

"Peter? He comes and goes. . .": First Graders' Perspectives on a Part-Time Mainstream Student

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Part-time integration of students with moderate and severe disabilities into regular classes has become a common feature of special education programs. How regular education students think about their school experience, including part-time mainstreaming, can be a source of information for integration efforts, but these perceptions have received little attention in the special education literature. Participant observation and in-depth interviews were employed over a 7-month period to study a first grade class in which a student described as "moderately mentally retarded" participated on a part-time basis. This student spent most of his school day in a self-contained special education class.

The findings reveal that these first graders had a common framework for defining their school experience. Their descriptions centered around themes of "where you belong," "what you do," and "with whom you play." Data collected about Peter, the part-time mainstream student, are interpreted according to this student framework. Findings indicate significant discrepancies between the students' definitions of what it means to be part of first grade and the focus of the teacher's efforts to include Peter and present him as a member of the class.

DESCRIPTORS: educational placement, ethno- graphic research, integration, mainstreaming, mental retardation, nonhandicapped peers, participant observation, peer relationships, qualitative research, school age

In recent years there has been a growing movement to include all students, regardless of the level of disability, in the life of the school, including regular classes (Lipsky & Gartner, 1987, 1989; Stainback & Stainback, 1984; Stainback, Stainback, & Forest, 1989). The emerging literature on how to achieve this goal has focused on issues of placement (Brown et al., 1989), classroom organization (Davern & Ford, 1989; Stainback, Stainback, & Slavin, 1989), and instruction (Davern & Ford, 1989; Ford & Davern, 1989).

There is also increasing recognition of the importance of social relationships between students labeled disabled and their nondisabled peers as a fundamental goal of inclusive education (Forest & Lusthaus, 1989; Strully & Strully, 1985, 1989; Vandercook, York, & Forest, 1989). However, only a few recent studies consider the perspectives of those students without disabilities who make up the social fabric of the regular classes we seek to understand. One study of full-time elementary students in regular classes reported on relations between class members with and without disabilities (Biklen, Corrigan, & Quick, 1989). Another study reported on the social relations between high school students who have severe disabilities and a sample of nondisabled students in the same school (Murray-Seegert, 1989). The perspectives of the nondisabled peers in these studies suggested that students with disabilities were often viewed just as "students" or "friends" - "...disability was not central to how he thought about his friend..." (Biklen, et al., 1989, p. 208). Some students described their classmates (with disabilities) as people who have rights, interests, and abilities. These studies also indicate that peer interactions are influenced by a number of factors beyond the characteristics associated with disability, such as the social and cultural experiences of non-labeled students, ongoing opportunities for students with and without disabilities to spend time together, and strategies used by teachers to share information and promote positive images of students who have disabilities.

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This article describes a study on part-time main-streaming and how it is understood by a class of first grade students. The situation represents a common arrangement: Peter (a pseudonym), a 7-year-old student who is assigned to a self-contained special education class, joins a first grade class for a period each morning as well as for a daily "special" (i.e., art, music, physical education, library). Several questions are examined in the present study:

What is the *meaning* of first grade for these regular class students?

How might this meaning shape their understanding of Peter, the part-time mainstream student?

What are the implications of the ways children define their school experience for facilitating the inclusion of a student who has disabilities?

Methods

Qualitative or ethnographic research techniques were used to gather data about the setting and the participants over a 7-month period. Some of the theoretical assumptions of qualitative research were described by Bogdan and Biklen (1982):

. . . that meaning and process are crucial to understanding human behavior; that descriptive data is what is important to collect; and that analysis is best done inductively.

Qualitative research methods call for the investigator to enter the lives of the persons being studied as fully as possible (Edgerton, 1984), and often require a long-term involvement to allow the investigator to become a natural part of the setting (Stainback & Stainback, 1989).

