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Students with Special Needs and Their Interaction with Peers during Play

by

Meghan K. Neary

January 1, 2010

A thesis submitted to the

Department of Education and Human Development of the

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

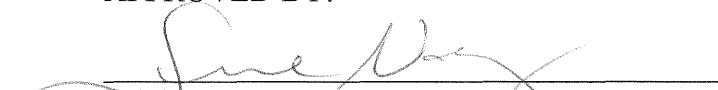
Master of Science in Education

Students with Special Needs and Their Interaction with Peers during Play

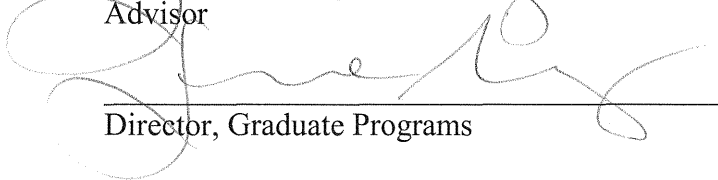
by

Meghan K. Neary


APPROVED BY:



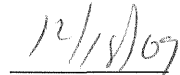
Advisor



Director, Graduate Programs



Date



Date

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

For students with special needs, social interaction is an essential component of development. Research has indicated that social and emotional development is crucial to the academic success of students; however, there has been little research related to peer interaction that supports this development and more specifically during play opportunities (Gottlieb, Gottlieb, Berkell, & Levy, 2001). Lev Vygotsky, a seminal theorist and social constructivist, understood the importance of creating meaningful social encounters throughout a child's development. His research indicated students with special needs benefit greatly from peer and adult interaction. Vygotsky stated, "children with difficulties should be included as much as possible in the regular activities of the primary culture" (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 83). With inclusive education, students with special needs have the opportunity to interact with peers in a general education setting.

All students with disabilities have the right to a free and public education (FAPE) in the United States (Jasper, 2004). With the introduction of the Individuals with Disabilities Act or IDEA, new guidelines were set in place to ensure the inclusion of students with special needs in the general education classroom (Jasper, 2004). Under IDEA, these students take part in the daily routine of the general education classroom; however, there are accommodations and modifications that need to be met to ensure that these students have equal opportunities for learning. These accommodations are not only necessary for academic success, but students with

disabilities need the social and emotional experiences within a general education classroom. One major outcome of an ideal inclusion model is the social development of students with special needs. These students are working cooperatively and interacting with peers and adults in the classroom. “If social engagement is indeed a goal of inclusion, then new understandings and new strategies are needed by teachers as to how social engagement can be facilitated within inclusive early education programs” (Walker & Berthelsen, 2008, p.34-35). IDEA opened the door for social interaction to occur, however, within the inclusive classroom there are still needed steps to ensure students with special needs are being included.

One key component necessary for social development is the opportunity for free play (Berk & Winsler, 1995). For elementary school children, free play is usually a time for imagination, make-believe, and socialization to occur. Students who are exposed to free play in the classroom are not only learning how to socialize, but are contributing to all areas of development. Past research has shown that students who participate in play are generally more advanced intellectually, are seen as more socially competent, and understand their own feelings and the feelings of others (Berk et al). Research also indicted “young children who especially enjoy pretending also score higher on tests of imagination and creativity” (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 58). Past research has shown that play is an important aspect of a child’s development (Celeste, 2006). Within the inclusion model, are students with special needs benefiting from these engagements?

Overwhelming evidence has shown that students with special needs have difficulty creating meaningful play interactions with peers.

Children with disabilities receive fewer positive responses to their social bids or attempts to engage in social interactions and, as a result, demonstrate less interest in their peers, which makes them more prone to social isolation. In addition, they are rarely sought out as resources by their peers, infrequently serve as role models, and are the least preferred play partners of typical children. (Celeste, 2006, p. 78)

With minimal interaction with others, these students are lagging behind their peers in other areas of learning.

Students with special needs lack social and behavior skills necessary for peer interaction during play. I was curious as to how elementary students with special needs engage in play with peers because these social and emotional skills are necessary within a child's development. Professionals will benefit in understanding the social interactions of students with special needs during play. The research study will show the characteristics of students with special needs as they interact with peers during play. It will also provide differing perspectives held by faculty and staff members who had insight on this research topic.

Research Questions

I have worked on the topic of interaction in students with special needs because I wanted to find out what their interaction with peers looked like during play. This, in turn, could help others understand the importance of social development

during play in students with special needs. I designed this research question: 1) What are the ways in which students with special needs interact with their peers during play?

Rationale

Peer interaction in students with special needs is an interesting topic because of my career in Childhood Education and Special Education. I student taught in an inclusive first grade classroom where free play was a time when students were encouraged to engage in imaginative play, use manipulatives and props, and create social ties with their classmates. As students participated in play on a daily basis, I noticed that students with special needs were not sharing in the interaction. Two or three of these students would participate in solitary play most of the time. On occasion, these students would be prompted by the teacher or other classmates to interact with other students. Throughout my own experiences, students with special needs rarely engaged in peer interaction during play. Only with prompting and support would these interactions be activated.

As a student teacher in an inclusive fifth grade classroom, I had the opportunity to observe the interaction of students in diverse situations. During lunch periods, I noticed the isolation of students with special needs once again. These students were ignored or bullied on a daily basis. The lack of peer interaction between these students was of great interest and concern to me. Students with special needs would benefit from engaging in play at a young age. These social and

emotional skills would help to develop peer relationships that students in my fifth grade placement were lacking.

Definitions of Terms

Some school districts across the country have time set aside during the school day for students to engage in free-play. Depending on the age of the children, during this free play period, *sociodramatic play* may occur. Berk & Winsler (1995) define this play as “coordinated and reciprocal make-believe with peers that first appears around age 2 ½ and increases rapidly until age 4 to 5” (p. 58). Sociodramatic play is when the engagement is pretend and involves interaction with others. Within this study, “play” or “free play” is an unstructured or non-directed period when students are engaging in activities, conversing with peers, and developing skills unrelated to class lessons and curriculum.

Within this study, the term *peer interaction* is defined as the engagement of two or more people. More specifically, students with special needs are interacting with other students in the classroom who either have special needs or do not. The interaction of peers may be observed as conversation within a free play setting where participants have chosen roles to follow. Interaction may also be nonverbal. In this study, I will take note of body language, facial expression, and other means of communication without words.

Within a public school system, a child may be evaluated and assessed to determine if his/her disability entitles them for special education services. If the child becomes eligible for special education services, the public school systems are

required to identify a disability and develop a plan to assist that child's learning (Jasper, 2004). School systems refer to this as a 504 plan. Students who have 504 plans are provided with special education services that are framed for their individual needs. If there is more support needed for the child, an Individualized Educational Plan or IEP may be developed. Within this study, a *student with special needs* is defined as a student who receives special services during the school day or is in the process of classification.

Study Approach

This qualitative study was designed to document the characteristics of peer interaction in students with special needs. The qualitative nature of this study was most beneficial because while analyzing data from the interviews and observations, I had obtained thick, rich descriptive data on the behaviors of a student with special needs during play.

An observational study took place in an inclusive classroom with three students with special needs, and the typically developing peers with whom they interacted with during play. These observations allowed for the collection and interpretation of the ways in which students with special needs interact with peers during play. In addition to observation, I conducted a focus group interview. This interview took place with specific professionals within the elementary school. The collection and interpretation of this interview provided differing perspectives on my research questions.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this section, I will discuss studies that offer current research in the field of free-play and students with special needs. I will also address topics related to the importance of peer interaction in relation to this topic. The areas addressed include: 1) Inclusive education, 2) Play, 3) Peer interaction, 4) Peer Interaction in Students with Special Needs during Play, 5) Where is the Teacher?, 6) Making Time for Play. This literature review will provide evidence of the importance of play and peer interaction for students with special needs.

Inclusive Education

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was the first law to protect the rights of a person with disabilities. This law stated that people with disabilities cannot be excluded from any program or activity because of their handicap (Jasper, 2004). In 1975, a law was passed to protect the rights of students with disabilities called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Jasper, 2004). This law stated that students with special needs have a right to a “free and public education” or FAPE. Since 1975, there have been laws and provisions passed to ensure that our public school systems are doing everything in their power to ensure that students with special needs are provided with services to further their education. In today’s public schools, these students are in their least restrictive environments or LRE (Jasper, 2004). LRE is defined as “a range of services provided in regular education classes or other settings to enable disabled children to be educated with non-disabled children

to the maximum extent appropriate” (Jasper, 2004, p.33). In public schools, students with special needs are placed in an inclusive or blended classroom with continued support from the classroom teacher, and in some cases the teacher’s aide, special education teacher, and other professionals working in the school. The student with special needs remains in the inclusive setting for as much of the day as possible, with added instructional time provided by the special education teacher or other professionals if needed. Researchers are investigating inclusive education to determine if this trend is beneficial for students with special needs in our school systems.

A review of literature was conducted by Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson & Kaplan (2007) to study the impact of including students with special needs into the regular education classroom. Because more and more school districts around the world are choosing to use an inclusive model, some people are concerned there will be negative effects on the other children in the classroom. The researchers set out to determine if the inclusive classroom is causing adverse achievement academically in typically developing students. The researchers collected literature that conducted studies related to student achievement in specifically identified inclusive settings. They analyzed and coded information found from the research articles based on positive, negative and neutral findings from the studies. Overall, the researchers found that there were no negative effects on the achievement of typically developing students in the inclusive setting. Kalambouka, et al., stated that 81% of the studies found there were positive or neutral effects on the achievement of the typically

developing students. The researchers go on to say that inclusion is not successful unless there is support from a number of areas; parents, teachers, school administrators and the students themselves. The inclusive classroom must be supported for all students to find success academically.

In addition to academic achievement, inclusive education also contributes to social and emotional development. All students are provided the opportunity to interact, collaborate, and learn alongside peers who are at varying levels of development. A research study conducted by Johnson (2006) focuses on views and perspectives on the inclusion of students with Down's syndrome. The study involved six pupils classified with Down's syndrome over a course of five years.

Questionnaires, surveys and interviews were given to parents, classroom teachers, principals, and special education teachers to determine views associated with the inclusion of students with Down's syndrome. The researcher was able to draw significant findings as a result of this five year study. The majority of parents expressed their approval of inclusion and would select that setting over special placement. When asked about the benefits of inclusion, most participants stated academic success and social interaction. The researcher writes:

The main benefits of mainstream were identified by the parents as being: the opportunity to mix with good role models, the support received, other children learning about people with special needs and the high expectations of the schools...From her own experience working in a special school she has not found the same expectations to apply there (Johnson, 2006, p. 27).

This study found that parents and pupils with Down's syndrome were generally accepting of the inclusive classroom. The majority of participants believed involvement of the teacher, special education teacher, and teacher's aide was a major component of student success. However, the researcher found that participants viewed teacher training and support as a weakness in the inclusive model. These findings together paint an interesting picture. One of the most important aspects of inclusive education is the support from teachers to the students with special needs, however, the support that teachers need in order to educate students in an inclusive classroom is lacking.

