

# MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD GENERAL EDUCATION USING NATURAL SUPPORTS

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study used participant observation and semistructured interviews to examine the types of natural support that were provided and the adaptive strategies used to promote the inclusion of Ryan, a 3 year old with a visual impairment, **in** a community-based preschool. It found that the adults and classmates gave Ryan natural support **in** a variety of ways and that Ryan used distinctive adaptive strategies to carry out tasks independently.

The inclusion of young children with disabilities **in** natural environments with their nondisabled, age-appropriate peers, which has been strongly advocated since the late 1970s (Bricker, 1978; Vincent, Brown, & Getz-Sheftel, 1981), continues to gain acceptance as a preferred model of delivering services to these children (Council for Exceptional Children, 1993a; Guralnick, 1990; Peck, Odom, & Bricker, 1993; Salisbury, 1991). **In** addition, federal legislation (the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Individuals with Disabilities **Education** Act) provided a solid foundation for ensuring that children with disabilities have equal access to

opportunities and experiences **in** natural community-based settings, such as preschools and public schools, child care centers, playgrounds, and other neighborhood facilities.

**In** its position statement on inclusion, the Division for **Early Childhood Education** of the Council for Exceptional Children (1993b, p. 1) defined inclusion as "a value [which] supports the right of all children, regardless of their diverse abilities, to participate actively **in** natural settings within their communities." This position was also endorsed by the National Association for the **Education** of Young Children, the leading and largest organization of **early childhood general educators in** the United States.

Although efforts have been made to establish more natural environments to accommodate young children with disabilities throughout the country, the availability of inclusive settings for children with low-prevalence disabilities (visual impairments, hearing impairments, severe mental retardation, and autism) is still limited (Erwin, 1993; Wolery et al., 1993). Thus, parents of young children who are visually impaired often have few choices of **general early childhood** programs that will provide the necessary supports and services that the children need.

The empirical basis for including children who are visually impaired **in** natural environments has also been scant. However, an increasing number of qualitative and quantitative studies have been examining this issue (Bowden & Thorburn, 1993; Erwin, 1993; Kekelis & Sacks, 1988; Preisler, 1993), two of which were conducted **in** other countries: New Zealand (Bowden & Thorburn) and Sweden (Preisler). Yet despite the growing interest **in** this topic, much more research is still needed to determine how children who are visually impaired can be included successfully **in** community-based settings.

Qualitative or ethnographic research can be instrumental **in** this regard. Qualitative research, especially on the **education** of students with disabilities, has been strongly advocated **in** recent years because of the rich source of data it provides on the participants and their beliefs, behavior, environment, and relationships (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Morse, 1994; Stainback & Stainback, 1984). **In** light of the limited knowledge base on youngsters with visual impairments **in** natural environments, the following questions remain unanswered: What adaptations or accommodations are made to include a child with visual impairments fully **in** a typical preschool? How can individualized support be provided **in** natural contexts? What strategies, if any, does a child with a visual impairment use to promote his or her own competence and independence?

The study presented here was a yearlong qualitative analysis of the full inclusion of a young boy with a severe visual impairment **in** a community-based **general education** preschool. **In** qualitative research, themes and questions traditionally emerge during the data collection and analysis stages. The questions just raised, which were explored **in** this study, were not formulated before the study was conducted; rather, they emerged over the course of the school year.

## Method

This article describes the nature of support received and the strategies used by Ryan, a 3 year old with a visual impairment who attended a community-based **early childhood** preschool. Qualitative methods were used to collect data over an 11-month period because the intent was to capture events within the natural contexts of the typical school environment (the classroom, music room, and playground) and to learn firsthand the perspectives of the participants.

## PARTICIPANTS AND SETTING

The setting of the study was a private elementary school in central New York that serves students from preschool to Grade 5, at which point they enter the public school system. Most of the children who attend the school are Caucasian, although there is a small but growing population of children of color. All the classes consist of mixed-age and ability groups. Students with disabilities are full-time members of age-appropriate **general education** classes; there is no self-contained special **education** class at the school, and related services are generally provided in the classrooms by therapists on contract from the public school system.

Classes for children aged 3-4 are half-day sessions, and parents have the option of sending their youngsters to school for the entire week or part of it. Each class is staffed by an **early childhood** teacher and at least one teacher assistant.