Two methods of data collection were used, participant observation and interviewing (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982; Stainback & Stainback, 1989). The researcher's role in this study could best be described as moderate to active participation. As an adult, the researcher could not become a full participant in the first grade class. However, conscious efforts were made to assume a role that was distant from that of a teacher or typical adult (e.g., refusing to monitor children's behaviors or assist with "work"). Whenever appropriate, the researcher joined the children as an active participant (e.g., playing with board games or puzzles, conversation). Qualitative interviews may also vary, particularly in the degree to which they are structured. In this case, informal conversations during participant observations as well as scheduled individual interviews with students and the teacher contributed to the data. The scheduled interviews were relatively open-ended, but focused around particular topics, such as "first grade" and impressions of classmates.

Participants and Setting

The study involved 23 students from one first grade class, their teacher, and a 7-year-old mainstream student who was assigned to a self-contained special education class. The setting was an elementary school located in a middle class neighborhood on the outskirts of a small city. The school enrolls about 500 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. The first grade class was a heterogeneous group of 6- and 7-year-old students, including five students who were repeaters. All first graders in this class received exactly the same content and used the same materials, except for small group reading instruction. Three homogeneous reading groups used different level materials from the same basal series in daily, teacher-directed small group instruction. A typical day began with individual seatwork, followed by opening exercises, full group practice of phonics skills, and students reading along as the teacher printed a brief story on the board for them to copy. For the remainder of the morning, students worked quietly on "folder work" at their desks while the teacher led instruction in each reading group. After lunch and recess, the class had several full group lessons in math and language arts (sometimes followed by seat work), a "special" (e.g., art), and free time to play with friends (for those who were finished with work).

Peter, the mainstream student, was assigned to a special class for students who have moderate and severe disabilities. The class was part of a regional school district that rents classroom space in this school. At least three of the students in the special class were described as having "severe and profound" cognitive disabilities, including significant physical disabilities. Peter, who has Down syndrome, was described as "trainable or moderately mentally retarded." He spoke in single words and short phrases and was difficult to understand unless one was familiar with him and the context of the conversation. Peter tended to talk in response to adults, or occasionally to greet familiar students ("Hi, Lisa."). He did not

initiate many verbal interactions with first graders. Physically, he had a healthy appearance and was about the same size as many of the other children in the class. Peter dressed much like other students his age. He followed the cues of the first graders quite well in routine situations (e.g., walking in line, waiting for directions, playing a game in gym, or performing with a small group in music.) In unstructured situations, Peter sometimes left his seat, climbed on desks, or took other children's crayons or papers. Individual activities (e.g., coloring at his desk) did not hold his interest for very long. Peter did show interest in the first grade teacher as well as many of the students and used their names frequently as he pointed to them or to their photos, which were posted in the hall. Peter was scheduled to join this first grade class every morning from 8:30 until 9:00 and for all "specials" (e.g., music, physical education, art). One of the teacher assistants from the special class joined him for art class, which was taught in the first grade classroom. Two other students from the special class also attended these music and physical education classes with Peter, along with a teacher assistant. The first graders would stop at the special education classroom on the way to physical education or music to pick up Peter. He would join their line and walk with them.

Data Collection Procedures

Participant observations began in mid-October and took place about once a week through mid-May. Visits generally lasted from 1.5 to 2.5 hr, and included times that Peter was participating as well as many hours when he was not present. Observations were conducted primarily in the first grade classroom but also included the specials (e.g., music, physical education), lunch, outdoor recess, and two field trips. Detailed field notes were written immediately after each participant observation session to reconstruct the experiences as accurately as possible. Beginning in March, unstructured, open-ended interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982) were conducted with 22 of the 23 first graders, Peter, and the participating first grade teacher. By this point in the school year, the investigator's frequent visits had contributed to a strong rapport with both children and adults. Guiding questions for the interviews focused on themes that were emerging from the data, but the informants provided the direction and content as they talked about their interests. Each interview was tape recorded with the permission of the informant, and later transcribed verbatim. In all, approximately 300 pages of field notes were generated, based on about 50 hr in the setting.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis is inductive and ongoing throughout the study. As data were collected, field notes (detailed written descriptions of participant observations and interview transcripts) were examined, and memos or observer comments were written discussing emerging themes, possible relationships, and reflections on the researcher's role in the setting (Bogdan & Bilden, 1982; Taylor & Bogden, 1984). Symbolic interactionism provided the theoretical framework for data interpretation. According to this framework, meaning is constructed by individuals through their interactions and experiences with other people (Blumer, 1969).

