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## Early Literacy And Making Sense In An Inclusive Preschool Classroom

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EARLY LITERACY AND MAKING SENSE IN AN INCLUSIVE PRESCHOOL  
CLASSROOM

An Abstract of a Thesis  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Educational Specialist in School Psychology

Patresa A. Hartman  
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May 2004

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to build understanding regarding the meaning and role of early literacy as a meaningful interaction in one inclusive preschool classroom. I was specifically interested in the idea of literacy as a social construction – as an interaction with one’s environment for the purpose of making sense of it. Furthermore, I investigated the way this construction facilitated or denied one child’s citizenship in the classroom community, which is located within an early childhood center in a mid-sized, Midwestern city.

My topic, examining early literacy as a sense-making interaction, lent itself quite naturally to qualitative methods, in that such research is, like the social construction interpretation of literacy, deeply embedded in context. Participant-observations were conducted from September to May of one school year, each observation taking place in the morning and early afternoon hours before the children without disabilities went home.

During observations, I recorded, in writing, occasions when Chelsea was observed in some sort of sense-making interaction with: her natural environment, classroom environment, adults and peers, language, and more traditionally accepted forms of early literacy.

Field notes and results of informal conversations with Chelsea’s teacher and the paraeducator in her room were analyzed and transformed into descriptive vignettes.

Chelsea and her classmates engaged in several forms of *full-body* sense-making: of a global context, a natural environment, the immediate classroom community, and in activities that offered equal involvement to all children; within purposeful context; and

while creating their own contexts, either ones that mimicked true-life routines or brand new ones. Chelsea also engaged in sense-making during various forms of peer interactions: as equals, as one who received help, as an accidental playmate, as a source of frustration, or as a member of the underground child culture. Other times, she did not interact at all. Chelsea was also involved in sense-making as it related to emotions, health, and hygiene.

While the structure of the classroom and the adult-supported, context-driven curriculum facilitated her membership within the general workings of the school, Chelsea struggled to be an active member of a more child-initiated context, specifically those contexts that required social and communication skills.

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has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the  
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## CHAPTER 1

### AN INTRODUCTION

*Where are the voices of families and children—voices of engagement, responsibility, investment, involvement, and firsthand knowledge? Where are the living accounts of those most intimately bound up with schools?*

-- William Ayers, *The Good Preschool Teacher*

In this ethnographic study I peer closely into the meaning and role of early literacy in one inclusive preschool classroom. I am particularly interested in the idea of literacy as a social construction – as an interaction with one’s environment for the purpose of making sense of it – and look for the ways in which this idea of literacy is supported or rejected in the classroom. Furthermore, how does early literacy construction partner with the inclusive environment to foster or deny the citizenship of children with disabilities – particularly one child’s, Chelsea’s – in the classroom community? As part of a related study, I conducted numerous participant-observations and informal conversations with the lead teacher, Renee, and paraprofessional, Marilyn

I am currently in a graduate program preparing to be a school psychologist. Prior to this program, I obtained certification to teach English/Language arts to students in grades seven through twelve. I was unfamiliar with the preschool environment I was to explore and those that inhabited it; and I was unfamiliar with a social construction perspective of literacy. To me, literacy meant reading and writing words. My induction into the larger study of multiple literacies (Kliever & Fitzgerald, 2003), the study which serves as the context for this investigation, began with several sessions discussing this

topic. It made sense to me in theory, but I was still confused about what it would look like. An important progression throughout this study has been not only tracing literacy patterns in the classroom as they relate to a cultural construct and citizenship, but my own developing appreciation for the many forms and purposes literacy, especially early literacy, takes on, as well. Chelsea, a five-year-old girl with significant developmental delays, served as a delightful and dynamic guide, and I, her humble tourist.

Chelsea is one of the sturdier youngsters in the class – taller and heftier than her classmates. Her personality adds to her distinct presence. She is quick to welcome strangers with a friendly smile, and a loud “Hi!” She may even take your hand and pull you to the various learning centers – all of which are frequently marked by the buzz of children engaged in meaningful play: exploring the scientific properties of magnets, creating dramatic episodes at the car wash, building castles out of blocks, or gluing sequins to outlines of bunnies or snowmen.

Chelsea’s classroom appears as perhaps a typical preschool classroom might – shelves are lined with children’s picture books. Large wooden cabinets teem with art supplies and building tools. A sensory table may at any given time hold water, sand, flour, or even autumn leaves the children gathered themselves from the school’s lawn. A dramatic play center changes theme regularly: at times it is a car wash, at other times, a grocery store, veterinary clinic, or ice cream shop. All children listen to stories being read; periodically, they even become characters. Each child has a library card. Each child is expected to play fairly, ask nicely, and use appropriate table manners. Each child is given responsibility to clean up after centers and, from time to time, serve as line

leader. To an outsider coming in, it is only marginally noticeable that one child uses a walker, three still wear diapers due to delayed potty training, and a handful have very limited speech. The classroom has been constructed in a way that differences take backseat to cooperation.

Take Chelsea, for instance. Chelsea has a developmental disability. Her label is nonspecific – Entitled Individual (EI) – partly because it is a district trend to give only all-purpose labels, which theoretically would then lead to a more individualized education. However, Chelsea’s generic label is also partly a result of inconclusive test results. Despite numerous clinical tests administered by a nearby research hospital, no one can quite put a finger on her disability. Some have surmised it is a form of Down’s syndrome, or at least that she has some characteristics that are routinely noted in children with Down’s syndrome. But test results have been consistently inconsistent.

Chelsea’s disability is most noticeable in her speech, which is commonly difficult to understand (However, this certainly does not deter her from speaking. She is heard frequently chatting with adults, peers, or simply – and quite happily – herself). She sees a speech therapist regularly to strengthen her verbal communication. Chelsea does not catch on to the same academic tasks, such as the alphabet or naming colors, in the way her nondisabled peers do. She does not participate in group activities in the same way many of her classmates do. For example, instead of watching the pages of a book being read, she may stare fixedly at the expressions on her neighbor’s face. She does not consistently exhibit the same concentration on center time activities as her classroom

friends – they may examine every angle of a Lego tower, while she simply touches it once and moves on.

Traditionally, a student such as Chelsea might be considered naturally illiterate (Kliewer & Fitzgerald, 2003). Because of this presumably global deficit (i.e., all children with significant intellectual disabilities are unable to achieve literacy) one might expect Chelsea to be in a segregated classroom exclusively for children with disabilities similar to hers, working on folding towels or tying her shoes. While Chelsea may still be receiving lessons in shoe tying, it is only for the purpose of remaining upright while walking, and not because it is the only task she is deemed capable of mastering. Chelsea is enrolled in a fully inclusive early childhood center where she, along with her peers – some of whom have labels like hers, others have no labels at all – visit the library weekly to listen to stories and take home books of her own

Chelsea's classroom is led by her teacher, Renee, and Renee's paraeducator, Marilyn. Their classroom is located within an early childhood center in a mid-sized mid-western city. Within Chelsea's classroom, students in the early childhood special education program learn side-by-side with children without disabilities. The center itself has a well-earned reputation of welcoming diversity. They have been leaders in the inclusion of children with disabilities in general education programs for years. This preschool provides a place to examine the ways in which literacy opportunities are afforded young children like Chelsea with cognitive disabilities and how these children use such opportunities. How does early literacy fold into the fabric of this diverse learning community?

### Literacy, in a Traditional Sense

A traditional road to literacy typically follows a course of letters and their connections to sounds; it weaves through and around printed words and gathers complexity as the child builds skills and dabbles with writing. At this point we traverse a field of invented spelling, to arrive at the alphabetic principle, with which a child is armed to form more meaningful combinations of letters (Gunning, 2002). This passageway follows what has been described as rungs on a ladder, or hierarchical literacy skills that children without disabilities begin climbing as infants, toddlers, or preschoolers (Kliewer & Biklen, 2001). However, this hierarchy has been tagged as an adult-created interpretation of what occurs naturally within young children (Kliewer, 1995). Furthermore, it is suggested that when teachers, parents, and other influential characters in a child's story adopt this ladder-like perspective of literacy development, children with severe disabilities are not considered candidates for such a journey (Kliewer & Biklen, 2001). It may be measured as a waste of resources to even provide them the opportunity to begin.

Such traditional maps of literacy are well supported by current legislation. This concrete vision of what it means to be literate and how literacy develops fits nicely within the newest move toward school reform lettered in the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)*. As a school psychologist, not only will I be called in frequently on cases where a child is experiencing difficulty developing reading skills, but I will also be expected to keep abreast of educational policies. For these reasons, I am particularly alert to how NCLB works to reframe the picture of young children's literacy.

## NCLB and the Impact of Federal Policy Making on Real-life Education, Literacy, and Disability

The reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*, through the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) is the most current political move to reform American schools. The purported aim of NCLB is to close the achievement gap in public schools (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.b).

Literacy (a term that is used interchangeably with “reading” throughout the NCLB literature) was targeted as the first area of concern. Federal funding for reading instruction was tripled from 2001 (\$300 million) to 2002 (\$900 million; U.S. Department of Education, n.d.b). Within NCLB, two reading initiatives have emerged: *Reading First*, which aims to bring all students to a proficient reading level by the third grade, and *Early Reading First*, which targets preschool aged children in developing prereading skills.

One basic and clearly stated premise of *Reading First* is that “all but a very small number of children can be taught to be a successful reader” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.b, p. 32), which is a notion that Kliewer and Landis (1999) may argue arises from an *institutional understanding*, or in other words, a notion that arises from accepted professional, cultural, and social presumptions that children with significant cognitive disabilities simply cannot achieve literacy.



The *Early Reading First* program outlines the following goals for preschool students:

(A) recognition, leading to automatic recognition, of letters of the alphabet, knowledge of letters, sounds, blending of letter sounds, and increasingly complex vocabulary;

(B) understanding that written language is composed of phonemes and letters each representing one or more speech sounds that in combination make up syllables, words, and sentences;

(C) spoken language, including vocabulary and oral comprehension abilities; and

(D) knowledge of the purposes and conventions of print.  
(U.S. Department of Education, n.d.a)

It is hard to say where children like Chelsea and her classmates fall within these objectives. How does Chelsea's teacher maneuver within this framework of early literacy to provide rich, meaningful opportunities for **all** of her students?

In his book, *The Good Preschool Teacher*, Ayers (1989) described the trickle down effect commonly resulting from federal education policy making. According to Ayers, the needs of international competition, the economy, and the military dictate what the goals of education should be and should become. As the goals of education morph, state governments and school district officials are forced to redevelop curriculum. Post high school expectations determine what receives emphasis in high school; high school expectations mold middle school curricula; middle school requirements inform elementary school practices; and the last voice heard is that of the preschool teacher saying, "Wha-? But..." Ayers argued that a *trickle up* effect might be more productive in addressing society's ills, in that preschool teachers tend to already practice in a way that

targets desirable citizen behaviors – kindness and cleaning up one’s own messes, for example (p. 3).