Ryan was among 13 3- and 4 year olds who were randomly assigned to one of the preschool classes, which consisted of 7 boys and 6 girls, most of whom were from middle-class backgrounds. He was the only child with a disability in this room. The class met from 9:00 A.M. to noon three days a week. In addition to the classroom teacher, one full-time assistant and one part-time assistant were assigned to the class. The full-time assistant was hired by the director as a "hands-off" aide for Ryan, which meant that she was responsible for all the children in the class but was to provide individualized support for Ryan in a nonintrusive way when he needed it.

Ryan lives with both his parents and a younger sister seven miles from the school. 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. He has also had numerous medical conditions since birth, including kidney disease and failure to thrive which led to a severe eating disorder. Ryan received vision services twice a week and occupational therapy once a week, both of which were provided after school, although the vision specialist consulted regularly with the classroom staff at the preschool and plans were made to provide vision therapy in Ryan's classroom in the following year. As was the case for most of the children in the class, this was Ryan's first school experience.

## DATA COLLECTION

The two methods of data collection selected for this study were participant observation and semistructured personal interviews. Both these qualitative methods were designed to provide a broad understanding of certain events and experiences from the participants' perspective and within natural environments

and contexts (Stainback & Stainback, 1984; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

### **Participant observation**

Participant observation can be characterized as the observation of individuals **in** natural contexts to understand the environment and the individuals' perceptions of interactions and experiences (Stainback & Stainback, 1984). The researcher conducted participant observations approximately once a month for the entire class (9 A.M. to noon) during the school year (September to June). No observation was conducted **in** January because Ryan had surgery and was absent from school for several weeks.

The observations were conducted primarily **in** the classroom, but also **in** other natural settings at the school (the playground, music room, cloak room, and hallway), depending on where the class was. The researcher wrote detailed field notes for each observation during or immediately following the observation to ensure that her descriptions were accurate, complete, and detailed.

During participant observations, the role of the researcher is generally to observe what the study participants do and say and to participate **in** their activities (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Stainback & Stainback, 1984). **In** this study, the researcher's **participation** was moderate to active. At the beginning of the school year, she did not approach the children and spoke only **in** response to a child's initiation. Over the course of the school year, she would join **in** games, dramatic play schemes, conversations, or projects when appropriate or when asked.

### **Semistructured interviews**

Semistructured personal interviews, which are often gathered **in** conjunction with participant observations (Stainback & Stainback, 1984), provided an understanding of the participants' views and perceptions. During qualitative research, themes and questions generally emerge during data collection and analysis. However, an initial set of guiding questions was used to facilitate the discussions and maintain consistency and flexibility across the interviews. These questions included, "How would you describe Ryan's school experience?" and "Is Ryan considered a member of the class?"

The researcher conducted four individual one-hour interviews during April and May with the classroom teacher, the full-time assistant, and Ryan's parents. The classroom staff was interviewed at school, and each parent was interviewed at home on different days. The four interviews were audiotaped with the permission of the participants. These audiotapes were later transcribed to capture an accurate and detailed account of the interviews.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

The analysis of qualitative data is typically an ongoing process of systematically reviewing, arranging, and coding field notes, interviews, and other data gathered (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Initially, the field notes were reviewed several times, and a set of codes (events and activities, strategies to accomplish tasks, and relationships) was created on the basis of predetermined categories used to develop interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Within some of these categories,

different themes emerged. For example, under the category strategies to accomplish tasks, such themes as types of support provided to Ryan and adaptive strategies used by Ryan surfaced. Because this was a continuous process, categories or themes sometimes had to be clarified, expanded, or combined.

Interviews are generally analyzed at the end of qualitative investigations, and these analyses are often combined with other sources of data in a process known as triangulation (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984), which provides a richer and clearer understanding of the environment, individuals, and events. The data derived from the semistructured interviews were analyzed in the same way as the data from the field notes. They were reviewed several times, and emerging themes were coded according to predetermined categories. Since there were several consistent themes in the field-note and interview data (strategies to accomplish tasks, relationships, and classroom membership) triangulation of the two data sources was performed. To verify the accuracy of the data, the researcher sent a draft of this article to the four interviewed participants and the program director for their review and feedback, followed up by telephone calls. The spirit and content of the article received unanimous approval from each individual.

## **Results**

In this section, the results of the participant observations and semistructured interviews are presented according to the themes that emerged, which provide a broader understanding of natural supports and strategies in a typical preschool class that may or may not be similar to those in other situations.

