Nurturing Social Experience in Three Early Childhood Special Education Classrooms

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Abstract

This study explored the ways in which early childhood special education teachers supported children's social behavior within the context of their preschool classrooms. Data collected for six children through naturalistic classroom observations were coded and analyzed for emergent themes within a qualitative framework. Findings revealed a variety of strategies and behaviors used by early childhood special education teachers and their assistants to respond socially to the children in their classrooms. The data were grouped into five overarching themes: (1) teachers' adaptations to support positive social experiences, (2) positive emotional connections between teachers and students, (3) negative interactions between teachers and students, (4) teachers' promotion of positive social engagement with peers, and (5) teachers' help with conflict resolution. These data present multiple lenses through which to view children's and teachers' social experiences in the classroom, providing the potential for a richer understanding of both what is observed as well as how it actually transpires. The complexity of individual differences and classroom dynamics are discussed, with recommendations for practice and future research.

Introduction

Despite a growing body of research on the social experiences of young children with disabilities and their peers, little attention has been given to the facilitative role played by early childhood special education teachers within the natural classroom environment (File, 1994; Mahoney & Wheeden, 1999; Taylor, Peterson, McMurray-Schwartz, & Guillou, 2002). Early childhood classrooms often provide the primary context for children's interaction with peers, particularly for young children with disabilities, because barriers within the community can limit their social opportunities. Teachers assume an important role in the socialization process because young children with disabilities often experience an increased and prolonged need for adult support to facilitate social interactions with both adults and peers (Guralnick & Groom, 1987; Mahoney & Wheeden, 1999). However, many studies on early social experiences present a decontextualized view of child behavior that does not adequately account for the power of teacher responses, both positive and negative, as a socializing influence within the early childhood classroom.

The development of positive social skills within relationships with adults and peers is a highly important competency in early childhood, and one with far-reaching repercussions. According to Birch and Ladd (1996, 1997), the nature of children's interpersonal environments in classrooms, including relationships with both teachers and peers, may contribute meaningfully to their feelings of both social and academic competence in school. Children who have well-developed social communication skills adjust better to school situations and transitions, and they have more positive attitudes toward school and learning. They are expected to be well liked by both teachers and peers and to be chosen as playmates more frequently by their peers. Positive early social experience contributes to ongoing positive social experience and later social adjustment (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997; Pianta, 1997; Sroufe, 1983).

Young children with disabilities are at risk for non-optimal social relationships with both adults and peers (Guralnick, Hammond, Connor, & Neville, 2006). Developmental delays in social competence often surpass other areas of disability for many children, with social skills lagging even further behind than would be expected for a typical child of similar developmental age (Guralnick, 2001; Guralnick, Paul-Brown, Groom, Booth, Hammond, Tupper, & Gelenter, 1998). Children with disabilities have been found to have difficulty forming and maintaining friendships, to engage in less social play, to demonstrate less positive affect, and to score lower on factors related to quality of interaction compared to their typically developing peers (Odom et al., 1999). Challenges to peer-related social competence are observed in children with a variety of developmental disabilities, including mild cognitive delays, communication difficulties, sensory

integration disorders, and physical disabilities. For children with developmental delays, challenges engaging in social play, negotiating conflicts, and maintaining friendships appear to persist beyond early childhood and if left unsupported may lead to later social exclusion and adjustment difficulties (Guralnick, 2001; Guralnick et al., 2006).

Although more research is needed to demonstrate the types of classroom social environments and interactions that are most likely to support social experience of preschool children with disabilities, some evidence suggests that children with disabilities demonstrate more interactive engagement (Hamilton, 2005), or higher levels of play, in inclusive rather than segregated classrooms (Odom et al., 2004; Rafferty, Piscitelli, & Boettcher, 2003). Even in inclusive settings, however, children with disabilities engage in less social interaction with peers compared to their typically developing peers. Moreover, a large percentage of children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms are likely to be rejected by their typically developing peers (Odom et al., 2004). For children with disabilities who have problems developing and maintaining interactions and relationships, adult support and specific teaching approaches are often needed to promote peer-related social competence (Odom et al., 2004; Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005).

The teacher's role in supporting children's social experience is unique because it is the teacher, as opposed to a parent, who is more often present to help when children are facing social challenges in larger groups (Webster-Stratton, 1999). Even when the classroom environment is specifically set up to promote social interactions with other children, teachers often need to take additional initiative to facilitate meaningful social relationships among peers (Brown & Bergen, 2002). Greenspan (2003) has emphasized the role of sensitive, nurturing, and individually tailored child-caregiver interactions in helping children solve problems, regulate behavior, and sustain interactions with peers. Contrary to findings regarding typically developing children (Rubin, Coplan, Chen, Buskirk, & Wojslawowicz, 2005), for children with disabilities, teacher direction may be needed to promote engagement in positive social interactions (Carta, Schwartz, Atwater, & McConnell, 1991; Mallory, 1992). According to Mahoney and Wheeden (1999), when teachers use a moderate level of directiveness and a high rate of responsiveness to children's interests and abilities, children with disabilities may be more likely to initiate and sustain peer relationships in the classroom.