### Literacy, Socially and Culturally Constructed

I embark on this journey seeking an understanding of the role of literacy as a social construction in Chelsea’s classroom, sans an actual, universal definition of what literacy is, nor a universal acceptance of what it looks like or how it is “done” (Kliewer & Biklen, 2001). It is argued that the meaning, purpose, and relevancy of literacy are vulnerable to passing time and changing social, political, and academic trends (Barratt-Pugh, 2000). As history reshapes literacy, it can be hypothesized that literacy, itself, is not a concrete collection of facts and learned skills, but rather a type of interaction within a certain context. This context may be described in terms of the distinctive values set by one’s family, that is, how literacy is used and defined within one’s family. Children may experience another type of literacy within their neighborhoods, that is, literacy takes a different form due to values necessitated by socio-economic factors (e.g., not getting shot on your way to school may take higher priority than conjugating verbs.). The country in which one lives may construct yet another idea of literacy. For example, literacy may take on a different relevancy in an agrarian country plagued by intertribal warfare than in a nation fed by capitalism and Hollywood.

Regardless, one new trend in literacy theory suggests it is an *interaction* that is molded by family, community, and society (Barratt-Pugh, 2000; Henderson, Many, & Wellborn, 2002; Kliewer & Landis, 1999). Said differently, literacy is not an end unto itself, but rather it is a means to an end – a tool used for purposes that vary with the

changing landscape. In this respect, literacy becomes a way to participate in one's culture and thereby achieve citizenship (Kliwer, Fitzgerald, & Raschke, 2001).

“Learning to be literate comes about through participation in particular cultural and social events” (Barratt-Pugh, 2000, p. 7). Literacy then, is an interaction between individual and milieu in order to attain citizenship.

Children are first introduced to literacy in their families and communities (Wells, 1986). These earliest years establish a certain framework for what constitutes literacy. Children from cultures outside of the mainstream may come to school with a completely different set of early literacy skills and experiences than those that are presented to them in preschool and kindergarten as valid and important (It is argued that traditional forms of literacy are preserved within the mainstream, and it is these forms that are valued in most American schools; Barratt-Pugh, 2000; Delpit, 1995). It is as if students outside the mainstream must learn a different language all together (and in the case of non-native English speakers, some do, quite literally.). Children from the “culture of power” (Delpit, 1995) begin their school years naturally at an advantage. They come predisposed to the learning skills expected and the activities that are presented.

The concept of literacy as a socio-cultural construct may most easily be applied to culture in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, etc. Where does disability fit? It certainly creates personal context. The social construction of literacy may dictate who gets it, who is thought capable of getting, and who needs it. A traditionally narrow framework for early literacy – one which applauds isolated and decontextualized phonics skills – may force children like Chelsea out, or, ironically, leave

them behind – not only leave them out of academic arenas, but deny them a sense of citizenship in a greater society that values predictable academic structures.

### The Relevance of This Study

I aspire to use ethnographic methods to examine the literate school world in an inclusive preschool classroom. The concept of comprehensive, multiple literacies, that are socially constructed, does not jive especially well with a traditionally hierarchical vision of literacy; the idea of a child adjudged with significant intellectual deficits engaging in early literacy is at times marginalized by policymakers. My hope is that this study will add weight to the growing theory of early literacy as more than just reading and creating printed words.

### The Importance of This Study

In this study, I aim to understand what early literacy means in an inclusive classroom. I examine how it is made accessible to, and how it is constructed for Chelsea, a preschool child with developmental disabilities, and her classmates – all of whom seek citizenship within the classroom community. As Barratt-Pugh (2000) wrote:

It is argued that all children should have equal access to literacy, which will enable them to take part in the wider society as well as in their homes and communities. A socio-cultural perspective enables early childhood professionals to examine the way patterns of inequality are constructed and maintained, and explores ways of teaching literacy which expose and challenge the inequality, as part of children's developing literacy competence. (p. 4)

The importance of seeing through the eyes of a child while simultaneously being able to see through adult eyes may better inform teacher practices (Henderson et al.,

2002). With this study, I hope to celebrate the wealth of knowledge and personal expertise children in similar settings and with similarly limited expectations bring.

## CHAPTER 2

### A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

With this ethnographic study, I examine the meaning and role of early literacy as a social construct with multiple forms and purposes in one inclusive preschool classroom. I am particularly interested in how the inclusive setting as well as these sense-making interactions support or deny student membership – or citizenship – within the classroom community. Chelsea, a child with significant developmental disabilities, served as my guide.

My review of literature was driven by the following questions: (a) what might literacy, as an interaction, look like; (b) how do children with disabilities interact with peers in inclusive preschool classrooms; and (c) how are students with and without disabilities invited into literacy and citizenship?

#### Literacy, As an Interaction

##### A Narrative Interaction Within Multiple Frameworks

One possibility for the discussion of early literacy as an interaction is found in ten forms of narratives hypothesized by Kliewer and Fitzgerald (2003) as possible components that make up the early childhood literate community. These ten narratives are a result of data collection and analysis within the larger study of literate citizenship within the inclusive preschool community, which serves as the context in which my own study has been conducted. Each narrative speaks to a different form and purpose of literacy and suggests an opportunity for participation in one's classroom community.

Firstly, *Relational Narratives* are those in which children develop a more intimate knowledge regarding what others enjoy and dislike. Children with disabilities are rarely observed to participate in spontaneous child-initiated relational narratives. Secondly, *Daily Narratives* consist of those interactions that reflect a sense of daily needs and emotions regarding on-going events. Such activities may include asking to go to the bathroom or engaging in a daily snack.

*Local Community Narratives* can best be understood as social contexts including the children's classrooms, schools, homes, neighborhoods, and wider, but immediate, communities. Fourth are *Abstract Community Narratives*, which involve a focus on social contexts far removed from the children either by time or distance. Maps and globes are useful tools in these discussions; historical figures and events are potential topics to explore.

*Natural World Narratives* attend to nature or the outdoors. *Basic Literacy Skill Narratives* are those that center on phonemic awareness and related skills. *Enculturation Narratives* emphasize positive social citizenship behaviors applauded by teachers and other authority figures. In contrast, *Narratives of Control* are those narratives that focus on what adults and other authority figures feel children should NOT do.

*Subterranean Narratives* entail those interactions between children that happen away from the influence of adults. Participation of children with significant disabilities is especially difficult within this narrative, as it is distinctly child-initiated and -sustained.

Finally, *Transcendence Narratives* are considered those occurrences in which children engage in symbolic acts, such as pretending (play-based transcendence) or making up stories (storytelling transcendence).

In my own data, I find evidence of these narratives – particularly transcendence and subterranean narratives – but see them in terms more related to early literacy as sense-making rather than story-telling.

#### An Effort to Make Sense of One's World

In their qualitative study of the effect of scaffolding on the literacy of eight preschool students in a general education preschool classroom, Henderson et al. (2002) discovered that literacy was far more than simply reading and writing, but rather a more comprehensive interface through which students made sense of their worlds. After five months of close observations, detailed field notes, and thorough interviews, as well as examination of artifacts and documents, these researchers noted that early literacy played out in several ways for these young subjects.

Their observations and discussions took on three frequently overlapping foci. First, they noted several literate interactions of an *Academic Focus*. These activities encouraged traditional reading and writing activities; however they were not necessarily delivered by traditional means. The teacher used rhythm, music, and art, to help students develop their knowledge of language, both written and spoken.

Second, interactions took on an *Intellectual Focus*. These activities were ones in which students learned from the context of life. These activities were typically spontaneous ones. A child hears church bells outside, and the teacher takes a moment to



count how many tolls they hear; the number of times the bell is rung indicates what time it is. Another student receives a spontaneous vocabulary lesson when a child misuses the word “anxious” in describing another student. The teacher also takes a moment to help the boy understand the somewhat confusing behavior of one of his peers.

Finally, Henderson et al. (2002) categorize activities into a third realm, an *Emotional Focus*. Activities within this focus assist students in understanding and expressing their emotions. Within this emotional realm, a child is helped to understand how his words hurt another child’s feelings. In another instance, a child learns how to express that he is angry about a decision the teacher made.

Students with disabilities were not identified in this study; therefore the ideas put forth by this team of researchers may be a suggestion of what a typical general education preschool may look like. It may be expected that these sorts of opportunities are ones regularly afforded children without disabilities. It is precisely these sorts of activities that one with an *institutional understanding* (Kliewer & Landis, 1999) of disability may deny children with cognitive impairments.

Korat, Bahar, and Snapir (2002) used qualitative methods to examine the role of sociodramatic play to aid in the literacy development of preschoolers in Israel. No children in the study were identified as having a disability. Like the current study, these authors held a social construction philosophy regarding early literacy, that is, literacy as an interaction in which meaning is conveyed and interpreted.

Researchers used a series of participant observations, field notes, photographs, and work samples, to follow the children through several activities that fostered literacy

development: art, blocks building, home activity center, doctor center, and a nature center. Researchers concluded that one of the first essential steps in the development of literacy was the intention to deliver meaning that withstands time and space (e.g. writing oneself a note so that something important is not forgotten).

Another trend noted by investigators was the marked increase of enthusiasm and self-satisfaction when children were able to accomplish tasks with minimal teacher or adult interference. That is, when teachers used methods such as purposeful questioning children demonstrated competent problem solving on their own and expressed a heightened sense of ownership over their learning experiences. For example, instead of directly telling a child to make a sign for the “grocery store” that says OPEN in order to let his peers know they can come in to shop, the teacher *asked* him if there was a way he could let the other children know that he was open for business, and therefore allowed him to produce the solution on his own. The instructor learned to evaluate children on the basis of what they know instead of what they don’t know.

Given the premise that literacy emerges from constant negotiations with peers, siblings, and adults, the opportunities the children in this study were given to explore suggested that there was a significant amount of early literacy learning happening. As noted by Brown, Odom, and Li (1999), children with disabilities in inclusive preschool classrooms receive significantly more adult support and direction than do their nondisabled counterparts. A related finding comes from Kliewer (1995) in which he noted that interactions between peers gained in complexity and richness when outside of adult presence. It may be suggested that if children with disabilities in inclusive

preschool classrooms – or in segregated programs, for that matter – are not engaging as frequently in interactions with peers and instead are spending more time with adults, they may not be given the same opportunities to explore language and early literacy freely.

In answer to my original question, and based on the review of this literature, my hypothesis may be that early literacy, as an interaction, takes multiple forms in which children are telling stories within multiple personal contexts (e.g., Local Community, Natural World, Academic, Intellectual, and Emotional contexts). Children are interacting with and within these contexts for the purposes of conveying and interpreting information. Mastery of this interaction fosters a sense of citizenship.

If early literacy grows through interactions, then a child's ability to interact not only within particular contexts but also with other people within those environments plays a significant role in the early literacy development of that child.

#### How Children With Disabilities Interact Socially in Inclusive Preschool Classrooms

Research indicates that fully inclusive preschool programs assist students with and without disabilities in practicing and mastering language skills and social-communicative interactions (Odom, 2000; Reynolds & Holdgrafer, 1998). However, some investigators have concluded that more direct intervention is necessary for children with significant disabilities to progress in the area of social communications.

#### The Problem of Social Integration

Reynolds and Holdgrafer (1998) conducted a study using qualitative methods to compare the social-communicative performance of six preschool children with developmental delays during free play in both mainstream and reverse integration

program settings. Authors defined mainstream programs as those general education classrooms that included one or two students with disabilities. Reverse integration programs were those in which there were more children with disabilities than without.

