, trading, helping). Conflicts or confrontations were perceived by adults as learning opportunities to further promote a sense of belonging because the process and outcome were equally important. Modeling for, teaching, and encouraging children to interact in positive and kind ways sends a clear message about the expectations in the environment. Supporting children during confrontations did not mean that the adult "fixed the problem," but rather gave the children the tools so that they would be able to negotiate and problem solve on their own. Providing specific tools for how to problem solve with peers reinforces the idea to children that maintaining peace and cooperation among group members is important.

As might be predicted, adult presence was critical in this classroom. It was equally important that adults assumed multiple roles that had a critical impact on a child's

experiences in school. For example, adults assumed the roles of interpreters (interpreting contextual or peer-related information to the child with disabilities), translators (translating the behaviour of the child with disabilities to typical classmates), support providers (of peer culture in the classroom as well as of the needs of individual children), and facilitators (encouraging positive peer interactions). Thus, children's interaction within the environment and with peers is often strongly influenced by how well an adult mediates the immediate context.

This study also pointed out the need to be more aware of the effects of adults' presence and support. The presence of an adult at times may have prevented peer interactions from occurring, limited child-driven choices, or created unnecessary dependence on the adults. The balance between a child's need for support and the need for autonomy is a complicated task. By determining (a) if a child needs support, (b) if the support should be mediated by an adult, and (c) when and how much support should be provided, might help guide decisions about using adults as natural support providers.

Creating the Spirit of Community

It is impossible to understand membership without examining closely the context in which membership occurs. In this study, there were deliberate efforts to create a positive community spirit within the classroom. Sergiovanni (1994) maintained that a school cannot become a caring or any other type of community, unless it first becomes a purposeful community. He suggested that in order for a school to become a purposeful community a core set of values must be articulated because schools need "norm systems that guide their quest for community" (p. 72). The classroom community in this investigation seemed to be built on three main core values which guided interactions, activities, and practices.

One value, democracy, was demonstrated in a number of ways including how adults talked to and about children, how children were treated, how conflicts were resolved, and how all the members were also valued participants. Democracy in education has to do with empowering children to make meaningful choices and decisions about their own lives. Fostering a democratic approach in early education can influence children to trust their own decisions, assume responsibility for their own actions, and appreciate their own and others' contributions and differences (Erwin & Kipness, 1997). While there may have been some missed opportunities to offer meaningful choices, children were respected, their voices were heard, and their needs were acknowledged and accommodated.

Another core value had to do with interpersonal interactions which were based in kindness and respect. The caring climate that was articulated and visible throughout the classroom setting was also reflected throughout the entire program (e.g., physical organisation, unspoken rules, daily practices). Adults were highly responsive to the needs of children, and children treated each other with genuine kindness and respect. This is consistent with other research on inclusive education that suggested professionals strive deliberately to create a social context in which shared values including equity, social responsibility, and a sincere concern for others exists

(Grenot-Scheyer, Staub, Peck, & Schwartz, 1998; Salisbury et al., 1995; Sapon-Shevin, Dobbelaere, Corrigan, Goodman, & Mastin, 1998).

The last core value was the celebration of human diversity. The staff assumed ownership for Timmy's presence in the class by viewing him as a full member or "just another kid" in the class. There was a strong commitment to addressing each child's individual learning styles or priorities, and perceiving each child as unique. Mary, the head teacher, was very cognisant of embedding children's own experiences into the routine or curriculum (e.g., buying glasses for the dolls when Timmy got new glasses). Including a child with a disability was not seen as something "extraordinary" but rather a natural and necessary part of creating a rich tapestry of diversity. Because human difference was respected, a climate was created that promoted children's natural curiosity and acceptance of one another.

It is important to note that parents, in particular, were vital members of this community. Parents were viewed as the focal point of their child's lives, a belief that was articulated in the program brochure and observed in classroom practices.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this study can provide an initial context for understanding membership in an inclusive setting. There is, however, much to be learned about the creation and maintenance of classroom membership as well as its effect on young children over time. Because the nature of qualitative research involves collecting data from an outsider's perspective, it is recommended that alternate approaches be used to further examine membership in classroom communities.

One recommendation is to encourage the use of Participatory Action Research (PAR) approaches in which stakeholders and researchers work together during all stages of the research process. There is increasing attention on PAR and children with disabilities (Meyer, Park, Grenot-Scheyer, Schwartz, & Harry, 1998a; Park, Meyer, & Goetz, 1998). Advantages to using this type of approach are (a) it narrows the gap between research and practice because there is joint decision-making at every stage of the research process, (b) it ensures that meaningful innovations are created that are representative of the values, expectations, and beliefs of the stakeholders, and (c) practices can be sustained over time (Meyer, Park, Grenot-Scheyer, Schwartz, & Harry, 1998a, 1998b). It would make sense to explore membership within the context of PAR because of the collaborative nature inherent in this type of approach. Research questions to explore might include what some of the outcomes associated with classroom membership are, when or why children are included or excluded by classmates, and how do young children perceive belonging or membership within a classroom context?

It is equally important to examine what immediate implications this research can have for practitioners. Practitioners need to receive training on an ongoing basis to competently carry out the myriad roles that are often required in an inclusive class. Equally important is the need for adults to keep their distance by allowing children to make their own choices and mistakes. Understanding children's need to create and maintain "community" and supporting their efforts at developing a peer culture

are other ways practitioners can facilitate membership in the classroom. Practitioners must assume full responsibility for creating a truly inclusive environment where social equity, democracy and humanity are deeply embedded within daily classroom practices. Questions practitioners may want to ponder include: what can I do to support children's attempts at creating a peer culture, what are the subtle and obvious messages that I am conveying on a daily basis, and how can I ensure that all children are participating in a meaningful and active way? Efforts to create a classroom community where everyone truly belongs must be consistent and intentional. The message in this environment was clear and simple—everyone mattered.

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