KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES: CLASSROOM ECOLOGY,
PEER INTERACTIONS, AND CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This study examined kindergarten teachers' perspectives about current practices that facilitate peer-related social competence for children with disabilities. Twenty kindergarten teachers participated in four focus groups to gather their thoughts about the roles teachers have in supporting peer interactions and relationships for children with disabilities, the opportunities children with disabilities have to interact with peers in their general education kindergarten classrooms, facilitators and barriers to supporting peer interactions and relationships for children with disabilities, and suggestions teacher had for changes to school environments to promote peer interactions and relationships for children with disabilities during their kindergarten year. Sixteen categories were identified across the four focus group sessions and two key themes emerged: moving beyond class-wide instruction and school-level barriers to providing social interaction interventions.

This is dedicated to everyone who believes we are more alike than we are different and to the teachers who instill that notion in the minds of young children.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The implementation of kindergarten in the United States is as varied now as it was in the late 1800s, when it was first added to public schools (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2000). Policies shaping kindergarten differ greatly among states in terms of availability, length of day, entry assessments, class size, teacher licensure requirements, standards/curriculum, and funding (Workman, 2013). Federal policies also have played a major role in the current construction of the content and focus of kindergarten over the last two decades (Bassok & Rorem, 2014). For example, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has had a major influence on the "push-down" of academic expectations and testing into the curriculum and experiences of kindergartners in public schools (Graue, 2009; Stipek, 2006).

More recently, the Race to the Top competition provided financial incentives to states to encourage their adoption of rigorous Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and assessment practices (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). These standards have been adopted in 46 states along with the District of Columbia (Workman, 2013). Some believe that the presence of rigorous standards and high-stakes assessments have pressured school leadership to focus less on developmentally appropriate curriculum and play-based learning in kindergarten and instead to focus more intensively on literacy, mathematics, and test preparation (Miller & Almon, 2009). The disappearance of play and opportunities for social-emotional learning in kindergarten classrooms can be troublesome for children who enter kindergarten with needs in these areas.

Emphasis on Social-Emotional Development

Supporting young children's social-emotional development has long been seen as an important role for kindergarten teachers (Bronson, 2006). Kindergarten teachers have often reported that the most essential school readiness skills are social or emotional in nature (Ackerman & Barnett, 2005; Johnson, Gallagher, Cook, & Wong, 1995; Rimm-Kaufmann, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). Teachers' support of children's social-emotional development in kindergarten is appropriate as children may enter kindergarten without the social skills necessary to successfully interact with peers. In a nationally representative study, Rimm-Kaufmann et al. (2000) found that one-third of kindergarten teachers surveyed reported at least 50% of the children in their class had difficulty transitioning to kindergarten because of a lack of social skills. The motivation to support young children's social-emotional development is well placed as social-emotional skills and peer-related social competence skills have important connections to positive social and academic outcomes (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000).

Research suggests that kindergartners who engage in positive interactions and relationships with peers tend to have better attitudes towards school (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996; Ladd & Price, 1987). Positive peer relationships also have been found to support kindergartners' achievement and adjustment to school (Ladd, 1990; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999; Ladd & Buhs, 2000; Ladd & Coleman, 1997; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1997). Additionally, findings from these studies show that children who interact with peers in positive ways are more likely to form friendships and to be accepted among peers.

However, when children's social behaviors are inappropriate for their age, there is an increased chance they will not be able to form positive peer relationships (Ladd et al., 1997).

Additionally, children who do not form healthy peer relationships in their early childhood years are more likely to be involved in criminal activities or to drop out of school (Kupersmidt & Coie, 1990; Parker & Asher, 1987). The deleterious effects of negative peer interactions and poor social skills may begin as early as kindergarten (Missall & Hojnoski, 2008) and may continue to impact children's relationships and quality of life into adulthood (Parker & Asher, 1987; Snow, 2007). For these reasons, kindergarten is an ideal time to support the development of social-emotional skills and help children build peer relationships which could lead to healthy and productive lives (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000). Furthermore, given recent research that suggests limited social skills and difficulties with peer interactions predicts later peer victimization of children with disabilities, it is conceivable that attention to this area of development may be most beneficial for this sub-group of kindergartners (Son et al., 2014).

Peer-Related Social Competence and Children With Disabilities

Perhaps the most at-risk group for entering kindergarten without necessary social-emotional skills are children with disabilities. Certain characteristics shared among some children with disabilities may put them at a greater risk for not developing the social skills needed to form and maintain relationships with peers (e.g., communication delays, challenging behaviors; Guralnick, 2010). In fact, research has shown that oftentimes significant differences exist between the social competence of children with and without disabilities (McConnell & Odom, 1999). These differences may be attributed to and also may contribute to the disparities seen in limited number of friendships children with disabilities develop compared to their typically developing peers (Buysse, Goldman, West, & Hollingsworth, 2008; Meyer & Ostrosky, under review).

According to the latest data from the Early Childhood Outcomes Center (2012), roughly 40% of children with disabilities who transitioned out of preschool programs in 2011 did not reach age-appropriate expectations in the area of developing social relationships with peers and adults. The impact of entering kindergarten without skills to form friendships may negatively impact the first year of K-12 education for children with disabilities. Using the Pre-Elementary Education Longitudinal Study (PEELS) nationally representative data set, researchers found that children with disabilities who were identified as having *fewer* or *far fewer* friends than most peers were significantly more likely to experience *somewhat hard* or *very hard* transitions into kindergarten (Carlson et al., 2009). These data suggest that there may be a sizeable number of children with disabilities who will transition into kindergarten without the social skills needed to positively interact with peers. This may directly impact the formation of friendships by children with disabilities, friendships that could support their successful transitions to school and positive outcomes.

Implications for Future Research

A large body of evidence supports the idea that social skills and peer relationships are important components to young children's development and success in school. There is a substantial research base that highlights the importance of supporting both academic and social development during children's earliest years (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000). This is especially true for children with disabilities who may enter kindergarten already behind their same-age peers in several areas, including social-emotional development.

Both early childhood and early childhood special education scholars have embraced an ecologically based perspective when examining the transition of young children into

kindergarten (Odom et al., 2004; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). The ecological perspective of human development is based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) seminal work that suggests multiple systems (i.e., microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem) interact to influence children's development. Using an ecological perspective, a common approach in special education research has been to study the skills young children with disabilities would need upon entering kindergarten classrooms in order to prepare them accordingly and provide them with the supports necessary to assist their successful access to the kindergarten curriculum (Carta, Atwater, Schwartz, & Miller, 1990; Johnson et al., 1995; Rule, Fietchl, & Innocenti, 1990). Current findings suggest the development of social skills necessary for positive peer interactions may still be emerging within some children with disabilities when they enter kindergarten. With this in mind, the mentality of "*Is the child ready for school?*" may need to be coupled with a "*Is the school ready for child?*" mentality in order to meet children's developmental needs (Pianta, Cox, & Snow, 2007).

Given existing data, it is evident that some children with disabilities will enter kindergarten needing support in the area of peer-related social competence. This means kindergarten teachers should be ready to meet these children's needs using evidence-based social interaction practices supported in the early childhood and early childhood special education literature (Brown, Odom, & McConnell, 2008). However, the present-day reality of kindergarten in the United States may be creating an environment where teachers cannot easily embed these skills into their curriculum and instruction. A literature review was conducted to learn more about the instruction of social interaction skills in kindergarten for children with disabilities. The details of this literature review are presented next.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Criteria for Inclusion

In order to be included in this literature review, each study had to: (a) involve kindergarten teachers or students; (b) include at least one child who had an identified disability or developmental delay, or was identified as having difficulties in social, behavioral, or emotional development (hereafter referred to as children with disabilities); (c) focus on teachers' perceptions or use of strategies to support the social interactions of children with disabilities; and (d) take place in the United States. Several methods were used to identify literature meeting these criteria. The first method used was an electronic literature search.

Electronic Literature Search

For the purpose of this review two online databases were independently searched, ERIC and PsycINFO. For both database searches, a parameter was set to find all pertinent literature between 1993 and 2013. This time frame was purposively set in order to capture the last 20 years of research on the peer interactions of kindergarteners with disabilities. Additional limits were set to identify articles that were published in peer-reviewed journals and were written in English.

The keywords "disability" and "kindergarten" were used in combination with other keywords to describe teachers (e.g., teacher role, teacher practices), a focus on the classroom ecology (e.g., environmental supports, environmental features, ecological characteristics, social environment, classroom environment), and the emphasis on peer relationships (e.g., peer interaction, peer assisted learning, peer-mediated intervention, social interaction intervention).

This electronic literature search resulted in 282 articles. Due to the large number of articles found, a three-step review process was implemented to identify articles that clearly met the criteria for inclusion in this literature review.

Three-Step Review Process

To begin, all article titles were reviewed. This title review was conducted to examine whether any articles could be eliminated based on their titles alone. For example, if the title included the word "Australia" it was excluded. After the title review, 122 articles remained. The second step was an abstract review. During this review, abstracts were read to see if they met the inclusion criteria. After the abstract reviews, 46 articles remained. For the final step, the methods section of each remaining article was read to determine if it should be included in this review. During this last step, several themes emerged among studies that would ultimately be excluded from the review. Primary reasons for being excluded included: (a) the study took place in a country other than the United States ($n = 4$); (b) the topic of interest was children's transition among early childhood settings without mention of peer interactions or relationships ($n = 9$); (c) researchers examined peer tutoring or peer-assisted learning programs without measuring peer interactions or peer relationships ($n = 12$); (d) the article was a literature review ($n = 1$); or (e) the article did not meet the inclusion criteria for other reasons ($n = 8$; e.g., studies did not take place in a kindergarten classroom, studies did not include children with disabilities). Following this three-step review process, 12 articles remained that met the inclusion criteria. To complement the electronic literature search, a hand search was conducted to find other literature that might meet the criteria for inclusion in the review.

Hand Search

First, because the electronic search was limited to the last 20 years, the references of literature reviews focused on early childhood social interaction and peer-mediated interventions were examined (i.e., Bain, Rheams, Lee, & McCallum, 2003; DiSalvo & Oswald, 2002). Bain and colleagues (2003) reviewed the social interaction intervention literature from 1980 to 2002. DiSalvo and Oswald (2002) did not specify the time frame parameters for their review on peer-mediated interventions, but the studies in their review fit within a similar time frame. In addition to the hand search, references from each of the 12 identified articles were reviewed for any literature that might meet the criteria for inclusion. These hand searches led to the identification of five additional articles, resulting in 17 articles that met the criteria for inclusion. However, 11 articles were quasi-experimental studies where researchers examined the effects of social interaction interventions (e.g., investigating the influence of social skills training on the social behaviors of children diagnosed with and without disabilities, see Gonzalez-Lopez & Kamps, 1997) versus investigations about classroom teachers' perceptions or use of social interaction strategies. These 11 articles were eliminated. Six articles remained and are the focus of this review.