Videotaped samples of each participant were obtained during free play or center time. Later, these video taped activities were coded. When a targeted child interacted with another, researchers recorded who initiated the interaction. In addition, they noted the function of the communication (i.e., joint attention, behavior regulation, or social interaction). It was also noted whether or not the child used Attention Getting Devices (AGDs; i.e., verbal or nonverbal indicators of intent to communicate, which prompt the listener to pay attention to the speaker, and thereby make the communication more successful) and finally, if the addressee responded appropriately, inappropriately, or not at all.

Findings suggested that partners responded to participant initiations appropriately more frequently when the participants used an AGD than when they did not use an AGD; and furthermore, children with limited language skills may consequently have limited abilities to engage other children in conversation. In turn, they may not get as much benefit from the social environment in terms of developing language.

In answer to the question posed, it is suggested that adult- and peer-directed interventions will help promote social-communicative skills. Again, this echoes the difficulties Brown et al. (1999) and Kliever and Fitzgerald (2003) noted when children with significant disabilities attempted to participate or were not invited to participate in child-initiated social activities. Together, the studies may suggest that language plays a

critical role in social skills development of children with disabilities. A child's ability to communicate effectively with others serves as a foundation to developing literacy; and the mastery of effective communication and literacy building fosters a sense of citizenship within that community (Kliewer, 1995).

#### How Students With and Without Disabilities Are Invited Into Early Literacy Institutional vs. Local Understandings

Kliewer and Landis (1999) discovered that individualizing practices typically originated from one of two contrasting sources: *institutional understanding* or *local understanding*. Practices stemming from an *institutional understanding* were those that did not necessarily acknowledge unique student context. In other words, they arose from accepted professional, cultural, and social presumptions regarding the literate capacities of children with moderate to severe disabilities. For example, a teacher believing that students with Down's syndrome cannot read may create more functional life skills sorts of activities for students with such a label. Individuation practices derived from a point of institutional understanding tended to be very limiting, often times denying students with disabilities access to viable literacy opportunities.

In contrast, other individuation approaches were born from a *local understanding*. That is, teachers adopted practices based on what they knew of the individual child's current level of achievement. The teacher sought to support the student where s/he uniquely needed extra support in order to access the same literacy opportunities to which her/his peers were privy.

Researchers also tended to notice a general lack of focus on individual student goals. Kliever and Landis (1999) noted that several of the children's Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) listed the same precise goals accompanied by the same precise monitoring procedures.

In another example of practices emerging from an institutional understanding, on days in an inclusive preschool classroom when the students without disabilities were present, the classroom was full of stories, books, writing, and dialogue; however, on days when those students did not attend, and students with disabilities were alone in the classroom, teachers primarily provided direct instruction for attending skills (Kliever & Landis, 1999).

In relation to the idea of literacy as a concept socially constructed, establishing an approach to literacy learning that is based on a local understanding, or a deep and meaningful knowledge of and relationship with a child with disabilities, is to reconceptualize or reaffirm the interactive nature of reading. Children are guided through a literate terrain until they see themselves as readers. Once they see themselves as readers, they are motivated to take more risks that lead to more growth. And with more growth, others recognize a greater potential and therefore create even more opportunities to engage in literacy (Kliever & Landis, 1999).

This idea of being motivated by success is quite similar to the hypothesis proposed by Sperling and Head (2002). In their study, they had proposed that as children (*typically* developing) improved test scores in performance of reading skills, their attitudes about reading, as measured by rating scales, would improve as well. The main

difference here seems to be the proposal of what literacy skills are. Sperling and Head purported mechanical subskills within the widely celebrated hierarchical model of reading (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, etc.) were the motivating essentials. Kliever and Landis (1999) refer to a more comprehensive set of skills based on the idea of literacy as a social construction that changes with time.

### Scaffolding to Independence

In the matter of scaffolding, Henderson et al. (2002) defined this teaching approach as providing children with additional support when they need it and then gradually reducing that support until the child is able to achieve success on her own. The research of Roehler and Cantlon (1997) was enlisted to map out types of scaffolding that are typically used to assist students in gaining conceptual understandings. In general, scaffolding may happen in the form of: explanations, invitations to participate, verification and clarification of what students understand, modeling of good behaviors, and invitations to students to contribute clues. They noted that the teacher's use of such scaffolding techniques within each of the three foci described previously is very effective.

Korat et al. (2002) also noted the importance of developing independence in children. They noted that as children achieved meaning making on their own, their enthusiasm and ownership for literacy endeavors increased.

### Summary

A few conclusions can be made from the collection of research examined here. First, early literacy exists as an interaction, which may take on multiple forms and serve

several purposes (Henderson et al., 2002; Kliewer, 1995; Kliewer & Fitzgerald, 2003; Kliewer & Landis, 1999; Korat et al., 2002; Werner, 2000). I especially feel a certain connection to Henderson's et al. (2002) idea that it is an interaction with the intention of *making sense* of one's world. Secondly, even though inclusive environments provide opportunities that enable all students to build interactive skills, students with limited cognitive and language skills need more adult intervention to maximize the benefits of inclusion (Brown et al., 1999; Holahan & Costenbader, 2000; Kliewer, 1995; Kliewer & Fitzgerald, 2003; Reynolds & Holdgrafer, 1998). And, finally, although the presence of an institutional understanding of disability may lead to limited access to literacy for students with disabilities, all students may become competent members of a literate community through a process of scaffolding (Henderson et al., 2002; Kliewer & Landis, 1999; Korat et al., 2002).



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

In this study I employed ethnographic methods to examine the meaning and role of early literacy as a means to *make sense* in the school world within one inclusive preschool classroom. I periodically called on the expertise of Chelsea, a five-year-old girl with significant developmental disabilities, to guide and illustrate my observations and conclusions. I was also interested in how the construction of early literacy in Chelsea's learning environment either facilitated or denied her membership within the classroom community.

#### A Qualitative Study

Within this study, I utilized qualitative methods. This decision to use qualitative methods was founded in the belief that early literacy exists as a social interaction. In this regard, a study of early literacy lends itself quite naturally to qualitative methods, in that such research is based on a "holistic view that social phenomena, human dilemmas, and the nature of cases are situational and influenced by happenings of many kinds" (Stake, 1994, p. 239). In addition, from the perspective of literacy as a social construction embedded in personal context, it seemed most appropriate to conduct a study that is equally embedded in context. To decontextualize early literacy by administering standardized tests of phonics skills, or whatnot, would have seemed inappropriate (Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

### The Methodology

As I have stated before, data was collected within the context of a larger, longitudinal study, which involved multiple preschools and children. The descriptions of my methods have largely been garnered from Kliewer and Fitzgerald's (2003) description of the methods used in the ongoing *Citizenship for All* study. These methods arise from a commitment to the ethnographic principle of studying real-world settings, "focusing on a particular place at a particular point in time" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 57).

It is important to note that my role in the larger study led by Chris Kliewer and Linda Fitzgerald, was as a pair of fresh eyes. My knowledge of preschool and of literacy as a social construction was limited. I was able to enter the classroom at ground level, so to speak. With a history of teaching English/Language Arts to teenagers, my notion of literacy was that of someone being able to read and create words in print. A significant part of the study was not only in discovering what early literacy as an interaction looked like, but discovering how my own views about literacy, disability, and young children were changing.

I spent the first two weeks of observations mostly as a passive (and somewhat bemused) observer lurking in the corners, furiously scribbling notes into my notebook. My field notes from these first few days are full of basic descriptions of the walking and standing contraptions used by one student, the "sandbox – type thing on legs" (the sensory table), and foolish attempts to figure out which child was deaf, because I kept seeing the teachers using sign language.

I had little interaction with the children during this time of orientation. As I became more comfortable and more enchanted with the environment and the characters within, I joined in the action more and more, until finally I was singing the songs right along with them and could occasionally be found covered in finger paints or Elmer's glue, discussing Spider-man with a pair of googly-eyed children.

Chelsea was chosen as my guide, not only because of a natural interest in her as an exceedingly remarkable child who took my hand and led me around the room within ten minutes of my arrival, but also because of her unique capacity to illustrate how certain theories and the issues of early literacy play out in the every day school experience of a young child entitled for special services. This is her school world. She spends five days a week within this uniquely inclusive environment.

### Participants

Participants in this study included: Chelsea, a five-year-old girl with significant, yet generally labeled, developmental disabilities; Chelsea's classroom lead teacher, Renee; and the paraeducator in Chelsea's classroom, Marilyn. All real names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the privacy of participants.

Participants are involved with an inclusive early childhood center in a small Midwestern city. All participants, including Chelsea, were sought for their personal experiences and expertise regarding inclusion and early literacy of children with disabilities. All participants were chosen, in part, because they have signed consent forms and expressed interest and willingness to participate in such a study.

In this particular program, there are children with no identified disability who are part of a Goldfish program for children considered “at-risk.” In addition, there are children identified with disabilities who have Individualized Education Plans (IEP) and are covered by state funds for Early Childhood Special Education. It took several weeks to figure out the difference between the programs and which child was in which program.

### Data Gathering and Analysis

Data gathering extended across approximately one year within the larger longitudinal study. It consisted primarily of participant-observations of Chelsea in her natural classroom setting. In addition, informal, yet informative, conversations were held with Renee and Marilyn.

Observations were conducted from September to May of one school year, each observation taking place in the morning and early afternoon hours before the children without disabilities went home. This was the time of day in which the preschool was truly inclusive.

During each observation, I kept a small notebook nearby to jot down interactions that seemed relevant to early literacy. Specifically, during observations, I looked for activities and behaviors that suggested a social construction of literacy. Upon my initial arrival in Chelsea’s world, I did not know exactly what this meant. However, I understood that a social construction of literacy took the form of an interaction. I took interest in occasions when Chelsea and her peers were observed in some sort of sense-making interaction with: the natural environment (e.g., examining newly emerged butterflies in the butterfly box); the classroom environment (e.g., playing in the dramatic

play area); adults and peers (e.g. negotiating the possession of toys); language (e.g., talking to oneself while playing alone); and more traditionally accepted forms of literacy (e.g., looking through books in the library or tracing one's name with one finger on a name card).

After an observation was conducted, I typed field notes, which also gave me the opportunity to reexamine them for themes and impressions. Once I had collected several typed pages of field notes, I studied them once again to look for patterns that suggested multiple forms, contexts, and purposes of literacy. As patterns emerged, I elaborated on my field notes to create more descriptive narratives that would capture and communicate more important details from my observations. I called these collections of vignettes my "synthesized notes" and distributed them to the other members of my team for their feedback and input. In addition, I gave a copy to Renee and Marilyn, so that they could review my impressions of what I was seeing, and either clarify any misconceptions I had, or add additional perspectives to these notes.

After I had a complete collection of synthesized notes, I examined them once again and sought more common patterns and themes throughout the narratives. At this time, I could set aside narratives that I felt were irrelevant to my study. I also reworked some themes – eliminating some, adding others, tweaking the rest. What resulted was one comprehensive set of ideas of how early literacy played out as a sense-making interaction in Chelsea's classroom and narratives to illustrate these ideas.