Process. Although analysis was a continuous process, it was divided into roughly three stages during the study. The first stage, which could be described as "choosing a focus," took place over the first 2 to 3 months of participant observation. A variety of themes and potential studies were noted as the researcher became more familiar with the participants and the context. At this time, a decision was made to look beyond the formal activities and plans determined by adults and focus on how students define their school experience. There were already emerging themes, such as students' use of free time, comments on what is *not* first grade, types of students, and class membership. The second stage, which continued through later participant observations and individual interviews, explored student participation and perspectives on first grade. Data were sorted and re-sorted into categories such as "work," "fun," "friends," "rules," "rewards," "types of kids" and "teachers." The final stage of intensive analysis occurred after data collection was completed. Analysis related to student perspectives on first grade continued, and data on Peter's participation were analyzed according to the perspectives generated by the first graders. At this final stage, interview data were coded into 31 different categories related to student activities, student definitions/ impressions, or "our class." Codes were designed to "fit the data" (Taylor & Bogden, 1984), with categories emerging from themes in the field notes, recurring conversation topics and the vocabulary of the informants, typologies (e.g., types of activities, types of students), and "concrete" concepts derived from the participants' culture (e.g., first grade "work," "friends," "teams"). Coding categories were not predetermined or created de novo by the investigator, but were grounded in the data (field notes and interview transcripts). From these, the most frequently occurring themes in the students' responses were identified, and coding categories were refined further. A three-part framework emerged that was common to the

student descriptions of first grade. Next, all data from both participant observations and interviews that included Peter or referred to him were re-examined and interpreted according to the students' framework of "What first grade is. . .".

Validity and credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) remind us that naturalistic inquiry methods are based on an assumption that there are multiple constructed realities rather than a single "true" reality. Because of this fundamental difference in perspectives, procedures used to ensure validity and reliability in other research methodologies are not appropriate for qualitative approaches. However, alternative techniques do exist to increase the probability that credible findings will be produced by qualitative research methods. A number of strategies were used to maximize the validity and credibility of this study, including prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stainback, 1988), use of observer comments and memos, and ongoing use of an experienced outside reader (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Prolonged engagement (7 consecutive months of fieldwork during 1 school year) allowed sufficient time to learn about the classroom and school culture, experience that provided insight into the context necessary for accurate interpretation of the data. Prolonged engagement also contributes to trust-building. It is a time-consuming, developmental process that is fundamental to naturalistic research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Persistent observation requires the identification of those characteristics of the situation that are most relevant to the issue (i.e., the issue of Peter's inclusion, students' perspectives) and focusing on these aspects in depth. Triangulation was employed by using different sources (interviewing numbers of students and the teacher; observing in different places and situations) and methods (participant-observation as well as individual interviews). To acknowledge and maintain awareness of personal biases and perspectives, the investigator recorded her own feelings and assumptions in observer's comments and memos throughout the study, and referred to these as a check during various stages of analysis. Throughout all stages of data collection and analysis, a researcher experienced in qualitative methodology collaborated as an independent reader and de-briefer. The reader reacted to field notes, observer comments, and memos written by the investigator, suggested considerations for directions the study was taking, and commented on emerging themes, categories, and hypotheses. Regular debriefing sessions helped to keep the investigator honest by probing possible biases, exploring meanings, and clarifying interpretations and findings. Differences between the researchers were resolved by seeking examples in the data to support or eliminate possible interpretations. The same reader read all draft stages of this report and found the analysis was consistent with the data.

Findings

What is First Grade?

During the unstructured interviews, students were asked to "Tell me about first grade." A number of recurring themes in their responses suggested a fairly common framework for how this group of students defined their first grade experience. The predominant themes fit three major categories: *where* you belong (your class assignment), *what* you do (structured and unstructured activities) and *with whom* you play (peer networks). Table 1 (below) lists common features for each of the three categories.