Overview of Identified Literature

The studies included in this review spanned from 1994 to 2007 (Hamre-Nietupski, Hendrickson, Nietupski, & Shokoohi-Yekta, 1994; Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Janney & Snell, 1996; Rheams & Bain, 2005; Vaughn, Reiss, Rothlein, & Hughes, 1999; Winter & Van Reusen, 1997). In order to better understand the literature in this review, a brief overview follows

to highlight several key features across all studies. An overview of these key characteristics can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Overview of Studies' Characteristics

Studies	Teachers' experience	Teachers' education level[a]	Focal grades
Hamre-Nietupski et al. (1994)	1 – 41 years M = 14.18	Bachelors = 218 Masters = 87 Doctorate/Specialist = 4 Not reported = 3	K – 12th
Hughes and Valle-Riestra (2007)		Bachelors = 62 Graduate degree = 33	K
Janney and Snell (1996)			K – 3rd
Rheams and Bain (2005)		Bachelors = 96 Masters = 41	PreK & K
Vaughn et al. (1999)		Bachelors = 20 Masters = 8 Doctorate/Specialist = 3	K
Winter and Reusen (1997)	7 – 20 years M = 11.66	Bachelors = 2 Masters = 1	K

Note. K = kindergarten; PreK = pre-kindergarten.
[a]Highest degree earned.

Teachers' experience and level of education. Teachers were focal participants for all studies. The years of experience teachers had was reported in two studies (Hamre-Nietupski et al., 1994; Winter & Van Reusen, 1997). Across studies that included such data, teachers averaged approximately 13 years teaching experience. The education level of participating teachers was mentioned in five studies (Hamre-Nietupski et al., 1994; Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Rheams & Bain, 2005; Vaughn et al., 1999; Winter & Van Reusen, 1997). Across studies that included such data, the education level was reported for 398 teachers. The highest education level for 56%

of the teachers was a Bachelors degree, a Masters Degree was held by 43% of the teachers, and a Doctorate or Specialist degree was held by 2% of the teachers.

Focal grade level. Half of the studies included only kindergarten teachers (Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Vaughn et al., 1999; Winter & Van Reusen, 1997). The other three studies included teachers across the following grade levels: pre-kindergarten and kindergarten (Rheams & Bain, 2005), kindergarten through third grade (Janney & Snell, 1996), and kindergarten through 12th grade (Hamre-Nietupski et al., 1994).

Purpose of studies. All research teams examined some element of teachers' perceptions about or use of practices to support the social interactions of children with disabilities. These examinations explored teachers' perceptions about the acceptability of practices (Hamre-Nietupski et al., 1994; Rheams & Bain, 2005), desirability (Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Vaughn et al., 1999), feasibility of implementation (Hamre-Nietupski et al., 1994; Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Rheams & Bain, 2005; Vaughn et al., 1999), or current use (Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Janney & Snell, 1996; Rheams & Bain, 2005; Winter & Van Reusen, 1997).

Other purposes of the studies included investigations of kindergarten teachers' implementation of an inclusive program for kindergartners with and without hearing loss (Winter & Van Reusen, 1997), early childhood special education (i.e., pre-kindergarten) teachers' perceptions about social interaction practices compared to inclusive kindergarten teachers' perceptions (Rheams & Bain, 2005), teachers' facilitation of peer interactions to support the inclusion of students with moderate or severe disabilities in general education classrooms and the nature of peer relationships that developed between students with and without disabilities (Janney & Snell, 1996), teachers' perceptions of barriers to and facilitators of inclusive kindergarten programs (Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007), and teachers' perceptions about

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facilitating friendships between students with and without severe disabilities across K-12 classrooms (Hamre-Nietupski et al., 1994). As all six reviewed studies included an investigation of social interaction practices, a brief description of these practices is presented next along with the methods used to examine the practices.

Social Interaction Practices

Four research teams used survey methods to explore teachers' perceptions or current use of social interaction practices (Hamre-Nietupski et al., 1994; Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Rheams & Bain, 2005; Vaughn et al., 1999). To begin, Vaughn and colleagues (1999) created the *Adaptations for Kindergarten Children with Disabilities* (*AKCD*) survey in which they and Hughes and Valle-Riestra (2007) used to examine teachers' perceptions about instructional practices to support positive outcomes for kindergartners with disabilities in general education classrooms.

The practices included in the survey included those related to social skill development and other areas such as facilitating children's transition to kindergarten, classroom management, curricula and assessment, and working with families and support staff. Six instructional practices were included in the social skills development category: (a) encourage all students to respect and include students with disabilities, (b) plan activities so students with disabilities can succeed, (c) teach students with disabilities positive social behaviors, (d) pair and group students with disabilities with typically developing peers, (e) help students with disabilities deal with appropriate feelings, and (f) implement the behavior plans of students with disabilities.

In the study by Hamre-Nietupski and colleagues (1994), researchers identified social interaction practices within the literature related to supporting friendships between students with

and without severe disabilities. These practices were listed on the survey and included: (a) arrange for integrated in-school and after-school activities; (b) collaborate with special education teachers; (c) encourage parents to create interaction opportunities outside of school; (d) implement cooperative learning approaches that emphasize children learning together; (e) make friends with adults with disabilities; (f) modify curriculum/instructional strategies to promote friendship building; (g) organize a "Circle of Friends" around students with disabilities to promote interaction and support (for more information about the "Circle of Friends" approach see Falvey, Forest, Pearpoint, & Rosenberg, 1997); (h) present information on disabilities to children, staff, and/or parents; (i) seek additional training—in-service or university; (j) teach students without disabilities to be peer tutors and/or partners; and (k) teach social interaction skills to students with and without disabilities.

Lastly, Rheams and Bain (2005) used the *Social Interaction Program Features Questionnaire* (*SIPFQ*; Odom, McConnell, & Chandler, 1993) in their study. The *SIPFQ* includes social interaction practices grouped within three distinct categories: child-specific (15 items), peer-mediated (14 items), and environmental arrangement (7 items) intervention strategies. A list of the 36 social interaction practices include in the *SIPFQ* can be found in Figure 1. The remaining two researchers with studies highlighted in this review used qualitative methods to describe social interaction practices used by teachers.

Child-Specific Approaches
Teach labels for emotions
Teach recognition and labeling of peer's emotions
Teach interpersonal problem solving
Teach specific social skills
Use direct instruction to teach social skills concepts
Develop individualized program to teach social skills
Teacher models social skills
Teacher describes use of skills during the day

Figure 1 (continued)

Figure 1 (continued)

Child-Specific Approaches
Test mastery of social skills
Praises use of social skills
Teacher corrects use of social skills
Multiple opportunities to rehearse skill with teacher supervision
Adults other than teacher praise child for social interaction
Fade social reinforcement
Child self-monitors own social interaction

Peer-Mediated Strategies
Group cooperates to achieve a goal
Prompt group to work or play cooperatively
Model cooperative behavior for group
Praise groups of children for cooperating
Peers taught ways to communicate with CWD
Peers taught persistence
Peers taught to share
Peers taught to share request with CWD
Peers taught complimentary statements with CWD
Peers taught to be affectionate with CWD
Peers taught to suggest play activities to CWD
Praise peers for interacting with CWD
Praise groups of peers for interacting with CWD
Teachers provide activity or tangible reinforcer for interacting with CWD

Environmental Arrangements
Small, well-defined play area
Toys that promote social interaction
Teacher introduces play activity
Activities with high structure
Play group includes children at different developmental levels
Play group includes children with and without disabilities
Videotaped examples of social interaction

Figure 1. List of social interaction practices in the SIPFQ. SIPFQ = Social Interaction Program Features Questionnaire; CWD = children with disabilities. Reported in "Acceptability and Feasibility of Classroom-Based Social Interaction Interventions for Young Children with Disabilities," by S. L. Odom, S. R. McConnell, and L. K. Chandler, 1994, *Exceptional Children*, *60*, p.230.

Janney and Snell (1996) observed teachers and students in five early elementary (i.e.,

kindergarten through grade 3), general education classrooms to learn how teachers' used peer-

mediated interventions and supports to facilitate the inclusion of students with moderate and

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severe disabilities. They identified four themes representative of the strategies used by teachers: (a) new rules about helping, (b) just another student, (c) age appropriateness, and (d) backing off.

Winter and Van Reusen (1997) observed teachers and students in a kindergarten program that included children with and without hearing loss. Winter and Van Reusen observed in two kindergarten classrooms and collected journal entries from the classroom teachers. The researchers then analyzed observational data to describe classroom practices linked to instruction, classroom management, and evaluation. Teachers' journal entries were designed to provide evidence of their use of practices connected to eight areas: (a) curriculum and instruction, (b) social skills development, (c) instructional arrangements (e.g., whole group, large group [6-8 children], small group [2-3 children], one-to-one instruction), (d) group management, (e) planning and record keeping, (f) resource management, (g) administrative support, and (h) parental involvement in inclusive kindergarten classrooms. Additionally, Winter and Van Reusen synthesized guidelines put forth by national organizations about teacher responsibilities in early education/early intervention and guidelines for educating students who are Deaf or hard of hearing into 73 "teacher responsibility statements" (p. 118). Finally, Winter and Van Reusen compared the collected data to the teacher responsibility statements. The following section describes salient findings associated with teachers' perceptions of or current use of social interaction practices identified across the six studies.

Major Findings

Acceptability, desirability, and feasibility of social interaction practices. Four research teams examined the acceptability, desirability, and/or feasibility of instructional practices designed to support children's social skill development, social interactions with peers,

or friendship development (Hamre-Nietupski et al., 1994; Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Rheams & Bain, 2005; Vaughn et al., 1999). Findings linked to each construct are described below.

   Acceptability. Two research teams looked at teachers' perceptions of the acceptability of social interaction practices (Hamre-Nietupski et al., 1994; Rheams & Bain, 2005). In Rheams and Bain's (2005) study, acceptability was defined as "how much you feel that the particular procedure fits your philosophy of teaching social interaction skills to young children with disabilities" (Odom et al., 1993, p. 228). Likewise, Hamre-Nietupski and colleagues (1994) asked teachers what practices adults (i.e., general and special education teachers and parents of children with and without disabilities) could use to facilitate mixed-ability friendships. Even though the term "acceptability" was not specifically used by this latter group of researchers, based on the question asked it could be assumed that highly ranked strategies would be ones seen as acceptable based on teachers' values and beliefs.

