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## School Roles: A Way to Investigate Participation

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### Abstract

Students who are more engaged in school have higher academic achievement, lower dropout rates, and increased involvement in activities during early adult-hood. Unfortunately, children with disabilities participate less than children without disabilities, thus increasing their risk for depression and anxiety. This study investigated the lack of school participation from a roles perspective. Roles refer to clusters of meaningful activities that are expected of, and assumed by, individuals in various contexts of their lives. Fifteen teachers from Southern Ontario, Canada, were interviewed about the roles in which children participate in school and 24 students in grades 4 through 7 were observed in order to determine the roles in which they engaged. Overall, students with disabilities engaged in less positive roles (Challenged Learner; Victim; Bully), while students without disabilities engaged in more positive roles (Independent Learner; Nurturer; Friend). Ideas for improving participation through role identity and engagement are discussed.

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### Cover Page Footnote

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### **Abstract**

*Students who are more engaged in school have higher academic achievement, lower dropout rates, and increased involvement in activities during early adulthood. Unfortunately, children with disabilities participate less than children without disabilities, thus increasing their risk for depression and anxiety. This study investigated the lack of school participation from a roles perspective. Roles refer to clusters of meaningful activities that are expected of, and assumed by, individuals in various contexts of their lives. Fifteen teachers from Southern Ontario, Canada, were interviewed about the roles in which children participate in school and 24 students in grades 4 through 7 were observed in order to determine the roles in which they engaged. Overall, students with disabilities engaged in less positive roles (Challenged Learner; Victim; Bully), while students without disabilities engaged in more positive roles (Independent Learner; Nurturer; Friend). Ideas for improving participation through role identity and engagement are discussed.*

Most students with exceptionalities are now educated in inclusive settings (see, for example, Bennett, Dworet, & Weber, 2008; Watkins & Meijer, 2010). Despite the movement over the last few decades, children and adolescents with disabilities are not included to the same extent as their peers without disabilities (Timmons & Wagner, 2010). One area of concern is that of participation of children with exceptionalities in the school system (Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Eriksson, Welander, & Granlund, 2007).

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health – Children and Youth defined participation as the ability to execute tasks or activities in meaningful ways in everyday life situations (World Health Organization, 2007). Repeatedly, participation has been shown as key to the healthy adjustment of individuals. It is through participation that people create meaning in their life. King (2004) presented a meta-model on the meaning of life experiences. According to King, meta-models serve to guide thinking across disciplines and provide simplicity to areas that are complex. She reviewed research literatures related to meaning in life and postulated that there are three fundamental ways in which people create meaning in their life: belonging, doing, and understanding. It is necessary then to participate in life experiences in order to feel like we belong, contribute in some way to the world, and understand ourselves and how we fit in the world. Unfortunately, children with disabilities have been found to participate in recreational, leisure, and school activities less than children without disabilities (Brown & Gordon, 1987; Eriksson et al., 2007; King, Law, Hurley, Petrenchik, & Schwellnus, 2010; King, Petrenchik, Law, & Hurley, 2009; Law et al., 1999; McWilliam & Bailey, 1995; Simeonsson, Carlson, Huntington, Strutz McMillen, & Brent, 2001; Timmons & Wagner, 2010), thus putting them at risk for negative mental health outcomes such as low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety.

“Mental health is a foundation for well-being and effective functioning for an individual, and for a community, and is created and compromised in everyday life, in families and schools” (Herrman & Jane-Llopis, 2005, p. 42). Simovska and Sheehan (2000) reflected on the health promoting schools paradigm as a framework for building school environments that are supportive of mental and emotional health. They called for “genuine student participation, both within the classroom and in the broader school environment” (Simovska & Sheehan, 2000, p. 216). Promoting children’s participation in school through opportunities, such as involvement in classroom lessons, games, sports, and social events, may lead to a greater likelihood of successful life experiences. One possible way to view participation in school is to investigate the roles in which children engage.