In this study, the adults provided natural supports to Ryan in a variety of ways, such as 1) using contextual cues, 2) promoting learning through naturally occurring opportunities and events, 3) providing specific directions or explanations, 4) offering anticipatory cues, and 5) using physical prompts. Ryan's sighted classmates were another important source of support. In addition to the natural supports he received, Ryan used a variety of adaptive strategies that promoted his competence and independence in the environment and helped him to adapt or accommodate to a situation, activity, or task.

## **PROVIDING NATURAL SUPPORTS**

To gain a better understanding of the natural supports in the natural contexts of the preschool, it was first necessary to determine who was providing the support to Ryan and how the support was given. For the purposes of this study, natural support was defined as assistance that is intended to create connections, competence, or teamwork in unobtrusive and individualized ways that lead to the achievement of a task or the provision of important contextual input about the environment. Throughout the year, Kima, the full-time assistant, provided the most support. In addition, the classroom teacher; Dan, the part-time assistant; and Ryan's classmates offered different types of support.

### **Adult intervention**

Providing contextual cues. Adults provided Ryan with the most frequent and

consistent types of support, including contextual cues, which yielded specific feedback on the immediate context (people, the environment, materials, and activities). This input was essential for Ryan because without it, he would not have had immediate or full access to this type of information. The following are two examples.

It was snack time, and Dan gave Ryan specific verbal input. He said, "I put your cup **in** front of you but not on the place mat. The other kids have it that way, so if the mat moves, the cup won't fall over."

Ryan and four classmates were at the sand table. Kima sat behind Ryan and provided verbal feedback to him, such as "You have to put more **in** your cup; it is still empty" or "Keep your hand inside the table because otherwise, the sand will fall on the floor: Feel the difference?"

Although Kima was assigned to the classroom, not just to Ryan, and provided assistance to all the children, she frequently furnished Ryan with consistent contextual information about her physical location. She would check **in** with Ryan to alert him that she was returning to or leaving the room or the immediate area. **In** the following example, she not only oriented Ryan to where she was, but provided contextual information about others who were **in** the immediate vicinity.

The children were waiting for the music period to begin. Kima, who had Ryan on her lap, told him that she had to leave for a minute but would be right back. Then she lifted Ryan off her lap and sat him on the floor. A classmate, Sue, scooted closer to Ryan. Although she did not say anything to him, she moved her fingers lightly and playfully over his leg.

When Kima returned, she let Ryan know she was back and lifted him onto her lap again. Sue inched closer to them and tried to sit on Kima's lap with Ryan, whereupon another child, Melissa, came over and sat close to them. Kima said to Ryan, "Ryan, Sue and Melissa are sitting here--all your friends are seated next to you!"

Using spontaneous events to promote learning. Another way **in** which the classroom staff shared important information with Ryan that he would not otherwise have had access to was to use spontaneous events to promote learning. This use of naturally occurring spontaneous opportunities as a context for learning helped Ryan make connections between pieces of information that other children acquired visually, as is illustrated next.

When it was Ryan's turn during Show and Tell, Ryan stood at the front of the circle with the teacher, as was customary, and answered her questions about the stuffed Barney doll he had brought **in** that day. The children seemed interested **in** the doll, and toward the end of Ryan's turn, the teacher asked another child, Laurie, to come up and stand close to Ryan. She then asked Ryan to look at Laurie's shirt and to tell the group what was on it.

Ryan bent down and touched Laurie's shirt with his nose because he was so close to her. Then he exclaimed, "It's Barney!" The teacher made a big deal about the fact that the same Barney that Ryan had brought **in** for Show and Tell was also on Laurie's shirt. Ryan and the other children seemed to get a big kick

out of this coincidence.

Providing detailed verbal directions or explanations. Offering Ryan specific verbal directions or detailed explanations about how he could accomplish a task independently was still another means that adults used to provide natural support, as the next two examples illustrate.

When Ryan finished painting, the teacher told him, "Walk over to the rug, and when you feel the rug, you'll see a bright yellow toy **in** front of you." Ryan followed the instructions and walked cautiously to the rug. He was a little bent over as if he was looking at the ground for cues. When he found the rug, he sat down to play with the yellow toy.

