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## Factors Affecting the Social Experiences of Students in Elementary Physical Education Classes

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There is a lack of research examining the social experiences of students with and without disabilities in regular physical education classes. Little is known, from the perspective of the student, about factors that affect his or her social experience while taking part in integrated physical education. This investigation examined the factors that have a positive and a negative effect on the social experiences of 12 elementary students who were thriving, struggling, or had disabilities in an integrated kindergarten and an integrated fourth-grade physical education class. This study utilized qualitative data collection methods that included observations and interviews with students and staff. Four factors were identified: (a) physical education teachers, (b) social substance of activities, (c) cultures, and (d) social skills of students. The physical education teacher factor was the only one found to have a positive influence on the social experiences of all students, whereas the other three factors differentially affected the social experiences among the 12 students.

**Key Words:** students with and without disabilities, interactions

In schools across the country, people from diverse backgrounds with widely varying physical and cognitive abilities are being taught physical education in the same gymnasium. Although there are some segregated programs, the movement toward including people with disabilities in regular physical education classes is becoming more and more prevalent (Block & Krebs, 1992; DePauw, 1996). While the physical and health benefits of inclusive physical education have been well documented (Graham, Holt/Hale, & Parker, 2001; Sherrill, 1998), recent research has suggested that the inclusive gymnasium can be an excellent venue in which to foster *social* competence (Ennis, 1994a, 1994b; Hellison, 1995; Hodges-Kulinna, 2000; Sharpe, Crider, Vyhldal, & Brown, 1996). Indeed, American, Canadian,

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and Australian educational systems currently emphasize the development of social competence in their national physical education curricula. Although improved social development is an anticipated outcome of integrating students with disabilities (Block, 1994; Ellery, Hawkinson, & Stewart, 2000), these positive changes are not an automatic consequence of placing students with and without disabilities in the same physical space. Rather, social skills must be systematically taught and interactions must be facilitated among students.

A well regarded approach to teaching social skills in the gymnasium to typically developing students, as well as those with identifiable disabilities, is Hellison's (1996, 1995) Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model. With this model, students learn to take responsibility for their own behaviors and choices and, more important, they learn that they have a social responsibility to be sensitive to the rights and feelings of their peers. Indeed, Siedentop and Tannehill (2000) have observed that respect for others is a cornerstone of the program. Graham et al. (2001) note that the use of the TPSR model requires a shift in both perspective and action in that the curricular focus is on the development of personal and social responsibility, with physical activity being the vehicle.

Although Hellison's approach holds great promise for teaching social responsibility in the gymnasium, some students continue to have negative social experiences in physical education. Therefore it is imperative that the underlying factors that influence, for better or worse, the social experiences of children be identified. A related question is whether the identified factors differ depending on whether or not the student has an identifiable disability.

By their nature, educational environments are multifaceted and complex. Clearly, the environment becomes even more complex as students with disparate motor, intellectual, and social abilities are educated in the same gymnasium. The effects of this complexity on diverse learners have been directly addressed in the writings of Thelen (1989, 1995) and DePauw and Goc-Karp (1992). These authors have eloquently argued that the contextual nature of teaching/learning cannot be ignored in physical education. The teaching/learning process for students is affected by the interaction of several variables: teacher, student, teaching and learning styles, management, feedback, attitude, class size/environment, resources, equipment, learning climate, class format, structure, and organization.

In order to understand how and *what* students are learning, the interaction of these variables must be clearly examined and understood. Thelen, viewing behavior change from an ecological perspective, has spoken of the need to view development—motoric, cognitive, and social—as a dynamic process. That is, at any given point the behavior observed occurs because of the individual characteristics of the student, the environment, and the task to be accomplished. These three components are dynamic in the sense that each may be more or less stable over time. For their part, DePauw and Goc-Karp (1992) view the teacher/learner process in a broader societal context in which forces such as politics, economics, social morals, cultural values, legal mandates, and traditions influence attitudes, beliefs, expectations, and motivations of teachers and pupils, thus impacting the learning environment.

In examining the social experience of elementary-age students with and without disabilities in physical education, the present investigation was influenced by these perspectives. The purpose of the present study was to single out factors that have a positive and/or a negative effect on the social experiences of students in

regular elementary physical education classes who were identified as thriving, struggling, or as having a disability. A related question examined whether the identified factors affected these groups of students differently.