Roles are defined as socially expected behaviour patterns determined by a person’s status in society and refer to clusters of meaningful activities that are expected of, and assumed by, individuals in various contexts of their lives (Warda, 1992). Crowe, VanLeit, Berghmans, and Mann (1997) noted that roles contain both privileges and responsibilities and that the expectations associated with these roles will influence how people behave. When examining the research regarding adult roles, Crowe et al. (1997) found that multiple roles in adulthood were related to overall life satisfaction and a decrease in social isolation. These multiple roles had an enhancing or protective effect on physical and emotional health (i.e., they helped create resilient individuals). According to Marks and MacDermid (1996), role acquisition may also be fundamental to the development of a positive sense of self. Although there has been considerable research concerning roles in adulthood, little is known about the roles of children and adolescents.

The current researchers were interested in exploring children’s roles in the school setting because school is the major context for the participation and socialization of children (Smith, Boutte, Zigler, & Finn-Stevenson, 2004). Additionally, Doll (1996) called for natural contexts when using interventions to promote resilience. It would therefore make sense to investigate the natural context in which children engage daily (i.e., school). The goal of the study was to determine if the construct of roles could be used to explore the meaning of participation in various formal and informal school settings and situations. By specifying, in a comprehensive way, the nature of roles in which children can conceivably engage, this study could serve to identify and

describe role opportunities for children. These roles may lead to improved ways of measuring students' participation in the school system.

## **What We Know about School Participation**

Higher levels of participation in school have been linked to a number of positive outcomes, including greater academic achievement, lower rates of school dropout, and increased involvement in social activities during early adulthood (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Simeonsson et al., 2001). In a well-designed longitudinal study, Sandler, Ayers, Suter, Schultz, and Twohey-Jacobs (2004) found that increased school participation led to fewer behavioural problems. Using structural equation modeling analyses of the Canadian National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth, researchers have found that increased recreational participation is a major predictor of children's level of prosocial behaviour (King et al., 2005). It may be that increased participation in recreational activities within the school setting could also increase prosocial behaviour.

Large survey studies have investigated the participation of children with and without disabilities in inclusive schools in both the United States (i.e., Mancini, Coster, Trombly, & Heeren, 2000; Simeonsson et al., 2001) and Sweden (i.e., Almqvist & Granlund, 2005; Eriksson & Granlund, 2004a). These studies have shown that diagnosis by itself is not an accurate predictor of the frequency of participation. Rather, physical, cognitive, social, and behavioural competencies of children interact to influence participation. Eriksson and Granlund (2004b) used survey methodology to investigate a definition of participation generated by students, teachers, and educational consultants. Although not related specifically to school participation, the findings point to some potential differences in the perceptions of teachers, special education consultants, and students. While all three groups identified belonging and taking an active part as key determinants for participation, teachers added involvement of an adult, and special education consultants added environmental barriers.

Research investigating activities that children participate in during the school day reveals that children with and without disabilities participate differently (Eriksson et al., 2007). Children participated similarly in reading, writing, physical activities, and circle time, but children with disabilities participated less in math, science, and breaks (e.g., recess). These findings indicate that context is important for investigating participation in school.

A few researchers have examined the roles of children in school. As far back as 1983, Kedar-Voivodas introduced the concept of student role. She focused on the roles of students within the classroom setting and determined that three such roles existed: pupil role, receptive learner role, and active learner role. Herrenkohl and Guerra (1998) used assigned roles to increase Grade 4 students' engagement in a science lesson. They found that the assigned roles (e.g., leader, recorder of information, and encourager) helped to focus students' attention and helped them to become more engaged in the learning activity. These assigned roles shifted the students from passive to active learners and participants. Perhaps most relevant to the notion of school roles is research by Simeonsson et al. (2001) who found six distinct activity groups by which school life in elementary, middle, and high school could be defined. These activity groups were determined through surveys that asked teachers to identify the types of activities in which students were engaged in their school. Factor analyses revealed that activities tended to cluster into one of six factors: social (e.g., school dances, pep rallies), recreational (e.g., phys ed., recess), communal (e.g., field trips, assemblies), creative (e.g., choir, band), civic (e.g., school paper, school clubs), and academic activities (e.g., science, math). Thus, an understanding of children's activities and roles within a school setting has seen some interest in the research litera-

ture, but not in a detailed manner. Given the many roles that students can assume within the school setting, it makes sense to investigate roles other than that of student engaged in learning.