In addition to participant observations, field notes, synthesized field notes, and participant and supervisory feedback, I conducted both informal interviews with Renee

and Marilyn and one more formal interview with Renee. As a newcomer to this world of early childhood education, I had many questions about what was being done and why. Informal interviews took the form of conversations during the school day: a quick question while the children were busy at centers, or a casual conversation while supervising the playground during recess. The information garnered from these informal conversations were woven into the text of my field notes and included with general observations, which were then sent to Renee for clarification.

One more formal interview was conducted with Renee the day after the children left for summer break. I was able to be more specific with my questioning, and Renee had the time to provide more detailed information. This interview took a more philosophical tone; Renee had the time to explain some of her own philosophies on early literacy in her classroom and competencies of Chelsea and her classmates. No interviews were tape recorded or video-taped; however I took detailed notes as the participants answered and included quotations when possible.

### Findings

As mentioned previously, data and conclusions are reported in the form of descriptive narratives. I made several attempts to establish clear categories in which my sense-making vignettes would neatly and gracefully fall; however each time something didn't quite feel right. My categories were all elbows and knees; I didn't believe I was accurately portraying what I had observed. Finally, I returned to the idea of sense-making and realized that this idea of making sense through interacting was the concept

that spoke most clearly to me. I reanalyzed my narratives and categorized according to the type of sense-making interactions they seemed to illustrate. And this...made sense.

## CHAPTER 4

### MAKING SENSE

My intentions throughout this ethnographic study were to attain a clearer understanding and appreciation for the meaning and role of early literacy as a sense-making interaction in Chelsea's inclusive preschool classroom. Under the umbrella of literacy as a social and cultural construct that enables one to achieve membership within a community, I have been specifically interested in how the picture of early literacy created in Chelsea's classroom fosters or denies her membership in its community. In this chapter, I present narrative vignettes that encompass a relatively wide spectrum of what I believe to be literate interactions.

It is a tricky thing to call literacy simply an *interaction*. The possibilities of what could fit within such a vague definition invite nearly anything that involves the bumping together of two masses. After studying my field notes, I have come to understand that what separates interactions from literate interactions in preschool is *meaning*. Throughout early childhood, a literate interaction goes beyond a mere physical coexistence and happens for the purpose of creating symbolic meaning on the part of the child or making sense of symbolic interactions with others. A common thread that runs through each of the forthcoming descriptions is that they are interactions in which symbolic meaning is constructed or intended to be constructed. This definition is based on the idea that the first steps toward all future literacy are the conveyance or interpretations of symbolic meaning through graphic means. Therefore, as documented by Henderson et al. (2002), Kliewer and Biklen (2001), Kliewer and Fitzgerald (2003),



and Kliewer and Landis (1999), interactions of meaning and the efforts to engage in such interactions are foundational to early literacy.

My first two days of observations in Renee and Marilyn's room were filled with hesitation flavored with bewilderment. My language was out-of-place, for instance. There is a particular sort of language teachers have learned to use with children at this age. A new book arrived in the school's library called *More Parts* (Arnold, 2001), a book in which figurative language stirs panic in a young boy. "People say all kinds of things / That I don't understand. / Like when my dad asked me if I / Would please give him a hand" (Arnold, 2001). Marilyn, who is a district leader in training paraprofessionals, planned to use this book in an upcoming training session to relay to her colleagues the importance of choosing words carefully when talking to children. It is a book I took to heart while I monitored my own tendencies for sarcasm and figurative language.

I didn't know what things were called, which routines were normal and which exceptional, or how to relate to the children within this environment. After my first day of observations, I returned to my research team talking about "that thing that looks like a sandbox on legs." I watched Renee and Marilyn use sign language and tried to figure out which child was deaf. On another day, I sputtered stupidly as Chelsea and another child threw rice from the "sandbox on legs" all over the floor, not knowing what words would make them stop – or whether or not their celebration of rice *should* be stopped. Perhaps this was a valuable lesson in gravity or a rehearsal for wedding etiquette.

Not only was the language being used in the classroom strange to me, but the concept I was exploring was elusive, as well. Several months had been spent discussing a more comprehensive view of literacy with the research team – a social constructionist interpretation. It all sounded good and made sense in theory, but I still didn't know exactly what it would look like, or whether or not I would know it when I saw it.

As I learned the language and the customs within Chelsea's classroom, I slowly became a more involved member of their community. With a stronger sense of belonging, I learned that the "sandbox on legs" was the sensory table and that sign language was used with all children to help them build communication skills. Understanding a little more about the classroom, I learned to decipher patterns that created a comprehensive picture of interactive sense-making. In this chapter, I offer descriptions of those patterns as they relate to: (a) what literacy as an interaction might look like, (b) how children with disabilities perform in the classroom, and (c) how students with and without disabilities are invited into literate citizenship.

### Literacy, As an Interaction

#### Making Sense is a Full-body Experience

From my experience in Chelsea's classroom, I learned, most notably, that regardless of the context in which sense making occurs, it is most always a full-body experience. Whether it is jumping up and down while counting the days of the month or catching a beanbag and clapping out the syllables to their names, the students rarely sit listlessly as literacy happens. All children are invited to participate equally in these highly demonstrative experiences.

How many children does it take to fill a mitten? Today during carpet time, Renee will read *The Mitten* (Brett, 1996). Beforehand, Marilyn has given each child a necklace made of yarn, festooned with the picture of one of the animals featured in the story.

While reading, each time another animal in the tale climbs into the mitten that has been dropped on the forest floor, the child wearing that creature's necklace comes to the front of the room and climbs into a large, white "mitten" (which looks to me more like a pillowcase for a pillow under an impossibly giant head) until Chelsea and several of her classmates, like anchovies, are stuffed shoulder to shoulder within this monstrous mitten.

When children are like race cars. Today the children are being led through the dramatic reenactment of *The Berenstain Bears and the Big Road Race* (Berenstein & Berenstein, 1987). Each child has been given a necklace made of yarn that sports the picture of a car from the story. Some cars are blue, some yellow, green, or orange, and one lone red car slower than the rest. Chelsea is – and quite proudly – a blue car. The room has been transformed into an obstacle course, and as Renee reads the story, adults in the room help steer the children through the route. Chelsea and her peers crawl under tables, over tables, around milk crates full of books, and through the reading dome. When cars crash in the story, they bump into one another and fall disastrously to the floor giggling; when their cars pass other cars, they zoom by shooting victorious grins over their shoulders; when their cars run out of gas, they slow and slump to the ground. The boy representing the red car – virtually, the tortoise in the tortoise and hare fable – shuffles ever so slowly around the course until he emerges the only car left moving, and by default, the victor.

In these two illustrations, Chelsea and her classmates are encouraged to not only listen to stories, an activity that Wells (1986) would argue is the single most important activity in preparing children to develop conventional literacy, but become active participants in their creation. In a very real sense, Chelsea is invited to partner with her teachers and peers and interact with story-making. She and her classmates began with a conventional symbol of literacy – a book with printed words and colorful illustrations – and they began to interact with that symbol in a non-conventional way. They became a part of it. Chelsea and her friends make sense of the context of the story by becoming part of it. Chelsea acts as a valuable member of the community in that her participation makes the story complete.

#### Sense-Making Happens Within a Universal Context

A key idea in the social construction of literacy is in the fact that literacy is an interaction, and therefore heavily reliant on context. Different children with varying life experiences and skills will interpret identical stimuli in a different way. Chelsea's classroom brings together children of different races, genders, socio-economic backgrounds, and abilities. It would be a wonder if any kind of common thread could be drawn to link the personal contexts these children bring to school. However, it does seem there are universals in this classroom – things that apply to everyone regardless of height, weight, race, gender, most hated vegetable, or ability.

This is not to say that Chelsea and her peers all receive identical instruction and have identical expectations. While all children are given a library card and encouraged to

check out books to take home, Renee and Marilyn consider the personal strengths and needs of each child and steer them towards books that will be most beneficial to their development. Additionally, while each child is heartened to write, they are not led through identical writing exercises. One child may be asked to write his entire name, using a name card with his picture laminated into the corner as a model. However, for Chelsea, who still struggles to grasp a pencil and trace straight lines, this expectation would be met with little success. Instead, she is supported in writing a “C” for her name.

Even these examples of individualized curricula happen within shared contexts. All children are expected to make sense and be a part of: a global context, the natural environment, and the immediate classroom community. Despite individual differences, there are still some sense making activities that are available, with no adaptation, to all.

Making sense within a global context. Most obviously, there is a universal context in that Chelsea and her classmates belong to the same global environment. When my research began, the United States was still finding ground after September 11. Relations with Iraq were worsening, and *War on Terrorism* was reaching its launch. Curious as to how world events were present in the classroom, I asked Renee and Marilyn how they were handling the topic of war in Chelsea’s classroom. It had been the subject of frequent memos, staff meetings, and training seminars. They had been told that they were not allowed to bring up the war with Iraq unless one of the children brought it up, at which point, they were to reassure the children that the war was very far away, and that they were safe.

Not all of the children will have identical perceptions of the war. However, each child exists within this common context of a country at war and must make sense of it – regardless of what unique impressions they come up with.

Making sense within a natural environment. Secondly, Chelsea and her classmates all belong to the same natural environment. Whether it is a life lesson in the emergence and death of a butterfly, or the exploration of snow in the sensory table, children explore and make sense of the properties of their shared natural world. And these properties do not waiver. No matter who you are, rain is wet, and butterflies will die. Like the global context of war, this is not to say that each child will experience nature in the same way, however the properties of nature do not change to accommodate personal nuances. Winter makes me grumpy, yet every year it comes.

*Leaves fall in autumn.* It is autumn, and red, brown, and yellow leaves blanket the ground outside. I arrive to find the students in the hallway outside the classroom putting on their coats. They have each been given plastic grocery bags. Renee tells me that they are about to take a walk to pick up interesting leaves. She instructs all the children to find a partner. Chelsea is paired with another child with a disability. Some pairs hold hands; some simply totter along side-by-side as we walk down the tiled hallway and out the double doors. As we straggle along in a crooked line down the sidewalk, students can be heard exclaiming, “Look at this one!” as they capture leaves from the ground and stuff them into their bags. Later, these leaves collected by the children, will be poured into the sensory table for further examination.

Making sense within a shared classroom context. Chelsea and her friends are members of a general classroom community. They hold similar roles and responsibilities within this context. Everyone is expected to take on responsibilities at times. Whether you have a disability or not, at some point you will be designated line leader. At some point, you will be asked to flip the lights to signal clean-up time. If you can't reach the light switch, someone will give you a boost so that you can carry out your duty. And when those lights flip on and off, no matter who you are, you must stop and clean up. When it comes to carrying out duties that keep the classroom running smoothly, Chelsea is a member.

Making sense within activities that acknowledge no boundaries. While there are activities in the classroom for which Chelsea must be given accommodations in order to participate (e.g. writing only the letter "C" instead of her whole name), there are certain activities that erase any kind of line of difference that may be drawn. Dancing, an activity that employs rhythm and music to develop a sense of spoken language (Henderson et al., 2002), is an example. Chelsea is a full-fledged member of a dance team.

