"Who's the Boss?" Young Children's Power and Influence in an Early Childhood Classroom

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Abstract

Using classroom observations and teacher interviews, this study examined how three young children, considered classroom leaders by their teachers, created complex dilemmas for their teachers through their interactions with teachers and peers. Findings showed that the children's powerful influence on their peers could be both positive and negative, and they could use their influence to agitate other children in ways that challenged teachers' thinking about building classroom community. The findings present an opportunity to address the influence of power dynamics in daily early childhood classroom practices and to expand on teachers' thinking about ways to negotiate power in relationships as they work to build classroom community.

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of power dynamics in child-child and teacher-child social relationships and their impact on the development of social community within an early childhood classroom. Three teacher-identified young leaders from a previous study (Shin, Recchia, Lee, Lee, & Mullarkey, 2004) were used as focus children in this study, with the aim of exploring the ways in which power comes to play a critical role in social relationships and how it can inadvertently influence classroom experiences for both children and teachers. It is important for early childhood teachers to think about the role of power because early childhood classrooms, like other communities, are social environments where relationships are complicated by the power dynamics at play between different individuals. Power relationships in early childhood classrooms are usually discussed within the context of teacher-child relationships, especially as they relate a teacher's loss of control when managing children's behaviors. The role of power dynamics is rarely connected to building a social community within the early childhood classroom, where all the participants share power beyond teacher-child relationships. The complex web of relationships, influenced by power dynamics, is difficult yet important to address in order to examine social relationships in a more meaningful way.

Support for the creation of democratic classrooms has been elaborated as a foundational component of early childhood practice (Moss, 2007). However, we believe that power dynamics are directly connected to broader issues in the development of social community, such as inclusion/exclusion (Sebanc, Pierce, Cheatham, & Gunnar, 2003) and the empowerment of children to make decisions (Erwin & Kipness, 1997). We believe that early childhood practitioners must look deeper into the ways that power relationships play out in their early childhood classrooms for both teachers and children. For example, children could take the role of class clown and use humor to negotiate their power by shifting the course of classroom conversations and creating contexts for other children to follow their agenda (Hobday-Kusch & McVittie, 2002). This study focuses on the role of power dynamics and acknowledges the feelings of discomfort for teachers in ways that we hope will help them raise critical questions related to building a social community.

Foucault (1977) states that power relationships are not constant but always in motion, implying that we create power as we engage in relationships and that at times that power shapes our own actions. Early childhood classrooms, like other communities, are social environments in which different individuals with diverse personalities and a wide range of abilities come together to create a complex web of human relationships. Within the context of social interactions, some children may have more power and influence over other children, and sometimes over teachers, setting the agendas during group meeting times and free play, regulating the minute details of physical space and time, and influencing who is included and excluded. One example of this type of interplay can be seen during circle time in an early childhood classroom, where it is a common practice for teachers to provide opportunities for all the children in the group to share their ideas and thoughts. However, sometimes teachers need to regulate individual children's power within the group, particularly those who may want to push forward their own agendas, in order for all the children's voices to be heard equally within the time constraints of the classroom schedule.

When considering power dynamics in the classroom, we affirm that power is created and circulated as a result of interactions and relationships, rather than a fixed entity that is possessed by a group of people. In a sense, children gain power in relation to the extent to which the teacher yields her own power. In the classroom observed in this study, teachers' acknowledged the selected child leaders as powerful (see Mullarkey, Recchia, Lee, Lee, & Shin, 2005, for a further elaboration of teachers' descriptions of the children). We viewed the teachers not only in their traditional roles of "facilitators" or "scaffolders" but also as power holders who create boundaries for children. Young children were also seen as powerful social negotiators who impact others' experiences. In some situations, teachers may find themselves in power struggles with children. We call these situations "dilemmas," a term that emphasizes a state of uncertainty or perplexity that requires a choice between equally unfavorable options. "Subjectivity" is applied as each case is constructed as a dilemma through the researchers' perspectives. For example, as described above, during circle time when one child wants to dominate a conversation and set an agenda for the group discussion, a teacher may face a dilemma between honoring the child's preference and silencing the child's voice to include perspectives of other children. No matter what the teacher does in this situation, there is something to be lost. The bigger and more troubling issue is to determine when to support the individual child and when to support the needs of the larger community—to determine when the rights and privileges of one student are infringing on the rights and privileges of others (Goodman, 2000).

