Kevin: "I Gotta Get to the Market": The Development of Peer Relationships in Inclusive Early Childhood Settings

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This study describes the lived experience of Kevin, a young child with physical disabilities who is placed in an inclusive classroom, a classroom where children with and without disabilities are educated together, with extra support provided for the child with disabilities. Children with disabilities who are placed in inclusive early childhood settings tend to be rejected or neglected more than their typically developing peers and are involved more with the adults in the classroom than with their peers. Kevin's experiences are framed in the context of the current emphasis on inclusive practices. The study documents that adult assistance and curriculum activities both play an important role in either facilitating or constraining social interaction with peers. When the assigned assistant functions as the child's playmate and mostly chooses table activities, both of these seem to limit opportunities for social interaction with peers. This study also documents that, without the assistant present, the child makes independent choices such as where and with whom to play. The dramatic play area serves as a conduit for meaningful verbal and nonverbal communication with peers. At the same time, Kevin's strong desire to play in this area seems to be the impetus for physical development—he walks alone for the very first time. Suggestions are given for teacher facilitation of dramatic play.

KEY WORDS: inclusion; peer competence; early childhood education; dramatic play; verbal and nonverbal communication.

INTRODUCTION

"Will you be my friend?" This is an often-heard request among young children in early childhood classrooms. Having a friend is an important issue for young children and they like to receive an affirmative response. According to Brown, Odom and Holcombe (1996), "It is well-known that young children who have frequent and varied positive peer interactions during early and middle childhood have greater peer acceptance and more extensive networks of friends" (p. 26). However, for some children labeled special needs, being included in the classroom community as well as developing close relationships with their peers is often fraught with difficulty.

Odom, Brown, Schwartz, Zercher, and Sandall (2002) notes that all children suffer from rejection by their peers at some time during their early childhood years. He notes that in typically developing young children the rate of rejection by other children is about 10%, whereas in children labeled special needs, about 33% are rejected by their peers (pp. 63-64). Even though this means that 2/3 of these children are socially accepted, the rate of rejection is too high.

In the United States, since 1975, several laws dealing with the educational needs of children labeled special needs have been passed and amended. The most recent one is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendment (1997). The law mandates that children with special needs be entitled...
to a free appropriate public education provided in the least restrictive setting, with services that support the child's needs. This means that early intervention services are now to be provided in the child's natural environment to the greatest extent possible. This natural environment is an inclusive classroom where children with special needs are being educated together with their typically developing peers. The outcome of the movement toward early intervention and the emphasis on inclusion has been that many more children receiving specialized services are now being educated with their typically developing peers included in preschool classrooms. However, as the rejection rate of 33% shows, physically placing children labeled special needs in an inclusive environment will not necessarily assure that they and their peers will engage in social contact and social interaction experiences that lead to the development of friendships.

In this article I focus on the experiences of Kevin, a three-year old boy with motor difficulties, who was enrolled in an early childhood program that believed in inclusion and welcomed children with special needs. Besides Kevin there were two children with speech delays in the classroom. These two children attended a special speech program for part of the morning and arrived in the regular classroom around 11 o'clock in the morning. Even though Kevin did not seem to be rejected by other children, he was not connecting with them in any meaningful way.

Kevin had an assistant assigned to him who functioned as his coach, play partner, and constant companion. His experiences are similar to those reported by Odom et al. (2002), who document that children with disabilities are more involved with adults and thus spent less time with their peers (p. 33). Odom et al. (2002) also notes that the support of adults to children with motor impairments "may lead to a classroom experience that is nearly exclusively adult-driven" (p. 168). This certainly seemed to be Kevin's experience.

In this study I examined the role of the adult(s), the environment, and the curriculum, and how they seemed to affect Kevin's opportunities to have meaningful social experiences with other children, including the opportunity to initiate, develop and maintain a friendship with at least one other child in the classroom (Rizzo, 1992).