*All you gotta do is dance.* Periodically, the kids do nothing but dance. After centers and before bathroom breaks or trips to the library, Renee may turn on up-beat music, call everyone to the carpet, and they simply get jiggy wi' it. These occasions never cease to amaze me. Every child, regardless of ability, shakes and wiggles while holding hands of either an adult or another child. Dance partnerships are forged between children with and without disabilities, regardless of how much they interact with one

another off the dance floor. When it comes to dancing, there simply are no boundaries. Although Chelsea is a child who usually seems quite content to spend time alone, as music fills the room, she bounces and jives, flapping her arms right along with everyone else.

### Making Sense Requires a Context

One of the most frequently used phrases I hear in Renee and Marilyn's room is "Use your words." It is emphasized during a fight between three boys on the playground; it is used around the breakfast table when food and drink are distributed; it is used when children are negotiating who gets what toy during centers. Renee even made it into a lesson. For children who need extra help, she created an "I want..." series of cue cards. On a long, thin, wooden block, she has taped one laminated paper square with the word "I" followed by another with the word "Want" and then a third space left empty except for a Velcro square where the child can add and remove a card that depicts the desired item. She leads them through this process by taking their hands in hers, pointing their fingers, and as she says each word, manually pressing their fingers lightly to the words. Throughout the day, they are prompted to use "I want" statements.

This idea of using words as a tool to get something desired speaks to the social construction of literacy. Literacy is a meaningful interaction with one's environment – whether it is with the people coexisting in that environment; whether it is objects in the environment; whether it is a feeling one encounters within that environment; or whether it is the environment itself. Each of these interactions is designed as a way to either convey meaning ("I want juice.") or interpret meaning ("Oh, Chelsea wants juice."). At



its very root, literacy is purposeful. Decontextualizing literacy robs it of its purpose, and therefore makes it more difficult – or more useless – for folks (Werner, 2000).

It seems that a decontextualized version of literacy – such as asking a child to read lists of nonsense words – may actually inhibit membership. Or at least it does not support one's membership. If someone relies solely on one's performance on such assessments to determine his or her capacity to be literate, then it is likely that a child with developmental delays will appear to be a non-candidate for citizenship within the literate society. An incident happened with Chelsea that made this idea very clear to me. It happened over ice cream.

Words can get you ice cream. Students are in the library listening to a story. After the story is completed, they are instructed to find a book to check out and take home. Chelsea has not returned her previously borrowed book yet, so she is not allowed to check out another; but she is still encouraged to explore books on display. A square wooden table holds a smattering of colorful board books that address issues such as counting, the alphabet, shapes and colors.

Chelsea has picked up a book about shapes and examines each picture closely as she turns the pages. I ask Chelsea if she can point to where the words are in her book. I am curious about her knowledge of conventional literacy. She turns the page, points to a purple heart shape in the illustration, lifts the book closer to me, and says, "Heart book." I assume she does not know what words, per se, are.

Shortly after the library, the students return to the classroom to continue centers. Chelsea resumes her play at the dramatic play center, which has been converted into an

ice cream shop. A counter made out of what looks to be a refrigerator box stands at the entrance to the center. A brown cardboard sign hangs over the counter advertising flavors of ice cream sold. In large, black, magic-markered letters, it reads:

ICE CREAM SHOP  
VANILLA  
CHOCOLATE  
STRAWBERRY

Either Renee or Marilyn has brought in Dairy Queen cups, spoons, and napkins. There is a blender filled with plastic ice cream cone tops (There are matching, separate cones upon which these tops fit squarely.) set upon an adjacent counter. There is one white ice cream top, for vanilla, one brown, for chocolate, and one pink, for strawberry.

One boy stands behind the counter awaiting customers. Chelsea, who played with me earlier at the ice cream shop, approaches the counter, and the boy asks her gruffly, "What do you want?" She peers at the cardboard sign hanging above the counter, smashes her fingertip confidently into the word, "Vanilla" and says, "That one."

This incident suggests to me that indeed Chelsea does know what words typically look like, and furthermore, she understands that they represent things; and by using these words we can communicate what we need or want.

I immediately think of an assessment that a school psychologist or teacher might give Chelsea to assess her position within the emergent literacy hierarchy of skills, specifically, her awareness of words. It would most likely be a task in which one would do exactly what I had done in the library, where one asks the child to point to the words in the book. Chelsea would have failed this test. But here, in the process of acting out a

true-life scene she and this other child have created, she illustrates that she understands more than what that simple, isolated task would suggest.

Wells (1986) would ask of such literacy awareness tests, "...is the knowledge tapped by this test what is really crucial?" (p. 148). If the child does not understand that the primary purpose of literate activities is to make meaning, then it would be irrelevant whether or not the child knew where the words in a book were.

On another day, I experimented again. This time, Chelsea sat on the floor of the classroom, flipping through a Barney book. Again, I asked her, "Chelsea, show me where the words in this book are." Again, seeming to ignore my request, she turned the page, pointed at Barney, the big, purple dinosaur, and smiled at me.

Thankfully, Renee and Marilyn, and the school, as a whole, have created an instructional environment that is submerged in context. Nearly everything they do is within a context that is accessible to all children. They have systematically changing themes: when the children read *The Berenstain Bears and the Big Road Race* (Berenstein & Berenstein, 1987), the dramatic play center became a car wash, and Chelsea even studied modes of transportation with her speech therapist. Because the curriculum is so embedded in theme, and rarely – if at all – requires students to perform isolated academic tasks, Chelsea is more likely to become an active member.

### Children Make Sense by Creating and Interacting with Their Own Contexts

Children create stories. Sometimes it seems they are practicing or mimicking ones they've seen, such as when Chelsea led a small plastic boy action figure in striped

shorts to knock on the front door of the dollhouse. Other times, they may appear to be practicing social customs, as the occasion Chelsea fake sneezed repeatedly, each time grinning broadly as I'd say either, "Bless you," or "Gesundheit." Other times they appear to create completely new stories that may or may not make much sense to anyone else, such as the day when Chelsea rocked a baby to sleep while holding a chicken puppet, which she had previously fed a peanut butter and lettuce sandwich, on her other hand. This sort of pretending does not come naturally to all children, however.

In an effort to scaffold and assist children's participation in story-making or community routines, Renee and Marilyn have created picture cue strips. For instance, when the dramatic play center is turned into a vet clinic, picture cue strips are placed in various areas of the center: a child holding a puppy, then feeding the puppy, taking the puppy outside; or a doctor holding a kitten, then holding a stethoscope to the kitten's back, then giving the kitten a shot. When asked about the cue cards, Renee tells me that she has seen Chelsea take advantage of these cue strips on several occasions. She adds, "A lot of the kids with disabilities have a hard time [initiating dramatic play] on their own, so the pictures give them ideas for what to do."

In fact, this idea is supported by (Kliewer, 1995) who noticed that children with disabilities rarely participated in typically child-initiated activities, such as pretending, unless they were given assistance or prompts from adults. Being given cue cards, Chelsea is able to pretend without having to request an adult's participation. It facilitates more independence not only in creating her own dramas, but in practicing those routines she may see in real life. And as other research literature has suggested, when children are

able to operate more independently, they are motivated to try more activities on their own (Henderson et al., 2002; Korat et al., 2002).

“I’d like vanilla, please.” Chelsea has settled into the ice cream shop after spending several minutes wandering from center to center. As she wriggles in behind the counter, she points to me and says, “Go!”

I ask, “Go where?”

She points to the other side of the counter, and I understand that I am being instructed to place an order. I scoot to the counter on my knees; squint at the sign while tapping my chin, and then I say to her, “I’d like a vanilla ice cream cone, please.”

Chelsea promptly turns to the adjacent counter and fishes around in the blender until she pulls out the pink one – strawberry. She places it atop one of the plastic cones and she brings it to me. I tell her, “No, I’d like vanilla, please. That’s strawberry.”

She looks at the pink cone blankly for a few seconds then returns to the adjacent counter to dip her hand, once again, into the blender. This time, she pulls out a white top, holds it up for me to see, and says, “This one?” Yes, I say. She brings it to me atop the cone.

After I take the vanilla cone, she turns to the purple and pink Fisher Price cash register and begins to punch buttons. I hand her invisible money, which she pretends to take. I ask her for a napkin, and she gives me one, along with a spoon.

At the car wash. The dramatic play center has been turned into a car wash. A red plastic car with a yellow hard-top and no windows is perched precariously atop black metal car ramps. A red gas can sits to the side along with a bucket, a sponge, a spray

bottle, and some adult-sized goggles. Chelsea straps the goggles on her head, covering her mouth and nose – as if she is going to surgery. A nearby adult sees Chelsea with the improperly placed goggles and adjusts them for her, so that they are correctly placed over her eyes. Chelsea returns them to her mouth and nose at once. She then proceeds to pick up the spray bottle, which has been filled with water. She sprays the yellow top of the car and wipes it off with the sponge in her opposite hand. She repeats this procedure several times on the very same spot on the car. Finally the adult intervenes, chuckling a bit, and says, “Chelsea, why don’t you spray other parts of the car, too? Don’t just keep spraying the top!” Chelsea ignores her and continues to spray the roof. Finally, she puts the sponge and spray bottle into the bucket, then picks up the gas can. By this point, the goggles have dropped to cover her chin and neck. She asks, “Gas?” and then tips the gas can into the little car’s gas tank to fill ‘er up.

When zebras and elephants fight. On a different day, I sit at a circle table playing *Hi-ho Cherrios* with two of Chelsea’s classmates. Chelsea has sprawled out on her stomach beside us on the carpet. She lies amidst toppled wooden blocks and plastic jungle animals. She poises a zebra in one hand and an elephant in the other. She makes animal sounds as she walks them about, sometimes crashing them into one another with great production. She remains here throughout the entire center time alone, chattering quietly to herself. I note that it is the most focused I’ve seen her.

Students as authors.

*Scarecrow, scarecrow, what do you see?* The class has written a book, which is propped up against the cork board at the front of the room. It is an orange, make-shift

spiral bound book, entitled *Scarecrow, Scarecrow, What do you see?* Each child's name is written underneath "Written By."

In *Scarecrow, Scarecrow*, each page is a photocopy of the words, "Scarecrow, scarecrow, what do you see late at night by the old oak tree?" followed by a line drawing of a tree. Beside the tree, each student has pasted a picture they cut out of a magazine. Below the tree and their picture, it reads, "A \_\_\_\_\_, a \_\_\_\_\_. That's what I see, late at night by the old oak tree." An adult has written the name of the object in the blanks, and the student's name at the bottom of the page.

This morning during carpet time, instead of reading one of the shiny, professional books from the library, Renee reads *Scarecrow, Scarecrow* to them. She reads the names of the authors. At the age of five, Chelsea can officially call herself a published author.

In each of the scenarios illustrated above, Chelsea and her classmates are using the tools of literacy to create stories, contexts and purposeful interactions. At the ice cream shop, the car wash, and with the jungle animals, Chelsea explores the meanings and uses of the various tools she finds in her environment by playing with them, experimenting with them, and building stories around them. In the final scene in which the students enjoy reading their own book, *Scarecrow, Scarecrow*, the children experimented with conventional forms of literacy – printed words.