Other researchers, such as Goodman (2000, 2002) and Ryan and Grieshaber (2004), have addressed complex dilemmas in early childhood classrooms, raising questions about common practices regarding such issues as peer acceptance/rejection, teachers' responses to diversity, and the issue of power within teacher-child relationships. Grieshaber and Cannella (2001) have also discussed the importance of deconstructing underlying values, biases, and beliefs that generate particular views about best practices in early childhood classrooms. However, although these researchers raised these critical issues, they did not fully explore in their work the classroom contexts in which relationships intersect to create a whole community. This study not only raises similar issues but interweaves and embeds them within this particular classroom context. As we looked deeply into our data, we found examples that led us to explore beyond the surface level of the social interactions within this preschool classroom. This study provides a unique opportunity to examine everyday practices, addressing how teachers can be influenced by young children's ideas and behaviors, and what happens when teachers become uncomfortable, and sometimes afraid of losing control, in response to particular children's powerful presence. The following research questions were addressed:

1. How do the behaviors and interactions of particular children, identified as young leaders, affect other children's experiences in the preschool classroom?
2. In what ways do these children's behaviors create dilemmas for teachers as their social interactions are colored by power dynamics that challenge teachers' ideas about creating classroom community?

Methods

Setting

This study was conducted in the preschool classroom of a university-affiliated child care center in New York City, which enacts a flexible and primarily child-centered, play-based curriculum. The classroom studied served a mixed-age group of 3- to 5-year-old children and followed an emergent curriculum philosophy. As described in their interviews, teachers worked hard to provide an environment that supported and responded to children's ideas, while building a sense of community in the group (Mullarkey et al., 2005). Approximately 14 children, 2 head teachers, and several assistant teachers were in the classroom at the time of the study.

Participants

This study is based on classroom observations and individual interviews with the two head teachers in the preschool classroom. Both teacher participants were European American women in their late 20s to early 30s with several years of previous experience with this age group. In an initial interview, teachers were asked to identify young leaders in their classrooms (for further description of this interview process, see Shin et al., 2004). Teacher 1 selected Calvin and Jackie, while Teacher 2 selected Louis and Jackie. Calvin was a 4-year-old African European American boy, Louis was a 4-year-old European American boy, and Jackie was a 4-year-old European American girl. These three children were selected as focus children for the present study on power dynamics because of their powerful presence in the classroom, as identified by the teachers.

Data Collection

This study emerged from a previous study focusing on early childhood leadership (Mullarkey et al., 2005; Shin et al., 2004) conducted by a team of seven doctoral students and a faculty advisor. During phase one of the study, each teacher was interviewed individually for approximately 30 minutes. Interviews began with questions regarding general background, educational philosophy, and thoughts on leadership and young children (see Mullarkey et al., 2005). The conversation then turned to specific children in their classrooms and their leadership styles, with each teacher providing illustrative vignettes, discussing an individual child's behavior, and reflecting on events and their responses to them. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and reader-checked by the participating teachers.

During phase two of the study, once leaders were identified, data were gathered about the children through natural classroom observations over a 6-week period of the spring semester of the school year. Each child was observed once a week for 30 minutes. Observations were recorded as a running record of social interaction and done at different times of the day in order to capture various aspects of children's experiences. Two additional videotaped classroom observations were also recorded for each child and included in the data analysis. Thus, our study included a total of 24 classroom observations.

Data Analysis

Following our initial analysis focused on early childhood leadership, two members of the original research team (the authors) had further questions about the role of power in creating aspects of the classroom social dynamics. We re-examined the original data in an attempt to deconstruct the ways that children and teachers used power to negotiate relationships and influence the social context of the classroom. The researchers analyzed data collaboratively. This qualitative data analysis process was complex, elaborate, and interpretive, bringing meaning to the data. Both researchers read all the data several times with great care and then examined the data to identify emerging themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of teachers' and children's behavior through the analytic process (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). All emerging themes were discussed and compared. The research questions were designed to explore complex issues of power dynamics based on the teachers' reflections on multiple levels as well as our classroom observations. Data gathered from observations of each child were examined alongside relevant excerpts from teacher interviews. Both a case-by-case and a cross-case analysis were carried out. Each case study attempted to describe not only how teachers conceptualized classroom leadership but also how teachers responded to the children's presence and behavior in the classroom.

Findings

Findings are presented in a case-study format in response to the research questions in order to highlight how individual children exercised their powers in different ways. Each case is described in greater detail below, supported with actual anecdotes from classroom observations and excerpts from teacher interviews.