**Classroom Life: Kevin and Katie, His Assistant**

I observed weekly for 5 months in the three-year-old classroom in Sunshine Child Development Center, a suburban childcare center. In this class were 12 children, their teacher and teacher-assistant, and Katie, Kevin's assistant. Families had the option of enrolling their child for either 3 or 5 days a week. There were three children labeled special needs in the class, Kevin, Ted and Tim. Kevin was the oldest child in the group, the only one to turn four that spring. I did not further examine the reason why he was placed in a group of younger children. Kevin walked with a walker or with the help from Katie. Ted and Tim attended an on-site preschool program for children with speech and language delays and arrived in the classroom about 11:00 am when the other children had left for play outdoors or in the gym. The teacher-assistant would wait for them, usually with a few of the other children. On Thursdays, while the other children were out of the room, an occupational therapist worked with Kevin.

Kevin was a serious-looking child with probing eyes behind dark-rimmed glasses that often perched halfway down his nose. At first, seeing him sit hunched over at the table or on the floor, his head tilted and his mouth hanging slightly open, I believed him to be developmentally delayed. Then, on my third observation, I heard him ask Katie, clearly enunciating, "What sound does a rhinoceros make?" He could talk and how!

Kevin attended 3 days a week and in that respect he did not seem different from other part-timers like Elly and Charlie. But in an important way he was very different. Where other children could move around on their own, he relied on a walker or on adults—most of the time Katie—to go places. He was moved from chair to walker or sometimes held from behind under his armpits while being guided to another area in the room. He often spent a long time at one activity, most often a table activity. The following events are representative of Kevin and Katie's interactions:

Katie is squatting next to Kevin at the snack table. He has a plastic knife and is spreading peanut butter on crackers. He sits hunched over, a position he maintains for the hour that I'm there until Katie takes him for a walk.

Katie is holding Kevin under his armpits and slowly pulls/moves him towards the sink. His feet are dragging more than walking. After Katie washes his hands, they walk by the rug where Mand-y sits with a floor puzzle. Suddenly, Kevin's legs are bending slightly. I read it to mean that he wants to sit down, but Katie, almost as imperceptibly, pulls him up slightly so his legs are straight again. A short distance farther, his legs bend again.
Does he want to sit near Mandy? Katie seems to “read” Kevin’s intention also because she pulls him up again, now more firmly and says, “NO, we HAVE to walk.” They move on.

Kevin is moving in his walker over to the block area. Katie follows him and she slowly lowers him to the floor so he is in a sitting position. She then lies down sideways behind as a support. Elly is playing nearby with the farm animals and Kevin has the dinosaurs. After a while, Katie asks Elly what she’s playing with. Elly responds briefly. There is no communication between Elly and Kevin or for that matter between Kevin and any other children while I am there.

Kevin is standing at the far end of the water table. Katie sits behind him on a small chair. Kevin leans against the table to support himself. He is wearing plastic, molded ankle supports. He stands in this standing position for at least 20 minutes, filling his boat with water and moving it down and around. Three other boys stand at both sides of the table. The boys look at each other and each other’s boats several times. Kevin seems to be on the outside, literally and figuratively. He stands a bit bent over and mostly stays down into the water. The other children don’t look in his direction. A few times Kevin says something that seems to be meant for Katie for she says to him, “I can’t hear what you’re saying if I only see your back.” He then turns half around, tells her something, and then continues to push his boat around. After 5-10 minutes the boys leave and Kevin is by himself with Katie.

Kevin, Katie and Charlie are at the art activity table. The activity is to make animal prints by dipping small plastic animals in red paint and press them on a sheet of paper. Kevin seems more interested in playing with his lion and Charlie with his horse. Kevin makes noises, Katie says “What noise does the lion make?” Kevin makes a grunting sound and pushes it across the table towards Kevin. They inch the animals forward until the toys’ noses touch. “Horse,” says Charlie. Kevin studies both animals, takes his lion back and slowly twists its tail around. Charlie looks at his horse and says, “No tail.” “Your horse has no tail?” says Katie. “No tail,” repeats Charlie. Kevin is silent.

The boys return to making animal prints.