## **Purpose of Present Study**

Although there is some interesting information provided in the survey studies of participation (e.g., Eriksson & Granlund, 2004a; Simeonsson et al., 2001) and examinations of children's general definitions of participation (e.g., Eriksson & Granlund, 2004b), research to date has not examined children's school participation in terms of their involvement or engagement in different types of roles. There is very little research on the roles of children in school, and it may be an important way to determine why it is that children with disabilities participate less in school overall and in specific areas, in particular.

In order to understand the roles that children participate in, we investigated the perceptions of teachers and observed students within their school. It was important to gain a sense of whether or not teachers view children as taking on roles in school as well as observing what these roles look like within a school setting. Therefore, we interviewed elementary school teachers regarding their perspectives of children's roles in school and observed children in various school contexts (e.g., classroom, playground, and lunch room) during school hours for the purposes of (a) identifying roles in which all children participate, (b) determining if differences exist between children with and without disabilities in terms of the roles in which they engage, and (c) understanding teachers' perceptions of school roles and participation.

## **Method**

A qualitative approach was used to explore school roles because it (a) provides rich information about a topic (Fiese & Bickham, 1998), (b) is especially suited to an in-depth exploration of complex issues that are not well understood, and (c) recognizes the influence of context and focuses on the meaning of phenomena to participants (Wright & McKeever, 2000). Thus, a qualitative approach is ideally suited to exploring the perceptions of roles. After receiving ethical approval, the lead investigator sent a request for participants to two Boards of Education located in Southern Ontario, Canada. The research officers of the two boards provided names of schools that could be contacted for participants. Six schools were contacted via a phone call to the principal. All six principals agreed to distribute letters of information and consent created by the researchers to teachers and students. Once signed consents were received, the researchers approached the teachers to schedule a convenient time for their focus group and/or a convenient time to visit the school for student observation. Given that the teachers and students could volunteer independently of one another, the participant and procedures are discussed separately in the sections that follow.

## **Teacher Interviews**

**Participants.** Fifteen teachers (12 women and 3 men) with teaching experience ranging from 5 to 30 years who were currently teaching in grades 4–8 inclusive classrooms agreed to participate in this study. This number of participants is within the recommendation to ensure saturation of themes in qualitative analyses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). They participated during regular working hours and received a ½ day release from teaching in order to participate.

**Procedure.** Focus group sessions with the teachers were held at a local children's rehabilitation centre. The groups consisted of 3–5 participants each. A semi-structured interview technique was implemented using the following questions:

1. What roles do you expect from the students that you teach?
2. Which roles do you see children perform?
3. How do you know that you are witnessing these roles? What are the behaviours that the children display (i.e., the cluster of activities)?
4. What are the opportunities that children have to display these roles?
5. Do children display different roles? Why? How?
6. Do you have a sense that children with disabilities engage in different roles than children without disabilities? If so, what contributes to this difference?
7. Anything else that you would like to share on this topic?

All of the teachers were invited to respond to questions, comment on what others were saying, and generally treat the focus group session as a conversation amongst colleagues. The facilitator ensured that all questions were covered during the session. Discussion continued until Question 7 was addressed and there was nothing left to add. Each focus group session lasted 1 ½ to 2 hours.