Calvin

Using Playful Silliness to Influence Peers. Calvin was a dynamic, outgoing, and charismatic classroom leader whose creative sense of humor was quite attractive to other children (Shin et al., 2004). However, his silly behavior often led to rough play with other boys, sometimes creating a challenge for teachers when this rough play did not appear safe from their perspectives. During the teacher interview, head teacher #1 described how Calvin influenced peers:

> *...at the lunch table, he'll like hit himself or make silly words, or maybe a little more in an adult-tolerable way he'll tell knock-knock jokes and then inevitably within like 4 minutes half the class is doing that also.... Also, ... well, recently they've been doing a lot of running games in the dance space.... So if he starts to chase another boy, then almost everyone will start following him.*

What started out as Calvin being silly could escalate into physically rough and aggressive play, which was sometimes intimidating to other children. With his powerful way of exerting energy, he sometimes took over other children's physical space, particularly when teachers were on the periphery of his activities.

Special Relationships Become Exclusive. Calvin had strong preferences toward several boys in the classroom, and a more critical (and somewhat controversial) issue arose as the researchers observed the ways that he used his power to clearly express who could be included in (or excluded from) their play. The following examples illustrate Calvin's selective choices.

> **Anecdote #1**
> "Calvin, Calvin, Calvin," Ira calls. "I'm talking to you, Calvin!"
> Calvin does not respond to Ira. Instead, Calvin reaches over and takes a Spiderman cup from Harry, who quickly turns to look at him. Calvin smiles and puts it back. Harry smiles.
> "Calvin, Calvin," Ira looks directly at Calvin, waving a large plastic bottle of orange juice in front of him while calling his name.
> Calvin does not look up. Calvin leans toward Harry, who is sitting on his right, and says something. Harry smiles as Calvin speaks.
> Ira calls out again, "Calvin! Talk to me!"
> Calvin replies quietly without looking up, "No."
> Ira asks Calvin, "Do you use the bathroom?"
> "Stop it!" Calvin replies. "I don't want to talk to you."
> "Calvin, Calvin," Ira calls again, waving his juice.
> Hana (TA) intercedes. "Calvin is not being such a good friend to you right now. Show someone else who's interested," she tells Ira.
> "Calvin," he continues.
> "OK, OK," Calvin says, looking up. "I'm not talking to you."

In the example above, it is obvious that Calvin openly ignored Ira's attempt to initiate play with him, while he showed a friendly response to Harry, one of his special friends. Maintaining his special relationships often resulted in excluding particular children from the boys' play. Because Calvin easily expressed his like/dislike toward peers through his powerful verbal communication, it was quite obvious who was in and out of Calvin's play. In this case, the TA allowed Calvin to choose to ignore Ira by re-directing Ira rather than requiring Calvin to respond to him.

Teachers' Concerns about Classroom Safety and Respect for Others. Calvin drew the teachers' attention by constantly testing them and was a leader who challenged the teachers' ability to bring their educational visions to life in the classroom (Mullarkey et al., 2005). Our observations often illustrated how Calvin pushed teachers' boundaries regarding safety and appropriate ways of engaging with peers. The teachers were very aware of the ways in which Calvin's active energy could become destructive. The following excerpt from the interview of head teacher #1 suggests the kind of "power struggle" she felt in her relationship with Calvin:

> *To be honest, when he's leading the kids in a sort of very silly way I have a really hard time with that. And sometimes it escalates and someone gets hurt, but sometimes ... it's just ... I don't think I've been doing a good job of doing this overall, but what I've really been trying in the last week, is to redirect him, but very subtly....*

Calvin had a way of inciting situations that caused the teachers to respond to him by reinforcing rules. Often the teachers responded to Calvin by instructing him about

appropriate, safe ways of being in the classroom. What follows is a good example of another kind of power struggle that ensued between the teachers and Calvin, which reflected concern about his ways of being disrespectful to peers. In this example, Jackie, another identified leader in the classroom, is worried that the boys are talking about her as they whisper quietly to one another. She seeks the teacher's help:

> **Anecdote #2**
> Head teacher #1 pulls up a small chair and sits down between Harry and Ira, almost across from Calvin. "A secret is something that's only between two people," she remarks. "What makes it good to have a secret? Why do you think you need to have a secret?" she asks Calvin.
> "Because I never told her," he replies, without looking up.
> "So it will be a special thing?" Head teacher #1 continues. "You want it to be a special thing between you and Harry?"
> "Then you have to tell it," Jackie says.
> "I think it's OK if the secret is about yourself. But when it is about someone else nearby, it can be rude," head teacher #1 says.
> Calvin looks up at head teacher #1 and calmly says, "I'm not telling Jackie," then goes back to eating.
> "Then don't talk about Jackie because she wants to know; she has a right to know," head teacher #1 tells him. Head teacher #1 changes the subject, "Calvin, you wanted to tell me about your new toy?"
> A minute later he leans toward Harry again. Head teacher #1 stops him again. "You are not telling secrets at the table. When it's just you and Harry (inaudible), then OK. When it's only two people around then secrets are OK. But not now."
> "But that's in like 10 weeks!" Calvin exclaims. "It's a long time till that comes."
> "But it's rude here at the table," head teacher #1 replies.
> "Then I'm not going to tell you guys," Calvin says, folding his arms in front of him.
> "You can tell out loud if you like," head teacher #1 tells him, but Calvin returns to his eating.
> "I told you all I have a secret," Calvin says to no one in particular.
> "OK, OK," he says. "It's not about her. It's about the cup," he says, pointing to Harry's Spiderman cup.
> "Then you can tell us all out loud," head teacher #1 says.
> "But then everyone will know the secret," Calvin responds.
> "Why don't you just say it? Don't whisper it," she tells Calvin.
> "It's about the cup," he repeats.
> "Then just say it out loud," head teacher #1 replies.
> "Now you made me say it!" Calvin yells.
> "I don't think I made you say it," head teacher #1 responds calmly. "That was your choice." Calvin goes back to eating. Still looking at Calvin, head teacher #1 continues, "I don't know, Calvin. You seemed upset all morning." Calvin continues to eat his rice.

The anecdote above illustrates that Calvin wasn't really talking about Jackie and seemed quite bothered by the fact that the teacher pushed him to reveal his special secret with Harry. Following Jackie's lead, the teacher imposed a "politically correct" rule about not talking about others secretly in their presence so as not to be rude and exclude them. However in so doing, she took from Calvin his right to share a secret with a special friend. Without having a full understanding of the situation, the teacher took Jackie's word for what the problem might be, without recognizing Calvin's rights or giving Calvin an opportunity to fully explain his actions.

Louis

Physicality as a Powerful Influence. Louis was a physically competent leader who explored the classroom freely, making his presence known (Shin et al., 2004). Although he used few words to get other children's attention, Louis had a powerful way of communicating using nonverbal action to interact with and influence his peers. During the teacher interview, head teacher #2 clearly described Louis's unique leadership characteristics:

> *Although that's not necessarily a positive leader ... the little boys will do anything he wants them to do—anything. Anything he's interested in—Power Rangers, Spiderman—they'll jump on the bandwagon. And they'll buy the t-shirts and the toys. And I don't think that's necessarily.... I mean, some of the kids have never even seen the Power Rangers on television, but they only play it because he's playing it.... Somehow that makes it cool. Because he knows what it is. So when we go to the park or the dance space, they're all Power Rangers.*

As described above, his charismatic way drew children to him, even when Louis did not seem to plan to do so intentionally. Unlike Calvin who wanted to be the center of attention and created situations that sought out teachers' and peers' positive and negative responses, Louis had a more verbally quiet and independent way of behaving. He used more indirect strategies for engaging others and did not always respond so clearly and directly to teachers or other children.

Like Calvin, Louis also engaged in physically rough and aggressive play. Louis enjoyed Calvin as a playmate, and other children seemed especially interested in their play. When peers joined these two boys, the group play usually escalated into rough play that challenged the teachers' notions of safety. The following anecdote shows how Louis engaged in active play with peers:

> **Anecdote #3**
> Louis and Calvin hold hands and walk around. Calvin says to Harry, "It's nice to meet you." Louis says to Harry, "You are a Power Ranger." Louis shouts this to Harry several times, and Harry responds by saying, "I'm just a boy." Louis keeps saying that Harry is a Power Ranger. After going back and forth several times, Harry begins to cry when Louis pushes him. Louis walks away from Harry with Calvin. The assistant teacher calls Louis and says, "Why don't you say nice words? It's not nice to push him." Louis answers back, "I did it by accident." The assistant teacher says to Louis, "You still have to say something."

As seen in the above anecdote, Louis's powerful presence could be overbearing to some children in the classroom.In this example,Louis's agenda in the play posed a threat to Harry who was not interested in being a "Power Ranger." Louis's action brought about a response from the TA, but her focus seemed to be on pushing Louis to behave in a more socially appropriate way, without addressing the underlying power issue. Her response highlighted Louis's aggressive action but did not support Harry's need to express his own individuality or question Louis's inability to honor it.