Where you belong. The two features of "where you belong" had to do with the teacher (and grade) to whom a student was assigned and the physical space associated with their class. The importance of the teacher to one's school identity was evident in student comments. One girl responded to the question "Are all first graders the same?" in this way: "No-'cause all the first graders got different *teachers*." The teacher also defined and maintained class rules and rewards that differed from class to class.

What you do. "Work," "play," "projects" and "specials" were reflected in many students' descriptions. "Work" was closely related to formal materials:

Hmmm... It's like you have to do math... red book... writing paper. Like word papers.

The amount of play, materials, and activities help to determine if something "is" or "is not" first grade. Kindergarten all we did was played.

(In kindergarten) we get playtime more often than work.. (In first grade) we have to get finished. We can't monkey around.

What first graders "do" became part of the way they came to define first grade.

With whom you play. During the interviews, many first graders shared detailed information about one another, and their interactions and relationships. Students in this class consistently reported friends and relationships based on "with whom one played" during classroom free times and outdoor recess. Nearly all of those mentioned were in the same first grade class. "With whom a person played" became part of that person's identity:

She plays alot with Susie and Melanie.

They're always hanging around together. .. I hang around with Kristen.

Another factor in friendship-building was the status of individual students. Students were influenced by how they felt the teacher acted toward particular classmates. Students were aware of "who got hollered at" and to whom the teacher gave special responsibilities. Well- liked students were often described by their classmates as "good." Being good was also offered as a desirable quality in friends. One student, Kristen, described her friends:

Anna, Amy... Todd. I like a lot of people. Everybody that's good.

Gender was another distinguishable feature of friend- ship. Girls were most likely to report other girls as their friends and boys to report other boys. Those who reported both girls and boys as their friends reported several same gender friends before mentioning the others.

Another type of peer network evolved during outdoor recess. Many students were on "teams." Teams were initiated and led by students. Participants played a kind of a tag game in which team members chased and "captured" students from the other teams. By March, there were at least two distinct teams consisting of boys and girls, both led by girls. According to many students, Kristen and Susie (the leaders) had started these teams. When they were outdoors, they pretended not to like each other because their teams competed against each other. Although they determined team membership and participation for the majority of first graders in this class during daily recess, Kristen and Susie were not the students identified by the first grade teacher as "leaders" or those to whom other students "looked up."

Table I: First Graders' Framework: "What is First Grade?"

"Where you belong"	"What you do"	"With whom you play"
Class assignment: teacher class rules class rewards routines	Work: assigned papers books	Free time playmates class free time recess playmates (team members)
Physical space: classroom ("Room 19") lockers our "hall space"	Free time activities: (examples) drawing puzzles chess	Types: same gender have same teacher "good" (liked by teacher)
	Projects: class individual	
	Specials: art music physical education library	

Summary: what is first grade? From the perspective of the students in this class, first grade is a complex world created through a variety of experiences that are shaped by their class assignment and grade (where you belong), activities (what one does), and classmates (with whom one spends his/her days, and especially free time). Members of the group describe a fairly consistent definition of what is, and what is not, first grade. These first graders seem to use this framework to think about school and the other students they come to know.

How Do First Graders Think About a Part-Time Mainstream Student?

What do these first graders think about Peter, a student who is assigned to a special education class but who spends part of each day with this first grade class? Early in the observations, Nate (a first grader) clarified Peter's status within the first grade class.

(Who's desk is this?)

Oh, that's Peter's desk.

(Who's Peter?)

He comes here in the morning. He's not in our class. He doesn't ever stay. He comes in the morning when we have seat work. Then he leaves to go back to his room.

Nate's comments reflected several common themes. Peter was viewed as an outsider, someone who is not "in our class", a visitor who "comes and goes." Nate's impressions were confirmed later in the year by many of the other children. How might these and other impressions of Peter have been influenced by the students' own understanding of first grade? How might the framework that emerged from the students affect Peter's status and participation in his mainstream activities?

Where You Belong

When they spoke of Peter, the first graders commented in two ways: He was not in their class (Mrs. T's First grade), and was in "his class – Room 10."

He comes in the classroom when we get to school... and when it's after 9, then he goes up to his classroom. Sometimes he's in this class and the other time he goes down to his room-his class in Room 10.