The role of the teacher as a protective factor or mediator of children's negative social experience (Garmezy, 1984) has also been explored in the literature (Birch & Ladd, 1996; Pianta, Nimetz, & Bennett, 1997). Promoting positive social interaction among peers and preventing social isolation and peer rejection are often major challenges for teachers working with children who have difficulty forming meaningful connections with their peers. According to Katz and McClellan (1997), the long-range, persistent effects of early social difficulties can be understood as a recursive cycle. In a recursive cycle, individual children's social behaviors tend to elicit responses from others that result in more of those behaviors, ultimately strengthening the behavior patterns. Children who are hard to approach and have difficulty engaging in positive social interactions with others are more likely to be avoided by others; this results in those children repeating such patterns of behavior, often with greater intensity, causing further avoidance or rejection by adults and peers. Teachers can play a crucial role in helping young children with limited social skills break these cycles.

For young children with disabilities, developing competent social interaction skills can be a significant challenge. Their increased need for support in developing appropriate and satisfying social relationships has important implications for early childhood teachers. When children do not initiate or respond to social behaviors in typical ways, the role of the teacher may need to be evaluated in a different way (Buysse & Bailey, 1993; Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997). Further research is needed to explore the complexities of teachers' impact on young children's social development (Katz & McClellan, 1997).

This study evolved out of a larger, quantitative study on social experiences in nine preschool

special education classrooms (see Recchia & Soucacou, 2002). Findings from the original study confirmed what we knew from previous studies—that young children with a wide variety of disabilities consistently demonstrated social skills deficits, and that teachers, for the most part, demonstrated overall low levels of encouragement, facilitation, and social support (McConnell, McEvoy, & Odom, 1992; Hamilton, 2005). However, our analyses left us with several questions regarding the contexts within which teacher-child interactions did and did not occur. We felt strongly that further qualitative analyses of these same data might illuminate a deeper understanding of the ways in which classroom teachers respond in the moment to the tasks of social interaction in their preschool special education classrooms. Insights gained from these analyses, shared with teachers and teachers in training, can ultimately lead to better social and educational outcomes for young children. Our nonparticipant observation field notes served us well in this undertaking, as we set out to conduct a careful analysis for emergent themes across three of the original nine classrooms studied.

Teacher behavior was the focus of this study; however, our interest in understanding the dynamic processes of social interaction led us to look at children and teachers within the holistic contexts of their classrooms. Our running records included play-by-play descriptions of not only the children and teachers but also other adults working within the classroom. These adults often contribute in meaningful ways to teachers' goals and expectations for the children's social experiences. We aimed to answer two research questions: (1) How do these teachers engage in social relationships with individual children? and (2) What do the teachers do to support social interactions between peers?

Methods

In keeping with our goal for this study of exploring child and teacher social behavior in context, we used a qualitative approach. Data originally collected through naturalistic classroom observations were coded and analyzed for emergent themes. Qualitative methodology was selected for its ability to support a more in-depth look into the complexities of classroom interactions (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Sites and Participants

Three classrooms were selected from the original sample to represent a range of populations and settings, including two self-contained preschool special education classrooms and one inclusive preschool classroom, each of which served children between 3 and 5 years old with a variety of disabilities. Our aim was to represent the broad range of early childhood classrooms available for young children with special needs. Two children were selected from each classroom to represent a range of abilities and competencies found in the previous quantitative analysis. The classroom teachers were three females, each with a master's degree in early childhood special education. Classroom, children's, and teachers' characteristics are described in Tables 1, 2, and 3 below.

Table 1
Classroom Characteristics

Classroom	Adult Characteristics	Child Characteristics	Classroom Activity
Jenny's Room Self-contained preschool special education classroom. Located in a hospital rehabilitation center.	One head teacher and two regular classroom assistants. Other adults are often present in the classroom, such as therapists and nurses.	Attendance ranges from 6-10 children on any given day. Children's disabilities include both physical and neurological impairments. Wide range of competencies across developmental domains.	Long period of semistructured free play. Many developmentally appropriate activities. Some more academically oriented planned activities.

			Most work done in small groups, but occasionally bring whole group together for songs and special activities.
Karen's Room Integrated preschool classroom in which one-half of the children have diagnosed special needs. Located within a large special education preschool center.	One head teacher and one regular classroom assistant. Other adults are occasionally present in the classroom, such as therapists or other observers.	Attendance ranges from 10-12 children on any given day. Integrated classroom in which one-half of the children have diagnosed disabilities. Children's disabilities primarily include speech and language delays. All children are mobile and have some functional oral language. Children demonstrate a range of competencies across cognitive, social, and language domains.	Organized semistructured free play periods throughout the day. Many developmentally appropriate activities. Some more academically oriented planned activities. Most work done in small groups, but some whole group activities such as "circle time" each day.
Marilyn's Room Self-contained preschool special education classroom. Located within a small special education preschool center.	One head teacher and one regular classroom assistant. Other adults are occasionally present in the classroom, such as therapists or other observers.	Attendance ranges from 6-9 children on any given day. Children's disabilities primarily include speech and language delays. All children are mobile and have some functional oral language. Children demonstrate a range of competencies across cognitive, social, and language domains.	Organized semistructured free play periods throughout the day. Many developmentally appropriate activities. Some more academically oriented planned activities. Most work done in small groups, but some whole group activities such as special biweekly group sessions with movement therapist.