Friendships That Openly Exclude Others. Because of their special friendship, the issue of exclusion/inclusion often became more obvious when Calvin and Louis excluded particular children from their play, as in the example below:

> **Anecdote #4**
> Head teacher #2 asks each child to pick a friend to line up with, so that they can go out to the park. When head teacher #2 calls Jen's name, Jen gets up, goes straight to Calvin, and reaches her right arm toward Calvin indicating that she wants to hold his hand. Then Ethan comes near and reaches his hands out to Calvin too. Calvin shakes his hands to say no, and points to Louis. Ethan turns around and holds hands with Brad. When Louis is called, he smiles and makes a move toward Calvin. They hold hands. Jen couldn't find anyone to hold her hand, so she turned to head teacher #2 for help. The teacher holds Jen's hand and everybody starts walking out of the room.

Shown here, as in Anecdote #1, with their strong influence over others, the young children set an agenda that could discriminate against certain children's opportunities to fully participate. Although the teachers tried to create opportunities for free choice among the children, when Louis or Calvin responded by making choices that clearly discriminated against certain children, the teachers did not openly address their exclusivity. In these situations, which are common occurrences in early childhood classrooms, we found that teachers usually focused primarily on keeping the routine flowing, ignoring the opportunity to articulate how some children can be marginalized. From the researchers' perspectives, these are situations in which the power dynamic has an impact on social relationships and creates an opportunity for teachers to address the issue of power.

Perspectives on Safety That Restrict Freedom. Like Calvin, Louis often engaged in rough play that challenged the teachers' notions of safety because he could be quite aggressive toward other children. As revealed in her interview responses, head teacher #2 seemed to struggle with this notion of inappropriate play and was uncomfortable with Louis's way of engaging children:

> *Well, the Power Rangers aren't always peaceful. They sometimes hurt the other children who they deem as bad guys. They don't even know they're bad guys until suddenly they're getting ... you know ... people are there pushing them down ... usually I try to ... I'll take like a few of the boys who are sort of the followers and try to sort of build a friendship. So like maybe I might say, "Maybe Calvin and Harry want to come away and do this special activity." ... Just try to*

break up the group a little bit ... and not let it keep building on itself.

Louis also seemed to create a dilemma for the teachers in terms of how to define "safe" and "inappropriate" play, because children and teachers may have different perspectives on this issue. For example, it might look inappropriate from the teacher's perspective when Louis knocked the blocks down instead of building something with them, but he was very physically competent and clearly enjoyed this kind of rough play. There were situations where teachers wanted to slow down his play, and they frequently stepped in to define what was "safe." There seemed to be an ongoing struggle over how to differentiate between supporting children's active energy in their play and reinforcing appropriate, safe ways of being in the classroom.

Selective Responses to Adults in the Classroom. One interesting thing about Louis's leadership style is that he used his strong nonverbal communication skills to actively ignore particular peers and adults, making them feel almost invisible at times. The following anecdote illustrates how Louis responded selectively to different teachers:

Anecdote #5
Louis takes out the Lego container and starts connecting the Lego pieces together. Ellen (TA) comes over and asks him to move the container over a little because there is not enough room. Louis does not respond to Ellen (TA). Ellen (TA) asks Louis, "You know what, do you want to play at the store?" Louis does not respond to her and walks away to the block area. Louis takes out two animals and pretends that they are flying around. Head teacher #2 is preparing snack, and Louis looks at her. Louis comes out from the kitchen and walks to the grocery store and the resting area. He takes out the blanket and puts it on his head. Louis calls her name with the blanket on his head. Louis says, "When someone gets up, can I go and eat snack?" Head teacher #2 says, "You can use my seat." Louis asks, "I can?" Louis leaves the blanket on the floor. He runs to the sink in the bathroom, washes his hands, and comes to the table.

In Anecdote #5, Louis did not respond directly to Ellen, a part-time assistant teacher. However, at the same time, he engaged in a friendly conversation with head teacher #2. Just as he showed a strong preference regarding children with whom he wanted to play, Louis clearly indicated his preference for teachers, evidenced in who he ignored and to whom he responded favorably. The following anecdote illustrates how he chose to ignore certain teachers' reprimands or diminish their attempts to scaffold more appropriate social behaviors:

Anecdote #6
When the "Head, shoulder, knees, toes" song begins, Louis stops dancing. He picks up a basket from the floor and puts it on his head. The assistant teacher tells Louis that it is not safe. Louis does not respond to her and walks away. Head teacher #1 tells Louis that he needs to listen to all the teachers. Louis takes the basket off his head and gives it to the assistant teacher.