Inclusive education is commonly practiced in school districts today. The laws associated with special education not only provide students with special needs a free and appropriate education and academic support; they also provide all students in the classroom with skills necessary for social development. Through inclusive education, students are now taking part in socializing with peers and adults, learning adaptive behavior skills, and cooperating with others (Gibb, Tunbridge, Chua, & Frederickson, 2007). Classroom teachers must promote peer interaction to enable social growth, acceptance, and cooperation. With continued emphasis on building a positive classroom community, students with special needs will be accepted and may increase their interaction with other students in the classroom. The benefits of including students with special needs not only affect these students themselves but also the other students in the class.

Play

Play is a critical aspect of a child's development. "Research indicated that child's play has essential positive impacts on physical development, social and emotional development, cognitive development, and student learning" (Tekin & Tekin, 2007, p. 208). For students, play engagement incorporates fundamental skills needed to succeed in learning. "Through play children make sense of the world around them and work through new experiences, ideas, and feelings" (Carlsson-Paige, 2008, p. 44). Without free play, students may not develop these skills necessary for learning to occur in the classroom and in the world around them.

What is Play?

Researchers and theorists have defined play in a variety of ways and there is no one explanation that is used universally. The reason may be because there are many different forms in which play occurs; one form being sociodramatic play, which is central in this study. In young school children, this play is mostly imaginative and based on the personal desires and what they believe to be reality. Children will also make up rules that are used throughout the play situation (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, there are two girls playing house, one plays mom and one play her daughter. The mom in this play engagement will take on the role of that person based on what she perceives as motherly responsibilities. She may interpret these responsibilities based her own mother's behaviors, mom's on television or in picture books, etc. The behaviors of the daughter may be based on these same interpretations through the eyes of the other participant. Both girls are imagining play together, formulating

rules that go along with the imagined situation, and creating a world all their own. Sociodramatic play enables a child to assume the role of someone in the real world but through the eyes of pretend. Ashiabi (2007) describes this type of play:

“Sociodramatic play involves children’s emotions, thoughts and their external world; it is social play in which children use their imagination and creativity and take on different roles as they create pretend situations involving the use of fantasy and symbolism” (p. 200).

At the early elementary age, children are using props and objects more imaginatively. In earlier developmental stages, children look at objects realistically; a spoon is a spoon, a pillow is a pillow. For school age children, they are able to create props that will enhance the imaginative play engagement; two pillows propped up a certain way will make the perfect computer (Berk, et al.). With the introduction of props, play engagement is enhanced.

Zone of Proximal Development

In understanding play within the world of a child, Vygotsky believed that the child’s zone of proximal development or ZPD is extremely important. No child is the same, therefore, academically, socially, and emotionally children have different needs and abilities. ZPD is the zone in which learning and development occur. Throughout the zone there are varying levels of outside support and scaffolding that are needed for the child to complete the task or process (Levykh, 2008). When learning, a child must be challenged beyond what they can do independently, and with scaffolding development can occur. Every child’s ZPD varies depending on the task, subject,

context, etc. Vygotsky believed that during play a child's ZPD is demonstrated and learning occurs. He theorized that play engagement was at "the center of young students' zones of proximal development, where new knowledge was gained through social interactions with more competent players" (Welsch, 2008, p. 138). Through interaction with other students, a child is learning within their zone and gaining in many areas of development. "The verbal prompts, descriptions, interpretations, and negotiations that result in metacommunication about the play fall within the zone of proximal development" (Welsch, 2008, p.138).

Pellegrini & Blatchford (2000) agree with Vygotsky's take on play. They argue that play changes depending on a child's level of development and also state the importance of play in child development. "We suggested that children's play is an important part of childhood and one that is vital to their school experience" (p.56). Research has shown that play may contribute to many areas of development. Researchers like Pellegrini take it a step farther stating; "young students [are] intrinsically motivated to play, and mostly concerned with the process of play rather than the product" (Welsch, 2008, p.138).

Using Play to Assess Students

Preschool teachers can assess students during play to understand multiple areas of development. In studying the social competence through play engagement, Gagnon, Nagle, and Nickerson (2007) said this:

"Some investigators have examined play within the context of parent-child interactions and peer interactions, while others have developed standardized

measures of play to use in the assessment of children's cognitive and language skills." (p.229)

By observing and assessing student play engagement, teachers can understand their students on a new level. Through play assessment, a teacher may create new and engaging ways to motivate his/her students to learn and develop.

A study was conducted by Riojas-Cortez (2001) to investigate the ways in which sociodramatic play can contribute to a teacher's understanding of their funds of knowledge. As described in the study, this is the knowledge a student uses "as a resource for concept and skills development" (p. 35). This knowledge includes cultural influences, background, roles outside of the classroom, family dynamic, etc. Past research has suggested that teachers who understand a student's funds of knowledge will be able to create more meaningful learning opportunities. This study focused on 12 culturally diverse preschoolers in a southern Texas school. The classroom teacher conducted an observational case study that to determine if students were learning skills that would contribute to academic and social development. The teacher drew conclusions based on categories she had created during the play engagements. For example, if a student was seen imaginatively changing a baby, their actions would be placed in the child care category. After categorizing the behaviors of the children, several conclusions were drawn. In watching a student play, the teacher is able to gain valuable information on the student's funds of knowledge, their background, and cultural beliefs. The author writes, "sociodramatic play allows children to exhibit their funds of knowledge...This is important because it

allows the teacher to become an observer of children thus discovering what youngsters know and their way of life” (Riojas-Cortez, 2001, p. 39). Meaningful play engagements are not only crucial to a child’s development but can also be beneficial for a teacher in providing the best learning opportunities.

Peer Interaction

Student interaction is extremely important to children’s social, and emotional development, as well as academic progression in elementary grades. Past research on this topic has shown that peer interaction in preschool has an effect on social skills later. Pellegrini and Blatchford (2000), leading researchers in the field of social development and play, make it clear that in order for social development to exist, there must be past components of play and peer interaction to build on this development. They believe that children who have problems with achievement in school also do not exhibit age appropriate behaviors with their peers and adults.

When students develop social and emotional skills, they are indirectly affecting their motivation in the classroom. Research suggests that, “children’s social and emotional adaptation and their bonding to prosocial peers and adults may further contribute to their motivation for learning” (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004, p. 78). Students who develop positive relationships with others may experience higher self esteem and motivation in school. When the experiences at school are positive, a child will want to wake up every morning excited and ready to participate in learning. Through peer interaction, students are developing skills necessary for academic success.

A study conducted by Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez, & McDermott (2000), examined the relationship between peer interaction and academic motivation in pre-school students. The researchers propose that the factors associated with kindergarten readiness are linked to the social relationships students develop in pre-school. Students who do not develop positive peer relationships are more likely to have behavior or emotional problems, enter the special education system, or eventually drop out of school. Coolahan, et. al. (2000), set out to determine what peer activities are most beneficial in creating positive learning engagements. There were 556 preschool participants in this study, ranging from 44.8 to 71.8 months of age. The students were rated on three different teacher rating scales. The first was based on teacher observation of peer interaction during play periods. They specifically looked for student disconnect, peer interaction, and play disruption. The second assessment was designed to identify positive learning patterns in the participants. Teachers rated students on attentiveness, motivation, and attitude. The third assessment was used to identify problem behaviors during learning opportunities. The teachers rated the participants based on unpredictable behavior, tantrums, inattentiveness, impulsive, restlessness, etc. The researchers used a quantitative method to analyze the data. They compared answers from all three of the assessments. They found that peer interaction does correspond with a child's learning behaviors and motivation. If a child is interactive with peers and engaged in social play, they are more likely to be engaged in learning, show motivation, and attentiveness. For students who do not engage in interactive play with peers, they are more likely to do the opposite in a

learning situation. The researchers concluded that their needs to be more emphasis on the peer relationships in the classroom. They believe these social and emotional ties will help students become successful lifelong learners.

A study conducted by Nabors, Badawi, & Cheney (1997) addressed the factors associated with peer interaction in students with special needs. The researchers identified students with special needs as having difficulty engaging in play with peers, less socially competent, and need more facilitation during a period of play. The purpose of their study was to understand what peer interaction is in students with special needs and students who are typically developing. The researchers used teacher-facilitated play activities to determine this relationship. The study involved 70 students, 48 of which were typically developing and 22 were students with special needs. The participants would be involved in centers for one hour, moving around the room, and working in groups. A lead teacher and a teacher's aide were present in the room and they would record observations of interaction and cooperation during centers. The teachers in the room were also participants in the centers activities if they saw a reason to be. Based on these observations, the researchers concluded that if teachers promote positive social interaction during the school day, students with and without special needs will benefit. The more opportunity for socialization and cooperation, the more motivated all students will be in participating in peer relations (Nabors et al, 1997). Future research must be done to identify intervention programs that promote peer relationships between students with special needs and students who are typically developing.

There is a strong relationship between peer interaction and a student's social, emotional and academic achievement. With increased emphasis on this relationship, students at a young age will likely begin to show motivation and attentiveness towards learning. Kohler, Greteman, & Raschke (2007) stated, "peer-mediated procedures have a long history of support and are emerging as one of the more effective interventions available for addressing the social behavior of children" (p. 155). When students are interacting with others, they are building on life-long skills necessary for growth.

Peer Interaction in Students with Special Needs during Play

Within the inclusive classroom both peer interaction and play engagement are extremely important. Students will develop social and emotional skills from interacting with the world around them. Through free-play, a student is able to take on an infinite number of imaginary roles, as well as transform ordinary classroom objects into extraordinary props (Pellegrini, 2000). Within free-play, students are also interacting with their peers to create a world all their own. Without this interaction, students will not develop the social and emotional skills necessary for development in school, as well as, in life. Past research has shown that students with special needs participate in solitary play more than cooperative play with peers. If these students are participating in solitary play, they are not developing the skills necessary to grow and develop (Owen-DeSchryver, Carr, Cale, & Blakeley-Smith, 2008).

A research study conducted by Nabors (1997) focused on the interaction between preschool students with special needs and their peers. Nabors reports that past research on this topic has shown that peer interaction in preschool has an effect on the social skills later; however, the results of related research studies have been contradicting. The study focused on students in an inclusive preschool setting and their engagement in cooperative play. A qualitative study was done by observing 43 participants during a period of free play. The researchers found that typically developing preschoolers participated in cooperative play 73% of the time; whereas students with special needs participated 53% of the time. Boys were more likely to engage in cooperative play, but also, more likely to play with peers who were typically developing. Another finding was that African American students were more likely to play in inclusive situations than Caucasian students. Understanding the interaction of students with special needs during play is extremely important to the social development and progression in later grades. Nabors suggests more research on students with special needs should be conducted.

“Naturalistic observations and assessment of other play behaviors (e.g., solitary play) need to be conducted to examine the behavior of children who engage in low levels of cooperative play.” (p.166)

Students with special needs should be observed to draw conclusion of behavior and the content of conversation if at all.