Table 2
Children's Characteristics

Teacher	Child	Age	Diagnosis	Profile
Jenny	Adam	4 years, 10 months	Spina bifida Hydrocephalus	Happy, affectionate, and social male child whose physical impairment often precludes his engagement in positive, sustained social interactions with adults and peers. Mild language delays.
	Linda	4 years, 2 months	Prematurity Developmental delays	Easily angered and distracted female child whose emotion regulation difficulties challenge her ability to make meaningful connections with adults and peers. Mild language and cognitive delays.
Karen	Jeremy	4 years, 2 months	Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD-NOS)	Happy, playful male child who experiences difficulties in relating and communicating with peers and adults in the classroom. Moderate delays in language, cognition, and play skills.
	Maria	4 years, 9	Typically	Verbal and social female child who enjoys classroom activities and

		months	developing(English-language learner)	social interactions with peers and adults.
Marilyn	Tony	3 years, 7 months	Attention and language difficulties	Happy, social male child whose language and attention difficulties affect his ability to sustain positive social interactions. Mild language delay.
	Peter	3 years, 3 months	Fragile X syndrome	Easily angered male child who experiences sustained negative interactions with peers and adults in the classroom. Significant delay in language, cognition, and play skills.

Table 3
Teachers' Characteristics

Teacher	Age	Experience (in years)	Curricular Priorities
Jenny	46	10.5	Rates ability to meet children's social needs at 4 on a scale of 1 (low) - 5 (high). Ranks importance of social development as 2 out of 6 areas of development. Feels least-effective strategy is "Imposing too much structure in certain learning situations." Feels an important thing to be added to her curriculum to enhance children's progress is "To be more observant of when a child needs assistance and how much is truly necessary."
Karen	(not provided)	1	Rates ability to meet children's social needs at 4 on a scale of 1 (low) - 5 (high). Ranks importance of social development as 2 out of 6 areas of development. Feels least-effective strategy is "Sticking to rote learning." Feels an important thing to be added to her curriculum to enhance children's progress is "More books to stimulate new ideas and pictures for the children to learn from and share with each other."
Marilyn	34	10	Rates ability to meet children's social needs at 4 on a scale of 1 (low) - 5 (high) Ranks importance of social development as 3 out of 6 areas of development. Feels least-effective strategy is "Getting too intense in one area and not focusing on other skills and progress made by students." Feels an important thing to be added to her curriculum to enhance children's progress is "To add a computer program in the classroom."

Procedures

Observations took place during the morning hours when young children were most actively engaged. Observers began by conducting two 2-hour visits to each classroom, observing the context, and making themselves familiar to the teachers and children. Following these initial visits, each study child was observed for two 1-hour sessions on two separate occasions during daily classroom activities. Because several children were studied in each classroom in the original study, the researchers spent many hours (10-14 hours per classroom) observing both individual children as well as the whole group. This extra time provided opportunities to observe each child beyond his or her individually scheduled observation time and to see all of the

children and teachers in each classroom engaged in multiple activities and experiences. Continuous running records of children's social behaviors, including initiations and responses from teachers and peers, were recorded for each child. All of the classroom transcripts were reviewed before selecting the focus cases for the present study. This process allowed us to see the overall classroom dynamics and interactions between teachers and the two study children within each classroom over the course of several days (from 8-12 days per room).

Once all classroom observations were completed, teachers were asked to respond to a brief questionnaire, which included requests for demographic information and several questions about their curricular priorities (see responses in Table 3 above). Responses were later reviewed alongside the classroom observations to find points of agreement and disagreement.

Coding

In the original study, 25% of the observations were recorded simultaneously by two observers, coded using a predesignated coding framework, and checked for minimum inter-rater reliability >.80 (see Recchia, 1999). For this qualitative analysis, all of the original transcripts from the three classrooms (three to five per room) were reviewed by both researchers, one of whom was new to the data. Transcripts were first reviewed by the two researchers independently to establish a sense of children's and teachers' overall social experiences. Each researcher created a summary of experience for each child focusing on social behavior with peers and adults. The researchers then compared and discussed their findings and developed a descriptive profile for each child. These preliminary steps allowed the researchers to immerse themselves in the data and to gain an overview of the children's classroom social experience, guiding the emergent themes analysis.

The researchers engaged in a collaborative process of comparing and collapsing their original emergent themes. Five themes were ultimately agreed upon within which anecdotes from the running records could be categorized. These included (1) adaptations made by teachers that helped support individual children's positive social experiences, (2) positive emotional connections made between teachers and students, (3) sustained negative interactions between teachers and students, (4) ways that teachers promote positive social engagements and interactions with peers, and (5) ways in which teachers help their students with conflict resolution. Finally, each researcher independently coded the transcripts for the six study children, placing the observational data into the five designated categories, and then came together to discuss and compare their findings, deciding on any disagreements by consensus.