Louis seemed to have a close relationship with head teacher #2. He actively participated in the activities she led and chose to be near her throughout the day. The dilemma that emerges from these situations centers on how comfortable teachers are with children's strong preferences for particular peers and teachers. Should Louis, for example, have had the power to choose which teacher he wanted to listen to and which teacher he could ignore? How did these behaviors reinforce or counteract teachers' notions regarding the power of their own voices in managing children's behaviors?

Jackie

Moving Her Own Agenda Forward. When engaged in peer play, Jackie held her own with the other children, often taking charge and enforcing the "rules" with them. Many children seemed to "obey" her orders quite readily, and even those who didn't follow her commands seldom challenged her, as described below:

Anecdote #7
Jackie goes over to two other girls saying, "Come here, I have it for both of us." She is holding a remote control of some sort. One of the girls attempts to take the remote control from Jackie, and there is a bit of a struggle. Jackie maintains her grip, and the other girl concedes. Jackie begins to play with two other girls and coaxes them over to the blue mat. She says, "Let's go to Princess Land," in a very excited voice. All three girls begin running around the room, laughing and smiling. Jackie is leading the other two back and forth from one side of the room to the blue mat and back again. Later, Ann arrives and joins their play. She asks if she can hold the remote control. Jackie says, "It only works for me." Ann says again, "I want to see it for now." Jackie, ignoring Ann's response, says, "Let's go to the roller-coaster ride."

At times, Jackie's demeanor, particularly with younger or more passive children, was strong enough to evoke a response from one of the teachers, cautioning her to reduce the intensity of her interactions. Jackie's persistence in pursuing her own agenda sometimes led her to impose her will on others against their wishes. In the example below, a younger child who is an English language learner works hard to let Jackie know that she is not interested in playing with her. Jackie is persistent and doesn't give up easily:

Anecdote #8
Jackie walks over to Sara (who is crawling around pretending to be a dog) and says, "Come on." She grabs Sara tight, and head teacher #1 warns her that she is playing too rough. Jackie gently pats Sara's back and walks alongside her, but Sara does not crawl in the direction that Jackie wants to go. Jackie follows alongside Sara very carefully.... Sara begins to crawl fast. Jackie says, "Run fast!" A few minutes later, Jackie gets up and says to Sara, "Come this way!" Sara does not follow Jackie. Jackie says, "Come on."... Sara walks away from Jackie and says, "No. I don't want to." Jackie asks Jen, "Do you want to be a kitty?" but Jen walks away. Head teacher #1 tells Jackie that she can ask Adam or Ethan to be a kitty, but Jackie says, "No."

Enacting the Teacher's Agenda. Unlike Louis and Calvin, Jackie's competent presence and more socially appropriate leadership style allowed her to enact her leadership role with less teacher interference. Jackie was selected as a young leader by both classroom teachers, and both described her characteristics in a positive way. In her description of Jackie, head teacher #2 said, "She always seems to take us all to another level," and head teacher #1 said, "She definitely speaks out the most ... and people follow her when she does." Both teachers acknowledged that Jackie was able to advance the classroom agenda in ways that clearly reflected their goals for the children. The teachers also saw Jackie as a catalyst for bringing the group to a higher level, and her good ideas often served as a scaffold for building on the teachers' agenda. Both teachers described specific incidents in their interviews in which Jackie was able to advance the classroom agenda in ways that clearly reflected their goals for the children:

Head teacher #1: One day when we were deciding whether to go to the dance studio or the park ... I got a clipboard and I made a chart and we went around the room together and we took a tally, took a vote. And then one day later on she overheard [the teachers' discussion] and she said, "Let's take a vote." And she ... did ... the whole thing by herself ... went around the room ... saying, "Well, the park would be good...." She's pretty influential.

Head teacher #2: I know, for example, if we're having a meeting and we're all on the rug and I need everyone to give me ideas, and everyone is drawing a blank, I can call her name.... She'll have something, something perfect. And it'll just spin the whole meeting and everyone will just play off her idea.