## **Student Observations**

**Participants.** Twenty-four children (14 boys, 10 girls) participated in the study. These children were all in grades 4–7 in inclusive classrooms. In order to protect the privacy of the students, schools were not permitted to indicate which children were on Individual Education Plans (IEP). Therefore, we asked parents whether or not their children were on an IEP at school because of a disability. One student had a physical disability; two students had intellectual disabilities; three students had behavioural disabilities; and three students had learning disabilities. However, as has been indicated in previous research (e.g., Mancini et al., 2000), disability identification alone is not an indicator of success; rather, function is an indicator of success. Although we did not assess function of the students, observations indicated that these students functioned at a level that allowed them to interact within the social environment of the school. That is, none exhibited behaviours that would be considered more than a mild to moderate disability within the domains of social, behavioural, or cognitive functioning. One male student used a wheelchair to move around the school.

**Procedure.** We spent a week in each child's school observing him/her interact with other students in the classroom and on the playground. The observation times focused around each classrooms' timetable and section of the day (i.e., before school, various teaching subjects, recess, lunch breaks, and after school) in order to ensure that the observations reflected the children's school experiences as a whole. During these times, we took field notes and organized them in terms of the timetables of the classes. We created a log of conversations, behaviours, and general happenings in the school events in which the children who agreed to participate were engaging. In order to prevent as much bias in the observers as possible, they were aware only of the students participating. They were not told whether or not the student had been identified with an exceptionality.



## Data Analysis

Teacher interviews were transcribed verbatim with any identifying markers removed. Qualitative data analysis was used to develop themes surrounding the roles of children in the school system. We employed a content analysis approach, which involves coding statements based on key concepts, clustering these concepts into themes, and revisiting themes to further refine them (Crabtree & Miller, 1991; Fiese & Bickham, 1998). The coding of each transcript was performed by two observers independently, resulting in over 80% agreement. Questions 1 through 3 allowed us to determine what roles teachers see students engaging in and the behaviours that were assumed under these roles. Questions 4 through 7 allowed us to determine what opportunities teachers see for students with and without disabilities to engage in during the school day.

Field notes from the student observations were also subjected to qualitative data analysis. We developed codes that allowed us to group together behaviours exhibited by the children. The process involved clustering observations and key concepts together into patterned behaviours. These groups of behaviours were classified as roles that children assume. Recall that roles refer to clusters of meaningful activities that are assumed by individuals in various contexts of their lives. The context in the current study is school, therefore we looked at field notes for each child and coded the kinds of behaviours that they were exhibiting and determined what, if any, category we could group those behaviours under in terms of roles that students might typically assume. For example, within the field notes we might code the following characteristics: self sufficient; works on own; does not require teacher attention; stays on task; attentive listener; organized; participates in class discussions. This student would be given the role of Independent Learner. These roles were then used to code the original field notes and to assign children to various roles in the school. The coding of each set of notes was performed by two coders independently. One of the coders was not present during the collection of data in the classrooms. The agreement was over the acceptable level of 80% agreement.

We used both the teacher interview data and the observational data to provide validity for the roles that emerged and the issues raised. We believed that if roles were mentioned by the teachers and observed by the researchers in the classroom, they were more credible than if they occurred in only one setting. Therefore, in the results section we report the roles that were shared in the interviews and observed in the classroom. Additionally, we used both the teacher interviews and the observations to highlight similarities and differences between students with and without disabilities. Finally, we looked at the teacher interview data for an understanding of their perceptions of roles in the school system and how that affects aspects of children's participation.

## Results

### Identifying School Roles

From the content analysis of the teacher interviews and observations in the classroom, we found that there were many roles that children can assume in school. Given that roles can help make meaning in life, we used King's (2004) meta-model of life experiences as the theoretical organizer of the roles that emerged from the data.