Dan gave Ryan a specific verbal description of what the slide looked like and who was behind him and then gave him detailed instructions about where to put his feet. He also gave Ryan a lot of verbal input about the slide and how to negotiate the stairs. The children did not seem to mind that Ryan took a bit longer to climb the stairs than they would and waited patiently behind him until he reached the top.

Providing less direct verbal feedback. **In** some situations, less direct verbal feedback was given. These verbal cues alerted Ryan to anticipate what might be coming next, as **in** the following example.

When another song began, Ryan was more attentive and engaged than many of his classmates. While Kima provided input like "Don't forget: Elbows next" or "Now comes the tricky part," Ryan independently carried out the approximate body movements that corresponded to the song. He generally remembered an action once it was explained to him; usually he needed explicit instructions or a demonstration only for new behaviors.

Using physical cues. **In** addition to verbal input, physical cues were a natural means of furnishing Ryan with specific input about how to carry out a specific task or activity.

Ryan really seemed to like music time. He had a big smile on his face as he moved his body to the music. Kima used physical prompts like positioning his hands straight out **in** front of him as the song indicated. Once she showed him, he was able to perform the movement correctly and independently the next time the song called for him to do so.

### **Peer support**

Peer support was another viable and practical means of providing Ryan with specific information about or assistance **in** the environment. However, Kima remembered that at the beginning of the school year, the children did not offer peer support frequently or spontaneously.

At the beginning, they wouldn't come close to Ryan. They would look from afar, and I don't think they knew he had trouble seeing. His movements were a little different at times, and they would just watch him. Then eventually, they would understand that Ryan was putting his face right into theirs, and I would always say this is this person or that person. And now most of them will say, "It's me, Ken," or "I'm Ronnie" if Ryan doesn't know who the child is. They will just tell him.

They just accept everything he does, and it's great.

The children did not usually identify themselves to other classmates, but they seemed to recognize that this way of sharing information was useful to Ryan. They also realized that Ryan gained access to certain types of information or needed assistance **in** a way that might be different from theirs. Several children seemed to respond spontaneously to situations **in** natural and **meaningful** ways, as the following example shows:

It was Show and Tell time, and the children were seated **in** a circle on the floor. When it was Sue's turn to show a toy to the group, the teacher asked her to pass the toy around so the children could see it. Sue first gave the toy to Ryan. Hillary, who was seated next to Ryan, leaned closer to him and guided his hands over the toy, purposefully showing him the knobs and buttons. The teacher and Kima provided positive verbal feedback such as "That was a nice thing to do--helping Ryan to learn about the toy." Hillary had done so spontaneously and naturally, and Ryan responded with great interest.

The teacher recounted a situation **in** which Sue, a child who is usually shy and quiet, provided unsolicited support to Ryan by asking him if he needed any help. I noticed this morning that when Ryan was getting up from the floor, Sue tried to help him. I thought that was just great. She just automatically took his hand and said, "Do you want help" ? and Ryan said, "Sure." They have really come a long way.

Similarly, Kima noted that the children would often provide unsolicited and natural support to Ryan.

The great breakthrough came when Hillary took Ryan's hand, put it on what he had been looking for, and said, "Here it is, over here." And another child said, "It is right **in** front of you." They are learning to use the words to describe something to him or help him out.

At other times, the adults were instrumental **in** orchestrating encounters between Ryan and his classmates to promote positive social interactions, as well as to reduce the amount of adult intervention, as is shown next.

It was a free-play period, and Kima said to Randy, "Show Ryan what you want to play with." She then left them and went to clean up from snack time. Randy took Ryan's hand and led him to the rug area, where there were a variety of toys to choose from.

Kima described additional situations **in** which she would enlist the help of classmates during a transition from one place to another:

If I am cleaning up from water play, I will often say, "Cathy, can you take Ryan's hand and bring him to the rug?" The children know right away that they need to bring him through a clear path. I have noticed that they don't run him into a chair. They seem to love to do this. He loves it, too. Ryan will take someone's hand and say, "Well, hi there" and start a conversation.

Kima further explained that classmates would not necessarily initiate or offer this type of assistance because they knew she would eventually do it or Ryan would move independently. But she noted that because of the spontaneous

conversation that tended to develop between Ryan and the other children, this type of arrangement worked out well when it was orchestrated by an adult.