Results

Our aim in looking qualitatively at the running records from these three dynamic preschool classrooms was not to compare teachers or students on explicit characteristics but to describe the unique social interaction issues that arise for teachers and children and the ways that they are responded to within the diverse and complex contexts that constitute these early childhood special education settings. Although only Karen's integrated classroom included some children who were typically developing, there was a range of social competencies among children in each of the classrooms, and some children in both of the self-contained settings had only mild social delays. In some classrooms, assistant teachers played important roles in nurturing social experiences, which were reflected in our observations and included in our analyses. Our data analyses revealed a variety of ways in which the teachers in these three early childhood special education classrooms responded socially to the children. All of the teachers made individualized adaptations and accommodations to address children's specific needs. At times, the nature of the children's disabilities posed particular challenges that required teachers to choose between supporting children's independent skill development and encouraging their social interactions with peers. In all of the cases, teachers and their assistants demonstrated a capacity to create

special positive one-on-one moments with each child, although in some cases, there were also persistent negative interactions with the children. A list of the positive strategies used by these classroom teachers to nurture social experiences in their classrooms is presented in Table 4.

Table 4
Observed Teacher Strategies That Supported Social Experiences

Themes	Strategy 1	Strategy 2	Strategy 3
1. Adaptations that supported individual children's positive social experiences.	Teachers allowed children the time and space they needed to explore their environment independently before supporting their participation in the group.	Teachers honored and respected individual differences by encouraging children to express their individual skills and needs in the group.	Teachers provided individual adaptations such as extra visual cues or physical input to enhance children's involvement in social activities.
2. Positive emotional connections between teachers and students.	Teachers acknowledged and validated children's feelings in both verbal and physical ways.	Teachers encouraged children to take an active role when redirecting them gently to more appropriate behaviors.	Teachers created special one-on-one moments with each child to nurture teacher-child relationships.
3. Ways in which teachers promoted positive social engagements and interactions among peers.	Teachers actively engaged in children's play to help them initiate and maintain positive interactions with peers, and they modeled what children needed to do to show peers that they were their friends.	Teachers set up activities for children that encouraged high levels of peer participation and peer interaction.	Teachers encouraged more socially competent children to initiate interactions with their peers, modeling appropriate language and social behaviors.
4. Ways in which teachers promoted positive conflict resolutions.	Teachers spoke for the children in order to explain their behaviors to others.	Teachers diverted conflicts by helping children find more appropriate ways to interact with their peers.	Teachers found ways to scaffold appropriate social responses through structured tasks in the classroom.

Teachers' Adaptations and Positive Emotional Connections

In classroom 1, Adam, a child with spina bifida, was very determined to move independently. Jenny, his teacher, often encouraged him to take the time he needed to scoot his body from place to place within the classroom. Allowing Adam to move independently, however, frequently precluded his participation in activities with the other children because of the time involved. Jenny seemed unsure at times when to offer help and when to stand back. This dilemma was demonstrated during one classroom observation when Adam spent a good part of the time allotted to free play with peers trying to move a chair over to the table.

> Jenny asked, "Adam, want me to move the chair?" He said, "I'll move it myself. My Mommy told me I could move it by myself." With great determination, Adam continued to move the chair inch by inch.
>
> Jenny says, "You're pushing it." Adam says, "Right." He seems to have stopped moving. He's gone about one foot. The assistant teacher says, "Come on, Adam." She straddles him with her legs, so that she is standing over him, poised to help. Jenny asks, for the assistant's benefit it seems, "Your Mommy said to push the chair?" Adam says, "Yeah, that's what my Mommy says." He moves another few inches.

Once Adam got the chair close to the table, he needed assistance to get into it. Jenny continued to make accommodations for Adam's assisted independence:

> She holds the chair steady, asking, "Do you want it closer?" Adam says, "No." After a second, Jenny asks, "Are you close enough?" Adam says, "No." He is trying to climb into the chair. Finally, Jenny says, "I'm going to help you, ready 1 ... 2 ... 3." She lifts Adam into his chair. He had taken about 10 minutes to get there himself.... Adam sits between Juan and Alexandra.

For Linda, a child with some emotion regulation difficulties who was prone to angry and aggressive outbursts, Jenny provided other kinds of special interactions and accommodations. When the children made valentines, for example, Jenny was sensitive to Linda's special feeling about making one for her mommy:

> Linda picks up her valentine and approaches Jenny, who is still at the table. Jenny looks up from her work and says, "Who is this for?" Linda says, "For Mommy." Jenny says, "Shall we write on the front?" Linda gets enthusiastic and says loudly "YEAH!"... Jenny positions Linda next to her, putting a marker in her hand. With a hand-over-hand approach, they write, with Jenny saying out loud, "To Mommy, Love, Linda." Linda smiles happily when it's finished.

In classroom 2, an inclusive classroom that served children with and without developmental delays, Karen, the teacher, often used physical ways of making connections with her students. Karen became involved in the children's playful activity in ways that we rarely observed in the other classroom teachers. She made special accommodations for Jeremy, a child with a Pervasive Developmental Disorder who had trouble making connections with others, and she did this in a very inclusive way that did not single Jeremy out. During one classroom observation, she demonstrated this inclusive strategy as follows:

> Jeremy calls out to Karen, and says, "I can't reach!" Karen reaches over to him across the table and responds, "Yes, I can reach you, see?" She then reaches over to touch all of the children sitting at the table; this appears to calm and focus them.

Karen appeared to know Jeremy well and to understand and anticipate those things that could make his day go more smoothly. She was often observed to interpret his words and help give meaning to his actions for the other children. She did this through collaborating with him rather than by overtly directing his behavior, as described below:

> Jeremy now has the microphone and says something into it about how he likes to play with Power Rangers, but his words are quiet and mumbled. Karen tells him, "I can't hear" and gets up to assist and show Jeremy how to hold the microphone. He repeats what he says, and Karen repeats his words again for all the children.