## How Children With Disabilities Perform in Inclusive Preschool Classrooms and How This Performance Facilitates or Denies Citizenship

In the previously described scenarios, in which Chelsea and her peers were observed creating and acting out stories within a global context, classroom context, and within the natural environment, Chelsea was on relatively equal footing. Renee and Marilyn made efforts to scaffold in order to bridge the gap between cognitive differences in the children. They individualized the curriculum so that all children could participate meaningfully in instruction. They created an environment embedded in context and one in which children were not asked to perform literacy tasks in isolation from meaning. Although they strove to provide the same support for children in developing social competencies, the social arena was rougher terrain to navigate.

### Making Sense of Interactions with Peers

I noticed children engaging in what might be described as social literacies – interpersonal interactions for the purpose of making sense of something else or for the purpose of making sense of one another. The most difficulties Chelsea had arose when attempting to engage in these social literacies. Renee tells a story about a day when she instructed each student to find a friend to play with during center time. “Everyone started pairing up,” Renee began, “and Chelsea started playing by herself. I told her, ‘Chelsea, you need to find a friend to play with.’ So she went from one person to the next asking them to play, and they all said, ‘No.’ It broke my heart. She didn’t stop asking, though. Finally somebody said, ‘yes.’”



Indeed, I did notice that Chelsea was most frequently alone. It never appeared to me to be a dejected sort of alone-ness, like a child who has been ordered to the sidelines. But rather, it always seemed to me that she was simply content to play by herself. Perhaps it is her personality rather than a symptom of her disability.

Previous authors would suggest that a lack of language skills makes performance in the social arena problematic (Brown et al., 1999; Holahan & Costenbader, 2000; Kliwer, 1995; Reynolds & Holdgrafer, 1998). While Chelsea is never short on words – she talks with great frequency – her speech is difficult for others to understand. In order for another child to communicate with Chelsea, it would take some effort, patience, and an open mind. In addition, Chelsea's mannerisms are somewhat abrupt. She does not move with a tremendous amount of grace or agility, and she is larger than the other children. To her peers, she may not appear as a most desirable playmate.

Sense-making interactions between Chelsea and her peers took on a variety of flavors. The first two illustrate Chelsea's *acceptance* as a citizen in her classroom community. Firstly, Chelsea and a peer interacted simply as two students with a common mission. For example, Chelsea asking another child to play would fit within this category. Secondly, Chelsea's peers interacted with Chelsea for the purpose of helping her, such as when one boy helped Chelsea identify the color of her race car.

The final three varieties of social literacies suggest Chelsea's *denied* membership in her peer group. In the first of these three interactions, Chelsea appeared as an accidental player in one of their games. This may be illustrated in the incident when Chelsea unwittingly became the "monster" in two girls' dramatic play at recess. Another

pattern of interaction took place when classmates without disabilities became frustrated with Chelsea's delayed communication skills. This was seen in occasions where others tried, without success, to negotiate toys with Chelsea. A third pattern emerged in Chelsea's attempts to engage in underground child culture, what Kliewer and Fitzgerald (2003) may refer to as a *subterranean narrative*. An example of this occurred when Chelsea taunted a group of other students who were getting into trouble on the playground. Finally, there were times when Chelsea appeared to have no interaction at all with her peers, aside from occupying the same space. These are the many times during which I observed Chelsea playing alone and carrying on a conversation with, what appeared to be, no one.

Equal peers with a shared mission. I observed Renee frequently using carpet time in the mornings to remind the children of social skills just before they were excused to centers. She sometimes used simple tactics, asking children questions, like, "What can you do if someone doesn't have a [toy to play with]?" Other times, she and Marilyn or another paraprofessional would act out brief skits to demonstrate desirable social behaviors. Renee also occasionally called on students to act out these skits.

*Wanna play?* An important social skill – or what I might call a social literacy – that receives attention in Chelsea's classroom is how to ask other children to play. In conversation, Renee has told me that sometimes she tells kids that they must have a partner in order to engage in certain activities. She does this so that kids must practice their social skills, including asking others to play with them.

Asking others to play is a skill that Renee has taught through direct instruction and by using peer modeling, which she believes is the most effective tool in the inclusive classroom. On this occasion, before children are excused from carpet time to find and begin center time activities, Renee has two students act out a scene in which one of them is busy playing with blocks and the other wants to join the activity. Their classmates sit very quietly, watching the scene – like something out of a silent movie – with what appears to be either intense concentration or awe.

Upon completion of the role play, Renee summarizes the procedure to the whole group. “How do we ask our friends to play? We tap them on the shoulder and say, ‘Can I play?’” Renee excuses the class reminding them that they are to find a friend to play with during center time.

Chelsea approaches another child with limited verbal skills who has settled at a circle table playing with magnets. Hand-held red bars with magnetic ends lay in two shallow blue trays amidst an assortment of items the children can experiment with: bottle caps, screw-top jar lids, paper clips, screws, and brightly colored magnetized balls that look like small gum balls from a machine at the grocery store

Chelsea reaches towards the boy and taps him matter-of-factly on the shoulder, then says, “I wanna play.” The boy does not respond but continues his play. Chelsea again reaches toward him and taps him, this time with significantly more oomph, on the shoulder, and repeats, “I wanna play.” Again, the child does not respond but continues to play with the magnets. At this point, Chelsea glowers at her uncooperative peer and calls on full body tactics. She grabs one end of the tray and starts to pull it towards her. But

the boy grabs the other end, his face in a grimace, and tug-of-war ensues. The battle ends when the paraprofessional for another child intervenes. She pulls the bickering children's chairs closer together so that they are close enough to the tray to play with its contents simultaneously, and orders them to "Play nice."

*Gimme some candy.* Renee also calls on stories and adult modeling to teach the children social skills. Chelsea and her classmates receive a lesson in how to share. The context of this lesson exists in the story *Stone Soup* (McGovern, 1986), which they have been reading every day for a week. The story is also the subject of an inter-class art project being carried out in the studio. The children are periodically called into the studio to work on the construction of a black paper mache pot and vegetables. These items will eventually take the form of a counting and naming activity, in which the children count and name the ingredients put into the pot. In Renee's class, she uses the story to talk about sharing. Before reading the story, Renee leads a discussion with the children about how the old woman in the story shared her food with the hungry boy so that he could make soup.

After reading through the story Renee takes out a bag of candy corn and begins to eat. Children stare up at her, their mouths agape. Renee says, "Mmmm...all this candy corn just for me!" Marilyn, who has been sitting behind the group, supervising, moves towards the front and says to Renee, "Renee, I'm your friend. Will you share your candy corn with me?" Renee responds, "Yes, I will share with you," and pours candy corn into Marilyn's hand. Renee then turns to the children, some of whom have begun to quietly murmur their own desires for candy corn. She reviews how Marilyn asked for candy, and

one at a time each child asks Renee if she will share her candy corn with him or her. Each child receives a small handful of candy.

### Peers as Helpers

Helping each other is something that seems to come fairly naturally in Chelsea's classroom. I did not observe any direct instruction in regards to helping one another. However, children appear to be eager to help adults with cleaning up and carrying out classroom routines. Renee also tells me that many of the children without disabilities also enjoy helping those with disabilities.

Getting by with a little help from my friend. On one occasion I observe a child without disabilities assisting Chelsea in distinguishing colors. They have been reading the story, *The Berenstain Bears and the Big Road Race* (Berenstein & Berenstein, 1987), and they are going to act out the story, each child representing one of the cars. Marilyn hands out necklaces of yarn with a different colored car – each to represent that car in the story. Both Chelsea and her classmate receive necklaces with a blue car. As Renee names off the colors one-by-one, she instructs them to raise their hands if they have that color. At “blue” Chelsea's classmate raises his hand, but Chelsea does not. He turns to her, pats her necklace with his hand, and says pleasantly, “You have blue, too.” At this cue, Chelsea raises her hand high and shouts, “I have blue, too!”

Getting by with a little help from the entire class. It is lunch. The children are corralled around two circular tables. Renee, Marilyn, another paraprofessional, and I sit with the children, our knees at our chins as we squish into these small wooden chairs built for much smaller bodies than our own. Like every day's meals (breakfast and

lunch) small juice bottles and milk cartons sit in the middle of the table, and each child must ask for his or hers. If they need help opening their milk cartons they are reminded to say, "I need help, please." Once each child has his or her milk and juice, they begin to pass around plates of food. Plates wobble and tip as their little elbows twist and contort to keep their meals off of the floor. Adults assist children in dishing out their own servings of each item.

Chelsea is spooning chunks of pineapple into her mouth as she says, "Big big big moo wa-er." Marilyn looks at her, perplexed, and asks her to repeat. Chelsea repeats, word for word. Marilyn asks, "Water?" Chelsea nods. "Big water?" Marilyn asks. Again, Chelsea nods. Still confused, Marilyn probes further, "Moo?"

At this point, deciphering what exactly Chelsea is attempting to communicate becomes a class project. From the second table, one of the children says between her bites of blueberry yogurt, "Maybe she's talking about a cow that's wet."

"Maybe," Marilyn responds with a shrug.

Another child sitting across from Chelsea declares with great excitement, "Maybe she means that the cow is in the water!"

"Oh," says Marilyn with sudden comprehension. "Are you talking about the story in the library today? When the baby bison took a bath?" she asks Chelsea.

Chelsea nods.

Approximately two hours prior to lunch, the class had been in the library where the librarian read them a story called *Cowgirl Rosie and her Five Baby Bison* (Gulbis, 2001). In the story, Rosie had led the baby bison to their bath time.

The paraprofessional for another child laughs and says, “I think we’re reading more into it than was probably there.”

Marilyn laughs also, but then adds, “But she really listened to that story.”

In these narratives, Chelsea receives lessons in social skills alongside her nondisabled peers. While her attempts to practice them are sometimes unsuccessful, she is still practicing them as a contributing citizen of her preschool community. Her communication skills and social skills are developing enough that she has her foot in the door.

When Chelsea’s nonconventional modes of communication sometimes caused a divide between her and her classmates, it was not necessarily a division that robbed her of her citizenship. Her peers still seemed accepting of her and interested enough in her contribution that they were willing to jump in and help her participate. As a member of a group of children that was continually exposed to lessons in social interactions and opportunities to practice them, Chelsea’s own social competency was growing.

The fact that it was not necessarily growing as quickly as some of her peers did occasionally appear to cause Chelsea to be left out of spontaneous and rich social interactions.

### The Accidental Playmate

Occasionally I observed situations in which Chelsea unwittingly became characters in stories other children created. I hesitate to call it “teasing” because I cannot know what the intentions of the children were. They may have been entirely innocent

and the use of a child with a disability a mere coincidence. However, these situations were most frequently negative. For instance, one day in the hallway, as the adults were busily trying to get everyone snapped and zipped into their winter coats and in line to go outside, I heard two children without disabilities calling each other the name of one of their classmates with a disability. Perhaps it was just a coincidence that they chose the name that belonged to this child; but it was clearly considered an insult, as the two became quite heated in dispelling the misnomer. I do not know if the child with the disability noticed.

Monster in the fire truck. It is recess, and the playground echoes with child laughter and squealing. I have noticed that during recess, as well as several other times of the day, Chelsea is usually found alone. Although she often times stops what she is doing to watch other children's play, as I've said before, it does not seem to me to be a dejected sort of alone-ness, but rather, a contented alone-ness. She seems to be fully content to amuse herself. Perhaps she is a natural people-watcher.