The classmates interacted with Ryan **in** ways other than providing natural support or assistance, and other resources **in** the classroom were adapted to accommodate Ryan's needs, including curricular, environmental, and instructional strategies. However, because of the nature and scope of this article, these adaptations will not be discussed here.

### **RECOGNIZING RYAN'S ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES**

The foregoing discussion centered on the ways that supports were used **in** the natural environment to meet some of Ryan's unique needs. This section discusses strategies that Ryan used to help him adapt to the activities and demands of the classroom. These adaptive strategies were different from the ways the sighted classmates carried out tasks. As Ryan's mother pointed out, Ryan had unique needs resulting from his visual impairment that had to be realized. She then said:

I wonder if he is as included as the other children **in** class because they see. They see what is going on, and Ryan is at a disadvantage because he can't see what is going on all the time.

Despite the challenges that Ryan might face because of his visual impairment, the adults who were interviewed identified specific strategies that Ryan used to enable him to interact with his environment as independently as possible. Ryan's father described one such strategy **in** which Ryan used his remaining vision: "Ryan becomes physically close to people because I think that is his means of really figuring out what they are doing." Although Ryan's father realized that this was an important strategy for his son, he wondered what kind of impact it had on the other children.

Ryan doesn't know how to regard other people's physical 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. I think young children are used to kids coming close to them only to have their toys taken away.

Ryan also maintained close physical proximity when he explored objects **in** his immediate environment, as **in** the following example.

It was free-play time, and Kima read the directions for the color-and-shape bingo game. Melissa, Ken, Cathy, and Charles came over. Ryan brought his face right up to the card when it was his turn. It looked like he was using his left eye to identify the color and shape. Then he independently and correctly identified both the color and shape.

During the yearlong observations, no adult ever discouraged Ryan from bringing objects close to his face or from standing close to others or reprimanded him for doing so. The classroom staff appeared to be cognizant and supportive of Ryan's need to use this distinctive strategy that his sighted peers did not use.

**In** addition, Kima pointed out that Ryan used specific techniques to help him travel independently to a frequently used area **in** the classroom.

He leads himself by touching everything. He also uses that light **in** the window.

That is always his way of knowing where the rug is. Very often it is time for everyone to go over to the rug. Ryan used familiar landmarks and signals **in** the classroom to orient himself--a strategy that fostered his independent mobility within a familiar environment. Kima further noted:

Lonie [Ryan's vision specialist] told us that he can find the light **in** the window, so we started fostering that right from the beginning. Also he can feel the difference when he is on the floor and when he is on the rug just by the way it feels when you walk from one to the other. So Ryan can go over and find his toys on the shelf by using the rug as a guide.

By using familiar landmarks **in** the familiar environment, Ryan was able to find his way **in** the classroom or identify preferences without assistance. Throughout the year, he received intensive adult intervention that facilitated his use of specific adaptive strategies.

The ability to travel independently **in** a familiar setting and to make choices were age appropriate and **meaningful** preschool tasks that Ryan, like his classmates, needed to learn. The difference was **in** the way the children accomplished the tasks. Ryan also used unique strategies to learn which classmates were **in** the immediate area or what they were doing. Kima reflected that

there is one trick Ryan has been using **early in** the morning **in** music when we are all sitting together. He will always say, "Who is here, who is there?" and I will say, "Here is Randy, and she has purple pants." He will look at her purple pants, and then later **in** the day, when he is on the rug, I will say, "Now who is sitting next to you? What color pants does she have on?" He will look down and say, "It's Randy; she has purple pants on!" He will be able to recognize the kids independently now by using these types of tricks.

He will walk over to a group of children, and he always uses his words. If he asks a question, he will not always get an answer. But he will go over and, rather than just join **in**, will say, "What are you doing? .... Who are you?" or "What have you guys got?"

Ryan often used his verbal abilities to ask questions to gain direct access to information, as **in** the next example.

It was snack time, and the children were seated at two round tables on the basis of where Dan put their place mats. Ryan asked Dan, "Who is sitting here?" and Dan told him which classmates were also at the table.

By using a variety of strategies to compensate for his visual impairment, Ryan moved freely within the familiar classroom environment and gained access to information. The natural support that was provided to Ryan, coupled with the adaptive strategies that he incorporated into his bank of knowledge, enabled him to be an active participant **in** this **general education** preschool classroom.