A research study by Celeste (2007) focused on the play behaviors of students who were blind. According to Celeste, past research on the topic of social

development has shown that students who are blind tend to have little peer interaction during play or otherwise. The majority of students have stronger relationships with adults they are working with or engage in play alone. In order for these students to find meaning in play, there must be some structure of facilitation provided by the teacher or student. Celeste found effective intervention practices to encourage peer interaction and inclusive play for students with visual impairments. The research focused on one student in the preschool setting for a six-month period. There was a team of professionals to plan the intervention, observe, and update, as well as, a pre-intervention assessment and a post-intervention assessment. The post assessment showed the child did not participate in sole play and 50% of play was spent with one other peer. A significant advancement in initiation of play, group interactions, and use of toys was recorded. The researchers stressed the importance of social development in students who are blind. Professionals should assess student interaction during play and develop a plan of intervention. In related studies involving the observation of children there are few cases where a child will not participate in sole play even in general education students (Celeste, 2007). Research has shown children prefer to use their imagination alone or will participate in an activity or game by themselves. Professionals would benefit in understanding the problems that are affecting a student during play to help in mediating interaction.

Students with special needs sometimes show stronger relationships with adults they are working with or engage in play alone. In order for these students to find meaning in play, there must be some structure or facilitation provided by the teacher

or student for play to occur. With the added support and collaboration, students with special needs will create positive peer relations during play.

Where is the Teacher?

With continuing emphasis on social interaction in students with special needs, the question becomes, “where is the teacher?” In a general education classroom, students sometimes engage in free-play with little interaction from the teacher. The responsibility of the classroom teacher could be anywhere from monitoring throughout the classroom to behavioral intervention. In an inclusive classroom, the role of the teacher changes during play. “Successful engagement requires a supportive environment that enables young children with disabilities to form relationships with peers” (Walker, 2008, p.34). There is more monitoring, reinforcement and behavioral intervention; however, there is also prompting and engagement in activities. A student with disabilities, sometimes, needs structure, guidance, and prompting to engage in activities and free-play. Whether the student with special needs is being assisted by the teacher’s aide or the classroom teacher him/herself, there is more responsibility on those adults in the classroom.

A review of literature by Barton & Wolery (2008) related to interventions that promote positive play engagements. The researchers discussed the need for structure and planning when students with special needs are expected to participate in pretend play. They conducted this review to determine intervention programs that would be useful for an inclusive classroom. There were 16 studies that were reviewed. Barton & Wolery (2000) selected the studies based on searches in peer-reviewed journals and

specific criteria based on research already done on the topic. The researchers concluded that there was a positive correlation between peer interaction during pretend play and teacher involvement. The literature showed that when teachers model or prompt students on how to pretend play there is an increase in engagement of that activity. The researchers also concluded that when teachers introduce and model props like specific toys, or objects, students will begin to use those same props without the need for teacher facilitation. Teachers who are involved in teaching students how to play are creating meaningful learning experiences that can be used in future play engagements.

Little research has been presented to determine the role of the teacher during play. Although teacher involvement has shown to be beneficial, there is little evidence to suggest that teachers promote and teach positive play engagements. A review of literature written by Ashiabi (2007) addresses two major obstacles teachers are facing when becoming involved in play. The first being “attitudinal barriers,” meaning that teacher involvement depends on their own beliefs and values associated with play. For example, if a teacher believes play to be a time for students to interact with peers and peers only, the teacher will not become involved in a play engagement. For a teacher who believes play is as important as the academic periods, more emphasis will be placed on student involvement and teacher influence. The second obstacle teachers express is “structural barriers.” These are outside factors contributing to the lack of play opportunities in the classroom. Teachers expressed a need for more time, materials, and space for students. They also expressed concern

regarding the high standards and curriculum requirements for students. The author writes, “growing expectations for teacher-directed academic instruction has limited time for play in early childhood classrooms” (p. 202). With these challenges, teachers are left on their own to determine their role during play. Research has suggested that teacher involvement during play is very important, but with these barriers, teachers are not able to create these positive play opportunities. The author concluded by stating,

“teachers have to recognize the developmental significance and appropriateness of play in promoting children’s socioemotional development, and engage in practices that scaffold children’s experiences and socioemotional skills during play. Teacher-guided play could be used to scaffold understanding of concepts or issues that children are interested in, but requires some form of adult intervention and guidance” (p. 206).

Making Time for Play

With the introduction of the No Child Left Behind act in 2001, school districts have placed a greater emphasis on academic achievement in their students (Ranz-Smith, 2007). This act stresses the importance of academic achievement and school advancement. School districts must conduct yearly assessments to ensure that students are learning and improving academically. There are high standards for the students who are tested almost every year, and the school district who, if cannot show improvement from year to year, could be forced to close (United States Department of Education, 2001). This emphasis is causing teachers to spend more time on

academics like math and reading and less time on other important aspects of a child's development (Ranz-Smith, 2007).

As discussed previously, socialization in school is extremely important to the academic success of all students. Under No Child Left Behind, teachers and school districts are placing more emphasis on academics which is taking away the opportunity for students to engage in social situations (Jasper, 2004). Research has shown there is a positive correlation between peer interaction during play and academic success (Coolahan, et al, 2000). As schools look to increase time spent on academics, are we compromising what is really important? For students with special needs, the time spent socializing and building relationships is just as important as time spent on academics.

A study conducted by Ranz-Smith (2007) focused on the importance of play in schools through the eyes of teachers. The researcher identified the stress that teachers are under in today's classroom. She writes:

The problem involves implementing curricular goals and objectives while attempting to maintain an environment that allows for child-sponsored activity. Within the contexts of our schools, and indeed all of American society, we seem to be experiencing a disregard for the child's perspective and need for play. (p.272-273)

The value of play and student-centered instruction is being lost in the classroom due to specific academic requirements placed on students. The purpose of this study was to determine if teachers regard play as an important component of a child's

development and should part of the school day. The researcher collected data by observing and interviewing four, first grade teachers at two elementary schools. The observation in the classroom was during the school day; however, emphasis was placed on how play was incorporated throughout the day. The teachers were also interviewed. The questions related to teacher perceptions of play in the classroom, definitions of play, personal memories and their values related to play and social development. Ranz-Smith found that teachers had difficulty viewing play as a component of the learning process because of the curriculum expectations placed on them. Some teachers believe play enhances learning and development and should be incorporated throughout the school day. The teachers that believe in this theory have classrooms that reflect a social-constructivist approach to learning. Three out of four teachers showed play through teacher-directed instruction, while the other teacher had students doing sensory and symbolic student-initiated activities. The mindset of today's classroom can be summed up in this explanation:

“In the product-driven climate of the current educational setting, educators often feel compelled to view the process of teaching as a mere scientific delivery system of didactic instruction with minimal time for student interest and initiative.” (Ranz-Smith, 2007, p. 298).

As more and more emphasis is placed on school performance, play and student-centered activities are being pushed to the side.

Summary

To a student with special needs, peer interaction and play engagement are essential components of development. Through free play, students are cooperatively engaged in imagined situations. There is overwhelming evidence to say this free play may not be working for students with special needs. These students lack the ability to engage in sociodramatic play with peers (Celeste, 2006). If the inclusion model is going to work for these students, more emphasis needs to be placed on creating meaningful play interactions. In understanding the ways students with special needs interaction with peers during play, research is one step closer in creating free play opportunities.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to describe the interactions between students with special needs and their typically developing peers during periods of play. An observational case study was conducted resulting in the interpretation of these interactions in special needs students and their peers during play. Data was collected through classroom observations, conversations with the classroom teacher, and professional focus group interviews.

Question

I designed this study to gain knowledge on my research question: 1) What are the ways in which students with special needs interact with their peers during play?

Participants

The participants of this study were selected from one suburban school district. The elementary school within the district educates approximately 350 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. The elementary school educates students of diverse groups: 76.2% White, 18.2% Black, 4.7% Hispanic, 0.9% American Indian/Alaska Native. Approximately 64.4% of the students within the school are economically disadvantaged. Within the school district, approximately 12.4% are students with disabilities (School Matters, 2008).

The observational case study took place in an inclusive first grade classroom. The interactions of students with special needs and their peers was observed during 17 different periods of play. In this classroom, students participated in free play at

the end of each day. Along with free-play, student also pack up to go home, finish morning work, and sit for timeout if they receive “tickets” that day. One ticket is equal to two minutes in timeout. Students sit at the guided reading table and cannot talk or interact with anyone in the room. As a non-participant, I observed and recorded field notes during the entire period of “free-time” from different locations around the room. These locations were chosen when I observed where the student with special needs was playing or interacting. In the event the student moved from this area, I would also move with him/her.

Observation took place four times a week for five weeks. Three students with low play skills from a first grade classroom had participated in this case study. The classroom teacher identified the students I primarily observed. These were students who were considered to have “low play skills” or students in the process of being classified with a disability. One student selected for the study was in the process of being classified with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, while the other two students were students identified as showing low play skills. The two students with low play skills were described as being “borderline” academically. As a non-participant, I was able to explore useful topics that may, otherwise, be uncomfortable or difficult for participants to discuss.

During the observational case study, I observed interaction involving typically developing students. Because I did not know who the students with special needs would play and interact with, I did not have specific students chosen for the study. I collected consent from parents or guardians for all students in the classroom. I also

had students in the first grade classroom agree to the study by signing an assent form. This did allow for observational notes to be taken on any student in the classroom that has given his/her consent.

The focus group interview took place in the elementary school at which I observe the student participants. There was a faculty lounge available for a round table discussion regarding professional perspectives of play and students with special needs. Specific professionals within this elementary school were asked to participate in a focus group interview which was videotaped. I asked for participation from inclusive teachers, school counselors, physical education teachers, special education teachers, psychologist, and the school principal. I conducted the focus group interview to determine teacher attitudes and opinions related to the interaction of students with special needs during play. I lead in with questions previously determined and asked follow-up questions that allowed for participants to elaborate or clarify their answers. The interview also allowed for the facilitation of open-ended questions and honest responses from the participants regarding my topic. I took into account the bias of responses related to my presence in the room.

To conduct my research, I received permission from school administration after providing a written overview of the study. First, I sent a letter to the school administrators describing my study and proposed involvement of the school district. Once I had received a signed letter allowing my study to be conducted within their school district, I began to focus on the classroom involved. A consent form was required from parents, teachers, and specific professionals who are directly involved

in this study whether through observation and field notes of their son or daughter, or participation in a focus group interview. I also had the first grade students sign an assent form allowing me to observe them while they played.

All participants in this study remained confidential. I did not record the names of the students I observed, nor did I record the name of the first grade teacher, the school principle, or the school district to which I was researching. During the focus group interview, only job titles of the faculty members were recorded. All data analyzed was kept in a locked cabinet throughout the duration of the study.

Instruments

An observational case study was conducted to describe the interaction between students with special needs and their peers. The observation was performed in an inclusive first grade classroom during play for thirty minute intervals, four times a week, for five weeks. The data was collected in an unstructured manner for three students with special needs. The classroom teacher chose the students primarily observed based on special needs and low play skills exhibited in the inclusive setting. Emphasis on specific characteristics of student behavior were observed and recorded. These behaviors included verbal communication, body language, facial expressions, content of play, enthusiasm, and interest. The observations were obtained through the use of anecdotal notes (Appendix E). These notes were analyzed to describe peer interaction in students with special needs during play.