In this snapshot, Kevin and Charlie were making nonverbal connections through their animals. Kevin noticed a difference in the animals and pointed it out to Charlie by taking his lion and twisting its tail. Charlie understood what Kevin meant, because he looked at his horse and said, “No tail.” Both boys were involved in an intricate communicative exchange. Kevin’s responses to Charlie were nonverbal and it seemed to me that Charlie’s verbal responses, in the context of this interaction, were clearly directed at Kevin. However, Katie did the responding while Kevin remained silent. This seemed to break the thread of communication between the boys and they silently returned to making animal prints.

During transition times, Katie functioned as a general classroom assistant, helping the teachers to get the other children ready for outdoor play. This was the only time where she was not directly interacting with Kevin. She would place him on the rug where he sat hunched over—patiently, silently and intently observing the goings-on, often for at least 10 minutes. When Katie was finished helping the other children, she returned to help Kevin. Kevin seemed used to having to wait. I did not hear him complain once.

Classroom Life: Kevin Without Katie

In a conversation with Sally, the teacher, I mentioned that I had not seen Kevin interact much with other children. Sally agreed and commented, “You should come back in the afternoon Sonja. Kevin’s like a totally different child!” I asked her what she thought the reason was and with a big smile she answered:

His aide has gone home for the day and he is with us by himself from 3:00 to 3:30 when his mother picks him up. He is SOO different in the afternoons! He LOVES the dramatic play area and interacts with other children there. They laugh and talk, he speaks a lot and in complete sentences too. You know, yesterday afternoon he walked independently from his walker to the chair in the dramatic play area! He only took a few steps, but I haven’t seen him do that on his own initiative. That’s a BIG accomplishment for him. He REALLY wanted to go there! (Capitalized words indicate the emphasis in her voice).

When I returned at 3:00 pm, Kevin was sitting at the snack table with Sally, finishing his snack. He peered over his glasses at Sally and proclaimed in a firm voice, “I gotta get to the market.” “What are you gonna buy?” asked Sally. “Applesauce with bananas,” said Kevin. Sally helped him from his chair to his walker and he slowly made his way across the room to the dramatic play area, maneuvering by Eddy doing a puzzle on the rug. Kevin had an excellent grasp of how to utilize his walker in the confined space and expertly maneuvered around Eddy. Sally brought his special wooden chair with side supports over to the table in the dramatic play area and after he lowered himself onto it, she left the area. I wondered why she did not encourage him to
repeat his accomplishment of walking alone from the walker to the chair, as he had done the day before, especially since she had noted it as a real accomplishment.

Children who want to participate in socio-dramatic play need to find ways to enter the play. They develop strategies in learning what the play is about and find a way to join in (Corsaro, 1997; Fernie, Kantor, & Whaley, 1995; Van Hoorn, Nourodt, Scales, & Alward, 2003).

Kevin joined Bridget, Elly and Kurt’s play-in-progress. They were running back and forth, taking things out of the refrigerator and putting them in pots and pans on the stove. In the following entries Kevin tries offerings of food as a bid for entry into the play. He also attempts to use me as his “helper,” a role from which I manage to extricate myself by enlisting Elly:

How ‘bout a taco?
Kevin looks at the basket with plastic food, then at Bridget. Elly and Kurt who are near the kitchen cabinets. He holds the basket up for a few seconds and says, “Here.” The others don’t seem to notice. Kevin puts the basket back on the table. “How ‘bout a taco, here’s a taco,” he offers: digging a plastic taco out of the basket. No response. “How ‘bout applesauce,” he tries next. Again, he gets no response. The others are very busy taking things out of the refrigerator and putting it in pots and pans on the stove. They have their backs to him. Kevin takes what looks like a plastic omelet out of the basket and holds it up. “Here, a pancake.” It falls out of his hand onto the floor. He cannot bend over sideways because of the chair’s armrests. Or maybe he cannot bend sideways in any case? Sally mentioned earlier that she was afraid he’d topple out of a regular chair.