## Methods

### *Participants and Setting*

A purposeful sampling strategy was used in this study. Particular settings, persons, and events were deliberately selected because of the comprehensive information they provided (Maxwell, 1998). By using this sampling strategy we were able to capture the heterogeneity of the students, and the findings adequately represented a range of children in the gymnasium.

*School District/School.* The research took place at Woodside Elementary School, located in a wooded area on the northwest edge of Bristol, a town of 24,000. Woodside Elementary, one of 10 elementary schools in the Bristol public school district, served 382 students, grades K–6. All the children at Woodside Elementary School participated in integrated physical education classes with a certified physical education specialist two times a week for 30 minutes. A classroom teacher provided one additional physical education class.

*Physical Education Teachers.* Two female physical education teachers participated in this study; they were selected because of their adherence to what is generally accepted as good teaching (Graham et al., 2001). A second reason related to their delivery of the adapted physical education services; specifically, they used a team teaching approach for both regular and adapted physical education. The teachers alternated responsibilities between being the lead teacher and the adapted teacher. The rotation depended on the skills or activities being taught. Regarding planning, one teacher was responsible for the assessments and individual education plans while the other was responsible for all the planning including but not limited to the modification of lessons. This team teaching relationship was based on mutual respect and on each teacher's strengths and preferences. A complete description of the teachers and school is reported elsewhere (Suomi, 2000/2001).

*Grade Levels.* Kindergarten and fourth grade were chosen primarily because each grade included two children with similar special education labels—cognitively disabled (CD) and learning disabled (LD). As well, the two grade levels had students with a wide range of physical and social skills.

*Students.* Six children in kindergarten (3 girls, 3 boys) and six children in Grade 4 (3 girls, 3 boys) participated in this study. It should be noted that the selection process was somewhat subjective. Skill tests were not used, as the testing procedures might have affected the participants' answers to the interview questions. Rather, participants were chosen based on input from the two physical education teachers who participated in this study.

At each grade level the six children were placed into one of three groups. The first group included children who were thriving. That is, according to the two physical education teachers, they were skilled in terms of motor development, physical fitness, and social ability. These students were considered successful movers and were faster and stronger than many of their peers. Socially they were popular.

The second group included students who were struggling and somewhat less skilled in terms of motor development, physical fitness, and social skills. These students had immature or uncoordinated patterns in motor skills such as running, skipping, hopping, throwing, catching, and kicking. As well, they were ineffective in their play with peers and, according to their teachers, were not popular. These students did not meet the eligibility requirement for adapted physical education services.

The third group included students who had a learning disability or a mild cognitive disability. They were selected based on their participation in regular physical education classes with an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Adapted physical education services in regular physical education were required. In this study, the students with learning disabilities received adapted physical education services because of deficits in perceptual motor skills and inappropriate social skills. Students with cognitive disabilities received adapted physical education services to address a combination of gross motor delay, a lack of social and communication skills, and an inability to understand game formations, rules, and strategies.

Students selected ranged from those who were at a high level of performance regarding physical and social skills to those who received adapted physical education services because of difficulties with physical and social skills. Given this range, factors affecting the social experiences of students with disparate physical and social skills could be identified, compared, and contrasted.

### *Data Collection*

*Observations.* Fine and Sandstrom (1988) suggest a need "for observational and in-depth research with children to learn more about their culture (p. 9)." The primary investigator observed the six kindergarteners and six fourth-graders over a 10-week period. There were 18 observations for each grade level, with each observation lasting 30 minutes. At the beginning of the study the researcher discussed the project with each class, noting that she was a student just like them and had a homework assignment about children and their gym classes.

Based on pilot data, the primary investigator decided to watch one student per class in two consecutive classes. During the first observation the researcher, as a nonparticipant observer, sat unobtrusively and took anecdotal notes on a given student and the class activities. During the second observation she was a participant observer (Yin, 1998) attempting to get a sense of what this student was experiencing socially (feelings, thoughts, behaviors, gestures, and words). During each observation the researcher took fieldnotes, a running account of events being observed. This account included direct observations as well as her personal impressions and thoughts. At the end of the day she transcribed the fieldnotes into a word processing program.