Unlike themselves or other students they knew, the first graders did not seem to be able to understand or describe Peter's place in the school in the usual way, by his teacher and grade. They did refer to his physical place in the school, but described it only by the room number-Room 10. Other students' classrooms were always designated by their teachers' names.

Mrs. T. made efforts to help Peter appear to be part of the class. For example, he had his own desk, which was situated among the other student desks. Just like the others, it had his name printed on a tag board sign. However, as the year wore on, Peter's desk was not respected as "his space" in the same way as that of the other students. For example, by spring, Peter's desk was often used to store a stack of completed worksheets. One afternoon Teri was coloring at Peter's desk during free time:

Teri needed a pink crayon. She decided to borrow one from a classmate, Josh. Teri walked over to his desk, but Josh was a few feet away, playing a game. She called over to him, "Josh, may I borrow your pink crayon?"

He said, "Sure. It's in my desk."

Teri removed the crayon from his desk and thanked him.

Josh replied, "Anytime."

When it was time to clean up, I saw Teri stuff her coloring paper inside of Peter's desk. I asked her if that was okay. She replied. "Yeah, he doesn't ever notice."

There were also other discrepancies relating to class- room assignment. Peter did not have a locker near the first grade room, and, as one girl reported, he operated under a different reward system:

Peter-he gives a sticker book to his teacher, because if he behaves very well, she gives him a sticker.

(Does anyone else get stickers?)

No: ... 'Cause Peter's in Room 10.

Peter's name was not on the various reward charts in the first grade classroom for happy grams, homework, and other accomplishments.

How could these first graders think about Peter, someone who has no grade, no teacher to speak of, someone whose desk is empty most of the day, someone who is not eligible for happy grams and homework rewards, but instead gets his own stickers? It was obvious that he didn't fit what they knew about first grade based on the "where you belong" test. Many of the differences first graders reported had nothing to do with Peter's individual characteristics, but related instead to "where he went" and the amount of time he spent in first grade or other places. As one student, George, explained:

(Is he in your class?)

Who?

(Peter.)

Yeah-he's really in Room 10. 'Cause he stays in Room 10 the most.

(And when is he in your class?)

In the morning. And then he leaves when one of the teachers come down or otherwise he can leave whenever he wants.

George saw Peter as someone who could "leave whenever he wanted," which is quite different from the first graders who spent all but a 40-min lunch/recess period and a 40-min special in their room. He was also aware of how little time Peter actually spent in the first grade room (20 to 30 min each morning before instruction began and 20 min for a special at the end of the day, which was usually in another room). In this class there were about eight first graders who left the room for some kind of extra service (e.g., remedial reading, speech). Most of them left for no more than 30 min a day, and the student who was gone the most was out for no more than 60 min on any given day. George and others came to the conclusion that "where Peter belongs" is the place where he spends most of his time.

What You Do

Another way that first graders defined their experience was based on "what you do": work, play, projects, and specials. How did this aspect of their definition color their impressions of Peter? Some of the students' comments, like Nate's, suggested that Peter did not participate in "work" activities.

He comes in the morning when we have math.

(So, Peter has math with you?)

No. He comes here then, but he doesn't have math. We do math, but he doesn't.

(What does he do?)

Colors. We do math and he colors.

(What do you think of him coloring? Is it okay if sometimes kids have different things to do?)

Yeah, if they're littler.

(What do you mean, "littler?")

Littler--not as old.

(How old is Peter?)

I think he's about 4.

(Where does he go when he leaves here?)

He goes to his room. He's in pre-school.

Later in the year, Nate told me this about Peter:

(How's Peter doing?)

Doin' good. His coloring-he's doin' his best coloring.

(And what do you do then?)

I just do my morning work.

Nate's explanation was consistent with other comments made by his classmates, who defined first grade work as "papers and books," and described the difference between kindergarten and first grade as "mostly play" versus distinct playtimes or free times that were contingent upon work completion. Actually, coloring was something that many of the first graders reported as an activity they enjoyed during free time. Peter, however, was coloring during a work time. In fact, Peter was not scheduled to participate in the first grade classroom during the regular free times. The longest first grade free time, when students got to play with one another, occurred during the last half hour of the day, after Peter's special bus had departed. I asked one student, Robert, about Peter's participation in recess, the time when first graders played with their teams.