*Belonging* roles involved the child's interconnections to others and consisted of (a) Nurturer, (b) Bully, (c) Victim, and (d) Friend. *Doing* roles varied across activities and consisted of (a) Athlete, (b) Leader, (c) Helper, and (d) Tutor. *Understanding* roles involved the child's

awareness of his/her own place in the world around him/her. Given that the context for this study was school and the child as student, identified roles consisted of (a) Independent Learner and (b) Challenged Learner. See Table 1 for a description of the identified roles. Some children participated in roles in each of the three categories, and others did not.

### **Role Comparison between Children with and without Disabilities**

After identifying the roles outlined in Table 1, we performed a comparative analysis to determine what, if any, differences occurred in both the observations and the teacher reports between the children with disabilities and the children without disabilities. In general, the children with disabilities assumed the less positive roles. The children with disabilities were not identified with any of the Doing roles. In terms of the Belonging roles, when identified, they were classified as the Victim or the Bully, whereas the children without disabilities were classified as Friend. A summary of notes from one boy's class (we shall call him Gerry) illustrates how he was shut out socially and could be seen as taking on a victim role:

Many of the students in Gerry's class refused to pay attention to him. A fellow classmate refused to take notice of Gerry while Gerry was speaking to him. In spite of the fact that Gerry was pointing directly at the boy while speaking to him, the boy continued to neglect him. Gerry's efforts to participate in presenting a slide show to his class were also ignored by his partner. Later while watching other students present, Gerry turned to a boy sitting next to him and began to speak to him. The boy, however, was unresponsive and did not even turn to face Gerry.

The children with disabilities tended to assume the role of Challenged Learner, whereas the children without disabilities tended to assume the role of Independent Learner. This is perhaps not too surprising given that most of the children with disabilities who participated in the study had difficulties with learning. For example, in one classroom, three children without disabilities were regularly observed working quietly and actively at their desks on classroom activities. They required very little assistance from the classroom teacher or from other classmates. These students were observed to engage frequently in on-task classroom behaviour; assignments were consistently completed during class time. In comparison, the two students who were identified with disabilities in that classroom were observed as needing frequent help. For example, one girl's Educational Assistant frequently approached her desk and would ask questions such as "What are you supposed to be doing?" in order to get her to complete school related work. A girl sitting in a desk next to her would also frequently tell her, "Come on, do your work." Another boy required frequent reminders from his teachers to record homework assignments in his daily agenda book and he would be punished (loss of recess) for forgetting to carry his agenda with him to each class. Teachers would also approach his desk often to make sure that he was on-task. For example, during French class, the teacher knelt down beside his desk and asked him, in a supportive manner, "Did you hear what I said?" When he nodded, indicating yes, the teacher said, "Okay, do it now then before you forget."

### **Teacher's Perceptions on School Roles**

In addition to the descriptions of roles, the roles that teachers need to fulfill in order to ensure the growth and development of children were discussed in the focus group interviews, as were the opinions of classroom teachers on the opportunities for children with and without disabilities to participate within the school. These issues are discussed below.

**Table 1**  
***Roles and Descriptions***

Role	Characteristics
<b>Belonging</b>	
Nurturer	typically an older student who takes on the role of “mother” with the younger students
Bully	focuses aggressive actions on one child (or small group); is physically or verbally abusive; intimidates others; uses force to achieve desired outcome
Victim	one who is either purposely ignored or is a target of playground verbal and physical abuse and is either oversensitive or has anti-social behaviours
Friend	socializes often; active member in a social group of friends; lots of friends/acquaintances
<b>Doing</b>	
Athlete	on sports teams whether competitive or intramural
Leader	in charge of a group; initiates new trends or activities; other kids listen to this child; speaks loudly and clearly
Helper	tries to assist the teacher at all times whether in the classroom, hallways, or playground
Tutor	typically falls to the “bright” students who help peers if stuck in their work
<b>Understanding</b>	
Independent Learner	self-sufficient worker; task orientated; completes homework; appropriately participates in class discussion; attentive listener
Challenged Learner	unfocused; distracted; uninterested; confused; frustrates easily; slow worker; unprepared; involved in separate learning program for some subjects

**Student roles as perceived by the teachers.** One of the most interesting ideas raised was that teachers tend to place children in roles at the beginning of the year: “At the beginning of the year, you almost set the roles in your head by pigeon holing each child. You know, he’s the quiet one, he’s the trouble maker, she’s going to speak out, this child needs to move.”