   Rheams and Bain (2005) found that both teachers in self-contained early childhood special education classrooms and inclusive kindergarten classrooms rated all social interaction practices high in terms of acceptability. There were no significant differences in ratings between the two groups of teachers. Hamre-Nietupski and colleagues (1994) reported that the five most acceptable practices for both general education and special education teachers to use were: (a) implementing cooperative learning approaches that emphasize children learning together, (b) collaborating with special education teachers, (c) teaching social interaction skills to all students, (d) teaching typically developing students to be peer tutors and/or partners, and (e) presenting information on disabilities to children, staff, and parents.

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Desirability. Two research teams looked at teachers' perceptions of the desirability of social interaction practices (Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Vaughn et al., 1999). Hughes and Valle-Riestra (2007) extended the work by Vaughn and her colleagues (1999) and both researchers used the same measure (*AKCD*). For this reason, in both studies desirability was defined as how much teachers would like to implement specific practices to support the learning of their students with disabilities. In terms of social skills development practices, both research teams found that teachers identified all six practices as highly desirable.

Feasibility. Four research teams looked at teachers' perceptions of the feasibility of social interaction practices (Hamre-Nietupski et al., 1994; Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Rheams & Bain, 2005; Vaughn et al., 1999). Again, the two research teams that used the *AKCD* defined feasibility as the practicability of actually implementing the practices (Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Vaughn et al., 1999). In Rheams and Bain's (2005) study, feasibility was defined as "Your ability as a teacher to implement the approach in your classroom, given your current resources (e.g., personnel in the classroom, materials, space, training)" (Odom et al., 1993, p. 228). Hamre-Nietupski and colleagues (1994) asked general education teachers to identify which practices they would be willing to carry out to facilitate mixed-ability friendships. Similar to the construct of "acceptability" the researchers did not specifically use the term "feasibility" in their survey. However, it can be assumed that the practices teachers would be willing to implement would be ones that would be feasible given their unique contexts as Odom and colleague's definition of feasibility (1993) would imply.

In three of the studies, the feasibility of implementing social interaction practices was rated highly. Yet, across each of these three studies, teachers' reports of feasibility were less robust than that of acceptability or desirability (Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Rheams & Bain,

2005; Vaughn et al., 1999). The two research teams using the *AKCD* found significant

differences between teachers' reports of desirability and feasibility for all six social skills

development practices (Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Vaughn et al., 1999). However,

kindergarten teachers reported to Hughes and Valle-Riestra (2007) that all of the social skills

practices were "relatively feasible for them" to implement (p. 124). Meanwhile, Vaughn and

colleagues (1999) found that four of the six practices having the closest agreement between

reports of desirability and feasibility were: (a) encouraging all to respect and include students

with disabilities, (b) teaching students with disabilities positive social behaviors, (c) pairing and

grouping students with disabilities with typically developing peers, and (d) implementing the

behavior plans of students with disabilities.

Rheams and Bain (2005) found no significant differences in reports of feasibility between

the two groups of teachers in their study. Interpretation of teachers' ratings of acceptability and

feasibility in this study are limited since descriptive statistics were not provided for each social

interaction practice listed in the *SIPFQ*. However, Rheam and Bain noted that kindergarten

teachers in inclusive classrooms tended to find practices that were "either highly-structured or

requiring teacher-directed activities" to be more favorable than their pre-kindergarten colleagues

(p. 60).

In similar fashion, Hamre-Nietupski and colleagues (1994) found that the top five

strategies that general education teachers reported they would be willing to implement were

similar to the strategies they identified as most feasible. These practices were: (a) implementing

cooperative learning approaches that emphasize children learning together, (b) collaborating with

special education teachers, (c) teaching social interaction skills to students with and without

disabilities, (d) teaching typically developing students to be peer tutors and/or partners, and (e)

modifying curriculum/instructional strategies to promote friendships. In addition to soliciting teachers' perceptions about the acceptability, desirability, or feasibility of social interaction practices, several research teams also examined teachers' current use of these practices.

Current use of social interaction practices. Four research teams examined teachers' current use of instructional practices designed to support children's social skills development and social interactions with peers (Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Janney & Snell, 1996; Rheams & Bain, 2005; Winter & Van Reusen, 1997). Data collected on current use of these practices were gathered using teacher self-report (Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Rheams & Bain, 2005), direct observation (Janney & Snell, 1996), or a combination of both methods (Winter & Van Reusen, 1997). Two of the four studies examined the constructs of desirability or feasibility *and* current use of the practices (Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Rheams & Bain, 2005). Results from the two studies that examined desirability or feasibility and current use of the practices will be described first.

In 2007, Hughes and Valle-Riestra extended the work by Vaughn and colleagues (1999) by asking teachers to report their current use of each practice. They asked teachers to report whether they used specific instructional practices daily, weekly, monthly, or never. Seventy to 80% of the teachers reported using all but one of the six social skills practices on a daily basis. Those five practices along with the percentage of teachers reporting that they used them daily were: (a) implementing the behavior plans of students with disabilities (80%), (b) teaching students with disabilities positive social behaviors (80%), (c) encouraging all students to respect and include students with disabilities (76%), (d) planning activities so students with disabilities can succeed (73%), and (e) pairing or grouping students with disabilities with typically developing peers (70%). The least used social skills practice was: help students with disabilities

deal with appropriate feelings. Forty-three percent of teachers reported using this strategy daily, 34% using it weekly, 10% using it monthly, and 13% reported that they never used it.

Rheams and Bain (2005) found teachers' reports of current use were lower than their ratings of acceptability and feasibility across both pre-kindergarten and kindergarten settings. However, there were no significant differences in current use between teachers in either type of setting. As mentioned above, two other studies contributed to the knowledge base about teachers' current use of social interaction practices through observational and/or self-report methods (Janney & Snell, 1996; Winter & Van Reusen, 1997). The findings from these two studies are described next.

After analyzing teachers' self-report data, Winter and Van Reusen (1997) found that one way kindergarten teachers supported social skills development for their students with and without hearing loss was to teach basic sign language to all children. The teachers felt that providing all children with a common language would support social interactions between peers and create a shared sense of community. In addition to the teachers' self-reported data, Winter and Van Reusen analyzed 60 hours of observational data (i.e., 20 hours of observational data for each teacher). From these data, they noticed that teachers rarely used instructional strategies to support social interactions between peers. In fact, teachers used instructional strategies to support social interactions less than 1% of the total time observed (i.e., 19 social interaction strategy occurrences over 3,894 total instructional strategy occurrences). The top three instructional strategies teachers were observed using were: (a) providing students with information (32% of the time), (b) giving students feedback (13% of the time), and (c) questioning students (10% of the time). The only strategy used less often than social interaction strategies were environmental

strategies (6 occurrences). Winter and Van Reusen did not provide their definitions for coding

social interaction strategies from the observational data.

Janney and Snell (1996) also reported anecdotal data on teachers' use of instructional

strategies to support peer interactions. As previously mentioned, Janney and Snell identified four

themes to describe how they saw teachers supporting peer interactions between students with and

without moderate/severe disabilities across five early elementary classrooms (kindergarten

through third grade): (a) new rules about helping, (b) just another student, (c) age-appropriate

interactions, and (d) backing off. In regard to these four themes, they highlighted exemplars of

these themes found in the observed classrooms. The examples reported here are based on their

observations in the inclusive kindergarten classroom of one student named Daniel who was

diagnosed with a severe disability.

One of the things Janney and Snell noticed was that many of Daniel's classroom peers

were eager to assist him. As a result, the kindergarten teacher implemented a "helper of the day"

routine so peers could take turns helping Daniel. Janney and Snell found that across all the early

elementary classrooms peer "helping" often took the form of providing prompts, corrections, or

rewards to students with disabilities.

Other instances in the kindergarten classroom that represented the themes identified by

Janney and Snell (1996) included the teacher's practice of expecting Daniel to follow the same

classroom rules and expectations as his peers. The early elementary teachers felt that this

practice promoted classmates' perceptions of the students with disabilities as "just another

student."

Another example from the kindergarten classroom was that Daniel's teacher reminded his

peers to use their regular voice when talking to him instead of a childlish voice. The early

elementary teachers wanted to ensure that peers and students with disabilities were having "age-appropriate interactions." A final example from the kindergarten classroom that embodied the last theme to emerge was when the paraprofessional who assisted Daniel reported how peers acted more natural around him when she was not around. The early elementary teachers in this study promoted the independence and privacy of students with disabilities by "backing off" and allowing them to experience more typical peer interactions. Along with findings related to teachers' perceptions and the use of social interaction practices, several research teams contributed evidence in other areas related to supporting the peer-related social competence of children with disabilities.

Additional Findings Related to Supporting Peer-Related Social Competence

       Facilitators for and barriers to instructing kindergartners with disabilities.
Kindergarten teachers in Hughes and Valle-Riestra's (2007) study identified both facilitators for and barriers to supporting the instruction of children with disabilities within inclusive kindergarten classrooms. The top three facilitators that teachers felt would help them meet the needs of kindergartners with disabilities were: additional materials and equipment, more staff or paraprofessional support in the classroom, and smaller class sizes. Additionally, teachers felt that professional development and having time to collaborate with special education teachers would support their ability to instruct children with disabilities. Considering teachers' perspectives about supports that would facilitate and increase their capacity to teach kindergartners with disabilities, the barriers identified by teachers were not surprising.

       The most common barriers reported were teachers' lack of confidence about their preparedness to teach or make adaptations for children with disabilities, the high student-to-

teacher ratio within general education classrooms, insufficient time to make or adapt materials, and a lack of appropriate materials and support. In terms of teachers' confidence in making or adapting materials for students with disabilities, Vaughn and colleagues (1999) asked teachers to describe the extent to which they felt prepared to teach children with disabilities and their level of confidence in making adaptations for children with disabilities. Slightly more than half of the kindergarten teachers reported not feeling prepared (16/29; 55%) and more than half reported that they felt only somewhat confident or not at all confident in making adaptations (18/28; 64%).