(Tell me about Peter.)

He does Art.

(Does he ever do anything with you and Nate?)

Uh-uh. He don't go outside.

Like other students' comments, Robert's remarks didn't focus on Peter's individual characteristics, but rather on what he *does* (e.g., art) or *does not do* (e.g., go outside) with the first grade class. Jennifer expressed a similar theme as she recalled Peter's participation in her kindergarten class.

. . . and when I was in kindergarten there was Peggy and Peter and Joey came.

(Peggy was your teacher?)

Miss C. was my real teacher. Peggy just came sometimes with Peter and Joey.

(And they came to your kindergarten class?)

Uh huh... but he... we just like played around and stuff.

(How?)

In kindergarten we used to play with blocks... but when they came we didn't really do our work, because they didn't know how really to do it.

(They came during playtime?)

Yeah. But not work time.

Jennifer's comments suggest a complication if a student with a disability is perceived to participate only during playtime. Other discrepancies in "what you do" became apparent when some first graders compared the materials and activities associated with Room 10 (Peter's room) with those in first grade. Megan, a first grader who went to Room 10 for an extra reading session each day, offered these comments:

They play more. They sit at tables... They do circles and stuff. They put their chairs in a circle to talk about the weather and stuff... and, well, it's a little different there.

(How?)

Because it's very, very different. They have a playhouse in there and we don't. It's fun in there.

We get to play with a giant beach ball.

Megan's impressions of Peter's room highlighted how different it was from first grade: it was all play. Peter was scheduled to participate in specials, another activity that some first graders brought up in their descriptions of school life. One or two other students from the special class attended music and physical education with this first grade. Peter was accompanied to art and music class by a teacher assistant from the special class. He sat next to this adult and

had little interaction with other students. However, Peter participated actively in physical education, and classmates tended to offer natural support to him by redirecting him or assisting him only when necessary.

First grade specials were scheduled from 1:45 to 2:25 in the afternoon on 5 of 6 days, but Peter left at 2:10. Although first graders acknowledged Peter's participation in specials, the fact that he always left early highlighted differences.

They're leaving. They always leave early. They come for one game and then they go. They get a different bus. They have to wait for it back there [pointing]. They don't get the bus where we do. We get it down there [pointing to opposite end of the building]. He comes for half and half. .. Half of gym and half of art and half of music.

Again Peter's schedule confirmed his image as an outsider who "comes and goes."

Another part of "what you do" was participating in special events (e.g., parties) and projects that were unique to your class. Valentine's Day was revealing in terms of Peter's participation. All of the first graders had large, identical envelopes on the front of their desks. These were made of white construction paper and decorated with red paper hearts. One was also taped to Peter's desk, and like the others it was stuffed with valentines. As a surprise, several students had made an envelope filled with cards for the researcher.

The party was held after gym, during the last half hour of the school day. Peter was not there. He never attended holiday or birthday parties in first grade because they were always held at the end of the day, after his special bus had left. Mrs. T. had a student take Peter's valentines down to "his" room. Some of the first graders described how they decided to whom they would write their cards.

Mrs. T. gave us all a list.
(What names were on the list?)
Everybody's.
(Was anybody else's name on it besides the kids in your class?) Different voices responded:
Yours!
Mrs. T's!
And Peter's!
(Did Peter make his big envelope?)
No, he wasn't here. Somebody made his for him

Peter did not experience this first grade ritual as the others did. As if he were a visitor, his name had been added to the list by the teacher, and someone else had made the envelope in an effort toward symbolic inclusion.

When one considers Peter's participation using the second part of the first grader's framework, "what you do," more discrepancies arise. The differences that students cited often focused not on Peter, but what he didn't do with them. He didn't do work (papers and books), he didn't play when they played (he was not around for free time or recess), he didn't stay for all of specials, he didn't come to parties or work on class projects. Many of these activity gaps seem to have more to do with Peter's class assignment and schedule than his individual abilities. Students noticed and saw him as someone who didn't fit what they knew about "what we do."