Teachers also believed that part of their job was to create new roles for children. They accomplished this by creating an environment within their classrooms that allows students to break out of their roles from previous years and continue to grow and develop from year to year:

A lot of what we do is create the environment that kids feel safe to explore roles that they may not view as typical for them. We encourage kids to step out of their role and into another one. Part of our job is to make sure that we give them the skills and opportunities to expand their roles and go beyond how we see them and how they see themselves.

**Opportunities for children to participate in extracurricular activities.** Teachers believed that there are an infinite number of opportunities within the community for children to play sports, join clubs, or acquire hobbies, which can benefit them just as much as those activities associated with participation in the school. They did not see it as their role to necessarily create participation opportunities outside of school time (i.e., extracurricular activities). However, if they did create such opportunities, they believed that the two major determinants of children’s participation in extracurricular school activities are cost of joining and time of day:

The way I see it is if the kids have to pay for it, they'll attend, and if they don't they'll skip a few. If you run things at 8:30 in the morning you get very few bodies but if you run it at noon hour, you'll get more. You'll also have the bus kids who can't take part in the morning or after school activities but are staying there for lunch.

**Opportunities for children with disabilities to participate in school.** The teachers indicated that several accommodations and provisions are made by schools to ensure that children with disabilities have the same opportunities to participate as their typically-developing peers. However, the perception is that many of these children choose not to take advantage of these opportunities and continue not to participate: "Inclusion is there, opportunities are there, but the facts still say they don't participate as much" and

There are so many activities ranging in diversity, but regardless, when it comes time for certain kids to leave early for the cross-country meet, or to practice for the Christmas concert or the sports meet, there is always the same five or six kids left behind.

Teachers suggested that one explanation for this lack of participation is that the children with disabilities find school to be difficult enough as it is and that they cannot take on any more of a challenge: "They could be hearing impaired and straining to listen all day and often one more thing at the end of the day is just a burden."

## Discussion

The results of this exploratory study indicate that teachers see students as participating in numerous roles and that these roles can be observed and classified. Individual roles could be organized into three categories—Belonging roles, Doing roles, and Understanding roles—in this study. This classification of roles builds on the six activity groups identified by Simeonsson et al. (2001) and corresponds to work on the meaning of life experiences (King, 2004).

The teachers viewed roles for all students as either predominantly positive or negative. Teacher knowledge and biases may, in turn, affect the participation opportunities provided to children in the inclusive school setting. Many of the negative descriptions (e.g., victim, challenged learner) provided by the teachers in the interviews were of children with disabilities; none of these children were referred to in a positive manner (e.g., nurturer, helper). In this study, there appears to be a perception that children with disabilities tend to fit into negative roles. Additionally, teachers seemed to place children in roles quite early in the school year. They also saw the lack of participation in the children with disabilities as something that was inevitable given their personality or limitations. These findings were confirmed by the school observers who did not observe children with disabilities fitting into positive roles. A caveat here is that although the observers were unaware of which children had been identified with disabilities, some were obvious in that they were in wheelchairs or had an Educational Assistant assigned to them. It may be that they had a bias about which roles students with disabilities would fit into. However, the second coder only investigated field notes and agreed over 80% of the time with the classification made for each child.

The findings of this study are quite concerning. The culture and climate of the school environment can have a significant influence on inclusion of children with disabilities (Frederickson, Simmonds, Evans, & Soulsby, 2007). Additionally, teachers influence the attitudes of others in the classroom with respect to the acceptance of students with exceptionalities (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Monsen & Frederikson, 2004). If teachers do not see students

with disabilities as participating in positive roles, it is quite likely that students' peers will not either. The field notes gathered in the classrooms lend credibility to these ideas.