Supporting friendships between students with and without disabilities. Hamre-Nietupski and colleagues (1994) reported that general education teachers (kindergarten through 12th grade) felt that not only could they support friendships, but also that they should facilitate friendships between students with and without disabilities. The researchers found this belief to be strongest among teachers of younger children (i.e., ages 5 to 10 years old). There was also a significant difference between teachers of older and younger children when it came to teachers' perceptions of the ideal setting for friendship formation between children with and without disabilities. That is, teachers of younger children identified full time inclusion in general education classrooms to be ideal settings for friendships to develop to a greater extent than teachers of older children.

Recommended guidelines, social interactions, and classroom observations. As previously mentioned, Winter and Van Reusen (1997) created 73 teacher responsibility statements using guidelines developed by prominent teacher education, early childhood, and disability-related organizations. Based on their observations, Winter and Van Reusen compared what they saw in kindergarten classrooms to recommended practice. In doing this, they identified several teacher practices from observational data that were contrary to recommended practices

for inclusive, early childhood classrooms; two of those practices could have limited peer interaction opportunities for kindergartners. First, kindergarten teachers in their sample provided children with a limited number of play-based learning opportunities. Second, planned group activities created by teachers promoted independent work versus cooperative learning whereby children work together.

In comparison, Janney and Snell (1996) observed kindergarten teachers engaging in practices that complimented recommended practices in early childhood special education. For example, adults would refrain from interfering with peer interactions and they created rules to ensure peers engaged in positive, age-appropriate interactions. However, some of the rules classroom teachers created to support peer interactions were not as successful as teachers might have hoped. For instance, Janney and Snell observed students talking to their peers with disabilities in a childish voice, even after teachers had instructed them to use "regular" voices. Additionally, some students were seen helping and showing affection to peers with disabilities in ways that were not commonly observed between children without disabilities.

The six studies included in this review establish a knowledge base for what we know about teachers' perceptions and use of social interaction practices to support the social skills development and peer interactions of kindergartners with disabilities. This information provides the groundwork to identify gaps in our knowledge and ideas for future research. However, like other literature reviews there are limitations to this review. In the sections that follow, these limitations are highlighted, and gaps in the literature along with ideas for future research are discussed.

Limitations of This Review

Two major limitations exist for this literature review. First, while a systematic electronic search was conducted, the search was limited to peer-reviewed journals. Even with the addition of a hand search of early childhood intervention journals and the reference lists of articles that met the criteria, only literature published in peer-reviewed journals was included. Adherence to this rule eliminated the inclusion of literature such as dissertations and book chapters.

Second, the time range set for identifying articles during electronic searches (i.e., 1993 to 2013) may have resulted in relevant articles about children's peer-related social competence that occurred during previous decades to be overlooked. The scope of research investigating the complexity of peer interactions for children with disabilities extends from the 1970s to the present (Guralnick, 2010). While efforts were made to search pertinent literature reviews that covered these earlier years, some salient literature may have been overlooked. Despite these limitations, the findings from this review provide an understanding of gaps in the literature related to interventions to support the peer interactions of kindergartners with disabilities and provide directions for future research.

Gaps in the Literature and Directions for Future Research

Two primary gaps were identified within the reviewed literature. The first gap is related to the age of the studies. The oldest article included in this review is 20 years old (Hamre-Nietupski et al., 1994) and the newest is 7 years old (Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007). Both research teams found that several social interaction strategies were reported by general education teachers to be desirable and feasible to implement (e.g., teaching social interaction skills, pairing and grouping students together). In 1994, Hamre-Nietupski and colleagues found that teachers of

younger children, more so than teachers of older children, believed that children with disabilities were more likely to form friendships when they spent the entire day in general education classrooms. In 2007, Hughes and Valle-Riestra extended the literature by capturing kindergarten teachers' perspectives about barriers to and facilitators of supporting children with disabilities within inclusive classrooms. This was important information to gather as more students with disabilities are spending the majority of their school day within general education classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). This move to increase inclusive placements for students with disabilities means that there may be more opportunities for teachers to facilitate social interactions in their classrooms. Additionally, the priorities of kindergarten education in America have changed dramatically over the last two decades (Bassok & Rorem, 2014). In light of recent changes emphasizing teacher-directed literacy and math instruction, standardized testing, and "one-size-fits-all standards" (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 15) teachers' perspectives about supporting kindergartners with disabilities' social skills development or social interactions may have changed from 1994 to 2007. Likewise, teachers' perspectives may have changed from 2007 to the present. Future research should focus on teachers' perspectives and their use of social interaction practices to mirror the current educational landscape of kindergarten education for children with disabilities.

The second gap in the literature is a lack of information describing teachers' perspectives about monitoring the social skills development, social interactions, and subsequent peer relationships or friendships of children with disabilities. One research team reported that kindergarten teachers used more class-wide assessments rather than individualized assessments to assess students (Winter & Van Reusen, 1997). However, the focus of the studies included in this review concentrated on instructional/social interaction practices and did not mention how

teachers made decisions about when to intervene and use those practices or how teachers monitored the effectiveness of the practices. Monitoring children's development in response to interventions is an essential component for delivering effective intervention (Wolery, 2005). Future research should address teachers' perspectives about how they intervene and monitor children's development of social interaction skills.

In conclusion, based on years of research in the area of supporting the peer-related social competence of children who are at-risk or have identified disabilities we have learned a great deal about interventions that support children's social skills development and social interactions with peers (Brown et al., 2008). Moreover, current outcomes data has shown that an increasing number of children with disabilities will enter kindergarten unprepared to engage in age-appropriate peer relationships (ECO, 2012). Having limited social skills to form friendships with peers may make the transition to kindergarten more difficult for young children with disabilities (Carlson et al., 2009). Without peer-related social competence skills children with disabilities may be at increased risk of being rejected by peers and not experiencing the positive outcomes associated with having close peer relationships or friendships (Son et al., 2014). Given this information, there is a need to address the gaps in our understanding about supporting the social interactions and social skills development of kindergartners with disabilities.

The study, described in the next chapter, was designed to address the gaps in our understanding of kindergarten teachers' perspectives about current practices to facilitate peer-related social competence for children with disabilities.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to learn more about kindergarten teachers' perspectives about practices that facilitate peer-related social competence for children with disabilities. The specific research questions addressed were:

1. How do kindergarten teachers view their role in supporting peer interactions and relationships for children with disabilities?

2. To what extent do teachers believe children with disabilities have opportunities to interact with peers in their general education kindergarten classroom?

3. From teachers' perspectives, what are facilitators/barriers to supporting peer interactions and relationships for children with disabilities?

4. What suggestions, if any, do teachers have for changes to the classroom or school environment to promote peer interactions and relationships for children with disabilities during their kindergarten year?

Research Design

This qualitative study was designed to understand kindergarten teachers' unique views related to the research questions above. Focus group methodology was chosen because it has been identified as a viable way to understand salient issues that may impact practice and subsequently the development of positive outcomes for young children with delays and disabilities. It is also a feasible way to better understand the values, attitudes, and perspectives of individuals who work with young children with disabilities and their families (Brotherson, 1994; Brotherson & Goldstein, 1992). The University of Illinois' Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved all recruitment methods prior to the start of this study (for IRB documentation see Appendix A).

Researcher Identity

Self-disclosing ones' values, beliefs, and assumptions prior to engaging in research and throughout the study (e.g., by engaging in reflective journaling), increases the credibility of a qualitative study (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). This necessitates a brief description of my values and beliefs about inclusive early childhood education, the peer relationships of children with disabilities, kindergarten classrooms, and peer-related social competence skills.

Prior to becoming a doctoral student, I taught as an early childhood special education teacher in both inclusive and self-contained public preschool classrooms. As a teacher, I felt strongly that inclusive classrooms were ideal settings for young children with and without disabilities to develop their skills and abilities. Dating back to my years as a student teacher, I have valued children's social and emotional development just as equally as I have valued their development in other domains. I also value children's development of peer relationships. I strongly believe that friendships can support children's social and academic growth and lead to improved outcomes that extend well beyond the early childhood years.

As a graduate student researcher I spent four years studying and conducting research in kindergarten classrooms. Due to my experiences observing in the field, I noticed that the social environment of kindergartens was changing. From my perspective, kindergartners had fewer opportunities to engage with each other socially. Through an early research study, I found that some young children with disabilities were spending months in their kindergarten classrooms without establishing strong relationships with classmates. Additionally, I learned that kindergarten teachers held low levels of confidence related to identifying the peer relationships of their kindergartners with and without disabilities (Meyer & Ostrosky, under review). These

observations led me to design this study in order to learn more about the current state of kindergarten classrooms and kindergarten teachers' perspectives about social interaction practices and supporting the peer-related social competence of children with disabilities.

Sampling Procedures

In their review of focus group studies, Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub (1996) reported that researchers using this methodology frequently failed to provide an adequate description of focus group participants. This included, and is not limited to, descriptions about participant selection (such as inclusion criteria for participants), percentage of recruited participants who ultimately joined the study, participant demographics, and other details about the process of sampling and recruiting participants. To address this shortcoming, I have written a detailed account of how the purposive sampling of participants for this focus group study evolved. Moreover, I have included a full description of the recruitment process, including the recruitment of teachers from a school district that ultimately did not participate. These details are provided next.

Purposive sampling. As in most focus group studies, a purposive sampling procedure was used (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001; Morgan, 1997; Patton, 2002). Several purposive sampling strategies exist (Patton, 2002). Since focus group methods tend to be more flexible than others (Bloor et al., 2001), it allowed for two types of sampling strategies to be used: homogenous and emergent opportunity sampling (Patton, 2002).

To begin, the homogenous group identified for this study was teams of kindergarten teachers, from the same school district, who taught in classrooms that included children with developmental delays, disabilities, or needs related to social interaction skills. There were several

advantages to using pre-existing teams in this study (Bloor et al., 2001). For example, the

logistics and implementation of kindergarten programs are largely influenced by school district

constraints such as boundaries, funding, and buildings. Grouping focus group participants by

school districts allowed teachers to challenge or contribute to the on-going conversation in more

detail because of their shared knowledge of school district or school-specific guidelines.

Grouping teachers this way also capitalized on teachers' familiarity with one another, whether

they worked in the same building or across multiple buildings within a district. Another element

of homogenous sampling was to establish teacher participation criteria to ensure that participants

would have experiences that could lend themselves to discussing the topics of interest in this

study. These criteria are described next.

Teacher participation criteria. Along with identifying the homogenous sample for

focus group sessions, criteria for participation was initially created to increase the likelihood that

teachers would contribute information related to the study's research questions. The teacher

participation criteria contained four specific components.