Karen knew that Jeremy enjoyed sitting in a "big chair," one of the classroom chairs that was somewhat larger than a typical child-size chair, and she allowed him this pleasure. In fact, she engaged the other children in supporting Jeremy's use of the special chair, creating an atmosphere of support rather than one of competition. She also made a special effort at times to provide extra proprioceptive stimulation for Jeremy in playful ways, as evidenced in the following observation:

> Karen gets close to Jeremy and says, "I'm going to eat someone's nose, I'm going to eat someone's knees.... I'm going to eat Jeremy!" She picks him up, holding him by the knees as she hangs him upside down, and tickles him as he laughs, giggles, and squirms.

Karen seemed to make a special effort for all of the children in her classroom to create an environment where individual differences were honored and respected. Maria, a typically developing child in Karen's classroom, was a child of Polish immigrants who was still learning English. Karen was frequently observed to give Maria opportunities to speak in Polish, just as

other bilingual children were encouraged to share words from their own home languages with the class. When Maria seemed unable to express herself to a peer, Karen helped to fill in the words for her. Karen provided gentle explanations for why Maria's sometimes boisterous activity might be inappropriate in the example below:

> Maria turns back around to look to Stephan, and says, "Look what I'm going to do. Watch." Smiling and laughing, she begins to lightly bop her forehead with the Duplo block, saying "Ooowww." Stephan joins in, and they are soon both amusing themselves in this activity. Karen notices the children's activities and interrupts her reading to look toward the children. "Stephan," she says in a comfortable tone, "What happened to your head?" She next addresses Maria with, "Maria, that's not such a good idea." Trying to further explain she says, "That's not such a good idea; it creates a boo-boo." Maria looks at her and retorts, "But it doesn't hurt me so much, Karen."

In classroom 3, Marilyn, the teacher, needed to make adaptations for children with a broad range of skills and abilities. Peter, a child with Fragile X syndrome, presented many challenges, particularly during less-structured times of the day. While other children in the classroom were able to more readily enjoy free play with their peers, Peter was frequently aloof, preferring to wander about the classroom on his own. Often his attempts at interaction with the other children were disruptive to their activities, and he could easily become a nuisance to them. Because of these pervasive behaviors, Peter required a great amount of individual attention from classroom adults. Marilyn demonstrated great patience with Peter, allowing him space to be noncompliant before imposing gentle reminders of her expectations for him, as observed below:

> Marilyn leads Peter by the hand to the table and tells him, "Sit down." As soon as she lets him go, he returns to the sink and gets his hands wet. Marilyn says, "No" a few times. She leads him again to the table and sits him down.

Sonia, the assistant teacher, spent a great deal of time with Peter. She too demonstrated great patience with him at times, as illustrated in the observations below. In this first example, she gently redirected him from an unsafe to a more appropriate activity, allowing him to relate to her in his own way:

> Sonia hugs Peter. "No. It's okay, but we don't climb on the table." Then she says, "Go, look at a book." She is kneeling on the floor and is at his face level. He touches her lips and studies her for a moment. Sonia lets him have this time.

In the second example, Sonia helped Peter make a transition from his play at the water table, where he had soaked his shirt and undershirt. She helped him to understand the reason he must be changed by engaging him in feeling his wet shirt:

> At one point, Peter tries to walk away from Sonia. She says, "Peter, we're not finished." He has to take off even his undershirt too; he screams briefly in protest. Sonia has him feel the shirt, explaining that it is wet and that they have to take it off. He complies now, allowing her to change him.

Persistent Negative Interactions

Although the teachers in this study demonstrated many instances of support for the children in their classrooms, we also observed some persistent negative interactions between children and adults. In classroom 1, Linda presented many challenges to the teacher and assistants, particularly when she became agitated and angry. Linda's emotional state could change quickly and unexpectedly when things did not go her way, as in the following example:

> Linda sits and asks, "Where's my juice?" The assistant teacher gives her juice. Linda then says, "No, Mommy gives me coke." When she gets no response, she yells, "NO, MOMMY GIVES ME COKE" at the top of her lungs. The assistant replies, "No, you must have juice." Linda again screams, "NO!"

The adults in classroom 1 frequently responded to Linda's anger with persistent repetition of the rules, which rarely resulted in effectively changing her behavior. At times, the ways in which they attempted to impose limits for her had the unintended result of rewarding her negative behavior:

> Linda says, "I'm a horsy." Jenny bends down and speaks with Linda, then goes to put on a record. Linda suddenly screams, "Hey, hey, they're mine. Give me." She is upset. "Orville took." Another child, Alexandra, says to Linda, "Don't scream. Don't scream!" But Linda hits Orville, and he hits back. They are both in the music chairs, next to each other. A therapist says, "Stop. Stop!" Linda continues to hit Orville, and he hits her back. The therapist says, "No!" about 10 more times. Finally, she gets Linda's attention. Linda has her arm raised and is smiling. She echoes, "Stop."