On this day, Chelsea has parked herself atop the red fire truck – a crude frame of a fire truck constructed out of red painted pipes, and wooden boards. She is sitting in the driver's seat of the fire truck, her arms draped casually over the “windows.” It seems she is resting after fighting a particularly fierce fire. She is watching the children run around her, climbing up and down the jungle gym.

Two girls run to the fire truck and jump aboard. They stop suddenly, looking towards Chelsea. They shriek and point at Chelsea, then leap out of the truck and sprint



the opposite direction yelling something about a “monster” as they throw gleeful looks over their shoulders. Chelsea smiles after them.

There are three ways to interpret this particular narrative:

1. The girls understood Chelsea to be different from them, and based on her difference, “monster-like”. It was naïve or mean-spirited.
2. The girls were actually inviting Chelsea into their game to play the part of the monster, but Chelsea, because she has difficulty understanding social cues from others, did not catch on. And finally,
3. The girls were actually inviting Chelsea into their game to play the part of the monster, but Chelsea didn’t feel like it, so she didn’t chase after them.

If the first interpretation is accurate, then it is an example of how children who struggle to communicate in traditional terms are sometimes marginalized by their peers and denied membership within the classroom community.

If the second interpretation is accurate, then it is an example of how children who struggle to communicate in traditional terms become marginalized by their own difficulties engaging in their classroom community meaningfully.

If the third interpretation is accurate, then it is an example of how children who struggle to communicate in traditional terms can still be choosy about the games they play.

### When Communication Differences are Frustrating

An interesting dynamic occurred occasionally between Chelsea and one of the children without disabilities. This child showed exceptional skills in conventional forms

of communication and was frequently the first to verbalize an original idea to his teachers and peers. Yet, I did not observe this particular child interacting with the children with disabilities with much regularity. On various occasions I observed him initiating dramatic scenes, making compromises with his nondisabled classmates, and sharing ideas in class discussions. These are skills that get you far with others who follow the same pattern of logic and use the same communication tools that you do.

“Hey, I need that!” Consider Chelsea, he, and I in the housekeeping center one morning. Chelsea has been carrying around the strawberry ice cream cone top as she fiddles with pots and pans on the wooden stove. Her classmate finds a plastic ice cream cone and then searches through the food baskets for tops. He sees Chelsea is carrying one in her hand, and he says to her, “Hey, I need that!” Chelsea pays no heed, but continues her play. Rather than begin negotiations with her, he turns to me, a look of uncertainty on his face, as if he is not quite sure what to do next. I ask him how he should ask her for it. He turns back to Chelsea and asks, “Please, can I have that?” She pulls the ice cream top closely to her chest and turns her body away from him. At this point, I tell him that since Chelsea had the ice cream first, technically she is not obligated to give it to him (another shining example of my adult language and logic sticking out like three left feet). No sooner had I uttered these wise words, when Chelsea turned back to him, offering him the ice cream with her outstretched hand.

Based on my previous observations of him, I was surprised at his hesitancy in negotiating with Chelsea. It was as if he either felt that she would never understand him, because she didn’t have the same skills as he did, so he was just going to hand this

situation over to me to handle. Or on the flipside, despite his verbal prowess with other children, HE felt inadequate and did not understand how to communicate with HER, and sought my help.

“I was just trying to clean up!” One month after this incident, Chelsea and this same classmate find themselves butting heads once again. I have been playing with marbles on the carpet with a group of children, including the same child who had requested the ice cream from Chelsea. The lights flick on and off and Renee announces that it is time to clean up. Chelsea has just joined us to play with the marbles.

The boy immediately begins tossing toys and marble track pieces into a large Tupperware bin. Chelsea, however, continues to play with the marbles. Seeing this, the boy snatches one of the marbles out of her hand wordlessly and tosses it in the bin as he continues on for the next item to put away. Chelsea bursts into tears, which captures the attention of Marilyn. The boy, realizing he is probably going to get into trouble implores, “I was just trying to clean up! And she wasn’t putting things away!” Marilyn tells him, “You need to use your words for that.” I wonder if his previous experiences with Chelsea have convinced him that words were of no use in negotiations with her, for he is a boy who typically minds his P’s and Q’s, and I cannot imagine him yanking something out of one of his nondisabled classmate’s hands without asking first.

In these two situations it might be said that we honor predictable and conventional patterns of literacy and interactions in school and the community. If a child can create those patterns, they are more easily afforded opportunities to grow and participate in: the global context, a natural context, and a more immediate context. When a child with a

disability cannot fit within that pattern consistently, a chasm begins to form between those who cannot and those who can. For that matter, a chasm begins to form between those who cannot and rich opportunities to interact meaningfully. Chelsea would have much to gain from a meaningful interaction with the child in the previously described episodes. Likewise, that same child would have much to gain from a meaningful interaction with Chelsea. Because they communicate differently, left to their own devices, such an interaction is unlikely to happen.

### Engaging in an Underground Child Culture

Kliewer and Fitzgerald (2003) may refer to this as a form of subterranean narrative. These are the events that happen when adults are not around. I think of them as the silly little come-backs and routines we learn as children. They are not taught to us by our teachers, but rather they are interactions that we learn from other children through everyday dealings. And they are rituals that typically (although, of course not always) cease when we reach a certain level of maturity. For instance, I do not remember the last time I asked another adult, "I know you are, but what am I?" Nor, do I intend to get my girlfriends together, prick our fingers with needles, and trade hemoglobin in the name of sisterhood. But these are the sorts of things that, for whatever reason, make sense to us when we are children. And they are the sorts of subversive activities that mark our membership in an underground child culture.

Past research has suggested that children with disabilities are frequently left out of such culture, as it is entirely child-initiated (Brown et al., 1999; Holahan & Costenbader,

2000; Kliewer, 1995; Reynolds & Holdgrafer, 1998). Although she is not always invited by other children to join such a secret society, Chelsea seems to be aware that it exists.

“No girls allowed!” It is recess, and the children are outside with those of another class. There are four boys from another teacher’s room on the fire truck. Chelsea joins them. One boy begins to yell at her, “Boys only! No girls allowed!”

Another hisses and kicks at her. She smiles at them and stays put on the fire truck while the boys continue to make jabs at her. This skirmish lasts several minutes before a paraprofessional from another room notices the commotion and intervenes. She gives one of the boys a time out. Chelsea, upon the adult’s arrival, has exited the fire truck and turned to watch the drama. As the boys receive a lecture from the adult, Chelsea waves her hands around her head in a taunting gesture and says, “Wah wah blah.” Her intonation sounds identical to the ever-popular “Na na na boo boo.” She sticks out her tongue and waggles it slowly, awkwardly, at them. It looks as if she is trying to scrape peanut butter off the roof of her mouth. It seems she has learned this childhood ritual of teasing another. She understands generally what the routine should look like (Wave your hands by your ears, like moving moose antlers; say “na na na boo boo”; then stick out your tongue and wiggle it around.). It just looks a little different when she does it.

#### No Interaction at All

On frequent occasions, I would hear Chelsea having what sounded like a conversation, with what appeared to be...no one. Although most of the words were unintelligible, her tone and inflection mimicked so closely that of which you would hear

in a conversation that I guessed that she must hear wordy dialogue with regularity. I imagined her listening to one-sided phone conversations held by her mother.

Rehearsing a conversation. On another day, she is back at the blue trays; they are full of magnets again. From Chelsea comes a steady stream of chatter. Although there are several children and adults nearby, Chelsea is not looking at any of them in a way that would suggest her speech was directed toward them; and no one appears to be listening. Her tone and pitch change in a way that almost makes it sound like she is singing. She is making strings of multi-colored balls: three yellows, three oranges, blue, pink, purple, white, purple. She exclaims, “Goodbye! Goodbye! Mommy!”

#### Making Sense of Ourselves

Early literacy is an interaction tailored to make sense of one’s world and therefore become a part of it. Thus far, I have covered the full-body nature of sense-making in addition to patterns of sense-making within various contexts and sense-making in the form of interactions with peers. A final pattern can be described as making sense of oneself. Within this more personal realm of a multi-faceted model of early literacy, Chelsea makes sense of emotions and her own physical health and hygiene needs.

#### Making Sense of Emotions

Emotions are tough to capture. While we certainly all experience them, labeling them or distinguishing one set of symptoms from another, can be an obscure task. In terms of membership within the community, Chelsea seems to have trouble grasping emotions – what they are and what they look like. This is not to say she does not experience emotions, but rather that it may be tricky for her to interpret what exactly they

mean, particularly when it comes to the intricate task of deciphering another's mood or emotion in order to say or do the appropriate thing (Denham et al., 2002).

Renee and Marilyn take plenty of opportunities to embed little lessons about feelings into the day. For instance, when reading *The Gingerbread Man* (McCafferty, 2002) to the class, Renee stops and asks the children, "What does his face look like?" in reference to the Gingerbread Man after he has encountered the fox. "He looks scared!" After the fox eats the Gingerbread Man, Marilyn asks the kids, "Does he look happy?"

Angry, happy, silly. I enter the classroom to find two large, hand-made posters propped against the cork board in the back of the room. The first one reads:

ANGRY  
HOW WE LOOK  
A time I felt this way was...

Surrounding these words are photographs of the faces of six students – three children with disabilities, including Chelsea, and three children without. I assume that the idea was for the children to make angry faces to show how they look when they are angry. The children in the Goldfish program all wear scowls (although with a hint of hilarity caught in the upturned corners of their eyes). However, all three of the children in the special education program are smiling. Chelsea peers into the camera with utter amusement – as if she is on a carnival ride holding cotton candy and having the time of her life.

Beside each photograph is a skinny strip of paper, on which their responses to what makes them angry are typed. One child gets angry when his mom turns off the

cartoons; another gets angry when he is given time-outs. Chelsea gets angry when she is told, “No.”

The second poster is all about being happy. It reads:

HAPPY  
HOW WE LOOK  
A time I felt this way was...

This time there are headshots of nine of the students. Everyone is grinning into the camera as if they have just heard a terrific joke. Also by each child’s pictures are the typed responses to the inquiry regarding what makes them happy. One child mentions that he is happy playing with Spider-man, another that getting hugs from his mom makes him happy. Chelsea is happy playing with frogs.

A month after the appearance of the Angry and Happy poster, a Silly poster arrives. It reads:

SILLY  
HOW WE LOOK  
A time I felt this way was...

This time, the pictures are of both individual students and photos of small groups of children together. They are dressed in funny hats and wigs, including Marilyn beaming under a large sombrero. Their typed responses are glued around the border of the poster. One child, donning a cowboy hat, says he feels silly when he slides down the slide at the park. Another child topped with a rainbow-colored clown wig states that he feels silly when he is wearing the clown hair. Chelsea is featured in a short black wig – a traditional Old Lady style – and a pair of large, blue glass frames encircling her delighted eyes. She says she feels silly when she plays with friends.



## Personal Health and Hygiene

Making sense of one's health needs is important to everyone. In her classroom, Chelsea is encouraged to take interest in and practice healthy habits. Good practices will forge a smoother transition into community acceptance – as no one enjoys one who is smelly and has smoker's cough.