1. Kindergarten teachers had to have at least one child in their class who had a developmental delay, an identified disability (i.e., a child with either an individualized education program [IEP] or 504 plan), or a child without an identified disability who had, from the teacher's perspective, great difficulty interacting with peers.

   a. The child's delay or disability needed to impact her/his social-emotional skills or interactions with peers.

   b. The child had to included in the general education kindergarten classroom for at least 50% of the school day.

2. Teachers needed to work in full-day kindergarten programs.

3. Teachers had to have at least 3 years experience teaching kindergarten.

4. Teachers had to have at least 2 years experience including children with developmental delays or disabilities in their classroom.

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These criteria assured teachers would have some experiences related to teaching kindergarten and planning instruction for children with and without disabilities who had difficulties in the area of peer-related social competence. It was assumed that these experiences provided teachers with both breadth and depth of knowledge that could support their rich discussion. Again, these criteria were considered *initial* because an emergent opportunity sampling strategy was also used.

An emergent opportunity sampling strategy is used in an ongoing study to identify other participants who might contribute a unique, confirming, or disconfirming perspective (Patton, 2002). Using this strategy meant allowing for the possibility that later focus group participants could differ from the original criteria. More details about the emergent opportunity sampling strategy used in this study and instances when teachers differed from the initial participation criteria are described below in the section on participant recruitment. Before that, an overview of the research plan used in this study is provided.

Research Plan

In concert with the sampling strategies, the research plan was to have between three and five focus groups in total. This is a standard number of groups suggested for a focus group study due to the intensive effort needed to recruit participants, transcribe recorded audio, and analyze transcripts (Bloor et al., 2001; Patton, 2002). Additionally, it is recommended to have between five and 10 participants per focus group with six to eight participants being the preferred focus group size (Krueger, 2002). For this study, at least five kindergarten teachers from each school district had to express interest, and meet participation criteria, in order for a focus group session to be held. It was anticipated that 15 to 50 teachers would participate in the study.

Study Personnel

For this study, I moderated all focus group sessions. One additional person was present to serve as an assistant moderator. I recruited six assistant moderators to potentially help across all focus group sessions. Assistant moderators agreed to help with focus group sessions that were close in proximity to their place of work or residence. Overall, three of the six recruited assistant moderators eventually helped with one or more focus group sessions. One assistant moderator was a graduate of Infancy and Early Childhood Special Education Masters' program, the second was a current graduate student in Special Education, and the third was a doctoral student studying Early Childhood Special Education. All assistant moderators received instructions about their roles and responsibilities prior to helping in a session and were compensated for their time. For the list of assistant moderator responsibilities see Appendix B.

Recruitment

All focus group participants were recruited from school districts in one Midwestern state. To begin, I met with two recruited assistant moderators who lived closest to me in the north-central part of the state. We discussed which school districts would be feasible to invite based on our collective availability and location of work/residence. Both assistant moderators were full-time teachers/therapists and their availability to commute was limited by where they worked. Together, we identified seven school districts for potential recruitment.

School district participation criteria. Similar to the participation criteria established for teacher participants, I created school district participation criteria to ultimately determine which school districts I would contact to invite teachers to participate in a focus group session. Two

factors were of utmost importance when creating the school district participation criteria. First, I wanted to recruit teachers from racially and socio-economically diverse school districts. Secondly, I wanted to recruit mid-size to large school districts to guarantee there would be at least five kindergarten teachers who might be interested in participating and who would meet the participation criteria. With these factors in mind, the *initial* school district participation criteria were established. At least one of the following school district participation criteria had to be met in order for teachers to be invited.

- More than half of the schools had majority-minority status (i.e., less than 50% of the enrollment included students who were white).

- A majority of the schools were ones where 25% or more of the student population was eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

- All schools had a Title 1 status.

In this case, "schools" referred to any school in the district that housed kindergartners. Similar to the initial participant criteria, the school district criteria for participation were also subject to change over the course of the study. Instances when this occurred are described later in this section.

The National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (CCD) program and tools were used to identify school district data (NCES, 2014). The CCD public school district dataset available was from the 2011-2012 school year. Again, statistics were only pulled for district schools that housed kindergarten classrooms. Of the seven identified school districts, four districts qualified based on the school district participation criteria.

Invitations to participate. I searched school websites and/or called school district offices for assurance that the four qualifying districts offered full-day kindergarten and included kindergartners with delays and disabilities in general education classrooms. One of the identified

school districts offered only half-day kindergarten, but they were transitioning to full-day kindergarten during the upcoming school year. This district remained on the invitation list with the emergent opportunity sampling strategy in mind. I thought that half-day teachers' views might be important to add later in the study. After the other school districts were confirmed to meet criteria, I gathered teachers' emails from school websites. This was an efficient technique for collecting contact information. However, in two instances I had to send a formal request to school districts for this information because teachers' emails were not posted on the schools' websites.

In total, 161 teachers from the four school districts (a range of 30 to 59 teachers from each district) received an email invitation and were asked to fill out a brief screening survey if they were interested in participating. Overall, 22 teachers expressed interest (at least three teachers from each district). However, eight teachers did not match the initial participant criteria. From this group of 14 teachers, there were only two school districts that had at least five interested teachers. One was a school district that offered district-wide, half-day kindergarten and offered tuition-based, full-day kindergarten (*District Alfa*). The other school district was the one that only offered only half-day kindergarten (*District Bravo*). I scheduled a focus group session with *District Alfa* and postponed scheduling a date with *District Bravo's* teachers until after the completion of *District Alfa's* focus group session and subsequent data analysis. Again, this was a decision made based on the emergent opportunity sampling strategy. An overview of the final emergent opportunity sampling and recruitment that took place during this study is described next.

Emergent Opportunity Sampling

While analyzing *District Alfa's* focus group data, I realized that the full-day kindergarten

teachers projected what they felt to be significant benefits of their full-day program compared to

half-day programs. For example:

> *Kimberly:* You think about the half-day program. They leave their room to go to P.E. and library, and that's it. You know, our kids leave for P.E., library, art, and music. They're up with the big kids always.

> *Natalie:* Everybody knows the all-day kindergartners!

Their concentration and passion on this topic moved me to officially set a focus group session

with the *District Bravo* teachers. Additionally, the *District Alfa* teachers felt strongly that a new

configuration of their school district's kindergarten classrooms would improve their ability to

support social interactions for kindergartners with and without disabilities.

> *Natalie:* We all know that if we had a kindergarten center where all the kindergartners would go and you could divide it up nicely [diversity in language and ability statuses equally distributed across classrooms] it would be perfect. But we can't even pass the referendum for the preschool center. So . . . .

This sentiment guided me to search for school districts in the state that had a kindergarten

center and provided inclusive education for kindergartners with and without disabilities. I easily

identified one school district with a kindergarten center because it was located in the town in

which I live. However, when I investigated the school district's CCD, the district did not meet

the initial participation criteria. A majority of all students enrolled in the district's elementary

schools were white. Only 35% of the student population was eligible for free or reduced-price

lunch and only 29% of the elementary schools were provided Title 1 funding. Additionally, this

district was considered a rural, fringe district. In light of this, the district's demographic

information was very different from the other school districts that had already participated in the

study. I thought that teachers from a district such as this one might have contrary views to the

teachers already interviewed, so I decided to recruit them to participate. Thus, this is the first time that the initial school district criteria for participation were altered.

Forty-eight kindergarten teachers from this district were invited to participant, but only two teachers expressed an interest in participating. I contacted the school district's Director of Elementary Education and she offered to pass out a flyer about the study to the center's kindergarten teachers during a professional development day. I emailed a flyer to the director, but she did not confirm receipt of it. I am unsure whether the flyers were actually distributed, because no other teachers from the district expressed an interest in participating.

Locating school districts with a kindergarten center was not an easy task because this information was not collected at the state-level and could not be found easily. Due to this, I solicited the advice of board members from the state's subdivision of the National Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC). Board members have various jobs in the fields of early childhood and special education. Plus, several members provide technical assistance to school districts throughout the state. I asked board members if they were aware of any school districts in the state that had inclusive, kindergarten classrooms housed in a center or other unique building arrangement. Their expertise proved helpful as two school districts were identified. One school district was centrally located in the state and had an inclusive kindergarten center (including pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms; *District Charlie*). The second school district was located in the southern part of the state and had an inclusive pre-kindergarten through first grade center (*District Delta)*. The crucial component in identifying these school districts was the configuration of their kindergarten programs. I felt that they should participant in the study regardless of their CCD. However, I checked their CCD and found that both districts met the initial school district criteria for participation, except each

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district was identified as a rural or rural, fringe district. I also investigated each district's status of

adequate yearly progress (AYP). While there was some variability, none met AYP in the 2013

school year. An overview of the CCD information along with information regarding each

district's AYP can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Demographic Data From Participating School Districts

		NCES Common Core of Data from 2011-2012 School Year					
District	Total schools[a]	Locale	Schools with majority-minority status	Eligibility[b] for F/R-P Lunch Range, Mean	Title 1 schools	Met AYP[c]	AYP status
District Alfa	13	Suburban large	1	7-73% (30%)	5	No	Academic watch year 2
District Bravo	12	Suburban large	12	71-90% (83%)	12	No	Academic watch year 7
District Charlie	2	Rural	0	42-54% (48%)	2	No	Academic early warning year 2
District Delta	1	Rural fringe	1	65%	1	No	Academic watch year 2

Note. NCES = National Center for Education Statistics; F/R-P = free or reduced-price; AYP =
adequate yearly progress.
[a]Data was collected only from district schools that housed kindergarten classrooms.
[b]Percentage of students who qualified at each school.
[c]AYP information provided by state's online 2013 report card website.

I was put in contact with a teacher at the *District Charlie* kindergarten center and shared

the participant criteria with her. She identified five teachers who met the criteria and I invited all

five teachers to participate. Four teachers expressed an interest and I verified that they met the

initial criteria for participation. Due to the difficulty in locating a kindergarten center in the state

with inclusive, full-day classrooms I went ahead with scheduling a focus group session with

District Charlie despite having only four teachers willing and qualified to participate.

After meeting with *District Charlie*, teachers' comments suggested that a kindergarten

center was not as ideal as one might imagine given their lack of peer models for kindergartners.

In light of this information, the need for another focus group session with a group of

kindergarten teachers working in a building that contained kindergarteners and older grades was

warranted. *District Delta* fit this description.