*Student Interviews.* The success of any qualitative research project depends on the researcher's ability to gain a clear understanding of the knowledge that individuals use to make sense of their world (Hatch, 1990). This is particularly true when investigating the world of children. Each student was interviewed for 15 to 25 minutes. These interviews took place after the informal and formal observations were completed, as it was felt by now that trust had been established. Interviews took place in a small office adjacent to the gymnasium with the student and the researcher sitting on the floor. All interviews were individually taped and tran-

scribed for later analysis. Although the students knew they were being recorded, this seemed to have little influence on how they answered the questions.

The interviews began with some small talk followed by a reminder that the researcher was completing a homework assignment about what gym is like from the perspective of the student. Each child was then prompted with, "Tell me about your gym classes." Other questions that were used to guide the students included "What did you think about the gym classes and the teachers?" "Think about some of the good experiences and/or bad experiences that you have had in gym." "What have you learned in gym?" "What do you like/dislike about gym?" and "Tell me who are your friends while in gym." Open-ended questions were used to gain insight about the factors affecting the children's social experiences.

*Focus Group Interviews.* The primary investigator used the focus group technique (Patton, 1990) to interact with the students of the same gender and grade regarding their social experiences in physical education classes. DeVault (1990), Lather (1988), and Stacey (1988) note that focus groups should be broken down by gender as same-gender participants get to hear responses free from dominance by the opposite gender. All students from the original pool of participants took part in the focus group interviews. The focus groups, which included six kindergarteners (3 M, 3 F) and six fourth-graders (3 M, 3 F), met after the individual interviews were completed and offered an opportunity for the students to reflect on their answers to earlier questions and to make additional comments.

*Physical Education Teacher Interviews.* A 30-minute interview was conducted with each of the two physical education teachers. At the beginning of the interview the teacher was asked to share information about her career path, her views about the physical education program, what a typical day entailed, and her educational philosophy. Each teacher then answered the question, "In your opinion, what do you think are the factors that affect the social experiences of students in physical education?" These interviews were also recorded and transcribed for later analysis. Once the interview was transcribed, the teacher reviewed it for accuracy.

### *Data Analysis*

In order to refine the data and elucidate the researcher's assumptions, the investigator carefully coded the data. This coding process is a crucial point in data analysis for qualitative studies (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Two sources of data, the 150 pages of fieldnotes and the transcribed interviews, were color coded and initially grouped under 27 categories during the analysis process. At this point data from all sources were reexamined in an attempt to verify, eliminate, modify, or combine the categories. As data analysis was continuously conducted, these categories were synthesized and organized into four major factors. The factors that emerged were from real events in integrated physical education classes at Woodside Elementary School.

The procedures that were used to assure trustworthiness included persistent observation, prolonged engagement, triangulation, and debriefing (Haworth & Conrad, 1997). The investigator discussed the interviews and observations of the children with a dissertation committee chairperson, who served as the "confirmability" auditor, to refrain from interpreting children's statements throughout the data collection and analysis process (Suomi, 2000/2001). These discussions

also helped keep the investigator focused, clarified working hypotheses, and tested emerging factors.

## Results

Through qualitative data analysis, four factors were determined to affect the social experiences of the 12 students: (a) the teachers, (b) the social substance of activities, (c) the cultures, and (d) the social skills of students. These factors applied to students who were identified as thriving, or struggling, or with disabilities.

### Teachers

This factor included (a) philosophy, (b) the curriculum, and (c) caring.

*Philosophy.* A teaching philosophy can be viewed as a system of values and beliefs that guides behavior (Graham et al., 2001). The two teachers studied had similar philosophies regarding physical education. They viewed winning or losing as relatively unimportant. Their goal was to create a noncompetitive environment in which students with a wide range of abilities could learn and enjoy movement. One physical education teacher said,

The focus in our physical education classes is not to stress competition, but to emphasize getting along with everyone, teamwork, and collaboration. We try not to be very competitive... I think it's really important especially at the elementary level to keep students active and happy. Because if children don't like gym now, then in the future as adults there will be a lack of exercise participation and appreciation. So we are not very competitive. Some other elementary physical education teachers might focus more on this team wins and this team doesn't. We don't. Our rule on winning is that if you play the game right, you are a winner. We want the students to have fun.