A school nurse who works for the agency comes in with puppets to teach them about caring for their teeth. A large, green crocodile is mean, because he has a toothache. He has never brushed his teeth. A small redbird teaches him how.

During Red Ribbon Week, a week dedicated to building healthy habits, Renee asks them how they keep their bodies healthy. One child shouts enthusiastically, "Never eat grass!" Another one adds, "And don't eat slimy things!" Renee steers the class into a discussion of how unhealthy it is to smoke cigarettes.

In these illustrations, both conventional and unconventional forms of early literacy are used as tools to help children understand and take care of themselves in the ways that our society values. If a child understands and can name and appropriately demonstrate his or her emotions, then he or she can take part in what our general culture deems appropriate expressions of emotions. If a child can derive meaning from a puppet show, then that child will learn that Americans don't like smelly breath; therefore we should brush our teeth at least twice a day. If Chelsea can correctly identify the symbolic meaning of the red ribbon, then she can participate in our government's campaign against smoking.

### Summary

In this chapter, I have presented a vast array of narrative vignettes and possible interpretations regarding events observed in one inclusive preschool classroom – full body experiences within a global context, a natural environment, the immediate classroom community, and in activities that offer equal involvement to all children. In each vignette, Chelsea or her classmates create their own contexts, either ones that mimic true-life routines or brand new ones. They engage in sense-making during various forms of peer interactions: as equals, giving or receiving help, as an accidental playmate, as a source of frustration, or as a member of an underground child culture. They also are involved in sense-making as it relates to emotions and health.

Throughout the chapter I attempted to attach each narrative to one of several branches of an idea of early literacy as a context-driven interaction that takes multiple forms, each of which serves the primary function of making sense of various aspects of the contexts in which we exist. This is an impossibly broad definition for what I am growing more and more certain is an impossibly complex and abstract concept – literacy.

According to this definition, I may absurdly argue that by walking across the room, Chelsea's feet are interacting with the floor for the purpose of traversing it; hence, her feet are literate beings. However, the discriminating factor between a literate interaction in preschool and simply a meeting of two forms of matter is *symbolic meaning*. A literate interaction in preschool is a *meaningful and symbolic* interaction. In all of the illustrations used in this chapter, a connecting theme is that each interaction described was a *meaningful* one. Each interaction may have looked different and

addressed different topics; however each was designed for the purpose of conveying or interpreting symbolic meaning. In many cases, children's ability to convey or interpret meaning in conventional, verbal forms, largely influenced how they were received by their peers – whether or not they were granted citizenship within the classroom community.

While the structure of the classroom and the adult-created, context-driven curriculum successfully facilitate her membership within the school on many levels, Chelsea still struggles to be an active member of a more child-initiated context, specifically those that require social and communication skills.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

My intent throughout this ethnographic study, conducted within the context of a larger longitudinal study (Kliwer & Fitzgerald, 2003), has been to build understanding regarding the meaning and role of early literacy in one inclusive preschool classroom. I have been specifically interested in the idea of early literacy as a social construction – as a meaningful interaction with one’s environment for the purpose of making sense of it. Furthermore, I investigated the way this construction facilitated or denied one five-year-old child’s – Chelsea’s – citizenship in the classroom community.

As a graduate student in school psychology with a background in teaching English/Language arts to students at the secondary level, I was in new territory. Not only were the environment and those who inhabited it alien to me, but I had never considered a social construction perspective of literacy. To me, literacy meant reading and writing words. This idea of a contextual and interactive literacy made sense to me in theory, but I was still confused about what it would look like. An important progression throughout this study was not only recording early literacy patterns in Chelsea’s classroom as they related to a social construct and citizenship, but my own developing appreciation for the many forms and purposes literacy adopts, as well.

Chelsea served as a delightful teacher – always friendly and willing to chat, regardless of her sometimes difficult-to-understand language. Despite numerous clinical tests administered by a nearby research hospital, no one has been able to pinpoint her disability. While guesses have been made, including a form of Down’s syndrome,

clinical test results have been inconclusive. Chelsea, therefore, remains with a generic Entitled Individual (EI) label.

While some may feel a child with Chelsea's level of developmental delays is incapable of achieving a traditional form of literacy – one that requires the successful completion of phonics-type tasks conducted outside of any purposeful context – she has been welcomed into her inclusive preschool. In a center in a mid-sized, Midwestern city which has a long history of embracing diversity, Chelsea is one of many students who enjoy equal access to meaningful preschool curricula despite their disabilities.

Throughout my investigation into this heartening environment, I worried of the impact that the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* would have on classroom operations. This most recent legislation passed down from political leaders seems in favor of reducing literacy to a narrow avenue of paper-pencil tasks – a confined space in which children with disabilities may struggle to enjoy success. With a lack of success, these children may be shuffled back into segregated programs to practice purely functional life skills such as making bologna sandwiches, instead of being exposed to the rich literacy opportunities other, more traditionally successful children, are afforded. Those who have adopted a more comprehensive view of what it means to achieve literacy may suffer funding cuts to their programs. Chelsea and other children with disabilities may be left behind.

#### Past Research

While reviewing past research, I was especially interested in these questions: (a) what might literacy, as an interaction, look like; (b) how do children with disabilities

interact with peers in inclusive preschool classrooms; and (c) how are students with and without disabilities invited into literacy and citizenship?

After reviewing several past investigations a few conclusions might be made. First, literacy exists as an interaction, which may take on multiple forms and serve several purposes (Henderson et al., 2002; Kliever, 1995; Kliever & Fitzgerald, 2003; Kliever & Landis, 1999; Korat et al., 2002; Werner, 2000). I feel an especially strong connection to Henderson's et al. (2002) idea that it is an interaction with the intention of *making sense* of one's world. Secondly, although inclusive environments provide opportunities that enable all students to build interactive skills, students with limited cognitive and language skills need more adult intervention to maximize the benefits of inclusion (Brown et al., 1999; Holahan & Costenbader, 2000; Kliever, 1995; Kliever & Fitzgerald, 2003; Reynolds & Holdgrafer, 1998). And, finally, although the presence of an institutional understanding of disability may lead to limitations to students with disabilities' access to literacy, all students may become competent members of a literate community through a process of scaffolding (Henderson et al., 2002; Kliever & Landis, 1999; Korat et al., 2002).

#### Methods Used

I utilized qualitative methods in my study design. This methodology arose from the belief that early literacy exists as a purposeful interaction. In this regard, my topic, examining early literacy as a sense-making interaction, lent itself quite naturally to qualitative methods, in that such research is, like the social construction interpretation of literacy, embedded in context.

Participant-observations were conducted from September to May of one school year, each observation taking place in the morning and early afternoon hours before the children without disabilities went home. This was the time of day in which the preschool was truly inclusive.

During each observation, I recorded, in a notebook, interactions that seemed relevant to early literacy. Specifically, I took interest in occasions when Chelsea and her classmates were observed in some sort of sense-making interaction with: the natural environment (e.g., examining newly emerged butterflies in the butterfly box); the classroom environment (e.g., playing in the dramatic play area); adults and peers (e.g., negotiating the possession of toys); language (e.g., talking to oneself while playing alone); and more traditionally accepted forms of literacy (e.g., looking through books in the library or tracing a name with one finger on a name card).

Field notes were analyzed and condensed into synthesized notes through which I arranged descriptive vignettes according to themes and patterns that emerged from the data. These synthesized notes were examined by Chelsea's teacher and by my research team for feedback. In addition, I held casual conversations, during which I asked clarifying questions regarding Chelsea and the goings-on in her classroom. The information garnered from these conversations was woven into my field notes.

### Conclusions

I have come to understand that what separates interactions from literate interactions in preschool is *meaning*. Throughout early childhood, a literate interaction goes beyond a mere physical coexistence and happens for the purpose of creating

symbolic meaning on the part of the child or making sense of symbolic interactions with others. A common thread that runs through each vignette is that each represents an interaction in which symbolic meaning was constructed or intended to be constructed. These attempts toward communicating symbolically in early childhood are the beginning strides toward future literacy.

First, I explored the idea of early literacy as an interaction. I learned that regardless of the context in which sense making occurred, it was most always a full-body experience – including all of the body's senses, and even including dance. I learned that literate interactions existed within context. There were universals in this classroom – things that applied to everyone regardless of height, weight, race, gender, most hated vegetable, or ability. For instance, sense making occurred within a global context, including being part of a country going to war. Also, Chelsea and her classmates belonged to the same natural environment and explored its properties together. Thirdly, they shared a classroom context, holding similar roles and responsibilities.

What I learned from these symbolic interactions within the preschool classroom is that making sense actually *requires* a context; therefore, decontextualizing literacy – such as asking a child to read lists of nonsense words – may in fact inhibit membership within a literate preschool community. Such contexts occur both naturally and through imagination. Chelsea and her classmates were observed exploring the meanings and uses of the various tools they found in the environment by playing with them, experimenting with them, and building stories around them. In one scene in which the students enjoyed



reading their own book, *Scarecrow, Scarecrow*, the children used story to experiment with conventional forms of literacy – printed words.

How children with disabilities performed in this inclusive preschool classroom aided in facilitating or denying their citizenship in the classroom's community, particularly when it came to interacting socially. I described these interactions as social literacies – interpersonal interactions for the purpose of making sense of something else or for the purpose of making sense of one another. The most difficulties Chelsea had arose when attempting to engage in these social literacies. In some instances, difficulties were minimal in that peers interacted with a common mission. In other cases, difficulties actually served as the impetus for peer interactions, as a nondisabled peer assisted a disabled peer.

In other examples, the difficulties within this social arena were marked, and suggested *denied* membership in the peer group. In these examples, students with disabilities were targeted in one way or another as *oddballs*. Other vignettes suggested denied membership as a product of clashing communication patterns between peers with and without disabilities. A third pattern of limited membership emerged in Chelsea's somewhat unsuccessful attempts to engage in underground child culture. Finally, there were times when Chelsea appeared to have no interaction at all with her peers, aside from occupying the same space. These are the many times during which I observed Chelsea playing alone and carrying on conversations with, what appeared to be, no one.

Another pattern of early literacy appeared when children were making sense of themselves. This pattern was observed in subtle or explicit lessons in emotions, that is to

say, how to express and interpret them. While we certainly all experience them, labeling them or distinguishing one set of symptoms from another, can be an obscure task. In terms of membership within the community, Chelsea seemed to have trouble grasping emotions – what they were and what they looked like.

Also, making sense of one's health needs was a topic in the classroom. Chelsea and her peers were encouraged to take interest in and practice healthy habits. These good practices would forge a smoother transition into greater community acceptance.

While the structure of the classroom and the adult-supported, context-driven curriculum facilitated her membership within the general workings of the school, Chelsea struggled to be an active member of a more child-initiated context, specifically those that required conventional social and verbal skills. This finding reflected those of past research, which concluded that while inclusive environments may provide the opportunities for children to build socio-communicative skills in a way that facilitates their citizenship, without adult support, children with communication difficulties may not be able to take advantage of those benefits (Brown et al., 1999; Holahan & Costenbader, 2000; Kliever, 1995; Reynolds & Holdgrafer, 1998).

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