At times, however, it seemed as though the teachers became almost uncomfortably aware of the ways in which capitalizing on Jackie's contributions might take opportunities away from others. Jackie enjoyed being in the spotlight, and it was easy for her to land there. But sometimes the teachers needed to make extra efforts to create a space for other voices in the classroom discourse. The anecdote below is an example of how the teacher relies on Jackie to offer her great ideas but struggles to keep her from dominating the discussion. Rather than acknowledging how Jackie's powerful presence can affect the discourse within the group, the teacher chooses to selectively ignore Jackie's input after she has several chances to contribute to allow room for the voices of others to be heard. In this example, the teacher's attempt to equalize power in the discussion did not really serve to bring power issues to light for Jackie or her peers:

Anecdote #9
Teacher: "Raise your hand if you have an idea about what happened to the goldfish." (Jackie is the first to raise her hand. The teacher ignores her and gives other students a chance.)
Sara (trying to explain): "He wanted to.... (inaudible)
Teacher (rephrases): "He wanted to swim in the water?"
Teacher: "That's one idea." (She writes the answer on the board. Jackie sits quietly and listens. The teacher asks another child for an idea, and he asks a question. The teacher reminds the children that they have to raise their hands. Jackie lifts her hand up high.)
Teacher: "Jackie, what is your idea?"
Jackie: "My idea is that she died."

Calvin: "I was going to say that."
Teacher: "It doesn't matter who gets to say it. That's Jackie's idea, but it could be your idea too." (She writes it down.) "So I wonder why he died."
Jackie (very ready to answer): "Because the water got too hot."
Teacher: "Maybe the water got too hot. Somebody told me that over the weekend the room got very warm, and we know that the goldfish do not like the hot water. So, Jackie, that's a good idea. Maybe the water got too hot."
Adam: "Maybe it got very, very hot."

The teacher then tries to call on others to express their ideas. She brings the discussion back to the idea of the water being too hot. She then talks with the children about replacing the fish. Jackie continues to try to offer suggestions by interrupting and even raising her hand, but the teacher chooses not to call on her.

Summary

As described above, although these three children exercised their power in different ways, across cases there are overarching themes in response to the research questions. In response to research question one, we see how these young leaders—with their creative ideas and competent skills—can lead other children to more interesting play themes and bring play and discussion to a higher level. On the other hand, the children's powerful influence can also become very domineering, limiting opportunities for other children's ideas to be heard and fully integrated into their play, and making it difficult for other children to take initiative. When classroom leaders have the opportunity to make choices that can impact others, questions of inclusion and exclusion arise, and these questions challenge early childhood teachers to think more deeply about social justice issues in their classrooms.

In response to research question two, interview data indicated a mismatch at times between what teachers envisioned a preschool classroom community to be and how actual children behaved within the classroom context (Mullarkey et al., 2005). For example, head teacher #1 discussed how Calvin was not the leader she envisioned, describing his behavior as "*definitely not what the teacher would like him to do"* and *"pushing the limits to see what he can get away with."* Also, head teacher #2 indicated that Louis was not "*necessarily a positive leader."* Although neither teacher expressed any negative comments about Jackie's leadership style directly, nor discussed specific ways that they might need to discourage her as a leader, Jackie's leadership style did not always fit the teachers' visions of their early childhood classroom. One teacher indicated this view in her telling response in the teacher interview, "*...we have a little girl who can even be very influential with me and I'm not always aware of it*...." From the teachers' perspectives, these young leaders stirred up other children in somewhat uncomfortable ways. Their compelling presence in the classroom could upset the power balance and even usurp the teachers' power at times.

For teachers who aspire to create a democratic community where all the children are respected and included, children like Calvin, Louis, and Jackie can create challenges. Because these young leaders hold great social power within the classroom, teachers' ways of responding to them can set a powerful agenda for all of the classroom children to follow. Our findings raise interesting, yet difficult questions:

- To what extent, or under what circumstances, can or should teachers allow young children to exclude certain peers?
- Must early childhood teachers insist that children be nice to or include everybody for the purpose of fairness?
- When young leaders strongly push their own ideas forward, sometimes in ways that can disadvantage others, how can teachers foster a community where all the children's voices are heard?

Our findings indicate that teachers' responses in situations that raised these questions were frequently inconsistent or indirect in addressing issues of power.

Discussion

Through a careful analysis of classroom interactions, we see how teachers may inadvertently empower some children while disenfranchising others in the ways that they encourage or discourage particular classroom behaviors. We do not intend to blame teachers for these actions. On the contrary, our observations point out how easy it can be for teachers to react to situations in the heat of the moment without reflecting upon whether they are unconsciously responding differently to children with powerful voices, compared with children who are marginalized. Real anecdotes from the classroom were presented to illustrate typical classroom situations, giving insight into dilemmas that many teachers face on a daily basis. It is our hope that these findings will help teachers think more deeply about their professional roles and responsibilities (Katz, 1984) as agents and negotiators of power in their classrooms.