Most activities were either individual or cooperative. Only one of the 18 fourth-grade classes observed included a competitive activity. Interviews with the 12 students reflected the fact that this environment was basically noncompetitive. All 12 students, regardless of grouping, said they enjoyed coming to gym because it was fun and a time to learn. Some noted that they liked many individual and noncompetitive activities such as running, gymnastics, and cooperative games. Five students pointed to what they learned motorically, cognitively, and socially while in the gym.

Ryan, a thriving kindergartener, said, "I like gym a lot because we run a lot and it makes me feel good."

Linda, a struggling kindergartener, said, "I like everything. I like doing things with my muscles. I don't like the feeling part but I like to work with my muscles."

Joshua, a thriving fourth-grader, said, "I like to run. I am the fastest kid in my class. It's fun to run because I like to get to exercise. I have learned to share in games, how to use equipment safely and that winning is not important, like what the teacher says, as long as we tried hard."

Jenny, another thriving fourth-grader, said, "We do a lot of running which is good for our hearts. It gives us some energy to do a lot of other activities like gymnastics... We get to play games. When we do, we are having fun and learning how to get along with one another."

Kelly, a struggling fourth-grader, said, "The gym classes are really fun because we do activities that make us healthy and our bones really strong and tough."

These data support the premise that the children learned in an atmosphere that minimized competition and in which physical activity provided enjoyment, self-expression, and positive social experiences (NASPE, 1995). Through observations and interviews, it appears that minimizing the competition did not detract from the enjoyment these students experienced. Because competition was minimized, there were few arguments about who won or lost and students rarely claimed that others were cheating or playing unfairly. The "win at all costs" attitude was nonexistent. A clear benefit of this cooperative environment was that the 12 students in this study truly liked coming to the gym. They were being taught to view activities from a health and cooperation perspective and thus appeared to be drawn to physical activity. Students did not seem to mind that they did not compete against each other.

The philosophy of the physical education teachers also included the acceptance and valuing of students with a wide range of abilities. Both were in favor of including students with disabilities in regular physical education classes. According to one of the teachers.

I like the range of abilities because it keeps things interesting. Years ago when I first taught in the high school, they had phase learning... So it is a much better situation to have a wide range. It takes care of those students in the middle like the little wallflower people. These are the ones in the middle that can kind of get lost. So, when you have a wide range of different abilities, these students can think, "Well, I am OK." Everyone is different and it doesn't matter. I see a lot of children doing things with the special education students like helping them tie their shoes or whatever... They are learning they can play with us and we still can have fun. So I think it's real neat to have a wide range of abilities.

Through the teachers' provision of a learning environment that minimized competition and accepted students with a wide range of abilities, the social experiences of the 12 students in this study were enhanced. The social climate of this noncompetitive environment was fun and safe. The gymnasium was a place to learn motor skills, games, to exercise the body, and to share as well as get along with others. This environment, in the words of one teacher, "did not tolerate put-downs, name calling, or making fun of others."

*Curriculum.* A well-designed elementary physical education curriculum has an obvious scope and sequence based on goals and objectives that are appropriate for all children. It should include a balance of skills, concepts, games, gymnastics, rhythms, and dance experiences designed to enhance the cognitive, motor, affective, and physical fitness development of every child (Graham et al., 2001). The physical education teachers at Woodside Elementary School followed a K-6 physical education curriculum model that was developmentally and instructionally appropriate. According to one of the physical education teachers,

We at Woodside Elementary follow this curriculum... We are just not into a "throw out the ball mentality"... Here the students are actually going through a sequential program of learning skills which will eventually be used in sport activities.



Curricular goals that addressed the attitudes and behaviors related to a positive social experience included the teaching of good sportsmanship, cooperation and teamwork, appreciation for regular physical activity, emotional control, and leadership skills. Another important element of the physical education curriculum was the infusion of Hellison's TPSR model (1995). Hellison's model was implemented not only in the gymnasium but across the school as well. One of the physical education teachers said,

The school focus has been the three R's. This has been happening for the last 5 years at this building—responsibility, reliability, and respect. It's something we focus on every year, and every month a different part is highlighted...It seems like we spend a lot of time teaching how to get along with others.