The observation of students with special needs included their typically developing classmates. During the free play period, the interaction of these students

was observed and recorded. If a student with special needs was interacting with a classmate the behaviors of the classmate were recorded. These behaviors included verbal communication, body language, facial expressions, content of play, enthusiasm, and interest. These observations were also obtained through the use of anecdotal notes which were analyzed to describe the interaction between students with special needs and their peers.

A focus group interview with teachers, principals, and specific professionals within the school was conducted and videotaped. The group included teachers and special education teachers who worked primarily in blended classrooms. The interview questions included topics addressing play and peer interaction, engagement during play for students with special needs, prompting and modeling the interaction, and perceptions on the ability of students with special needs to interact with peers during play (Appendix F). This group interview provided different perspectives on the topic of peer interaction of these students during play.

Limitations

The limitations within this study are related to the range in disabilities, experience in playing with peers and the possible misinterpretation of information from the focus group interview. Because there are 13 classifications for students with disabilities, there are a wide range of needs within the classroom. For example, a student with a language disability may find it more difficult to participate in peer interaction than a student with a physical disability. Another limitation in this study relates to the amount of experience a child has with peer interaction and play. A

student who participates in an after-school program has more experience with interaction and play than a student who goes home after school and plays video games. Finally, based on answers given in the focus group, there could be a misinterpretation of information between the teacher/researcher and the focus group participants.

Data Analysis

Throughout my analysis, I used constant comparison methodology (Hubbard, & Power, 1999). I categorized my data based on common themes. These themes were present when interpreting data of each child, across children, within professional perspectives, and across all forms of data collected. The categories were sorted and coded based on interpretations from the observations of specific behavior of the students with special needs and the responses from the participants in the group interview.

I analyzed classroom observations from the beginning of my study. While taking observational notes, I was also recording interpretations and determining possible themes that were present. The evidence collected was then categorized and placed in a chart. The trends and common themes presented through observation were compared with the focus group interview to determine if my notes aligned with teacher perspectives.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

This study was conducted to determine the ways in which students with special needs interact with their peers during play. An observational case study focused on three students with special needs as they took part in periods of free time over the course of five weeks. A focus group interview was also conducted to record differing perspectives of teachers and specific school professionals in topics related to this research study. The observations and focus group interview were designed to answer this research question: 1) what are the ways in which students with special needs interact with peers during play? The observations, teacher conversations, and focus group interview provided findings in these areas: 1) Play and students with special needs; 2) Social skills; 3) Timeout, 4) Teacher role during free time

Play and Students with Special Needs

When observing a student during play, the teacher may be able to determine the student's needs in other areas of development. The first finding from this study is that during play students exhibit the same difficulties they have at other times during the day. For a teacher, these observations may shed light on possible teaching practices, interventions, or classifications of a student with special needs. During my study, each of the three students showed evidence that difficulties academically can also be shown during free time. Through the observation of play, teachers may see the difficulties these students have in other areas of development. The participants in the focus group were able to add valuable insight to these findings. One teacher

stated, “when I watch them, I pick up on things they might need or areas of development.” The students in my study showed difficulties during play that contributed to their needs in other areas of the classroom.

Student A

Student A was described by his teacher as “borderline.” He was below average in reading, writing and math. The classroom teacher chose A at the beginning of my study because he was not interacting with classmates and was very protective of the toys he was playing with. The classroom teacher also believed that A’s academic achievement was mostly related to his low levels of motivation and his disinterest in school. From day to day, A’s mood changed. His teacher described him as being highly motivated, interactive, and attentive one day and come back the next day with low self-esteem, drive, and interest in anything school related. I observed these mood swings during the five weeks of observed play.

When A participated in free time, his play engagement would depend on his mood. On 8 out of 17 observations, A exhibited behaviors similar to that of his typically-developing classmates. He would initiate conversation, engage in imaginative play with peers, use props, and show cooperation with others. On December 12, 2008, the classroom teacher described A’s day as “okay”. She said, he started the day with low motivation and bad behavior, meaning he did not participate in whole group discussion and did not complete any of the work assigned to him. During this time, I observed him knocking papers off his desk, whining about assignments, slouching in his chair and distracting others around him. This behavior

resulted in one timeout ticket that he would have to do during free time. His classroom teacher said A's afternoon went a lot better. He participated during a whole group math lesson and he stayed at his desk until he completed his seatwork. I observed him comply with the teacher's instructions when it was time to pack up. He did not have to be told to go to timeout. He went right over to the timeout table and stayed seated until the teacher came over to set the timer. After he sat out, A jumped out of timeout, went right over to his backpack and grabbed a stuffed bear to show his classmates. He walked around the room, first to show his teachers, then went to every classmate and explained the bear in detail. "This is Rox, I keep him for a long time in my house. He's soft." A was initiating conversation with peers, he showed positive body language and facial expressions when talking to others, he also showed social skills appropriate for his age; sharing, cooperation and initiation of conversation. These kinds of behaviors were observed on A's good days in the classroom.

Unfortunately A had just as many bad days as good, as indicated by his teacher. Of the 17 days of recorded observation of A, nine days were said to have been "bad days." For example, on January 15, 2009, I began observation thirty minutes after the classroom teacher left early from school. With the teacher gone, classroom behavior was inappropriate forcing eight students to sit in timeout, including student A. While A sat in timeout his body language gave clues to his mood that day. He was slouching in his seat, head down, and unresponsive to other students and his teacher. Once the timer went off, A stood up slowly and walked to

his desk. He sat at his desk for the remainder of free time. A did not watch the other students like he normally did, instead sitting with his head on his backpack staring at his desk and playing with his nametag. Once the students were called to the carpet for dismissal, A did come over and sit with the other students. His body language did not show any sign of engagement with his peers. During the five minutes on the carpet, he said two words to his peers after being asked if he's playing soccer, "I think." As compared to the other eight students in timeout that day, I observed A as having showed very different behaviors than his classmates. After timeout these other students began to play, socialize and cooperate with their peers. Had the same behaviors been seen in any of the other students, I could dismiss A's behaviors as similar to his classmates. However, A was the only child who showed no engagement during free time. On these bad-mood-days, A exhibited behavior that was inappropriate for his age, he did not show interest in play, other peers, or engagement in the classroom community. Out of the 17 days of observation, A had nine of these days, making it almost impossible for him to have positive play engagements with his peers.

Student B

At the beginning of this study, student B was a brand new student to this first grade class. Originally he was not a part of my study until an incident forced me to rethink another student's involvement. The classroom teacher suggested B because he was being classified with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and had shown little progress in making friends with his classmates. Academically, B had

a difficult time focusing during lessons, group, and individual work time. He was constantly being told to pay attention, or to focus. To help with B's hyperactivity, he used a sensory seat, which would help to get his "wiggles out."

On January 22, 2009, I observed a guided reading period to help better my understanding of B during the school day. During this time I observed his distractibility while he was independently working. For four minutes, I saw him playing with the assigned writing paper. He would hold it up to his face or slide it off his desk. He was also folding the paper in various ways. After the classroom teacher was done with one of the guided reading groups, I took note of the work B had done, writing, "B hasn't done anything!" The classroom teacher has described free time for B as being mostly spent in timeout due to bad behavior, or spent at his desk catching up on work. However, on the days that B participates in free-play, he exhibits many of the same difficulties seen during the school day.

B showed the same difficulties engaging and interacting during free time as he did during other times of the school day. Throughout the study, B spent the most time in timeout as compared to the other students in the class. Out of the 17 days of observation, he was in timeout on 15 different days. His behavior during this time was inconsistent. He did not follow the classroom rules for timeout, such as, no talking, no playing, and to stay seated at all times. One minute he would be following the rules and the next minute it was as if he had forgotten that he was even in timeout. I observed him on several occasions leaving timeout and walking around the room, or trying to talk to other students. I also observed him talking to students from the

timeout chair, playing with the teacher's materials, swinging him on the chair and flapping his arms. This inconsistent, inappropriate behavior has been seen in all areas of his first grade experience, and highlighted during his play opportunities.

On several occasions, B would show difficulty staying focused on one toy or activity at a time. On December 17, 2008, he was observed having played with five separate objects. He began free time in timeout. There he was touching the teacher's materials and yelling across the room to students at their desks. Once timeout was over, B went over to his backpack and pulled out a stretchy toy man that could stick to things. He began running around his classmates sticking the object to his classmates and swinging it in every direction almost hitting the teacher. Without warning or observable reason, B dropped the toy where he stood, and pulled a lego out of another student's hand. This behavior was ignored by the student, so B jumped up leaving the lego, and went over to the computer. These behaviors were all recorded and observed in less than one minute.

At the computer, B could not figure out how to login. He asked for help from his peers but was ignored. B sat at the computer for a few seconds, but becomes frustrated. He stood up quickly, knocked over the chair, and without picking it up, went over to another group of students singing in the corner of the room. B laughed at them and said, "you sound bad!" He tried to then start singing the song but his classmates start separating themselves from him and eventually B leaves the group.

The teacher called the students to the carpet for dismissal and B sat next to two boys. He did not initiate conversation with them, instead added a negative

comment about the picture one of them drew during art. The two boys began conversing with B but the interaction is not friendly. His loud, inappropriate behavior had negative effects on his relationships with peers. The conversations he tried having with peers was not friendly. He was never observed saying nice things to classmates or having nice things said about him.

In much of B's interaction with peers, he showed an inability to develop friendly, cooperative conversations. This inability had negative effects on his peer interaction during play.

Student C

Student C is described by her teacher as being a "borderline" student academically, who is just below average in reading level. The classroom teacher believed C's difficulties in school relate to her life after the bell rings. These experiences include her background, home and family connections, and her relationships with peers and family members outside of school. The classroom teacher believed the negative relations and experience she had in her home has had negative effects with the relationships and behaviors she has in school. C exhibits characteristics of a child in need of attention. In order for a task to be completed, C would need the teacher's aide or classroom teacher to assist. Although she was constantly asking for help, her classroom teacher believed C was fully capable of completing the task herself and that she was pretending she did not understand. During free time, C was observed reaching out more to the adults in the room than her peers. Out of the 17 days I was there, C was recorded as "attention-seeking" 15

days. These “attention-seeking behaviors include, need for constant physical closeness to a teacher, distractibility due to the need for support from an adult, distractibility while watching other students interact with adults, and inability to do a task while the teacher was not with her. Because there were so many observed days of these attention-seeking behaviors, there was not much recorded on her actual play engagements with peers. What is known of her needs during free time is based her interaction with adults, her language used when trying to grab the teachers attention, her tantrums, and her need for help from an adult. C’s teachers believe she had the ability to do the work and to have positive relations with peers. She just had the added challenges of learning to do tasks independently.

On January 22, 2009, I observed C working on a writing assignment independently. During that time, she was constantly looking around the room finding the adults. She approached the guided reading group three times and asked the teacher for help even though she was not allowed to approach the group when they were working. The teacher’s aide gave in on the third try and allowed C to sit with the guided reading group while she worked on her writing. For the next five minutes C seemed to be the focus of the teacher’s aide. She was asking the teacher’s aide for spellings of words that she should have known such as “the” and “they.” C’s classroom teacher expressed her frustration in saying “C can be successful in the class but wants to act low to receive more attention.” These behaviors during the school day also translated into her free time.