In classroom 3, Peter and the assistant teacher Sonia sometimes struggled with one another around behavioral issues as well. Peter rarely conformed to social expectations in the classroom, and Sonia seemed unsure at times how much to intervene and what she should be expecting of him. Although it was clear that Sonia and Peter shared an affectionate and caring relationship, and that Sonia could demonstrate great patience and skill in adapting her interventions to accommodate Peter's special needs, Peter's unpredictable outbursts of anger and aggression could be quite challenging. At times Sonia seemed to become frustrated by his behavior, as shown in the examples below:

> Peter tries to grab popcorn from Sonia**.** She grabs his hand saying, "You need to chew and swallow first." She then tells him to open the napkin, but he doesn't. She repeats this direction a few times, and then gives him a new one. Peter gets mad; he wants popcorn, so he tries to take Daniel's napkin.... Sonia gives him two pieces of popcorn, and he hits her. He hits her again, and then again. Sonia tells him that he's finished.
>
> Peter is not too pleased with having to clean up. He hits Sonia several times. She threatens, "If you keep hitting me, I won't take you for your walk."

In all three of the classrooms, the teachers appeared to know the children well, to understand their particular dispositions, and to make efforts to establish and maintain positive social relationships with them. They did this by making individual adaptations in the ways they approached children and involved them in classroom activities, and by working to establish special bonds with them. Those children who seemed to present the greatest challenges for teachers demonstrated unpredictable and aggressive behaviors, and greater degrees of antisocial behaviors in the classroom. The teachers' social relationships with these children appeared to affect the ways that they facilitated positive social interactions with peers.

Teachers' Facilitation of Interactions with Peers

Our data analyses uncovered several ways that teachers helped to support positive social interactions between the children in their classrooms, as well as ways in which they helped children deal with conflict resolution. Through our observation and coding process, we also uncovered a number of missed opportunities for promoting social interactions between children and their peers. One of our goals for this study was to seek a better understanding of the ways in which these processes transpire and the child and teacher components that contribute to them.

Promoting Positive Interactions with Peers. Jenny, the teacher in classroom 1, provided little direct encouragement for social interaction with peers. Although she set up the classroom and planned curricula in ways that provided many age-appropriate opportunities for children to engage with peers during free play, she most often used this time to prepare for more-structured activities such as stories, art, and lunch, rather than to engage playfully with the children. The classroom assistants were often left to oversee play times, which they did with varying levels of involvement. However, Jenny did attempt to encourage sharing and joint activity at more-structured times, such as the following:

> A piece of paper is given to each child. Jenny demonstrates dipping dental floss in paint and applying it to the paper. Adam watches, shaking his piece of floss, watching carefully. Jenny gives a plate to Linda and Adam to share.

Karen, the teacher in classroom 2, on the other hand, was frequently observed to be an active participant in the children's play. She seemed able to step in at just the right time and successfully draw the more-reluctant children into play with others, as demonstrated in this pretend play sequence:

> Karen takes out a toy telephone and calls out in a very musical tone, "Hello Maria, someone's calling your name, I think, I think. I think that I hear it again. If it isn't Joey on the phone!" She hands a second toy telephone to Joey, and the children simulate talking. The play continues from Joey and Maria, to Jeremy and Jessie, then on to the other children until everyone has had a chance. Jeremy participates fully, simulating talking to Jessie. Even when it's not his turn, he is obviously enjoying this activity, clapping his hands to the musical beat and bobbing his head up and down.

Although each of the three teachers rated their classroom's ability to meet the children's social needs as 4 on a 5-point scale, it was clear from our observations that Karen took on this responsibility with a high level of action and awareness. Although she rarely imposed social rules on the children, she did not miss many opportunities to encourage the children to be kind to their friends, as demonstrated in the observation below:

> Karen says, "I think everybody's friends." Dominic says, "Nobody is Clara's friend." Karen replies, "You know what, I'm Clara's friend, and I'm going to sit right next to her." (She pulls up a chair and does this.) Soon Maria stands up and says loudly across the table, "Clara, I'm your friend." Karen tells her thank you, and Nellie also adds that she too is Clara's friend.

Through her active, participatory style, Karen frequently demonstrated for the children what they needed to do to show their peers that they were their friends, rather than simply relying on verbal descriptions of behavior. Her supportive presence and contagious enthusiasm seemed to catch on quickly for the children in her classroom, leading to an overall positive classroom climate.

In classroom 3, the teacher and the assistant teacher tended to use different styles of encouraging children to socially engage with peers. In part, the style depended on the individual skills and needs of the child. With Peter, who almost always needed help to express positive behavior toward others, Sonia tended to use a more directive style, as indicated in the examples below:

> Sonia comes over with Tammy, a child who is visiting from another classroom. She says to Peter, "Let's walk Tammy back to her room." She takes Peter by the hand, and they leave.
>
> Sonia goes to Peter and says, "You have to give Jimmy a hug because you hit him."

> ... She assists Peter to hug Jimmy with hand over hand—he does and smiles, repeating after her, "I'm sorry." He continues to hug for a few seconds.