One physical education teacher explained how the TPSR model was used:

The Hellison approach is something every teacher at this school uses a little different in their classrooms... In our gym, each child is assigned, at the beginning of the school year, a certain number 1 to 25 [depending on the number of students in a class]. At the end of each class, three numbers are pulled from the cup. Whichever student that is, his or her behavior is discussed and assigned a number 1, 2, or 3 [being the best]... The highest total of points per class is 9. The total points of these three students then go on a chart. When the class receives 115 points, then the entire class is rewarded with a free day... Children are learning to be responsible and to be on their best behavior and just be a good example for everyone else.

Kelly, a fourth-grader identified as struggling, shared this about the number-picking strategy and about behaving in a socially appropriate fashion during physical education:

It is kind of cool how the teachers made the attendance lines and we have certain places to sit. They pick numbers, which I think is fair too. Then each student that is chosen either gets a 1, 2, or 3 based on how he or she acted. I think that is fair because we should all act the right way when we are in gym.

It was evident that the physical education curriculum used in this program was a well-thought-out, thorough sequential plan that was child-centered, developmentally appropriate, and that infused social responsibility.

*Caring.* During the observation period at Woodside Elementary, both physical education teachers created a humanistic and positive learning environment. This environment was directly observed and elaborated upon during the teacher interviews. The teachers smiled frequently, gave students a pat on the back and a high-five, made strong efforts to learn students' names, and talked with students before and after class, asking what they did at home or what they did in the classroom. They acknowledged individual accomplishments and provided frequent positive feedback. When corrective feedback was given, it was done in a constructive fashion. Throughout the observation period, the teachers remained upbeat, smiling, and seemed to enjoy what they were doing.

When the students were asked, "Tell me about your teachers and what you like about them," all 12 students used the word "nice." Jenny, a thriving fourth-grader, said,

They are really nice. They teach us things and are great at everything. I'm proud of them because they do an awesome job... I just hope that they stay teaching here because this is a great school and they are wonderful gym teachers.

The classes included a great deal of laughing, smiling, and friendly chatter. There was no argumentative talk between the students and teachers. This caring teaching approach had a positive effect in terms of the social relationships between teachers and students in this study. According to one physical education teacher,

We try to make our environment a little more social at times. Sometimes at the beginning of classes we will ask the students if there is anything that they want to discuss or share... talking with the children just gives me the warm fuzzies, just a real neat feeling. It's hard to have a bad day when teaching elementary students.

To summarize, the teachers' philosophy, curriculum, and caring approach had a positive effect on the social experiences of all 12 students. Using a developmentally appropriate curriculum that minimized competition while striving to make the classes fun and inclusive seemed to have a positive effect on the social experiences of all students—whether they were thriving, struggling, or had disabilities. The teachers were excited about being in the gym, and their friendly and caring personalities, along with their curriculum, created a positive physical and social learning environment. To quote Martha Graham, "Great dancers are not great because of their technique, they are great because of their passion" (Graham et al., 2001). These two teachers had great technique and great passion.

### *Social Substance of Activities*

The social substance of activities included obvious positive social situations and hidden negative social situations.

*Obvious Positive Social Situations.* These occurred when the teachers taught specific social skills within activities (e.g., turn-taking or sharing) or provided positive feedback to the students regarding prosocial behaviors (e.g., the use of kind words, proper use of equipment, and helping others). Following are some examples of positive feedback:

I really saw some nice working together, sharing, and some wonderful underhand throws." "I saw some nice tagging, no shoving or pushing." "What great teamwork during the scooter activity. I saw some good pulling. I saw no one fall off the carpet-square, being pulled hard but not too hard." "I saw some great galloping—step together and no collisions, what a nice job."

Observational data indicated that the teachers provided positive feedback across all groups. They always took time to discuss the social behaviors of specific students at the end of each class.

*Hidden Negative Social Situations.* These refer to negative situations and/or interactions between students that the teachers were unaware of. Three games, observed in the kindergarten class, had hidden negative social consequences for one student who was struggling and another student with a disability. The games were Stuck-in-the-Mud, Toilet Tag, and Duck Duck Goose.