A common characteristic of C during free time was that she would almost always be the last person to pack up and be ready for dismissal. The first thing students do before free time is pack up and leave their backpacks on their desk. When the teacher told students they may pack up, C usually sat there until the teacher noticed her. After observing one of these episodes on December 10, 2008, I interpreted my observation by saying, “C seems helpless – does she need guidance for everything?” On January 13, 2009, I came to the first grade class a little early and was able to make some observation about the end of a reading lesson. At the beginning of my recorded observation, the students were all working at their seats finishing a science worksheet from earlier. The classroom teacher, then, called everyone over to the carpet for read-aloud. At once all the students got up from their seat and came over to their spot on the carpet, except for C. She was still at her seat, taking her time and waiting for the teacher to call her over. Once she did, C came slowly to the carpet, but someone was sitting in her seat. During the lesson on the carpet, C sat right in front of the teacher. She let everyone in the class now that that is her seat by whining, “you can’t sit there, I sit here forever! My seat is with Mrs. M!” Throughout read-aloud, C was not paying attention. She was observed taping the teacher’s feet and legs, turning around and facing the back, making faces at me, and playing with her peers’ things. Once the lesson was over, the teacher gave permission to start free time. C did not move. Like before, C wanted to wait until the teacher noticed her on the carpet. About three minutes into free time, the teacher’s aide came over to C to get her to pack up. C told her she didn’t feel good, which was

a common excuse for her slow movement. For the next 10 minutes the TA lead C around the room, helping her pack up for the end of the day. Once she was done packing up, she had to sit in timeout for bad behavior during the day. The observation on January 13, 2009 was good example of what occurred on a daily basis for C. Her need for attention was taking away from her play engagement, her interaction with peers, and her ability to work and play independently. As a result of this behavior, C was only observed participating in play on two separate occasions throughout this study.

Aside from C's behavior during the beginning of play, there were also attention-seeking behaviors exhibited throughout free time. On the few days C was not in timeout or taking 15 minutes to pack up, she was observed participating in "free time." The characteristics she had were unlike those of her classmates. During eleven different observations, I saw C was follow the teacher around, look up from what she was doing to see where the adults were, or throw a tantrum until an adult came to her. On January 12, 2009, C began free time on a good note, having only taken her five minutes to pack-up. She immediately found an adult and said, "I have no tickets today." The teacher, who was talking to another student, stopped and said, "Good C, now you can find something to do for free time!" C decided to go over to the computers and play games. She sat down next to two boys who were already in the midst of playing an alphabet game. C did not engage in conversation with them, but instead spent the next 10 minutes looking around the room for the adults. She would look at the computer screen for a few seconds and then turn her head to find an

adult. If she made eye-contact, she would wave or point to the screen and show them what she was doing.

After about 10 minutes of the computer, C got up and went to the carpet. On the carpet were two girls playing with blocks and building houses. C sat next to them but did not interact. She decided to use the same blocks as the other girls, but there was no conversation between them. I recorded, “does C have any friends?” While she sat with the blocks, she did the same as when she was on the computer. C’s eyes were constantly scanning the room for an adult and when one made eye contact, she would point to the structure she was building.

Student C showed many signs of a student who is attention seeking. She did not seem interested in making friends with classmates because she was too concerned with the adults in the room. Her classroom teacher believed C had the ability to learn, work and play without her help, but because she needs constant attention, she is unable to learn this way.

Social Skills

Sharing

Classroom Observations

The students in this study showed a difficulty in the social skill of sharing as compared to the other students in the classroom. Although I have minimal recorded observations of the other students in the classroom, I was able to compare these students with my three participants during daily observation of A, B, and C. There were several times when I recorded this social skill; out of the 17 days of observation,

I observed student A showing difficulty sharing 8 times, while student B was seen 14 times and student C was seen 5 times. The inability to share with others was recorded and usually resulted in the other student leaving the play area, or the student with special needs walking away. There were, however, two specific times during observation when this inability to share caused a much bigger problem between peers.

On December 9th, 2008 the classroom teacher was absent. A group of students were playing with blocks on the carpet. The group had started small with only three boys playing with blocks. During that time student B was sitting in timeout for four minutes because he had received two tickets that day. During timeout, B was intensely looking at his group of peers. While B was sitting out, another two boys and a girl joined in building the structure that looked like a very tall building. Once he had sat out the four minutes, B went right over to the group. At first, it looked as though he was going to initiate conversation. He was using good eye contact, listening to the other students, and showing body language that was excited and eager to participate. Instead, student B took an “important” block, used for the base of the structure, from the group and began building his own creation. One of his classmates said, “B can I see that thing, I need to have it.” B says “No” and continued to build his structure without using that “important” block. It looked as though B was not engaged in creating anything but instead just wanting to keep the block away from the other group. I observed him banging two blocks together on the floor, with no intension of using them to build anything. I also noticed, B was scanning around the room looking for his peers. He did not want them to play with him, but instead was

ready to pick a fight. The rest of B's time was spent arguing with his classmates about giving the block back. The conversation between him and his classmates was very negative. One boy from the group yelled, "B give it back!" The girl in the group says, "I don't want you here, you're not nice." Throughout the entire episode, B didn't seem to be affected by what his classmates were saying. It was as though B was enjoying the argument and did not see anything wrong the way the play engagement ended. I observed him smiling and laughing, still listening to the other students but perhaps not processing their anger.

Student C ended the day in a great mood on December 12, 2008. She seemed excited to pack up and get ready for free time with no tickets for the day meaning no timeout! Play was initiated by one of her classmates after the classmate said, "C, do you want to play tic-tac-toe?" C replied, "Yea, I really like your bear, too." The play engagement seemed to be going well with the two students playing tic-tac-toe on the white board in the front of the room. There was a lot of communication between the two students, there was compromise and cooperation, and most importantly each student showed good sportsmanship whether they won or lost a game. Although C did not initiate conversation to play tic-tac-toe, she did continue the conversation. I observed her asking questions, laughing with the other student, and sharing the dry-erase marker. C would playfully tell the other student that she was going to win the game, what her next move was, and that she was really good at this game.

During the time of play, other students came to the board to join in the activity. Towards the end of free time, each student broke the board into four sections and they

were each drawing a picture of their house. While the students were engaging in solitary play, there was, however, a lot of conversation and praise of the other students coming from student C. She said, "I like your flower, will you draw one on my side?" C was also respectful of space around the board. One student asked her to move down a little, and C did so without complaint. Up to that point, C was demonstrating social skills that were equal to those shown by her typically developing peers. C was seen sharing the colored markers, asking to use the eraser, and making positive comments towards other pictures on the board. However, when it came time to clean up, problems began to arise. C told her classmates that she was going to erase the entire board. One of the students said rather angrily, "C, we can each take turns and erase our own picture!" C told her "no" and tried quickly to erase everyone's pictures. The activity that began positive, turned physical when the students tried taking the eraser from C and blocking their picture from being erased. It was interesting to see this seemingly positive engagement turn negative in a split second. In this example, C was lacking in the ability to share the responsibility of clean-up with the other students.

Focus Group Interview

The second grade inclusive teacher expressed her frustration that goes along with this group of students. She pointed out the difficulties these students have during small group activities. She stated, "it is more difficult for the lower group, they can't share...they just can't take turns...it's not fun for them." These small group activities translate into free time play. The two general education teachers

shook their heads in agreement, while the special education teacher added her points.

She said,

Interaction with Peers

Classroom Observations

Throughout the observation of B and C, interaction with other students in the classroom was minimal and insignificant, whereas A would show positive interaction with peers when his mood was good. On several occasions the three students I observed would try to initiate conversation with no response from their peers.

Student B had the most trouble with initiation. He would say, “hey guys,” or “hey, look what I made.” At these times he is ignored. On January 15, 2009, B was playing with a small toy he had brought in. This toy had different part that could be moved and adjusted to change the appearance of the toy. B was observed playing with the toy alone for about five minutes. He was changing the shape and destroying other objects with the toy. During this time, two boys were sitting next to B creating a building out of legos. Once B was finished adjusting his toy he went over to one of the boys and said excitedly, “Hey Jeff look at this!” Jeff looked irritated when hearing B’s plea and stood up. He responded before walking away, “That looks horrible!” It seemed that as soon as B said something to initiate conversation, Jeff had lost interest in play and had left the play engagement all together.

B also found trouble joining groups in the midst of play. During these times, students either ignored him or walked away and did another activity. B showed aggressive behaviors when joining a playgroup. He would push other students out of

the way, grab toys out of their hands, or start ruining the structure that was created. On December 12, 2008, B joined a group of four students that were circled around the building blocks. He quickly pushed and shoved his way into the circle as the other students yelled for him to stop. B said to the group, “hey what stupid thing is this,” and at the same time grabbed the blocks off the structure. One student in the group became very upset and started moving the other blocks away from B. At that point, the three other students did the same, creating a new circle around the set of blocks. The student who became upset before yelled, “We don’t want you here, go away!” B’s aggressive and impolite behavior may have caused other students to decline his want to play with them.

On several occasions, B was approached by classmates to play but instead chose to play alone. These observations were very confusing. On four separate occasions, a student would approach B and say, “hey B want to build with the legos.” On another occasion, a student said, “B want to play tic-tac-toe with me?” Each time, B looked in the direction of where play would be and would say “no.” Again, these observations were very confusing. Most days B did seek out peers to play, but then on days when peers asked him to play, he would turn them down. Was this a sign of control? B only wanted to play with others if he had control to choose the activity, game or engagement? During the five weeks of observation, B was found interacting with peers only one day for about 5 minutes and this interaction was with another student with special needs. Throughout free-play, B chose to play alone or was ignored when trying to initiate play.

Focus Group Interview

While addressing general characteristics of students with special needs the discussion focused primarily on social skills. All four teachers in the room agreed that students with special needs have difficulty initiating conversation. The second grade inclusive teacher described students with special needs as having an inability to communicate with others. She said “they don’t have the tools to communicate, they don’t have the vocabulary.” They also said these students do not have the means to practice conversing with peers. The first grade inclusive teacher pointed out that generally these students rarely have play dates and free time outside of school consists of sitting “in front of the computer or tv.” She made this generalization based on speaking with parents at conferences, speaking with the students and observations made during class. When students don’t have the opportunities to practice their social skills outside of the classroom, they are already at a disadvantage during free time in the classroom.

Cooperation

Classroom Observations

One student in this study showed a difficulty in cooperating and collaborating with classmates during play. Once these students had began a period of play with peers, I set out to determine quality of their play. Because play for these students was mostly alone, the few occurrences with peers demonstrated mostly negative play engagements. For example, student B had joined in with a group of boys playing with legos. He was not invited into the group, however, the boys did allow him to

stay and work on building with them. The play engagement turned negative when B did not want to work on the same structure the boys were building. When it was time to clean-up, B destroyed the structure the boys had built and said before walking away, "I'm not picking it up." The classroom teacher intervened and told B that if he was playing with the legos, he needed to help the other boys pick it up. B demonstrated that he was not interested in working with the boys, and in turn did not want to help pick up.