Marilyn, on the other hand, used language to encourage the higher functioning children to work collaboratively with their peers in the observations below:

> Tony gets up to get another book and says, "Mine." He chooses a Barney book and shows it to Sonia as he sits back down on the couch next to Daniel (a child who understands more but expresses very little language). Both Daniel and Tony look at the book. Marilyn comes over and asks, "What do you have?" Tony says, "Barney book." Then Marilyn asks Daniel something, but he stays quiet. Marilyn then asks, "Where is the fish?" Jimmy comes over and also tries to sit on the couch. Tony says, "In the water." The three boys shuffle around a little, and Daniel gets up. Marilyn asks the other boys to make room for Daniel, and they easily comply. At this point, Marilyn is called away by another child, and the three boys sit quietly.
>
> Jimmy drops a piece, and Tony immediately gets off his chair and picks it up off the floor. Tony says, "Here." Jimmy says, "Thanks." Tony then knocks them all over and says to Jimmy, "Look, they all fall down!" Jimmy looks. Marilyn comes over and tells them that now they have to put them back. Both boys settle down and start to clean up.

Missed Opportunities. In each classroom, we also observed what we felt were missed opportunities for teachers to promote positive social interactions among peers. These instances came about when children spontaneously initiated interactions with peers or showed particular interest in another's activity, but the teachers either didn't respond or responded in ways that did not contribute to enhancing a potentially positive social moment. Given the busy nature of these early childhood special education classrooms, it is not surprising that these opportunities were missed. With their multiple agendas to attend to, it can be difficult for teachers to stay conscious of the social climate in the classroom. Sometimes in their attempts to maintain order in their classrooms, the teachers inadvertently curtailed potentially positive interactions between children before they were given the chance to fully unfold, as demonstrated in the following observations:

> Peter tries to take a piece of popcorn from Daniel's napkin. Daniel is sitting next to Peter on the other side of Marilyn. She says, "No. That's Daniel's." Peter puts the piece of popcorn in Daniel's mouth. Daniel accepts it. Peter then tries to take more of Daniel's popcorn, but Marilyn stops him. Peter takes another piece. Marilyn tries to help Daniel tell Peter to stop. She tells him what to say, but Daniel won't say it. Peter continues to take more of his food.
>
> Next is the hello song ... and Tony claps his hands throughout the song, again saying some of the words. Next, Tony moves his chair closer to Jimmy, and then Carrie moves her chair closer to Tony. Sonia tells the kids that they'll stop the meeting if they don't stop moving the chairs.

In each of these scenarios, children spontaneously expressed positive social interest in their peers in ways that could have been encouraged rather than discouraged by teachers. Opportunities like these could have served as springboards for teachers to promote authentic positive social interactions between children. However, the teachers' responses indicate that they viewed these social behaviors as inappropriate, and they intervened in ways that prevented further interactions between the children.

Promoting Positive Conflict Resolutions. Although teachers were less likely to facilitate spontaneous positive social interactions that emerged out of children's silly or "off task" behaviors, they were more likely to capitalize on opportunities to promote positive social skills

in response to conflicts between children. The three teachers in this study did this in different ways. Jenny, who struggled with setting limits for Linda, especially when she became aggressive and angry, tended to speak for her to the other children at times, attempting to explain her behavior while modeling the use of appropriate words for her, as demonstrated below:

> Linda puts her face into Alexandra's face and says something. She gets no response from Alexandra because Alexandra is listening to something Jenny is saying to her. Linda says something about Mommy and Big Bird. With a toy snake that she is still holding, she pushes Alexandra's valentine off the table. Alexandra yells, "Stop it, Linda. What'd you do that for?" Jenny answers for Linda: "She didn't mean it." Linda picks up Alexandra's valentine, handing it to her.

Karen typically addressed conflicts between children by suggesting an alternative that brought them together, such as sharing, as described below. Although these children did not exactly follow her suggestion, they were able to resolve the conflict in their own way with her supportive input:

> Jeremy is called to Karen's table, but he and Stephan squabble lightly over sitting in the same chair. Jeremy then gets up and looks around. He says, "Hey, where's my big chair?" Karen says, "I don't know, maybe Stephan can share with you?" She then turns to Stephan, and says: "Stephan, can you share your chair with Jeremy?" Stephan doesn't answer but decides to move to a different chair next to Karen, freeing up the controversial chair for Jeremy. Jeremy is now seated directly opposite Karen.

After Sonia's initial attempt to direct Carrie to do the right thing, Marilyn and Sonia together relied on a more indirect way of imposing a routine structure to help divert the conflict in the following example:

> Carrie takes the book away from Tony. It has been sitting in front of him while he looked around. Immediately Tony says, "My book. That my book!" He says this a few times while trying to reach for the book that Carrie is now holding to her other side so that he can't get to it. Sonia interrupts and tells Carrie to "Give the book back to Tony." Carrie immediately gives it back, and Tony clutches it in front of him while he returns his attention to Marilyn. Carrie again takes his book, this time from his hands. "My book," Tony says, and he takes it back. Sonia sees this and sits down. She says, "Carrie will collect the books today." Tony immediately puts the book in front of Carrie, on the two books that are already there. He again immediately turns around in his chair to watch Marilyn. Then he shifts his attention to Carrie who is now putting the books in the book bin.

This strategy allowed the children to demonstrate positive social behavior independently.