With Whom You Play

The final theme of the students' descriptions of first grade had to do with their relationships with one another: "with whom you play." Peer networks were reported to be an integral part of daily free times. What did this mean for how students came to know and understand Peter, who did not participate during the all-important free times? The first concern might be that his opportunities to develop and sustain relationships were severely limited. (It should be noted that Peter's special education teacher reported that his goals in the mainstream situation were "all social.") Second,

there were limitations on the assumptions the first grade students could make or other indirect sources that they could use to determine Peter's identity as it related to a peer group.

Of the 23 students in the first grade class, each was mentioned by at least one classmate as a friend or playmate. Peter was mentioned by no one. Perhaps because he had no friends or playmates during first grade free times, Peter was associated with two other boys (Joey and Jessie) from the special education class who usually attended first grade specials with him.

I help Peter and he 'has his friend, Joey.

Yeah. Because Peter is only a little, little guy... like Joey... and Jessie's even smaller.

Peter's image as a "little guy" seemed to be influenced by Mrs. T., the first grade teacher. Students were aware of how she thought about Peter. Mrs. T. enjoyed Peter, but often described him as being "like a little kid," or "like a 3-year-old" when she talked about him to the researcher. This message was frequently passed on to the first graders.

When the class lined up for special, Mrs. T. said, "Who's my line leader?" Jim answered, "Me."

She said, "Don't forget to stop at Room 10. It's your responsibility to pick up our two little guys" [referring to Peter and his classmate].

For Peter, the issue of "with whom you play" was, at best, unknown, because he shared no free time with the first graders. This left him outside of the class social networks, and gave him an identity that was based on certain assumptions. The major assumptions seemed to be his association with other outsiders, the students in Room 10 and Mrs. T.'s "little guy" image.

Seven months of participant observation suggested that Peter was viewed by the first graders as an outsider, someone who "comes and goes." They clearly did not think of him as a peer. By examining the data concerning Peter according to the students' framework of "what first grade is," we get a picture of why this may be so.

Discussion

For this particular group of elementary students, the meaning of school goes far beyond curriculum. Their perspectives raise several issues that may help us to understand and support the inclusion of a student who has significant disabilities as a member of a regular elementary class.

First, *part-time* is different, not just less. These first graders had great difficulty sorting aspects of their definition of school life into discrete parts. Based on students' perspectives, Peter's experience differed in kind as well as amount. Although he visited for part of each day, he did not share in the first grade experience as defined by the students. Peter's different class assignment and his "coming and going" were highlighted by a number of students as prominent discrepancies between him and other first graders. In fact, these discrepancies were reported much more frequently than any of Peter's individual characteristics (e.g., academic abilities, or behavior). This study raises questions about part-time placements: Is the difference only quantitative, one that can be measured in hours and minutes? Or, does it in fact redefine the experience for both the individual and the regular class members?

Another factor to be considered is the notion of belonging. These first graders talked about their school lives in ways that reflected their strong sense of belonging to a clearly defined group—their class. In comparing and contrasting their life in Mrs. T.'s class with past situations (e.g., kindergarten) and other classes (e.g., other first grade classes, special education classes), they often described their situations in terms of "we" and "they" or "us" and "them." Class members reported a number of shared experiences that made up a general definition of first grade. However, based on interview themes, two of these factors seemed most related to belonging to their class. These were: (a) the teacher and class to whom a student was assigned, and (b) shared daily experiences (e.g., common schedules, rules and rewards, activities).

Differences in *methods and materials* colored student descriptions of what was, and was not, first grade. Most learning activities (work) centered around papers and books, creating a narrow view of first grade work. Doing papers and books (the same papers and books for all members) and working individually became part of the definition of being a first grader in this setting. By this definition, someone like Peter is at risk of exclusion because he does different activities, needs help, or uses materials associated with play. On the other hand, if teachers can provide a balance of learning activities (e.g., projects, themes, hands-on materials, cooperative groups, role playing) in addition to individual paper and pencil activities, first grade (or any class) might be redefined in a broader way. Methods and materials that promote active, experiential learning in meaningful contexts benefit all students, and may facilitate planning for a wider range of student abilities and learning styles (Bredekamp. 1987).