Focus Group Interview

This section on characteristics of students with special needs concluded with the whole group in agreement that students with special needs are "more prone to playing independently...they don't have to talk to somebody and socialize." Teachers generally thought students with special needs did not play with other students and socialize. This was also thought to be a trend seen throughout the school day. The second grade teacher added that these students, generally, do not cooperate in small group activities during different subject areas. She said, "it is more difficult for the lower group, they can't share...they just can't take turns...it's not fun for them." They believe these students are more prone to working and playing independently.

Timeout

The classroom teacher used a color card system to determine the amount of time students spent in timeout. For every one card, the student must sit out 2 minutes. For example if a student has to change his/her card twice that day, he/she will need to

sit in timeout for four minutes. A student would change her or his card if they were distracting others, not following classroom rules, inappropriate behavior in the hallway, lunch room or during specials, or if they are disrespectful to the teacher or other classmates. In this study, students A, B and C would usually be among the students in timeout. Out of the 17 days of observation, student A was in timeout for at least two minutes on 10 different occasions, student B was there 15 times, and student C was there 14 times. For the most part these three students were the only ones to receive timeout, and I was surprised on days when other students in class had to sit out. Are these students receiving timeouts because they cannot control their behavior, or is their behavior related to their special needs? In this classroom, students lost minutes during free time and play at the end of the day.

Because students valued and looked forward too free time, teachers believed it was the best thing to take away when they are being disruptive. This method is commonly used in classrooms all over the country, but is this timeout helping or hindering the opportunity to learn? Interesting observations were made of these three students when, after finishing their timeout punishment, were placed into an already established play engagement.

Free time for student A usually began with timeout. Out of the 17 days of observation, he spent at least two minutes in timeout 10 different days. During that time, A was generally cooperative as compared to the other participants in the study. He was observed sitting quietly at the table most of the time. Also during that time, A would watch the other students on the carpet. He would watch them play with

blocks, interact with the teachers and students, and play games on the computers. Out of the three students, A's behavior during timeout was most appropriate.

Once A was allowed to join the rest of his classmates for free time, he also showed the greatest ability to become engaged in free-play with his classmates. On three separate occasions, A is observed watching his classmates play while he was in timeout, then directly going to that spot with his classmates after his time in timeout was done. On January 14, 2009, A had four minutes of timeout. He sat with his back to the carpet, but was turned around in his chair watching students play. The students on the carpet had taken out the legos and were building a train, a station, and a building. All students seemed to have a job. For example, one student was putting wheels on the train, while another was putting together the supplies that would go on the train. A sat in timeout, watching the students behind him. He showed interest through his body language and through facial expressions. Every so often, A would smile or move his head to get a better angle. He seemed to want to say something to the students playing, but knew he couldn't. When the timer went off indicating A was done with timeout, he slowly stood up and walked over to the students using the legos. He walked around the circle of students and tried to find the best spot to sit. The students in the group were concentrated on the activity and were not interested in A's participation. He tried to sit with the group but could not find a spot or a job he could help with. He said, "Hey can I help with that man?" With that question, A tried to become part of the play engagement but when the student said no, A

reluctantly got up and moved to another area alone. Would that have happened if he were involved in the activity from the beginning?

Student C had the greatest difficulty joining play engagements. She did not initiate conversation with peers, so when she did not start free time with the other students, she generally would not try to join a group after timeout because the students were already engaged in play. C was observed on five occasions wandering around the classroom. She did not show any interest in joining other groups of students; she was more involved in watching the teachers in the classroom. For C, timeout seemed to be her way of getting out of play engagements. She would be in timeout almost every day. Once the timer went off, C would stall as much as possible to get out of play. She showed behaviors like laying on the floor, rolling around or off of chairs, standing by her desk looking through papers, sharpening pencils, etc. She would do anything to get out of play. Her difficulties were associated with initiating the play engagements. It is difficult to tell if those difficulties would be present if she was able to start play along with the other students.

Student B exhibited inappropriate behaviors through much of his days of observations. The behaviors of students A and C were notable when they needed to sit out for timeout. Student B was different. He exhibited the same behaviors on days when he sat in timeout and on days when he did not. In past sections, these behaviors are discussed. I believe, because of B's lack of social skills, he was unable to create positive social interactions in both environments. His inability to join a play

engagement after timeout was the same as when he tried to join a play engagement if he did not have to go to timeout.

The teachers from the focus group had expressed the importance of free time and their use of timeout. They said that this method of discipline is most commonly used, however, not always agreed with. The first grade teacher said, “You want to take something away from them that they do enjoy, and that’s free time.” She went on to say that the decision of when to discipline is tough. Because students enjoy free time so much, they will feel the greatest loss when they suffer the consequences of bad behavior. The teachers went on to say that they recognize the importance of free time for students with special needs and that most of the time these students are the ones getting in trouble. The special education teacher said, “This form of punishment is universal in classrooms, but there needs to be a better way to discipline in today’s classrooms...I just don’t know what it is.”

Teacher Role during Play

Through classroom observations and the teacher focus group, I collected evidence to show the teacher’s role during play. The focus group showed that the teachers involved in this study held very different perspectives on the topic. While one first grade teacher thought students should be left alone during free time, the special education teacher believed students need constant attention and some intervention during this time. The same conditions held true during classroom observations. Generally, the classroom teacher was busy catching up on the day’s

work while the special education teacher was seen engaged in the period of free-play and interacting with students around the room.

Differing Perspectives

The most discussion surrounded this topic during the focus group interview. The teacher's role in the classroom has been debated through research and there that was no different with this focus group. Much of the disagreements came between the special education teacher and the classroom teacher. This section of the interview began with the questions, "What is the teacher's role during play and does this role change in an inclusive classroom?" One first grade teacher spoke first saying, "I really try to be back, and let them go." She believed the most important part of play engagement is peer interaction. When a student doesn't know how to play, then "let another student show [him/her]."

The special education teacher spoke next. She expressed her agreement with the other teacher, saying, peer interaction is extremely important during play, but the other students in the classroom may not always interact with that student having difficulties. "The teacher really has to intervene and show them what it looks like." In her own experience she does a lot of observation and reflection during play. "When I watch them, I pick up on things they might need or areas lacking." She tries to figure out how to engage students in play, stating, "how can I ask them a question?"

The conversation went in a new direction when the other first grade teacher said, "I feel very overwhelmed during free time. I try and make sure everyone is

caught up. It's wonderful that [the special education teacher is] there during that time." In her classroom, free time allows her to catch up on paperwork like, writing letters to parents, checking desks and unfinished work, book-keeping, etc. She thought for a moment and then said, "I do feel bad because I feel my role should be more of the same." She expressed a lot of the same concerns that teachers feel during the school-day. There is usually not enough time to keep caught up on work, so the main focus during free time is most likely not students and their play engagements.

Observation of Teachers

During observation, most days teachers would not intervene during play if a student was showing difficulty engaging in play. As one of the first grade teachers said, "I try to make sure everyone is caught up." On 14 out of the 17 days of observation, this characteristic was recorded. On December 17th, 2008, I recorded this observation, "most of time teachers do not pay close attention to free time." It was observed that unless there was a major problem in the classroom, a teacher would spend free time catching up on her own work or helping students with work that was due.

Generally interactions between the teacher and students were only one or two sentences. The students would want to show her something they made or were playing with and the teacher would redirect the activity back to play with peers. On two separate occasions, there were three students working on a large 100-piece puzzle. The students became stuck on the puzzle and would ask for assistance from the teacher. The students walked across the room to where the teacher was standing. On

both occasions, the teacher was writing in a student's assignment book when approached. The teacher, then, went over to where the children were working on the puzzle. She looked at the puzzle, but instead of sitting with the students and walking them through the problem, the teacher asked them one question related to the puzzle. For example, on one occasion the teacher said, "Does that piece have a straight edge?" "Where do straight edges go? Work together to figure it out." The teacher encouraged cooperation within the group, gave them an idea of where the piece should go, and then walked away. These examples add to the idea that teachers in this classroom emphasized the importance of peer interaction during play. These teachers believed play was between peers and that adult support should be limited.

An adult in the classroom did interact with play engagements on two of the 17 observed days. On December 12, 2009 the classroom teacher did interact with the students during play. One of the typically developing students brought in a hand held 3-D puzzle. A small group of three students worked on the puzzle for several minutes until they became frustrated with it and went to get the teacher for help. The classroom teacher and the TA were over at her desk discussing a note that needed to go home with one of the students. Up to that point they had not been engaged in what the students were doing. Once the students explained their problem, the teacher went over to the carpet to look at the puzzle. In other observations, the teacher would give the students advice on what to do next to solve the problem and leave them to finish it, but on this occasion the teacher sat on the carpet with them to figure out the puzzle. This small group of three students quickly became the whole class standing around

the teacher while she put together this puzzle. The teacher talked her way through the problem and students were engaged and interactive with others around them. The teacher also allowed two students to help her put together some of the puzzle. One student worked on a few pieces, while the others worked on several other pieces until the whole thing came together. During this interaction, the teacher provided students with a model for problem solving, peer cooperation, and the importance of conversations when working with others. It was also a demonstration of how engaged students become when the teacher interacted with them during play.

Observation of Students

Throughout this study, two of my participants expressed a desire for adult support during free time. This was shown through the observation of these students and briefly touched on in the focus group interview. These students are given added support in lessons, activities, and individual work during the school day. When they are left to enjoy free time, they seem to have difficulty separating from the aid they receive during the rest of the day. Aside from lunch, free time is the only other time during the day that students are encouraged to be independent and interactive with peers not adults. This separation can be very difficult and as observed in these three students, is noticeable during play engagement.

Student C showed the greatest need for support during play. She would wander around the room during play in search of the teacher. She would also stall while getting ready for dismissal because when the teacher noticed her unprepared, she would come over and help C. During play, C would do everything she could to

become noticed by the teacher. She needed the support and reinforcement from a teacher during every part of her day including free time. On January 12, 2009, C was observed as starting play positively. What usually took 10 minutes for her to pack up and get ready for dismissal only took five minutes, leaving her plenty of time for free-play. She stood at her desk, looked around the room for the classroom teacher or the teacher's aid, and noticed the teacher helping students login to the computer. C quickly walked over to the computers and sat down at an open one. She sat at the seat and immediately started staring at the teacher for help. The teacher said, "C you can login now, you know what your password is!" C pretended that she forgot what it was so that the teacher could type it in for her. She was ignored by the teacher and watched as she walked away. C waited two or three minutes before logging into the computer. She chose a game to play and stayed seated there for five minutes. While she sat there she periodically would look around the room for adults. If one came close to her, she would perk up, stare at them and pretend she needed help. During this time, she was ignored. There were few occasions when C would have the opportunity to play for the full length of free time. She was too concerned with the need for support and reinforcement to concentrate long enough on play engagements.