He looks at me and says, “My pancake. Can you pick it up?” Elly is nearby and I ask her. “Elly, Kevin wants to ask you something.” Elly looks at me, and then walks over to Kevin who says, “I dropped my pancake.” He points his hand down and gazes from Elly to the object. Elly quickly bends down, picks it up and hands it to him. He smiles at her, with his head tilted slightly and his glasses perched halfway down his nose. When Elly walks away, Kevin waves at her and says, “Bye Elly.” Now all three children, Bridget, Elly and Kurt are running by and around Kevin, yelling “bye bye” to each other.

When Elly stops by the table, Kevin says, “Here Elly,” and gives her some plastic flowers that are on the table. She says “thank you” and runs off with them. A few steps away she looks down and picks up several pieces of play money from the floor, walks back to Kevin, hands him a few pieces and says, “Here Kevin.” She keeps the rest herself. He accepts them with a smile. She says something and Kevin responds with, “What?” She walks closer to him, looks him straight in his eyes and says, “I like that you like that too.” Kevin smiles and nods as she runs off again. He says to himself, “I’ll have fun at the market. Where’s my candy?” A few minutes later Elly is standing next to him again. “This is my ponytail,” she says, turning sideways. Kevin immediately cranes his neck to look around her at the back of her head. “Where’s your ponytail now?” he inquires. “Here it is,” she says, turning and grasping some hair on the back of her head with her hand.

Kevin’s initial comment to Elly, “I dropped my pancake,” followed by pointing and gazing at the object on the floor—a nonverbal request which involved establishing eye contact—was an important form of communication. From infancy, children learn to recognize and use this point-and-gaze technique to establish what is called joint attention (Bennett, 1993, Bretherton, 1991). Elly quickly understood and responded to both Kevin’s verbal and nonverbal requests.

I wondered whether Kevin gave her the plastic flowers as a thank you. If that were the case, it looked as if Elly reciprocated and extended the interaction by bringing him some of the money. Her empathetic comment, “I like that you like that too,” indicates that she had some understanding of his feelings. For several minutes they both created a framework of mutual interest and shared understanding (Bretherton, 1991; Goncu, 1993).

**DISCUSSION**

This half hour—and my 19th observation—was the first time where I observed Kevin in self-initiated social play with other children. I was deeply struck that in almost 5 months of observations in the morning, I had not seen him engage with other children in this meaningful way. Sally’s comment about Kevin’s walking alone for the first time the day before was significant: “That was a BIG accomplishment. He REALLY wanted to be there.” According to Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory (1978), adults and peers as well as the environment play an important role in enhancing the child’s cognitive and emotional development. He suggests that “....what is in the zone of proximal development today will be the actual level tomorrow—that is, what a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow” (p. 87).
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For Kevin however, the kind of assistance Katie provided him with “today” did not seem to help him make physical progress in her presence. The progress he did make occurred in her absence, in the socio-dramatic play area, where she had not taken him. Vygotsky believes that play promotes social and cognitive development in children. He argues that in play a child always behaves in advance of her/his daily behavior; ‘...play contains all the developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development’ (Bodrova & Leong, 1996, p. 102). I venture that for Kevin, the desire to play in the dramatic play area, together with the opportunity to do so, may have given him the impetus to walk alone for the first time because, as Sally stated so succinctly, “He REALLY wanted to get there.”

Thus, in a way the environment, in this case the socio-dramatic play area and the curriculum which offered the opportunity to engage in self-initiated pretend play, seemed to have created a Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) for Kevin—a window of opportunity for physical as well as socio-emotional development. I found it curious that Sally, Kevin’s teacher, who was very aware and excited about the difference in Kevin’s behavior between the morning and the afternoon, and who was convinced that his motivation to play in the dramatic play area was a major reason for this progress, did not help to create similar opportunities for Kevin to play in this area in the mornings. For Kevin, participation in socio-dramatic play seemed to play a pivotal role in building connections with other children, and it likely contributed to his physical progress as well.

As I described earlier in the anecdotes, Kevin’s communicative exchanges in the morning were mostly limited to exchanges with his assistant during table activities. It seemed that in this classroom, when children were participating in table activities such as painting, making collages, doing constructions or puzzles, they focused on their interactions with the materials and engaged in few reciprocal exchanges with their peers. However, in the block and the dramatic play areas they had opportunities to create elaborate, meaningful, pretend play themes with others, communicate verbally and nonverbally, negotiate and reconcile differences of opinions, and as a result develop social competence, including the development of friendships.