During Stuck-in-the-Mud, if a student was tagged, he or she became immobile until another student crawled under his or her legs. One of the struggling students stood for a minute before a peer came to get her unstuck from the mud. To move again in the game of Toilet Tag, the student's arm had to be flushed. For one student with a disability, the primary investigator "flushed her toilet" because she was kneeling with her arm out for approximately one minute. It appeared that students were purposely avoiding her as they would run toward her and then quickly dodge and change directions. After Toilet Tag, the student with a disability said, "No one picked me." The struggling student who was ignored during Stuck-in-the-Mud said during the interview, "I feel like no one likes me because I get tagged and then I don't move." During Duck Duck Goose, an activity students chose to do on a free-choice day, the same student was not chosen at all. When asked about this during the interview, she said, "I felt left out. I didn't get a turn to run. It made me sad."

These are examples of activities that created feelings of exclusion for two kindergarteners, thereby negatively affecting their social experiences. The teachers seemed unaware of these negative feelings, as the children were not given a chance to share or reflect on their feelings in either the kindergarten or fourth grade classes. For instance, during Prison Ball in fourth grade, a thriving student jumped in front of a student with a disability to get the ball. The latter was asked during the interview how that incident made him feel. "I was mad," he responded.

Another example of a hidden negative social situation was when the kindergarteners lined up at the door. The student with the disability was the line leader and was told by her teacher to go to the door with two peers she had worked with in class. Many peers surreptitiously moved away, as they were reluctant to stand next to her. This went unnoticed by the physical education teachers as they were putting equipment away and talking about the next class.

To summarize, social skills were overtly taught by both teachers, and positive feedback regarding social behaviors was given across groups. However, at times both teachers were unaware of students being left out. Usually these students were either struggling or had a disability. Negative interactions could have been missed because of the large number of students, of all abilities, being educated in a large space. As noted, the children were not given time to reflect upon their feelings. Although positive social skills were taught and reinforced, the majority of the curriculum emphasized the learning of motor skills and physical fitness. If students were in the struggling or disability group, hidden negative social situations that the teachers were unaware of negatively affected their social experiences.

### *Cultures*

When the physical education teachers divided children into small groups to practice skills, they let students choose who they wanted to work with. During the observation period it became clear that cultures quickly formed, each with an identifiable character. Through observation and individual student interviews, three cultures were identified and are referred to as the popular, the comfort zone, and the leftovers.

*Popular.* The common element for this culture was that these students could be with anyone they wanted and were regularly sought out by classmates. They

had many friends and rarely experienced rejection. When asked during interviews to talk about friends and the people they chose to be with, this is how the two thriving fourth-graders replied:

Joshua said, "My friends are just about everybody. I would choose partners that I know a lot about." Jenny said, "Basically I would work with anyone in the class. I like mostly working with my sister and my friend Jackie in the gym. They are really great friends because we help each other and we stick together."

During the interviews these students were asked to share their thoughts about the students with disabilities and whether they would be partners with them. Jenny confided.

Well, basically Gail is kind of a little cuckoo because she always says peekaboo and stuff like that. She doesn't pay attention and goofs around a lot... it seems like she doesn't want to do things we do and she gets too crazy and wild sometime... I would be a partner with Gail only if the teacher asked me.

All thriving students, both kindergarteners and fourth-graders, were part of this popular culture. When it was time to choose people to work with, others readily sought out these students. The primary investigator frequently observed a student silently gesturing toward a thriving student and then back to him/herself as a way of saying, "You and I will be partners."

*Comfort Zone.* Some students found comfort being with peers who were similar to them because of past educational experiences or nationality. In kindergarten, one student who was a struggler and a student with a disability sought each other out when it came time to choose a partner, as they had been classmates in the early childhood program. Students in the comfort zone did not seek out other students unless their preferred partner was absent. When this happened, the student generally stood alone, with no one approaching. When asked to name their friends, all four students with disabilities replied with the names of other students with disabilities. No other classmates were mentioned.

In the fourth-grade class, when students were given the opportunity to choose partners, a fourth-grade struggling girl of Hmong descent generally selected another female Hmong student. In this case nationality created a comfort zone. During the observation period this student was never approached by her other classmates. Interestingly, this struggling student chose at times to work with an Asian student with a disability rather than a student who was more skilled. She shared why she liked being partners with this student:

She is funny and she makes me ticklish. She makes me laugh a lot. I like doing things with her and I can help her.

*Leftovers.* This culture was evident at both grade levels and only included the strugglers and the students with disabilities. When the teacher had students find partners, most students in both classes would eagerly and easily do so. This was not the case for the strugglers and students with disabilities. These students hesitantly approached others and never sought out the students who were highly skilled. At times these students would not seek a partner but instead stood in one place and waited to see if someone would come toward them. Usually no one came. The teacher would then help them find partners.