I was put in contact with the principal of the pre-kindergarten through first grade center

in *District Delta*. The principal connected me with a kindergarten team leader who identified six

teachers who were interested in participating. It was with this focus group that the initial

participant criteria were adjusted. Of the six teachers who were interested in participating from

District Delta, three of them did not meet the initial participant criteria. That is, these three

teachers did not meet the criteria related to years of experience teaching kindergarten and

teaching in an inclusive kindergarten classroom. These teachers either had only 2 years of

experience teaching kindergarten, instead of 3 years, or 1 year of experience teaching

kindergartners with and without disabilities instead of 2 years. Due to the difficulty in finding

inclusive, full-day kindergarten programs with unique grade level configurations, I felt that a

focus group session with *District Delta* should be scheduled. Additionally, up to this point, all

teachers had met the participant criteria, and they were mostly older teachers with many years'

experience. For example, the number of years of teaching kindergarten for participants from

Districts Alfa, Bravo, and Charlie ranged from 4 to 33 years (*M* = 16 years). More than half of

the teachers from these districts had 5 or more years of experience teaching children with and

without disabilities. I viewed including teachers with fewer years experience teaching in

inclusive, kindergarten classrooms as a benefit to the study. I thought these teachers could have views divergent from those of their more experienced colleagues and thus far teachers with fewer years of experience had not contributed their perspectives.

In accordance with the data analysis procedures outlined for this study and described later in the paper, *District Delta* was ultimately the last focus group session held. Overall, 20 female kindergarten teachers participated in this study. Additional participant demographic information and details about their teaching experiences are provided in Tables 3 and 4. Next, a description of participants by district is provided.

District Alfa

Six teachers from District Alfa participated in a focus group session that lasted 2 hours and 18 minutes. On average the teachers had 14 years experience teaching (range = 4 to 20 years) and an average of 8 years experience teaching kindergarten (range = 4 to 13 years). All teachers had 5 or more years experience teaching in an inclusive kindergarten setting. Teachers identified the following categories of disability represented by children included in their classroom this school year: (a) developmental delay (n = 6 teachers), (b) speech or language impairment (n = 6 teachers), (c) autism spectrum disorder (n = 3 teachers), (d) other health impairment (n = 3 teachers), (e) emotional disturbance (n = 2 teachers), (f) intellectual disability

Table 3

Focus Group Participants' Demographic Information

Category	Alfa School District (*n* = 6)	Bravo School District (*n* =4)	Charlie School District (*n* =4)	Delta School District (*n* = 6)	Totals (*n* = 20)
Highest degree held					
B.A. or B.S.	1	-	2	2	5
B.A. or B.S., plus Coursework	-	1	-	2	3
M.A. or M.S.	-	2	1	-	3
M.A. or M.S., plus Coursework	5	1	1	2	9
Special Education Training					
None	-	-	-	1	1
Workshops/seminars	-	1	-	2	3
1 - 2 courses	4	2	1	2	9
3 - 4 courses	2	1	1	-	4
5 or more courses	-	-	2	-	2
Graduated from Special Education Department	-	-	-	1	1
Age					
< 25	-	1	-	2	3
26 - 35	2	-	1	2	5
36 - 45	2	1	1	-	4
46 - 55	2	1	1	2	6
> 55	-	1	1	-	2

Note. B.A. = Bachelor's of Arts; B.S. Bachelor's of Science; M.A. = Master's of Arts; M.S. = Master's of Science.

Table 4

Focus Group Participants' Teaching Experience

Category	Alfa School District (*n* = 6)	Bravo School District (*n* =4)	Charlie School District (*n* =4)	Delta School District (*n* = 6)	Totals (*n* = 20)
Years of experience teaching					
1 to 5	1	1	-	4	6
6 to 10	1	-	1	-	2
11 to 15	1	1	1	-	3
16 to 20	3	-	1	1	5
21+	-	2	1	1	4
Years of experience teaching kindergarten					
1 to 5	2	1	-	4	7
6 to 10	2	-	1	1	4
11 to 15	2	1	1	-	4
16 to 20	-	-	1	-	1
21+	-	2	1	1	4
Years of experience teaching inclusive kindergarten					
1	-	-	-	3	3
2	-	-	-	-	0
3	-	-	-	2	2
4	1	1	-	-	2
5+	5	3	4	1	13
Familiarity teaching children with disabilities					
Speech or language impairment	6	4	4	5	19
Developmental delay	6	3	4	3	16
Emotional disturbance	4	4	4	2	14
Autism	5	1	4	3	13
Other health impairment	4	2	3	1	10
Visual impairment/blindness	2	3	2	1	8
Specific learning disability	1	2	2	2	7
Hearing impairment	2	-	1	3	6
Intellectual disability	1	2	2	1	6
Orthopedic impairment	-	2	2	2	6
Multiple disabilities	1	-	1	3	5
Deafness	-	-	-	2	2
Traumatic brain injury	-	-	-	2	2

(n = 1 teacher), (g) specific learning disability (n = 1 teacher); and (h) visual

impairment/blindness (n = 1 teacher). All six teachers had at least one child with a disability in

their classroom who had a social goal on his/her Individualized Education Program (i.e., IEP).

An important characteristic of District Alfa was that it offered both half-day and full-day

kindergarten programs. The full-day program, where the six focus group participants taught, was

tuition-based. There were 15 full-day kindergarten classrooms in the district and these

classrooms were intermixed with half-day and full-day kindergarten classrooms housed together

among schools.

District Bravo

Four teachers from District Bravo participated in a focus group session that lasted 2 hours

and 12 minutes. On average the teachers had 19 years experience teaching (range = 4 to 30

years) and an average of 18 years experience teaching kindergarten (range = 4 to 30 years).

Three teachers had five or more years experience teaching in an inclusive kindergarten setting

and the other teacher had four years experience. Teachers identified the following categories of

disability represented by children included in their classroom this school year: (a) speech or

language impairment (n = 4 teachers), (b) emotional disturbance (n = 3 teachers), (c)

developmental delay (n = 2 teachers), (d) specific learning disability (n = 2 teachers), (e) visual

impairment/blindness (n = 2 teachers), (f) autism spectrum disorder (n = 1 teacher), (g)

intellectual disability (n = 1 teacher), and (h) orthopedic impairment (n = 1 teacher). Half of the

teachers had at least one child with a disability in their classroom who had a social goal on

his/her IEP. The teachers from District Bravo taught in half-day kindergarten programs and the

district was in the process of switching to a full-day program for the upcoming school year. One

of the teachers taught in a half-day bilingual classroom for kindergartners who were learning Spanish and English.

District Charlie

Four teachers from District Charlie participated in a focus group session that lasted 1 hour and 33 minutes. On average the teachers had 18 years experience teaching (range = 9 to 33 years) and all of their experience was in teaching kindergarten. All four teachers had five or more years experience teaching in an inclusive kindergarten setting. Teachers identified the following categories of disability represented by children included in their classroom this school year: (a) speech or language impairment (n = 4 teachers), (b) developmental delay (n = 3 teachers), (c) emotional disturbance (n = 2 teachers), and (d) visual impairment/blindness (n = 1 teacher). Half of the teachers had at least one child with a disability in their classroom who had a social goal on his/her IEP. District Charlie offered both half-day and full-day kindergarten programs. The teachers from District Charlie who participated in this study, taught in the full-day kindergarten classrooms. Their classrooms were located in the district's pre-kindergarten through kindergarten center.

District Delta

Six teachers from District Delta participated in a focus group session that lasted 1 hour and 15 minutes. On average the teachers had 8 years experience teaching (range = 2 to 22 years) and an average of 7 years experience teaching kindergarten (range = 2 to 22 years). One teacher had five or more years experience teaching in an inclusive kindergarten setting, two teachers had three years experience, and three teachers had one year of experience. Teachers identified the

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following categories of disability represented by children included in their classroom this school year: (a) speech or language impairment ($n = 5$ teachers), (b) developmental delay ($n = 3$ teachers), (c) autism spectrum disorder ($n = 2$ teachers), (d) hearing impairment ($n = 2$ teachers), and (multiple disabilities ($n = 2$ teachers). Note that two participants in this focus group, one special education and one general education, co-taught together. For the report of disabilities represented in their classroom, children were counted only once to represent both teachers. Additionally, it should be noted that the co-taught classroom included a larger number of children with disabilities when compared to other kindergarten classrooms in their school (i.e., 46% of the children in this class had identified disabilities). The co-teachers also reported that the severity of disability for the children in their classroom was greater than for children with disabilities in other kindergarten classrooms. Unlike the other focus group participants from *District Delta*, the teachers in the co-taught classroom were the only ones to have had at least one child with a disability included in their classroom who had a social goal on his/her IEP. The teachers from District Delta taught in full-day kindergarten classrooms within a school building that housed the district's pre-kindergarten through first grade classrooms. One other point of distinction was that one of the focus group participants taught in a Spanish two-way immersion (TWI) kindergarten classroom. In a Spanish TWI program, instruction is provided in Spanish and English to children who are native Spanish or English speakers. Next, a synopsis of the focus group procedures is provided.

Focus Group Procedures

The focus group sessions were scheduled based on teacher availability, and locations were selected based on factors such as adequate lighting, ventilation, quietness, and privacy to

ensure confidentiality. Of the first two groups, one group met in a private community room at a local restaurant and the other met in a conference room at a local library. For the last two groups, one met in one of the teacher's classrooms after school hours and the other met in their school's conference room. The total time of the sessions, counting discussion time only, ranged from 75 to 138 min ($M = 109.5$ min). Each teacher received a $50.00 Amazon gift card immediately following the focus group session.

Focus group interview guide. An interview guide, informed by the review of literature on teachers' perspectives and use of social interaction practices, was used across all focus group sessions. The interview guide helped keep discussions about key issues consistent across groups and helped keep the conversation focused while still allowing for unique contributions and insights from participants (see the focus group interview guide in Appendix C; Patton, 2002).

Pilot procedures. The interview guide was piloted with three kindergarten teachers from a non-participating school district. Field notes were taken during the pilot and were used to revise the interview guide and questions. The pilot also provided me with an opportunity to refresh my focus group moderation skills.

Fidelity of focus group implementation. During the focus group sessions, the assistant moderators completed a fidelity of focus group implementation guide (see Appendix D). The fidelity of implementation for the four focus groups ranged from 90 to 100% ($M = 97.5\%$). In one focus group, the assistant moderator did not have the opportunity to ask questions to the participants. To remedy this, the assistant moderator and I discussed the questions she wanted to ask during our debriefing meeting. The questions were logistical in nature and could be answered by any of the teachers (e.g., How many school psychologists work at your school? Do they work

between different buildings or do they work only at your school?). These questions were sent to the teacher who conducted that focus group's member check.

