

# The Role of Play in Building Classroom Community

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32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Meeting of  
The Association for the Study of Play  
Brock University  
St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada  
May 18-20, 2006

# Purpose of Study

- The purpose of this study is to complicate the dominant notion of classroom community in early childhood education with complex and contextualized stories through a case study of community in a classroom setting. This study explores the tensions surrounding our ideas of community and how we attempt to live as a community in a U.S. EC classroom.

# Significance of Study

- The first goal of developmentally appropriate practices is to develop and maintain a classroom community
  - “Developmentally appropriate practices occur within a context that supports the development of relationships between adults and children, among children, among teachers, and between teachers and families. Such a community reflects what is known about the social construction of knowledge and the importance of establishing a caring, inclusive community in which all children can develop and learn.  
The early childhood setting functions as a community of learners in which all participants consider and contribute to each other’s well-being and learning.”  
  
Bredekamp, S. & Copple, C. (Eds.) (1997). Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Very little research in early childhood education has examined classroom community, yet educators are constantly encouraged to promote community in their classrooms.

# Significance of Children's Play to the Study

- In his Pedagogical Creed, Dewey stated that school is a "form of community life." (Dewey, 1929)
- Dewey believed that through play young children experienced "free participation in a community of people with shared interests" (Frost, Wortham, and Reifel, 2001, p. 24).
- Experiencing social community was key to experiencing democracy and young children's play activities provided the context for those experiences.

# Questions

- How do the members of an early childhood classroom experience and understand community?
- What are the tensions of community in an early childhood setting?
- What are the (im)possibilities of classroom community in early childhood education?

# Theoretical Approach to Classroom Community

- Ideals, Goals, Desires
  - Democratic, Caring, Inclusive
- Lived Contextualized Experiences
  - Societal Structures
  - Identity and Positionalities
  - Multiple Perspectives and Meanings
- The “Problematic”
  - "moments in the lives of children and their caregivers which may or may not seem insignificant in themselves and their temporality, but may symbolically be representative of major tensions, conflicts, or ruptures in their relationships" (Leavitt, 1994, p.1).

# Case Study Methodology

- Setting: Public school in the Southwest U.S., 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classroom
- Participants:
  - Third year female Anglo-American Teacher
  - 20 8 year-old children
    - 1 African- American
    - 7 Hispanic- American
    - 12 Anglo- American
- Ethnographic Methods:
  - Participant Observation (January-June), individual and group interviews, researcher journal
  - Cyclical in nature and participants involved in interpretation and analysis (observation/participation of event, interviews, class discussions, interviews)

# Data Findings:

## Our Ideal: Community means being included.

- Children

- “Just because people look different than you, that doesn’t mean you should leave them out.” Alexandra
- “It feels good to be friends when you have problems, when you play games it makes new friends.” Kylee
- “It’s harder when you have no friends. Some people have friends. Other people don’t because other people laugh.” Tanya

- Teacher

- “The goal is not to be friends but to not be exclusive or make people feel yucky.”

# Data Findings : Classroom Experiences (Routines, Play, and Planned Curriculum)

- Critical Play Experiences: Moments of Inclusion and Exclusion
  - Card Games
    - Yu-Gi-Oh card games at recess
      - Tanya and those without cards are left out of the games.
  - Clubs
    - Lunchtime Performances: Nachos and Cheese
      - Derrick is leader of the girls. Elizabeth is left out.
  - Chase Games
    - Dolphin Chase
      - Adult attention legitimizes play of Karen. Teacher is left out.

# Data Findings: Participant Interpretations of Play Experiences

## Teacher: It's Natural Exclusion

“So I guess I understand why some people might be left out by that. And I guess we need a conversation about it. But I'm not gonna step in and be like: "You can't do that." Now if somebody is saying something or their actions are really disrespectful then I would. I would say, "In our classroom we aren't like that." But to me that's almost natural exclusion. You know what I mean? It's like -we all like something.. We all like to... You know like John [her husband] and his friends. I'm excluded from their game group. But that's natural exclusion. It doesn't bother me because for one thing, I'm not a guy and I don't want to play the game. You know? But that feels like natural exclusion to me. So when they talk about these things (referring to John's games), I don't know what's going on, but I have a choice. I can find out about the stuff or I can deal with it. And that is kinda natural. Now if they were over there like "Stay away from us. Go away." To me it's like it is exclusion. That's why I don't allow that kinda of stuff. **But to me, the natural exclusion stuff- that's gonna happen. That's life.**“

- Teacher : I can't lose my authority.
  - “I don't play with them at recess. I can do that but I can only do it- I do it in bits and pieces because I can't have them looking at me that way because then it is hard for when I have to say ‘don't do that or I'll pull your clip’. I mean it's hard I don't want to pull their clip. But I have to put on this mask because it's my job. That is the hardest thing about teaching that was the hardest thing my first year. I was miserable because of that one reason.”

# Participant Interpretations

## Children: Labels, Identity, Normalcy

Charlotte: Yeah. At the beginning of the year, everyone made fun of Karen because she talks funny. But then they got to know her and they stopped. I think they thought, "What if they got picked on?" and I think they changed. But we don't get along right now. I don't think the clubs and groups are fair. I think we all should start getting along. Not just some people, but all. I don't care if they're not popular. It's not like that in our class.

- Matthew: Like Derrick. Yeah. 'Cause he is always making things up. He lies. And in P.E. today he was bossin' us around, tellin' us what to do in the tug- of- war and he pulled me away! That's why we leave people out.
- Deb: You don't think you guys could work it out?
- Matthew: No. Like with Jerrold. He copies and we don't want him around us. He acts like his older brother. That's just the way it is.
- Deb: It seems to me that sometimes you belong and sometimes you don't.
- Matthew: Yeah. That's life. It's not fair, but... (Matthew sighs and shrugs his shoulders.)

- Matthew explains as Ethan listens, “Being normal is like wanting to be perfect. Like you probably think of doing bad things but you don’t do it. That makes me feel bad because it is normal to mess up.”

“Who do you think is normal in your class?” I ask.

“David is normal,” Matthew states. (David is one of the taller boys in the class. He is quiet during schoolwork, but cracks jokes when the teacher isn't present. The teacher considers him one of the better students academically.)

Ethan interjects, “I have something to tell. Our class is normal. WE like it the way it is because we got cool people in it.”

# The Problematic: Contradictions and Tensions

- Teacher and children have different ideals, goals, and desires.
- Play experiences simultaneously provide inclusion for some and exclusion for others.
- Despite our desires for inclusion in a classroom community, we accept exclusion as a natural part of life and a natural part of play.
- Exclusion is tied to labels, fixed notions of identity, and the desire to be normal.

# Discussion

- Play does not guarantee inclusion, friendship building, nor community building.
- When community and play are discussed as contextualized experiences, the nuances of our relationships are exposed through multiple meanings and contradictions.

# Further Considerations

- What if we began to imagine play and community experiences as the starting point for exploring our ideals such as democracy, care, and inclusion, rather than the destination?
- What if we began to treat community play experiences as opportunities to make choices to change our exclusive social behavior?
- What if play was not viewed as a strategy for building community but a part of our community lives to reflect upon and study to learn more about our selves?

# Further Research

- What would community play experiences look like in different contexts?
- How would other teachers and children in other contexts understand and experience community?