Discussion

Our findings reveal the complex roles that teachers play as facilitators of social experience in early childhood special education classrooms. Teachers in this study responded in diverse and very individualized ways to the children, demonstrating multiple styles of social engagement with their students and promotion of social interaction between peers. In fact, our findings indicated that teachers individualized their adaptations in response to particular children in ways that are not often described in the social skills literature but that would be clearly supported by some scholars (see Greenspan, 2003). Each of the teachers seemed to know her students well and to work hard to accommodate their individual special needs. Addressing children's social interactions with peers, however, proved to be a much more daunting task, as demonstrated in previous studies, and most of the children clearly required specific kinds of teacher scaffolding

to be able to fully participate in the social life of the classroom (Brown & Bergen, 2002).

Although small in scope, this study looked at a complex set of classroom variables surrounding the nature of social experiences in three early childhood special education classrooms. The use of qualitative analyses to further elucidate findings from a quantitative study served to create multiple lenses through which to view children's and teachers' social experiences, providing the potential for a richer understanding of both what is observed as well as how it actually transpires.

The six children selected for this analysis presented very distinct profiles. Clear examples of the impact of each child's challenges on his or her experiences and the challenges inherent for teachers as facilitators of children's social experiences provided a deeper understanding of the multiple layers of social behavior within the context of these early childhood classrooms. Children's physical and social engagement with the environment and their social communication with peers and adults—and the ways in which the adults did and did not provide support and encouragement for peer interactions—all contribute in complex ways to the overall social experience within the classrooms.

With regard to their engagement in social relationships with individual children, teachers were observed adjusting the environment and activities to promote children's social experience, making emotional connections with the children, and engaging in power struggles with some of the children. The nature of the adult-child interactions that were observed differed across classrooms, as well as between individual teachers and students within classrooms. The most successful strategies for promoting positive social experiences that we observed were the use of clear, individually responsive interventions—a finding that supports the importance of teacher style (Mahoney & Wheeden, 1999).

Differences in observed teacher style may be attributed in part to certain child and teacher variables, such as the child's individual strengths and needs, and the nature of his or her disability, as well as the teachers' level of engagement and affective involvement during their interactions with the children. These variables have not previously been studied in relation to teachers of young children with disabilities, but findings from general education early childhood classrooms indicate that they may play an important role in nurturing children's social and perhaps even academic experiences over time in the classroom (Birch & Ladd, 1996, 1997; File, 1994; Garmezy, 1984).

Of interest in this study were the particular ways that Karen, a teacher who worked within an integrated classroom, was able to address the unique needs of individual children in ways that supported membership and engagement in the group. This strategy, essential to building classroom community, might be more difficult to enact within a group of children whose abilities, skills, and interests vary more widely, which is often the case in many self-contained early childhood special education classrooms. Some of the children in Jenny's and Marilyn's classrooms presented more serious behavior problems than the children in Karen's room, which may have contributed to recursive cycles (Katz & McClellan, 1997) of negative social interactions with peers and adults.

Questions remain regarding the degree to which some children are able to capitalize on teacher input as a social resource. Teachers must continue to navigate the delicate balance between encouraging socialization among all of the children while continuously enforcing limits for some of them. As clearly defined in the literature, an important goal for young children with disabilities is to learn how to initiate spontaneous social behaviors toward their peers in appropriate ways, so that ultimately they will benefit from positive social relationships. Creating opportunities for children to practice these skills can be particularly challenging for early childhood teachers, who are often faced with the dilemma of finding the balance between encouraging spontaneous expressions and intervening to manage inappropriate behaviors. In their efforts to redirect inappropriate social behaviors, teachers may inadvertently discourage spontaneous social engagements, taking away the very opportunities they hope to create for

young children with disabilities (Kliewer, Fitzgerald, Meyer-Mork, Hartman, English-Sand, & Raschke, 2004). Insights from Karen's classroom can help teachers rethink their strategies for encouraging young children's social experiences and find creative solutions for supporting the emergence of spontaneous social behaviors.

Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Children within early childhood special education classrooms are a complex group, with diverse needs and abilities. Studying their social experiences in context requires the use of methodologies sensitive to the subtle nuances of behavioral interactions. Few studies on preschoolers with disabilities have looked at the ways in which unique aspects of children's behavior can influence their social interactions and relationships with others. Further research is needed to understand the social implications of specific disabilities for individual children.

The role of the teacher as a mediator and supporter of children's social relationships, particularly as applied to young children with special needs, has received little attention in the literature. More studies are needed that will look more carefully at this complex and important role. In order to create a classroom environment that supports positive social experiences, teachers need to adapt their social responses and intervention strategies not only to meet the individual needs of each child but also to respond to the child within the specific classroom context. Allowing children opportunities to express their spontaneous feelings toward their peers can be challenging when children's social skills are inappropriate or immature. Early childhood special education teachers, traditionally trained to teach appropriate behavior, may need to give children more space for spontaneous social expressions within the classroom environment, taking advantage of the opportunities presented for supportive teacher responses.

Dynamic interactions that take place among young children with special needs, their peers, and their teachers are influenced by many factors beyond the children's behavior. Researchers and practitioners must also attend to teacher expectations, teacher perceptions of the children and their needs, teacher behaviors and responses, and the impact of disability on the child's experience. For young children with multiple developmental challenges, it may be difficult for teachers to prioritize social experiences as a key route to other avenues of learning. Given what we know from the literature on early social experiences, however, it seems imperative that early childhood special education teachers take advantage of the powerful positions they hold in influencing young children's opportunities for further social learning.

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