Participants' feedback about focus group implementation. To enhance the study's credibility, participants completed a brief, anonymous questionnaire regarding the focus group session. The fidelity of implementation questionnaire was adapted from Rous, Myers, and Stricklin (2007) and can be found in Appendix E. It covered topics such as flow of the discussion, participants' comfort level, and their knowledge level. Additionally, there were three forced choice questions about topics related to creating social opportunities and supporting peer interactions for children with disabilities such as its importance, teachers' comfort level, and amount of time available. The questionnaire also restated five interview questions to provide participants with an opportunity to write comments that they may not have felt comfortable sharing in the large group.

Participants' feedback about the focus group sessions can be found in Table 5. In regards to focus group implementation, a majority of the teachers felt that they and their colleagues had an equal opportunity to speak at a fairly easy pace, that they could comfortably express their opinions even if they were not similar to others' opinions, and that they understood all the issues that were discussed. Answers provided by teachers to the five open-ended interview questions and three forced choice questions about creating social opportunities and supporting peer interactions for children with disabilities are reported in Chapter 4 with the findings of this study.

Table 5

Participants' Feedback About Focus Group Implementation

Questions and multiple choice responses	Frequency of responses (*n* = 20)
1. How would you describe the *flow of the discussion*?	
(a) There was so much discussion that it felt rushed to get through all the questions.	(*n* = 1)
(b) All members had an equal opportunity to speak at a fairly easy pace.	(*n* = 19)
(c) The discussion was dominated by a few people.	(*n* = 0)
2. How would you describe your *comfort level* in expressing your opinions during the focus group session?	
(a) I felt comfortable expressing my opinion, even if it was not similar to the other members' opinions.	(*n* = 19)
(b) I felt comfortable expressing some of my opinions, but I kept some thoughts to myself.	(*n* = 1)
(c) I did not feel comfortable expressing my opinions.	(*n* = 0)
3. How would you describe your *knowledge level* in regards to topics discussed during today's session?	
(a) I understood all the issues that were discussed.	(*n* = 18)
(b) I learned some new things from the discussion.	(*n* = 2)
(c) I learned a lot of new things from the discussion today.	(*n* = 0)

Debriefing session. Following each focus group, I met with the assistant moderator for a post-session debriefing meeting as one way to begin the data analysis process (Krueger & Casey, 2009). First, we debriefed by checking the audio recording to make sure it successfully captured the focus group conversation. Second, we discussed what themes were heard and added this information to our original field notes.

Member check. Within three days of each focus group session, I independently listened to the full audio-recording again, re-checked my anecdotal notes for completeness, and wrote a summary of the focus group discussion capturing big ideas and salient issues. I randomly selected one teacher from each group to provide a member check of my written summary (see

member check email in Appendix F). Teachers chose to provide feedback by sending me an email message or making comments via the track change function in Microsoft Word and sending me the updated document. The feedback provided by teachers during this member check is provided in Table 6.

Table 6

Member Check Feedback

Focus group	Feedback
District Alfa	I think your summary of our focus group is great. I feel it accurately describes what we talked about without any biases or additions on your part. I honestly do think your summary states what the group discussed, hitting all of our points without any additions or changes to what we said. As I read your summary I could remember how our conversations got there and what examples were given, so that helps me to know that it is an accurate summary.
District Bravo	I just read through it and it looks very good. You have expressed our opinions nicely. Thank you for the opportunity to be involved in this focus group. It was an interesting conversation.
District Charlie	Edited PBIS to *PBIS-style* and noted, "*We do not have the official program, ours is an independent customized version.*" In response to the summary statement: "Teachers felt that kindergartners have a desire to include and be respectful of their peers with disabilities," the teacher wrote: "*This is partially the result of children's innate ability and desire to reflect the behaviors and environmental norms and standards modeled for them by trusted adults. When staff provides appropriate positive modeling, children accept it as 'the way the world is supposed to operate.'*" Added to the summary statement: "Teachers reinforce the school psychologists' lessons throughout the week *and beyond as situational contexts require*." Added to the summary statement: "Additionally, teachers commented that classroom spaces could benefit from being larger to fit the increasing number of children in their care *(e.g., class size is currently 22+ and is anticipated to be 26+)."*

Table 6 (continued)

Focus group	Feedback
District Delta	Your five-page document concerning our thoughts from the session was an accurate reflection of our discussion that day. I have no concerns with any of the topics you elaborated on.

Note. Additions or responses added to the member check summary by the teacher providing feedback are italicized.

Transcription and accuracy check. The focus group audiotapes were professionally transcribed into a word processor with all identifying information removed for confidentiality purposes. Following the transcription of a session's audiotape, I checked the entire transcript for accuracy and made edits when necessary. Also, the professional transcription contained a generic placeholder each time an alternating speaker was identified during the dialogue (i.e., "Female"). The assistant moderators took detailed notes as to who spoke and when, so I was able to add participants' code names next to their comments. This detail aided my interpretation of the data during the analysis phrase that is described next.

Data Analysis

Transcripts from the focus groups were analyzed as soon as they were prepared using a grounded theory style of coding (i.e., constant-comparative method; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). It is important to note that a colleague with her Ph.D. in Special Education, who has experience in qualitative methodology, collaborated with me during the data analysis process to strengthen the credibility of the findings (Brantlinger et al., 2005). To start the process, we individually read the focus group transcripts and unitized the data by identifying excerpts that provided information about one or more of the study's research questions. A unit was defined as "the smallest amount

of information that is informative by itself" (Vaughn et al., 1996, p. 106). Each excerpt was linked to one or more of the research questions.

Following this method of identifying units of information from the transcripts (average length of transcripts was 48 typed pages, range = 34 to 65), we met and came to agreement on the units identified and assignment to specific research questions. Following this step, we independently coded the excerpts line-by-line to note major ideas that emerged (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Multiple codes could be given to each excerpt to define the ideas' dimensions and properties that were present. These multiple dimensions and properties, represented by codes, later helped form categories and provided a rich description of the ideas represented in the focus group discussions in relation to the study's research questions. After this step, we discussed our initial codes, refined our codes and categories, and reached consensus on the development of the codes, categories, and their defining features. We reviewed all transcripts in this way and results are presented in the next chapter.

As additional data were collected we used axial coding to compare initial codes and categories to each other and to new data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In this process of constant comparison, we looked for similarities and differences between codes and categories to further differentiate and define category development. At the conclusion of coding the fourth focus group transcript we examined the data to determine whether or not theoretical saturation had been reached (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Patton, 2002). By this session, we determined categories were saturated and no new ideas were likely to emerge from additional focus groups. The last step in the data analysis process was to engage in an interrater agreement process that is described next.

Interrater Agreement

Johnson and LaMontagne's (1993) guidelines for content analysis and interrater agreement were used for this study. A doctoral student from the Department of Special Education who was not involved with data collection or analysis conducted the reliability check on the category development. To train the rater, I selected a small sample (i.e., 10%) of coded data from each category. I discussed the categories and their definitions with the graduate student. A point-by-point method of agreement was used (i.e., agreements divided by agreements plus disagreements, multiplied by 100) and training was considered successful when the rater reached at least 80% reliability for each category. Once the training criterion was met, the rater coded an additional 30% of the data that was randomly selected from each category. The range of reliability across all categories was 80% to 100% ($M = 96\%$).

Credibility

Several steps were taken to safeguard that the findings from this study are credible. In order to determine which activities should be included to enhance credibility, the indicators of high-quality, qualitative research in special education were reviewed (Brantlinger et al., 2005) and applications of high-quality focus group designs in early intervention/early childhood special education research were studied (Brotherson, 1994; Brotherson & Goldstein, 1992). While an array of activities could be undertaken to promote the credibility of qualitative research, the determination of which activities to conduct is greatly dependent on a study's design and characteristics of the study (Brantlinger et al., 2005). With this in mind, credibility activities applied during this study are described next.

Credibility activities occurring during the focus group sessions. One of the credibility activities implemented during the focus group sessions was to use multiple sources of data to

confirm the ideas provided by participants. One way this activity was actualized was simply by having multiple participants from the same school district in the focus group sessions. This provided natural opportunities for discussants to triangulate information that was shared (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Two other credibility activities occurred during the focus group sessions. First, I gave a brief oral summary of the participants' discussion at the end of the session. Participants had an opportunity to confirm, challenge, correct, or add to the summary. Second, the focus group implementation questionnaire, previously mentioned, gave participants a chance to share their views on whether the ways in which data were collected during the session was appropriate (e.g., flow of conversation, comfort sharing ideas, and knowledge of the issues discussed). This questionnaire also provided an opportunity for participants to share additional information related to the research questions. The participants' responses to the open-ended questions were transcribed and analyzed similar to other participant data collected in this study. Next, credibility activities completed immediately or soon after the focus group sessions are described.

Credibility activities occurring after the completion of a focus group session. Many of the activities to establish credibility in the findings, that took place at the end of a focus group session, have already been described earlier in the paper. These activities included: (a) audio-recordings being transcribed verbatim, (b) checking the entire typed transcript for accuracy, (c) having a debriefing meeting with the session's assistant moderator, (d) conducting a member check of the written focus group summary, and (e) engaging in collaborative work which included conducting an interrater agreement process. Another credibility activity that took place during the data analysis phase was to look for disconfirming evidence. That is, as I reviewed transcripts I looked for ideas or incidents that did not fit the emerging patterns or themes

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(Brotherson & Goldstein, 1992; Patton, 2002). I used Brotherson and Goldstein's (1992)

description of disconfirming cases to guide my work looking for incidents that were "exceptions

to the rule or instances that cause the rule to be broadened or redefined" (p. 338). When

disconfirming evidence was found, I brought it to the attention of future focus group participants

as another form of member check. These focus group participants had the opportunity to discuss

the incident and provide further evidence to help us discern its' significance in relation to other

patterns in the data. Examples of disconfirming evidence included teachers' perspectives about

the opportunities available for children with disabilities to interact with their peers during half-

day kindergarten programs, opportunities for and strategies used to monitor the social interaction

skills and peer interactions of children with disabilities, and children's social interaction skills at

kindergarten entry. There was no disconfirming evidence identified in the final focus group

session. While the credibility of qualitative research tends to receive the most attention, it also is

important to discuss the study's generalizability, or more preferably, transferability of findings.