There was also evidence that the *teacher can have a powerful influence on the status of individual students* as valued members of the class. Todd, a first grader in this class, was a "repeater" and very withdrawn. However, Todd was mentioned by a number of students as a friend or as a popular student. His teacher described promoting Todd's image by giving him valued roles and responsibilities and "talking up his strengths in front of his classmates." Another student, Jim, had difficulty making friends. Students said some people didn't want to be his friend because "he's bad-always getting in trouble and getting hollered at by the teacher." Similarly, a number of students reflected the first grade teacher's view of Peter as a younger child rather than a respected peer.

Relationships between individual class members emerged as a fundamental part of these students' definition of first grade. Those described as one's friends were almost exclusively members of the same class. Although class assignment does not ensure friendships, it may preclude the development of relationships between students. This is an important factor to consider when facilitating relationships between individuals who have disabilities and those who do not. According to this study, class membership also plays an important role in maintaining friendships. Some students reported that they had been friends for "a long time-ever since kindergarten!" For some students, maintaining existing relationships might become a priority when planning for transition to the next grade or setting.

For these first graders, friendships were developed and maintained during free times. Identifying when and how students interact with their classmates is the first step. Ensuring that a student with a disability has access to these important times, as well as meaningful ways to participate, may be a prerequisite to developing relationships with classmates.

Future Research Considerations

Because this was a case study, the findings may reflect features that are unique to this particular situation. Future research efforts might focus on understanding aspects of classrooms and schools that shape their meaning for all members, such as organization, instructional practices, grouping patterns, teacher's beliefs, local policies and student diversity. These features differ from classroom to classroom and from school to school. Research that investigates such characteristics will contribute to a broader understanding of how meanings are shaped by student experiences. Other aspects of schools and classrooms that relate more directly to the participation of students who have disabilities also need further study. These include the proportion of students with and without labels, the class to which students are assigned (or "based" in), the amount of time students with disabilities spend in regular classes, the activities and routines that are shared, the role of support staff, and how different students participate in regular routines deserve more in-depth investigation.

In this first grade classroom, for example, learning activities and rewards were usually organized according to individualistic or competitive goal structures, rather than through a cooperative approach. Opportunities for students to interact were limited to non-work times, which may have had an impact on relationship patterns that were strongly tied to free time. Students were rewarded for their individual accomplishments. How did these practices influence the student definition of their experience? Would the definitions of these students differ significantly from those of first graders whose classroom is organized according to more cooperative goal structures?

There is evidence that Peter was viewed as an outsider because of the limited amount of time and number of activities he shared with the first graders. Future studies should explore issues of time and participation related to where a student who has disabilities is placed (regular or special class), the amount of time in the regular class, and perhaps just as important, what those shared times mean to other students. Should students begin and end their day together? Is the shared preparation for a holiday party as important as the actual event? What are the times and activities that students associate with friendship-building?

Research must also focus on the perspectives of regular class teachers whose classes have part-time or full-time students who have significant disabilities. How do regular class teachers think about a student who has different abilities and characteristics? Are their perceptions and beliefs reflected by their other students? Although the teacher in this study made some effort to present Peter as a member of the class, she herself clearly viewed him as a visitor who was not part of her teaching responsibilities. In many ways, the students' comments and beliefs were closely aligned with her views about Peter's membership in the class. How is membership among classmates the same or different in cases where teachers have more ownership and responsibility for a student with disabilities?

Similarities and differences according to student age and grade level also may be of interest to future researchers. For instance, are there other primary age students who think about school in ways that are similar to the first graders in this study? Do student perspectives change as children get older?

Conclusion

Attention to formal and informal aspects of class-rooms as social settings can contribute much to the successful inclusion of students who have disabilities. This study points out the value of seeking and learning from student perspectives. Even very young students, such as these first graders, have important insights that are different from those of the adult members in their setting. Students are the only legitimate source for some of the answers we need for understanding and promoting school inclusion, because it is their world, not ours, that defines it.

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