As discussed earlier, B had difficulty conversing with peers during play because of his lack of appropriate social skills. One day of observation provided an example of the need for teacher involvement for student B. On December 13, 2008, Student B brought in a G.I. Joe from home. He immediately took it out of his bag and ran over to the teacher. The classroom teacher listened to B tell about her about

the toy, asked questions about it and then grabbed the class's attention. The teacher quickly told the class about the toy B had brought in and told him to walk around the classroom and show his friends. Judging B's body language he was ecstatic. He walked quickly around the room showing everyone he could. While students began playing with their toys again, B was very excited about play. He was approached by several classmates and asked if they could play with him. Because of B's lack of social skills, he said "no" to almost everyone, and those that he did not say no to, he ignored. This example showed the importance of the teacher's role in setting up classroom relationships and positive play engagements. Although this example did not lead to a play engagement, B did take steps to get there. In introducing students to B's toy, the teacher created opportunities that would otherwise not be possible.

Summary

This observational case study was conducted to determine the ways in which students with special needs interact with their peers during play. I was able to collect data from the observation of three students in a first grade classroom and a focus group with teachers from the elementary school. My findings helped to uncover four important themes in this study. First, I found that these three students faced the same issues during play opportunities as during the rest of the day. Second, each of these students showed a delay in social development, whether it was in sharing, cooperating, or interacting with others. Third, my findings point to the use of timeout in the classroom. During timeout, these students were missing out on the interaction and play opportunities that other students were involved in. Teachers expressed a need

for these students to have play opportunity with peers, but these students were the ones in timeout most often, taking away from these important opportunities. Finally, my study focused on the teacher's role during play. While the focus group offered different perspectives on this topic, the classroom observations showed evidence that some teacher involvement is necessary during play for students with special needs.

CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The teacher focus group and observation of peer and adult interaction during play provided findings to present conclusions, deliver evidence to support past research, and show opportunity for further studies. This chapter addresses the meaning of the findings presented in chapter four, implications and connections to prior research. This chapter also includes recommendations for future research in the area of peer interaction in students with special needs during play. Lastly, this chapter concludes with a summary of the findings from this observational case study.

Student Needs Exemplified during Play

Through observation of these three students, I was able to determine their needs based on play engagement and interaction. Student A would exhibit mood swings, which would determine his involvement in play. By eliminating these mood swings, A was more engaged and interactive with peers and in play. Teachers can use play observation to determine A's mood and possible ways to counteract it. Student B has ADHD. His needs were expressed through play almost every day he was observed engaging in play. By observing B's behaviors with his peers, teachers could use this information in other areas of his development. Student C showed a constant need for attention. This attention was mostly needed from adults. By observing her need for attention, teachers should apply new teaching strategies to her regular instruction. Based on her attention-seeking behavior, I believe it is important for teachers to encourage C to become more independent in her learning. Teachers

will benefit from watching C play and possibly helping her complete tasks individually during this time. With play observation of these three, very different, students, their needs and abilities were clear. By observing play engagements of students with special needs, teachers may be able to apply what they have learned about these students to other areas of their learning and development.

Teaching Social Skills

Socialization is a major component during play engagement and one that is often lacking for students with special needs (Hess, 2006). The development of social skills in two of the students in this study were lacking as compared to their typically developing peers. In addition to observation, teacher perspectives also pointed to a delay in these students' learned social skills. The specific social skills found to be most lacking were; sharing, initiation of conversation, and collaboration. Through the focus group interview, teachers addressed general characteristics of students with special needs during play opportunities. In their description, generalizations were made in relation to students with special needs and their social development pointing to a lack of skills in the social setting.

Overwhelming evidence has shown that students with special needs have difficulty creating meaningful play interactions with peers. They are less likely to initiate conversation, "receive fewer positive responses to their social bids or attempts to engage in social interactions and, as a result, demonstrate less interest in their peers, which makes them more prone to social isolation" (Celeste, 2006, p. 78). As shown through observation and the focus group interview, students with special needs lack

the social skills to participate in play with peers. This study showed evidence of a lack in the ability to share with others, to initiate conversation and play opportunities and to cooperate with others during play. The group of teachers also added that in their experience students with special needs rarely were able to have the practice outside of school to develop these social skills.

These students were more prone to being rejected by their peers. This was most obvious with Student B. I interpreted his behavior and interaction with others as negative. He was inattentive, hyper, and rarely able to have positive communications with peers. When he was approached by peers, he would usually ignore them or become angry and would say hurtful things to them. I believe these negative responses to others, had negative effects during his play engagements. Whenever B tried to initiate play, he was turned down, sometimes by the same peers that B was mean to before. This constant aggression towards others affected the relationships he built. His classroom teacher also told me “B doesn’t have any friends.” It’s from these negative interactions that B has not been able to become friends with others. He is a student that needs to be taught social skills and positive interactions with others to be able to have cooperative play.

Students with special needs must be taught social skills like sharing, cooperation, and conversing with others. This lack of ability was present in all three students observed and also commented on in the teacher focus group. Student B and C did not show the ability to initiate conversation with others. They did not use the correct words and phrases, and they also did not know how to approach others. All

three students showed a lack of ability to share with peers as related to their typically developing peers. I believe these student have a lack in social skills, however, I also believe there are many factors to consider when determining why this has occurred. Is it due to their disability or insufficient opportunity and support necessary for growth?

Timeout on Learning

Through student observations and the teacher focus group, I have concluded that students with special needs spent more time in timeout and less time interacting with peers. In this classroom, timeout was used as punishment. The classroom teacher wanted to “take something away that they enjoyed.” Not only do students really enjoy play and free time, but “through play children make sense of the world around them and work through new experiences, ideas, and feelings” (Carlson-Paige, 2008, p. 44). Without free play, students may not develop these skills necessary for learning to occur in the classroom and in the world around them. The importance of play and free time in a child’s development is critical, but what happens to children that are constantly missing out because of timeout and punishments. Alfie Kohn, a leading researcher in education and human development, argues timeout is not beneficial to a student’s development. He believes timeout teaches students, not to correct their behaviors but instead, learn “a lesson of conditionality: I’m loved – and lovable – only when I do what I’m told” (Kohn, 2008, para.6). Drawing conclusions from my findings has raised many questions related to the possible effects of timeout on play and social growth.

First, is timeout negatively affecting a student's ability to socialize with others and engage in play? The students with special needs were seen in timeout much more than the typically developing students. They had less time to engage and initiate play with others, because they were sitting at a desk quietly for up to six minutes a day. This alone would contribute to a child's inability to create play engagements. Many times the three students in my study would enter free-time several minutes after everyone else. During these first few minutes, students were seeking out peer interaction and settling into an activity, game or conversation with others while the three students in my study were watching quietly at a round table in the corner of the room. They miss the first critical minutes of play when children initiate an activity, compromise on their roles, and determine the rules. Once these three students were allowed to join the rest of the class, it was difficult for them to join an already established play engagement.

Secondly, is timeout effective? Specifically, are students learning social skills to control inappropriate behavior? From observing the students in this study, timeout did not seem to have an impact on the students with special needs. Because, these students were in timeout almost every day, it became a routine for them. Even on the days when C was not supposed to be in timeout, she would sit at the table anyway. She did not seem to mind the punishment nor have a sense of understanding for what she did wrong on the days she was there. Throughout the study, these students did not seem to show social growth in relation to appropriate behavior. Student B was a perfect example of a student who did not show any social growth from his

experiences in timeout. He seemed to exhibit the same inappropriate behavior everyday he was observed. Student A was the only student who looked unhappy when he had to be in timeout. He seemed to recognize what he had done wrong during the day. However, A did not show the ability to keep his behavior in control day after day, because he was also constantly in timeout. The three students in this study, did not seem to be affected by the punishment of timeout. They were not able to improve their behavior from the beginning of my study. Is there another form of punishment that teachers could use that would be more effective for classroom behavior and also not take away from a student's social growth? Alfie Kohn (1999) would say yes. He believes teachers must work with the student to encourage good behavior and to become responsible for his/her own actions. Kohn says, "Kids who are told what to do all day aren't developing socially or ethically the way they could be, just as kids are not developing intellectually in a classroom driven backward by demands for Tougher Standards" (Beyond Discipline, 1999, para.2) We must work together with the student to determine possible solutions to inappropriate behavior in the classroom.

The negative affects of timeout for these students with special needs brought up many questions and considerations for further research. Not only are students pulled away from play opportunities, but they are also left to fend for themselves. While at the start of play there is a room full of students initiating play with others, the students in timeout must wait several minutes and try to initiate something alone. Also, the students with special needs in this study were in timeout almost every day,

leaving them with little exposure to socialize and converse with their peers. Without practice and opportunity, a student may not develop the social skills appropriate for his/her age and grade.

Teacher Role

Through student observation, research and a teacher focus group many questions regarding the role of the teacher are still unanswered. Teachers do not seem to agree on this topic. In a general education classroom, students sometimes engage in free-play with little interaction from the teacher. The responsibility of the classroom teacher could be anywhere from monitoring throughout the classroom to behavioral intervention. In an inclusive classroom, the role of the teacher changes during play. The teachers involved in the focus group did not see eye to eye. The biggest disagreements came from the classroom teacher and the special education teacher. Why might this be? Well, as more and more emphasis is placed on school performance, play and student-centered activities are being pushed to the side. The classroom teacher sees the overwhelming need for her students to “pass the test,” while the special education teacher sees more of an importance for social development. As schools look to increase time spent on academics, are we compromising what is really important? For students with special needs, the time spent socializing and building relationships is just as important as time spent on academics. Again, there is an argument, who is right?

Research suggests “successful engagement requires a supportive environment that enables young children with disabilities to form relationships with peers”

(Walker, 2008, p.34). In observing these students, I saw the need for teacher modeling and prompting an activity. This was especially important when the student fulfilled his/her time in timeout and was sent into free time by him/herself. Having a teacher there to help the student find peers to play with and interact with would have been useful. Also, during the times when these students would walk aimlessly around the room, looking lost. The teacher may have been able to step in and give them some direction. Students with special needs do not just require support during academic tasks but through all parts of their day. Through these observations, it was easy to see that the role of a teacher is not just to intervene when behavior is inappropriate. There are opportunities for learning and teaching, especially for these students.

Recommendations

Based on the observation of these three students and through the teacher focus group, I believe students with special needs are lagging behind their typically developing peers when building social skills through play engagements. There are several steps that can be taken to ensure students with special needs are offered an opportunity to create positive play interactions with peers. I recommend there be more of an interactive role from teachers during play. Free time should not be a break from teaching but rather an opportunity to gain in other areas besides academics.

First, I recommend that the timeout system in classrooms be eliminated or changed. I recognize the importance of punishment in a classroom where students

must be responsible for their actions, however, teachers must find a system that does not negatively affect the learning process of their students. In this study, teachers agreed that timeout was the most commonly used classroom behavioral plan and that free time was usually when students were punished. Through observation, I concluded that students with special needs were more commonly in timeout, thus, losing valuable minutes to engage and interact in play with peers. By eliminating timeout, students would start free time with the rest of the class, possibly making it easier for them to initiate play with other. I recommend teachers use only positive reinforcement with their students. I believe this will build more of a classroom community and offer students added confidence and self-esteem. I understand there are circumstances where punishment must be used, but there are always other options that will not have such negative effects related to a child's social development.