### **Discussion**

This study provided a unique perspective on the inclusion of a young child with visual impairments **in** a typical preschool class over the course of a school year. Although the events the participants experienced and the ideas they expressed may be useful **in** understanding how some natural supports are identified and

implemented, the generalizability of these findings may be limited. For example, although the data were gathered throughout the school year, more frequent observations each month might have yielded different themes. **In** addition, Ryan's background, priorities, strengths, and gifts are unique to him and may not be reflective of other children who are visually impaired.

The findings of this study are consistent with other research that suggested that for children with visual impairments who attend integrated or inclusive preschools, the role of the teacher is paramount (Erwin, 1993; Preisler, 1993; Workman, 1986). **In** this study, the teacher or full-time assistant (Kima) assumed a variety of roles, including guide, translator, mediator, and facilitator. It appeared that the classroom teacher and both assistants (Kima and Dan) learned the specific needs that Ryan had and then identified ways to provide support **in** the most natural and unobtrusive manner. It is important to remember that the classroom staff received direction and feedback from the vision consultant, who met regularly with them at the preschool. This consistent communication between the vision specialist and the classroom staff reinforces the importance of the vision specialist, who plays a vital role **in** helping **general education** staff understand and address the unique implications of a child's visual impairment.

**In** addition, Kima, the full-time assistant, played a crucial role during the school year by balancing Ryan's need for independence with his need for some type of assistance at times, which suggests that immediate and systematic training of classroom staff, particularly assistants or paraprofessionals, is a critical factor **in** achieving successful outcomes **in** an inclusive setting. Adults do not need to shadow or hover over children with visual impairments, but they do need to provide them with important feedback and tools to promote independence, confidence, and competence. Perhaps because the adults **in** this classroom seemed to provide individualized support to Ryan using a natural and "hands-off" approach, many of his peers also learned how to support Ryan **in** the same way.

The other children seemed to be cognizant of Ryan's need to use certain techniques that they, because they were sighted, did not use. **In** a study of Jessica, a young child with multiple and visual disabilities who was **in** a regular class at her neighborhood school, Bowden and Thorburn (1993) found that the sighted classmates not only wanted to learn skills that would enable them to interact and assist Jessica but often initiated interactions with her independently and spontaneously. This finding was consistent with the findings of the present study, which suggested that although sighted peers did not necessarily initiate or provide support to Ryan at the beginning of the year, they eventually learned skills and instinctively and appropriately applied them. For example, Ryan's classmates sometimes introduced themselves by name to him or guided his hands over an object. The children did not use these techniques when they interacted with other sighted peers.

Furthermore, when an adult orchestrated an interaction between Ryan and a sighted classmate, the classmate was willing to and competent **in** providing assistance to Ryan. Therefore, future research and personnel training efforts

must address the importance of imparting information to sighted classmates, so social interactions and friendships between children with visual impairments and their sighted peers will become even more positive. A good beginning point for meeting a child's unique learning needs **in** a natural setting would be to teach or model specific strategies to sighted classmates (such as alerting a child with a visual impairment when they are leaving the immediate area).

Another theme that emerges from the study was Ryan's use of adaptive strategies to confront the daily demands **in** school to gain access to information that was otherwise unavailable to him. These adaptive strategies included maintaining close proximity to people or objects, identifying and locating familiar landmarks, and asking questions. Erwin (1994) summarized additional strategies that are often used by young children with visual impairments, such as depending heavily on familiar objects and routines, using physical contact to gain a partner's attention, and imitating utterances made by familiar people. This is not meant to suggest that every child who is visually impaired uses all these strategies. What seems to be important here is not necessarily what strategies are used, but how they are understood and supported by others. **In** the present study, it appeared that the adults as well as the children were supportive and accepting of Ryan. They seemed to recognize and respect that Ryan could accomplish the same tasks as everyone else, but just had a different way of doing so.

**In** short, this qualitative analysis provided firsthand information on the inclusion of a young child with visual impairments **in** a preschool class over the course of a school year. The classroom staff and sighted children used specific techniques to provide support to Ryan **in** the most natural way possible. Likewise, the unique strategies that Ryan used were accepted by his classmates because they seemed to understand why he needed to use them. Full inclusion cannot exist if the child with a disability is not a valued and participating member of the class. Active **participation** and membership can be promoted by recognizing and addressing individualized and natural support **in** ways that are casual, unobtrusive, and **meaningful**.

This research is part of a larger study that examines classroom membership and peer culture.

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