Although the teachers in our study (Mullarkey et al., 2005) were able to envision ways to facilitate an ideal social environment where all children, including those from diverse backgrounds and with a wide range of abilities, can have equal social opportunities and share power, the everyday challenges they faced with the real children in their classrooms made it difficult at times to bring their visions to life. Our teachers' responses to the most powerful children in their classroom showed that in order to empower all children, sometimes it was necessary to disempower some children, going against the children's wishes and their own ideals. Best practices in early childhood teaching exemplify the teacher's role as an empowering agent in her work with young children. Because of the dynamic and fluid nature of power, however, no one person can always be empowered, and both teachers and children are able to disempower each other in everyday classroom situations. The nature of these disempowering interactions can easily lead to a sense of discomfort in teachers, as they reported in our study.

Our observations demonstrated ways that teachers often ignore this aspect of power dynamics, missing opportunities to raise critical questions about their own and children's behaviors. We believe these feelings of discomfort experienced by teachers must be recognized and validated before they can become opportunities for learning how to share power. These uncomfortable moments can be used as a catalyst for reflection and transformation. Teachers can actively reflect on their beliefs and practices in relation to children's choices, which can emerge in unexpected ways.

Furthermore, this study deconstructs some taken-for-granted early childhood practices. For example, recommended practices in early childhood (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) emphasize the value in creating curriculum that supports children's initiations, but these recommended practices do not fully consider the role of power dynamics in the early childhood classroom. While early childhood educators emphasize "child-centered" and "emergent" curriculum, we often fail to fully recognize the ways in which different children's voices contribute to determining the curriculum within a dynamic, play-based classroom environment. If individual children are perceived as having diverse minds, bodies, strengths, and needs, can there be a single or simple understanding of "child-centered" practice? The use of this term seems to operate under the assumption that it is all about the children. But in the day-to-day world of an early childhood classroom, teachers ultimately have to make decisions and be responsible for outcomes. Furthermore, within a dynamic classroom, the child is not always at the center; rather, power shifts back and forth between teachers and children. Our findings encourage a rethinking of the term "child-centered" and a move toward a "community-centered" classroom that emphasizes the importance of shared power. When creating "community-centered" curriculum, it is important to include a place for teachers' power and to reflect deeply on how power is shared among and shifted between teachers and children.

Recommendations

This study raises a critical question faced by early childhood teachers—when children who take on powerful leadership roles in the classroom use their status to create uncomfortable situations for their peers and their teachers, what are the implications for building a social classroom community? Through the lens of postmodernism, teachers are encouraged to consider their own values and interests in framing classroom practices and to view teaching and learning interactions from multiple perspectives (Ryan & Grieshaber, 2005). One of the teachers' crucial roles is to reflect upon the issue of when and how to support children to be empowered. When classroom practices overly restrict children from expressing their feelings and desires in the name of "being nice to others" or "facilitating classroom management," what messages do we send children about honesty and leadership (Goodman, 2000)? As Goodman (2002) reminds us, if our goal is to raise children as critical thinkers rather than obedient listeners, we must give them opportunities to be actively involved in experiencing moral dilemmas and making moral decisions. However, if teachers honor children's choices without providing opportunities to critically analyze their consequences for others, or fail to raise children's consciousness about the impact of their choices, are they truly supporting opportunities for all of the children to share power in the classroom?

On a practical level, it is important for teachers to engage in dialogue with children to present and validate multiple points of views. In order to accomplish this goal, teachers must first be able to trust children to find their own solutions with peers. Teachers must also be role models for children, demonstrating how power can be shared, for example,

through thinking out loud with other adults as a model for the children. Creating opportunities within the classroom for joint problem solving between teachers and children can also serve to scaffold more meaningful peer interactions and provide a forum for children whose voices are heard less often. Through these actions, teachers can influence the day-to-day quality of all children's social experiences within their classrooms.

Finally, our findings raise interesting questions about the role of power dynamics in the early childhood classroom and their influence on issues of diversity, community, and social justice. As teachers strive to meet the multiple needs of young children in their classroom through "developmentally appropriate practices," they must not lose sight of this "hidden curriculum." In order to create early childhood classroom communities that truly embrace diversity and empower all children to find their voices, teachers will need to make a conscious effort to bring issues of power in from the shadows by articulating them with and for young children.

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