Secondly, I recommend that teachers take a more active role in observing student play and interaction. Not only do teachers gain valuable information about students during this time, but they may also make connections between children's social and their academic abilities. In this study, I concluded that the special needs of a student are observable during free time. If teachers take a more active role, they may be able to teach students more effectively. For example, if a student spends all of free time drawing on the whiteboard and expresses his/her love for it, the teacher could create assignments that allow this child to answer questions through his/her drawings. This connection will get students more engaged in school and will create positive learning experiences for all.

Thirdly, I recommend that teachers take a more active role in interacting with students during play. Some teachers in this study believed free time should be a time that students have on their own. However, based on observations of the three students with special needs, I believe these children need more support during this time. Teachers need to model play and prompt students throughout the interaction or whenever they need extra support. By teacher modeling, students are learning important social skills and seeing, hearing and doing play. Instead of offering no guidance during play, teachers need to be available for prompting. If students are struggling with initiating and interacting during play, teachers should offer the support for students to continue a positive play engagement. With more teacher support, students will learn how to create and maintain positive play interaction with peers. They will also build valuable social skills, they can take with them through life.

Lastly, I recommend a school wide social and emotional education initiative. This program would be integrated throughout the school year and be used at every grade level. Students would learn to build social skills, interact with peers and adults and build a sense of community throughout the school. Teachers and administrators would take part in trainings and workshops to ensure their students were getting the opportunities to build these skills. School districts must recognize the importance of a child's social development and through this program be able to provide students the teaching they need. Because so many students are lacking in these skills, schools need to change the way they currently teach. With an initiative aimed at social skills

building, it will only increase the opportunities that students with special needs have to catch up with typically developing peers.

Further Research

This study focused on what peer interaction looked like in students with special needs during play. This study focused on one classroom with three specific special needs. More research must be done to determine if a student's lack in social skills is due to their disability or due to their lack of exposure and social opportunity. The three students in this study showed a lack in the ability to socialize and to initiate positive play opportunities with peers. Are there other factors involved? Investigating the social development of a typically developing student compared to a student with special needs could contribute to the theory that students with special needs lack social skills because of their disability. It may also address the factors that could influence this development.

More research must be done on effective implementation and teaching roles during play for students with special needs. Through research, classroom observations, and the teacher focus group, there is still no definitive role a teacher must follow during a period of free-play. In researching this topic, most difficulty came with finding evidence of the effective role of the teacher during play. Although there is evidence to suggest teachers do need to contribute to a student's play engagement at a young age, Ashiabi (2007) suggests there is little evidence suggesting how a teacher should contribute. Investigating effective teaching practices

could show evidence to suggest that teachers do contribute to a student's social development.

In relation to effective teaching practices, more research must be done in the area of effective punishments, such as, timeout. Through observation of these students, I determined that timeout may have been negatively effecting their ability to form positive play engagements and relationships with peers. In researching classroom behavioral plans that do not include timeout, then the conclusion may be drawn to show timeout is negatively effecting these students during play. A qualitative study could be conducted, similar to this one, focused on a classroom in which timeout is not used as punishment during play. This study would enhance the theory that timeout is negatively effecting the students who are constantly being taken away from play opportunities. With more play and interaction, comes more practice.

Summary

The purpose of this study to describe the interactions between students with special needs and their typically developing peers during periods of play was achieved in one first grade classroom. Based on student observation and teacher focus questions it was concluded that students with special needs lack the social skills necessary for play engagement and interaction with peers during play. These students also exhibit their needs through play opportunities, and teachers can gain important knowledge through observing play engagements. Because play is so critical to a child's development, the use of timeout as a punishment during free time may have negative affects on a child's ability to socialize. In this study, the students with

special needs were seen in timeout more than their typically developing peers. This raises the question, does timeout negative have an impact on a student's ability to create positive play engagements? The role of teacher during play must be more interactive. In this classroom, there was little interaction with the adults, play was not modeled, and students were left on their own during free time. Many teachers believe this is the way free time should be and is an area for future research.

In order for students with special needs to develop social skills and interact with their typically developing peers during play, there must be more opportunities for structured play. Teachers must use free time as a means for teaching developmental social skills and model and scaffold positive play interaction. Research shows the importance of free time to a student's social development and is just as important as any other time during the school day. There must be more research done to suggest other punishment options besides timeout. Students with special needs were seen in timeout almost everyday, and with minimal interaction with others, these students are lagging behind their peers in other areas of learning. Overwhelming evidence has shown that students with special needs have difficulty creating meaningful play interactions with peers. Schools must implement programs and train teachers to better accommodate students with special needs throughout the school day, including their "free time."

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APPENDIX

Appendix A

October 15, 2008

Dear Principal,

I am a graduate student at SUNY Brockport. I am currently developing my thesis on peer interaction in students with low play skills during play. I am investigating the interaction that occurs, as well as, the attitudes of professionals towards this interaction because I would like to better understand the relationship between students with low play skills and their peers.

As part of my study, I would like to observe an inclusive first grade classroom during a period of play three times a week for four weeks. A copy of my observation notes are enclosed, as well as, the parental consent of the student with low play skills from which I am observing. I would, also, like to conduct a focus group interview with professionals within the Elementary School. This may include: the inclusive teacher, school counselor, school psychologist, physical education teacher. This interview will be tape-recorded and consent forms will be collected. Attached are the interview questions I may ask, as well as, a consent letter to the professionals in your school.

I will be taking a non-participant role in this research study. I will not disrupt instruction during my observation. I will not ask for student names, professionals within the school. In my study, I will not disclose the name or location of the school, professionals, or student names.

In order to comply with SUNY Brockport Institutional Review Board, I must submit a letter from you, on your school's letterhead, stating your approval of this study. I must also submit informed consent forms from and the parents/guardians of her students.

Please contact me at (607) 435-1741 or mnea0719@brockport.edu, if you have any questions regarding my study. If you approve of my study, please mail a letter to me at the address below. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Meghan Neary
332 Main St.
Brockport
Brockport, NY 14420
(607)435-1741

Sue Novinger
Thesis Advisor at SUNY
snovinge@brockport.edu
(585) 395-5549

Appendix B

CONSENT FOR OBSERVATION OF STUDENT

The purpose of this research project is to explore the ways in which students interact with peers during play. The person conducting this research is a graduate student at SUNY Brockport. If you agree to have your child participate in this research study, your child will be observed during periods of play in the classroom.

In order for your child to participate in this study, your informed consent is required. You are being asked to make a decision whether or not to allow your child to participate in the project. If you would like for your child to participate in the project, and agree with the statements below, please sign your name in the space provided at the end. You may change your mind at any time and your child may leave the study without penalty, even after the study has begun.

I understand that:

- a. My child's participation is voluntary and s/he has the right to refuse to answer any questions.
- b. My child's confidentiality is guaranteed. Her/his name will not be recorded in observational notes. There will be no way to connect my child to the observation. If any publication results from this research, s/he would not be identified by name. Results will be given through the use of pseudonyms, so neither the participants nor the school can be identified.
- c. There will be no anticipated personal risks or benefits because of participation in this project.
- d. My child's participation involves participating in regularly scheduled play in her/his first grade classroom.
- e. The researcher will be observing my child's interaction with others for approximately 30 minutes three times a week. The researcher will sit at a desk close to where children are playing and record observations on an observational sheet.
- f. The results will be used for the completion of a thesis paper by the primary researcher.
- g. Data from the observations will be kept in a locked filing cabinet by the investigator. Data and consent forms will be destroyed by shredding when the research has been completed.

I understand the information provided in this form and agree to allow my child to participate as a participant in this study. I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understand the above statements. All my questions about my child's participation in this study have been answered to my satisfaction.

If you have any questions, you may contact:

Primary Researcher:
Meghan Neary
Graduate Student, SUNY Brockport
mnea0719@brockport.edu
(607)435-1741

Thesis Advisor:
Dr. Sue Novinger
SUNY Brockport
snovinge@brockport.edu
(585)395-5549

Signature of Parent _____ Date: _____
Child's Name _____

Appendix C

Statement of Assent
To Be Read to First Grade Students

My name is Meghan Neary. I am a student at SUNY Brockport. I came to your classroom to learn about play. I would like to find out what all of you do when you play with your friends. You may see me writing in my notebook or looking at what you are doing when you are playing with your friends.

If you decide to let me find out about the way you play, I won't write down your name or let anyone else know who you are. When I write about my study, I will only say what you and your classmates did during play.

Your parent or guardian has given permission for you to take part in this study, but it's up to you to decide if you would like to. If you would like to take part in my study, but change your mind later on, you can tell your teacher or me that you have changed your mind. It is okay to change your mind at any time.

If it is okay with you for me to find out about how you play, you can write your name on the first line below. Under your name you can write today's date which is December 3rd, 2008.

Thank you very much,

Meghan Neary

Name: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D

CONSENT FOR FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

The purpose of this research study is to explore the ways in which students with low play skills interact with their peers during play. The researcher, Meghan Neary will conduct a focus group interview with professionals within the elementary school to discuss differing perspectives on this topic. The person conducting this research is a graduate student at SUNY Brockport. If you agree to participate in this research study, you will take part in a focus group interview and be asked about your perspectives and attitudes regarding the interaction between students with low play skills and their peers during inclusive play.

In order to participate in this study, your informed consent is required. You are being asked to make a decision whether or not to participate in the project. If you want to participate in the project, and agree with the statements below, please sign your name in the space provided at the end. You may change your mind at any time and leave the study without penalty, even after the study has begun.

I understand that:

1. My participation is voluntary and I have the right to refuse to answer any questions.
2. My name will not be recorded. If any publication results from this research, I would not be identified by name.
3. My participation involves answering 10 questions in regards to play and students with low play skills. The questions will be formatted to allow for discussion to occur.
4. Time is a minor risk. My participation will be no more than 45 minutes.
5. The focus group interview will be videotaped. The videotape will be set up in the corner of the room so that I will be seen and heard on the tape. The videotape will be used for data analysis only, and the interview will be transcribed. Only the Primary Researcher and Thesis Advisor will be able to watch the video. The results will be used for the completion of a master's thesis by the primary researcher.
6. All data including videotapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet by the investigator. Data and consent forms will be destroyed by shredding when the research has been accepted and approved.

I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understand the above statements. All my questions about my participation in this study have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in the study realizing I may withdraw without penalty at any time during the survey process.

If you have any questions, you may contact:

Primary Researcher: _____
Meghan Neary
Graduate Student, SUNY Brockport
mnea0719@brockport.edu
(607)435-1741

Thesis Advisor:
Dr. Sue Novinger
Thesis Advisor at SUNY Brockport
snovinge@brockport.edu
(585)395-5549

Signature of Participant _____ Date: _____

Appendix E

Observational Notes

Date: _____

Grade Level: _____

| Observations | Interpretations |
|--------------|-----------------|
| | |

Appendix F

Focus Group Interview Guide

Participants: Job Title

Interview Questions:

1. Describe a period of free play in a classroom.
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of free play for students?
3. What is the role of the teacher during free play?
4. In what ways does peer interaction during play foster a student's development?
5. What does play look like for students with special needs?
6. Does the role of the teacher during play change in an inclusion classroom?
 - a. Does the teacher monitor free play more closely?
 - b. Is there prompting?
 - c. Is there modeling?
 - d. What is the role of a teacher's aide during play?