It is unclear why children with disabilities were not observed in positive roles in this study. It may be that these students have limited opportunities, that others do not see these students as capable of being in these roles, or that the students themselves may not see themselves as being capable of assuming such roles. Regardless of reason, in order to increase the participation of students with disabilities, teachers need to be aware of potential biases that children with disabilities cannot participate to the same extent as children without disabilities. As Pearman, Barnhart, Huang, and Mellblom (1992) have suggested, inclusion and the successful education and participation of all students requires that everyone associated with schools begin to make changes not only in the way that students are taught, but also in how students are valued and viewed as successful learners. Improving opportunities for children with disabilities to engage positively in the school environment implies improvements for all students (Fritz & Miller, 1995).

People create meaning in their day-to-day lives through interconnections to others (Belonging roles), by taking part in activities (Doing roles), and by seeking to understand their own nature and the world around them (Understanding roles; King, 2004). The expectations of others about these roles and one's understanding of whether or not one meets those expectations combine to situate the child in his or her place in the world. In the role of leader, for example, children follow the expectations prescribed for leaders and make some decision about whether or not they have met those expectations which, in turn, helps them create a sense of meaning in their day-to-day life experiences. Given that the children with disabilities in this study participated mainly in negative roles, it is little wonder that they are at risk for negative life outcomes. In order to assist them in creating an improved sense of self, we need to encourage participation in more positive roles that help children with disabilities create a more positive view of how they fit in the world.

Changes in attitudes and beliefs concerning children with disabilities are required in order to help guide these children into roles associated with successful, positive participation in school. Attending to the type of roles in which students engage is one way that we may be able to increase opportunities for quality participation. For example, if students assume a helper or a leader role they have opportunities to interact in positive ways with others, try out new skills, and feel good about the positive feedback received from others. If students with disabilities are observed by teachers and classmates as being successful in these positive roles, they will come to understand that students with disabilities are competent, which may begin to change their attitudes about the roles in which students with disabilities can engage.

## **Limitations**

This study was a preliminary investigation to determine if school roles might be a useful way to study participation in the school system. We collected information on the behaviours that students were exhibiting or were inferred to exhibit from the teachers' descriptions and examined how these behaviours combined to create roles. We do not have data that would allow us to look at what teachers were doing to promote meaningful engagement. For now, we can only talk about the attitudes that we heard in the interviews and the behaviours that clustered together. In addition, we did not hear the voice of the student, only that of the teacher and the researchers who performed observations.

## Future Research

It is important to explore and understand the reasons for differences in the intensity of student engagement in roles of different types. Ideally, the educational system should provide all children with equal opportunity to engage in the same variety of roles. We do not know to what extent this is occurring or to what extent children with disabilities are guided into certain roles rather than others. Future research should investigate the extent to which opportunities exist for students with and without disabilities to participate in different roles in school. The current study interviewed teachers to explore their perspective of school roles and had people observe students engaged in roles in their schools; future research should employ an interview format to elicit the perspectives of parents, teachers, and students about role development at school. We need to understand the home and school perspectives on roles as it provides the complete picture of the connections among the players most crucial to healthy child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1999).

## Conclusion

This study contributes to our understanding of the school participation of students with disabilities by investigating it from a role perspective. Differences in student roles have been identified and it has been revealed that teacher bias may interfere with school participation. Future research is needed to understand the way in which roles assist students in participating in school activities. Undoubtedly, teachers play a significant role in the participation of students in varied roles that help them create meaning in life (belonging, doing, and understanding). Ideally, participation of children with disabilities will include involvement in the same variety of roles that their non-disabled peers experience, and to the same intensity, thereby allowing them to enjoy the healthy benefits that result from their participation.

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