Once when the teacher told the kindergarteners to find a partner by the count of 5, a student with a disability said loudly and frantically, "Who is going to be my partner, who is going to be my partner?" Eventually the teacher came over to this student with another child, a struggler who did not have a partner, and paired them.

Another time when most of the students had found partners, one kindergartener had not. She then became part of the leftover culture by default, as the only other student left was one with a disability. She said, "I don't want her to be my partner. She tries to hug me." The teacher spoke privately to this student about her comment. These two students then worked as partners. Initially the student without a disability showed her displeasure by frowning and stomping her feet. Eventually both students were smiling and laughing. The teachers shared these thoughts:

This kindergarten class is challenging because there are students who do not want to be partners with the students with disabilities. This stems from the classroom environment because even though they are part of the regular classroom, they tend to work in a small group away from the large group.

The character of this leftover culture was based on what it looked like when the teachers gave the children an opportunity to choose who they wanted to be with. At both grade levels, being leftover occurred uniquely to students who were struggling and to those with disabilities.

Most of the time students could choose who they wanted to be with, thus providing ample chances for decision-making (Graham et al., 2001). For students with disabilities and the strugglers in both grades, this approach proved problematic. Those with disabilities were unable to find a partner as quickly as everyone else, thus often creating some anxiety for them. Eventually the teacher would pair them with other struggling students. They were never paired with the popular students, nor did the popular students ever seek them out. The class organization did not encourage partnering or interacting with someone who was different. Rather, it created subcultures of children. The social experience of students clearly varied depending upon their social "cultural" grouping.

### *Social Skills of Students*

It became evident that one's social skills either positively or negatively affected his or her social relationships and interactions with others. Based on the observational data and individual and group interviews, the social skill factor included being caring, mean-spirited, and different.

*Caring.* Two thriving fourth-graders demonstrated caring by assisting students with disabilities. Joshua, the thriving student, shared this information about assisting others:

When we were playing the Prison Ball game, I saw that Gail [student with a disability] was not getting a ball to throw, others would jump in front of her to get the ball. So I decided that if a ball came to me I would give it to her. I don't like seeing people doing practically nothing. I learned to be helpful and nice from my parents. Plus, the gym teachers want us to share and help others.

Another example of caring was demonstrated by Kelly, a struggling fourth-grader who assisted the other student with a disability:

Steve has troubles a lot, so I try to help him. I helped him in gym when his hearing aids weren't working by letting him know it was his turn to get checked off by the teachers. I don't mind helping him. It's nice to help him. I have learned that if you help people, they will help you. I learned it from my mom being nice and helpful.

In these examples, two fourth-graders in different groups demonstrated caring and helpful behavior with students with disabilities. From the interviews, the positive influence of their parents and teachers was evident.

*Mean-spirited.* Conversely, some students in the thriving group were observed acting in a mean-spirited way toward a student with a disability. During the beginning class discussion, Roger, a thriving kindergartener, said softly to a girl with a disability, so the teacher wouldn't notice, "kiss me, kiss me." The student with the disability crawled over to Roger and tried to kiss him. The teacher intervened and the student with a disability was reprimanded. This inappropriate behavior negatively affected the social relationship between a thriving kindergartener and one with a disability.

*Different.* There were two children with disabilities, one kindergartener and one fourth-grader, who frequently demonstrated inappropriate social skills such as touching, kissing, hugging others, and hand flapping. These behaviors negatively affected the students with disabilities. Social interactions were rarely observed between students without disabilities and those with disabilities when they arrived at the gym, during physical education, and leaving the gym. Three kindergarteners, two thriving and one struggling, shared these thoughts about a student with a disability:

I don't like Susan because she always laughs and kisses too much.

I don't like to play with Susan because she bugs me. She kisses and hugs me. She kind of embarrasses me.

She touches my hair, my back, and I don't like that.

Two of the fourth-graders, one thriving and one struggling, confided:

Well, basically Gail is kind of a little cuckoo because she always says peekaboo. She doesn't pay attention and goofs around a lot.

These quotes illustrate how immature social behaviors can have a deleterious effect on relationships in elementary school. The teachers seemed unaware of the negative social consequences of poorly developed social skills.