Thus, it seems that curriculum activities can either facilitate or constrain peer interactions, with table activities inviting less social interaction and block and dramatic play activities inviting more social interaction. This result is corroborated by others (Kemple, 2004; Kemple, Dungan, & Strangis, 2002; Kontos, Burchinal, Howes, Wisseh, & Galinsky, 2002; Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997; Petrakos & Howe, 1996).

In the play episodes of the other children in the class I observed extensive social interaction and communication. They had disagreements, misunderstandings, went on shopping trips, fed each other pizza, put babies and themselves to sleep, talked together on the telephone, barked like dogs and were fed plastic chicken legs, meowed like cats and were petted, went fishing and pretended to catch fish. Communicative exchanges in socio-dramatic play and other child-initiated activities that were planned and carried out by the children themselves, showed a deep and rich complexity. Thus, Kevin, because he rarely participated in these events, missed out on important opportunities to develop social competence and friendships with other children.

Children need to be actively engaged with each other to develop social competence. This includes learning about social rules which are transmitted and facilitated by adults but are also constructed by the children in the course of social interactions (Smetana, 1993). As children amass event knowledge early on in daily life, over time, they develop a repertoire of everyday experiences called scripts, such as going shopping, cooking dinner, or going to bed. They then bring their own representations of these social and cultural experiences to their interactions with other children. In these themes children enter with some shared symbols and implicit rules and learn to make sense of their world (Fromberg, 1992; Hudson, 1993).

According to Light (1993), “Children are initiated into the practices and traditions of their own social group, and it is through these very particular social experiences that they acquire the cognitive tools they need for participating in a wider society” (p. 198). Brown et al. (1996) note that, “young children who have frequent and varied positive peer interactions during early and middle childhood have greater peer acceptance and more extensive networks of friends,” and “... social contact and social interaction were critical factors in determining friendships” (p. 26).

Since children’s most successful and sustained social interactions and thus opportunities to learn from these interactions appear to be in creative
self-initiated play in blocks and socio-dramatic play more than in individual or group table activities, early childhood educators in inclusive settings need to consciously create opportunities for all children, including children labeled special needs to engage in this type of play (Kemple, 2004; Kemple, Duncan & Strangis, 2002; Kostelnik, Onaga, Rohde, & Whiren, 2002). Kemple points out that the teacher's involvement is of a sensitive nature. Too much teacher involvement may prevent the child from making social connections with other children; too little involvement may leave the child isolated.

Teachers take on different roles in play, from helping children initiate or enter play with others, to helping to maintain and/or extend play interactions. In each of these instances teachers need to be careful observers of children and interactions and engage in what I would call 'the dance of lightly stepping in and lightly stepping out' of the play. It is important for teachers in inclusive settings to collaborate with other professionals in adapting the individual child's Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals and objectives into an as natural context as possible. Horn, Lieber, Sandall, Schwartz, and Wolery (2002) developed 'embedded learning opportunities' (ELO). They write that, "children can practice the skills stated in the IEP objectives in natural activities and routines occurring in the class" (p. 51). In Kevin's case the teacher might meet with Kevin's parents, the physical therapy teacher, and the teacher-assistant, and describe the importance of social skills development and the development of self-efficacy for Kevin in conjunction with the physical goals in the IEP. Together, they might think of opportunities for Kevin to engage in social interactions with his peers that include physical movement.

For further reading and more detailed guidance on children's play and the development of young children's peer competence in inclusive early childhood settings, and teachers' roles in facilitating social competence, I suggest Play at the center of the curriculum (Van Hoorn, et al, 2003) and Let's be friends (Kemple, 2004). I would like to conclude with a comment by Wise and Glass (2000), authors of, Working with Hannah, a Special Girl in a Mainstream School. They note that Hannah, a Down Syndrome child, "had many friends but, like all young children, she had some best friends." This is what we wish for all our children, with or without disabilities.

REFERENCES