In summary, positive social experiences resulted from a curricular approach that was developmentally appropriate, valued cooperation, infused social responsibility, and downplayed competition. Yet when one looked more closely at the lessons, there were factors that negatively affected the social experiences of all students, especially the strugglers and those with disabilities. For example, some activities such as tag games led to hurt feelings, students being left out, or students being embarrassed. As well, when students chose their partners, the more popular

ones never chose students who were struggling or had a disability. This worked against an acceptance of diversity. Ongoing observations and comments made during interviews indicated that membership in a given culture was an important variable that influenced, either positively or negatively, the social experience of the thrivers, strugglers, or students with disabilities. Finally, students who demonstrated inappropriate social skills had difficulty developing positive social relationships with classmates.

## Discussion

The findings of this study have implications for physical education teachers who want to provide a positive learning environment for diverse learners that includes the teaching of personal and social responsibility, that is, to respect oneself and to respect others.

The physical education teachers in this investigation embraced the philosophy that physical education at the elementary level should not be aimed at developing elite athletes. Rather, games and activities should maximize learning and enjoyment of movement for all children. When designing, sequencing, or modifying games and activities, the physical education teachers were minimally aware of the social substance of activities that negatively affected the social experiences of students who were struggling or who had disabilities. Physical education teachers should ask themselves, how are the students socially interacting during the game? Are all children being included or do some feel left out during the game? Do the lessons develop personal and social responsibility in accord with Hellison's (1995) TPSR model?

Although the teachers in this study did not let students pick teams, the students chose who they wanted to partner with most of the time. By doing so, it appears that cultures were formed. These cultures did not encourage an acceptance of diversity and difference. In some cases negative social experiences occurred, especially for the students who were struggling and those with disabilities. These children often felt left out. In order to facilitate an acceptance of diversity, teachers might consider using a variety of techniques to divide students as well as utilize peer teaching and cooperative learning tenets (Snell & Janney, 2000).

Research that compared well-liked children with those who are less popular indicates that a lack of social skills plays a significant role in reduced initiations and leads to difficulty in maintaining good relationships with peers (Katz & McClellan, 1997). Students with disabilities who are in integrated physical education settings seldom interact with peers without disabilities unless instructional activities promote interaction (Gresham, 1982). Further, peer acceptance is not easily achieved when people are perceived as different (Fishbein, 1996). Many students with disabilities in integrated physical education report that no one wants them as partners (Heikinaro-Johansson & Vogler, 1996).

In this study, students who struggled as well as those with disabilities could have benefited from specific social skill instruction. Improved social skills would likely enhance their chances of acceptance. As early as kindergarten, students in this study recognized physical, social, and cognitive differences, and at times balked at being the partner of a student with a disability or a student who was physically or socially struggling.

Although the teachers in this investigation used Hellison's (1995) curriculum for personal and social responsibility, more time must be allocated for direct instruction and individual assistance in the area of social skill development, especially for students with disabilities. Physical education is highly interactive and oftentimes emotional. Therefore, teachers must take the time to teach social skills to all children and to be aware of the subtle social interactions—positive and otherwise—that occur regularly.

In this investigation, the interaction of individual (teacher and students), environmental (learning climate), and activity (the tasks engaged in) variables affected the social experiences of students both positively and negatively. In the gymnasium, the teacher variable had a largely positive effect on the social experiences of all 12 students. Generally students enjoyed coming to the gym and viewed physical education as a time to learn, work on their health, and have fun. On the other hand, the results suggest that despite highly skilled and empathetic teachers who used a progressive curriculum, the gym at Woodside Elementary was a socially difficult place for students who struggled and for those with disabilities. The manner in which students chose partners and the level of individual social skill development had a negative effect on the social experiences of the struggling students and those with disabilities.

In summary, the frameworks articulated by Thelen (1995) and by DePauw and Goc-Karp (1992) were supported in this study. Having effective teachers who care, a developmentally appropriate curriculum, and the utilization of a socially responsible curriculum model does not necessarily dictate positive social experiences for all students. The ever-changing and dynamic interaction between student, teacher, environment and task related variables that influence the teaching and learning process espoused by Thelen (1995) and DePauw and Goc-Karp (1992) must all be examined to ensure positive social experiences for diverse learners in integrated physical education settings.

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