Generalizability and Transferability

Researchers who conduct qualitative research traditionally focus on individual cases,

incidents, and populations, while not necessarily being concerned with how their findings might

generalize or transfer to other cases, incidents, and populations (Patton, 2002; Stake 2010). The

findings from focus group research often lay the foundation for future studies, which would

consist of different research designs that could establish generalizable findings (Vaughn et al.,

1996). A primary reason why focus group findings are not generalizable is because participants

are not randomly sampled (Bloor et al., 2001). However, even if focus group participants had

been randomly sampled, it would be unlikely that the findings would be generalizable because such a small number of teachers participated (Morgan, 1997).

Yet, instead of focusing on generalizability, the concept of transferability can be given attention when conducting focus group research. Transferability activities provide support for understanding the particular experiences of an individual or group of individuals. They also provide information necessary for others to develop their own understanding of how the findings might relate to them, thus making the findings potentially transferable to other similar groups. Several transferability activities were used in this study and are described next.

A crucial transferability activity was to clearly describe and define the purposive sampling strategies used in this study and outline the recruitment process. Another activity that aids in transferability of knowledge is the use of contextual, thick descriptions (Patton, 2002; Stake, 2010). Several data collection methods and sources were used to better understand participants' experiences and work settings in order to provide thick descriptions. Methods and sources included: (a) a teacher demographic questionnaire, (b) district-wide data from a national database, and (c) interview questions that probed participants to discuss their unique experiences. Collecting and reporting this information provides readers with information that may help them decide how the findings from this study relate to their own lives. Key findings from this study are reported next.

<center>**Chapter 4**</center>

<center>**Results**</center>

The findings from the four focus group sessions to learn about teachers' perspectives on current practices that facilitate peer-related social competence for kindergartners with disabilities are grouped by research question in this chapter. First, the research questions are restated along with interview questions that elicited teachers' responses. Second, the categories identified through systematic analysis of the focus group data are presented. Third, a synthesis of the focus group conversations is presented along with the categories that emerged during data analysis. Fourth, an interpretation of the findings in regard to the research questions are presented. Words italicized in this section represent specialized language that originated from the focus group participants versus the lead moderator. Emphasizing these words is meant to aid the reader in their interpretation and understanding of the teachers' comments (e.g., words like *pre-loading, mother-hens, balance)*. Before presenting the focus group data, it is necessary to discuss how, based on my interactions and conversations with teachers during the focus group sessions, I believe they came to translate and make sense of the phrase "children with disabilities" when answering questions.

An Interpretation of What "Children With Disabilities" Meant to Teachers

It is important to note that exploring teachers' perspectives about supporting the peer interactions and social interaction skills of children with disabilities was at the forefront of this study's research questions. I emphasized this purpose at the start of each focus group session and with prompts provided throughout the discussion. Regardless of this emphasis, during focus group discussions, teachers responded to the questions by referencing not only children with

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identified disabilities but also kindergartners who teachers identified as having delays in their social interaction skills yet who did not have an official diagnosis or an IEP.

As teachers discussed the questions posed to them, they moved back and forth between talking about both the general and particular aspects of supporting social interaction skills for all children, children with identified disabilities and children who were struggling to interact appropriately with peers. Three beliefs, based on teachers' discussions across the four focus groups, suggest why teachers may have interpreted the phrase "children with disabilities" to include children without disabilities. First, teachers believed that all kindergartners needed additional instruction on social-emotional skills. Second, teachers believed that many children came to school without the necessary play or social interaction skills to successfully interact and build relationships with peers. Lastly, teachers believed that supporting all children's social-emotional development was something they valued and saw as one of their primary responsibilities as a teacher.

Taken together, the findings that follow are based on teachers' perspectives about kindergartners who struggle to interact appropriately with peers. In some cases this refers specifically to children with identified disabilities and in other cases it does not. When reading the findings, it is important to keep this interpretation of teachers' beliefs in mind.

A Caveat: Children Identified as Dual Language Learners

It is important to clarify a term that participants used to describe young children who are acquiring two or more languages. Teachers used the term English Language Learners (ELLs) to describe children learning multiple languages. However, the recommended term to use is Dual Language Learners (DLLs) since this term "acknowledges that young children are in the process of acquiring language, not a particular language" (DEC, 2010, p. 7). The only time the term

English Language Learners or ELLs is used in this chapter is when it is part of a quote taken directly from teachers.

For one group of teachers (i.e., at least five of the teachers in District Alfa) there were many children included in their classrooms who were identified as international refugees and as Dual Language Learners (DLLs). These teachers, in particular, often referred to children who were DLLs as children needing the most support to achieve successful peer interactions and relationships in their classrooms. Often, when they were responding to questions about children with disabilities, they were simultaneously discussing children identified as DLLs. As one teacher described it, and others agreed:

> I'm sitting here thinking we give all this . . . all this extra thought, attention [to children with identified disabilities] . . . it's wonderful, please don't get me wrong, if children have a special need . . . like my little guy who has Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. You now, he's got his delays. That's fine. But, if you ask me, it's a disability to come into a classroom and not be able to speak English. (Hyejin)

As a researcher, former early childhood special education teacher, and teacher educator, I do not believe it is accurate to describe children identified as refugees or as DLLs as children with disabilities. I view acquiring and using more than one language to be a strength and prefer to carefully monitor individual development to determine whether a disability is present. In light of facilitating a respectful focus group session, I did not think it was appropriate to voice this opinion to the teachers at the time. This being said, some teachers included DLLS under the umbrella of children with disabilities.

However, the teachers' years of experience and awareness of kindergartners' developmental milestones led me to believe that teachers may have used the term DLLs to refer to children who were learning to speak two or more languages and who may have been at risk for disabilities. The teachers discussed at length the difficulty they had acquiring additional supports

and services for DLLs who they thought were not achieving age-appropriate developmental

milestones. An excerpt that highlights this discussion follows:

> *Michelle:* [The director] looked at me and said, "They're ELLs. We need to give them more time." Here's nine other ELLs in my class who are making great progress. It's comparing apples to apples. I'm not comparing apples to oranges. I'm comparing apples to apples and these kids are severely delayed. They need Occupational Therapists. They need Physical Therapists. They need Speech Language Pathologists. They need Social Workers.
>
> *Natalie:* Because our ELLs are not assessed for . . .
>
> *Melinda:* Special Education.
>
> *Natalie:* Especially in Michelle's classroom population. There are some children whose families have been living in refugee camps for years. And these children have had nutritional issues. Therefore, it's not just their language. It's that they're cognitively behind. . . .
>
> *Natalie:* Their whole mindset and their whole being.

While it is challenging to untangle the teachers' interpretation and use of the terms children with

disabilities and DLLs, knowledge of the teachers' backgrounds, classroom populations, and

experiences offers some insight into how they may have approached questions asked during the

focus group. Next, the categories identified through analysis of the focus group data are

presented by research question.

Kindergarten Teachers' View of Their Role in Supporting Peer Interactions and Relationships for Children With Disabilities

During the focus groups, teachers were asked to describe their role in supporting peer

interactions and relationships for children with disabilities and their classmates. Teachers were

asked to think back to a time when they had children with disabilities in their classrooms who

had difficulty interacting with peers or who were struggling to make friends. With this in mind,

teachers were asked about the roles they assumed in supporting children's peer interaction skills,

who or what influenced their roles, their level of confidence in identifying friendships of their

students with disabilities and what impacted their feelings of confidence.

Five categories emerged from teachers' responses to these questions and in their

discussion of supporting the peer interactions and relationship development of kindergartners

with disabilities. These categories included: (a) creating an accepting, safe, and supportive

community; (b) the academic curriculum can wait; (c) pairing and grouping children; (d)

monitoring and intervening; and (d) parents' interest in children's friendships. Definitions for

each category are presented in Table 7. A synthesis of the focus group conversations by category

is presented next.

Creating an accepting, safe, and supportive community. Teachers from all four

districts appeared to promote an accepting, safe, and supportive community through class-wide

instruction. The teachers mentioned how they discussed expectations for positive behavior with

all students and taught those expectations to students through modeling and role-playing.

Table 7

Teachers' Views of Their Roles in Supporting Peer Interactions and Relationships for Children With Disabilities

Category	Definition
Accepting, safe, and supportive community	Teachers discuss the ways they create an accepting, safe, and supportive community for all children and include comments about promoting positive attitudes towards peers with disabilities (e.g., class-wide discussions about similarities and differences among classmates). This includes teachers' thoughts about establishing expectations for children's behavior and how they or other staff members teach and reinforce positive behaviors and expectations (e.g., class-wide positive behavior support [social skills curriculum such as Second Step, Superflex, etc.], modeling, creating rules, pre-teaching skills, and praise).
The curriculum can wait	Teachers discuss the importance and value of the social-emotional domain in children's development. This includes teachers' comments about having to explain or defend the value of social-emotional development to administrators, teachers' feelings of responsibility to teach social skills in kindergarten, teachers' attempts to create time in their schedule or take advantage of teachable moments to include social-emotional instruction, and teachers willingness to set aside academic expectations or other curriculum in order to focus on social-emotional instruction.
Pairing or grouping children	Teachers discuss prompting or placing children together with peers (e.g., partners or small groups) across the day (e.g., during centers, seatwork) and/or their thought processes behind intentional groupings (e.g., pairing children, establishing buddies, assigning children to groups for instruction).

Table 7 (continued)

Category	Definition
Monitoring and intervening	Teachers discuss how and when they monitor children's peer interactions, friendships, social-emotional skills, or positive behavior across the school day. This includes discussions about opportunities to observe children, what teachers look for in terms of children's behaviors, and the degree to which they feel knowledgeable about the children they teach. Additionally, comments that include teachers' thoughts about intervening to support peer interactions, social-emotional skills, or positive behaviors go here. This includes discussions about child-specific interventions (e.g., social stories), related services children receive, and additional support provided by school staff (e.g., special education teachers, social workers, school secretaries, etc.). Details about any difficulty monitoring or intervening to support children's peer interactions, friendships, social-emotional skills, or positive behavior should be included here.
Parents will tell you	Teachers discuss parent feedback about children's friendships. This includes parents' concerns about their children needing more teacher support to establish friendships with peers. Any comments about how or when teachers and parents' discuss children's friendships are included here.

Teachers from District Alfa defined the action of teaching expectations and having

discussions about behaviors during daily activities as *pre-loading*. One teacher said, "I call it pre-

loading. You need to pre-load the kids so that they know what to expect and what to do, how to

handle themselves. Some children need that a lot more than others" (Hyejin). Similarly, teachers

from District Bravo reported pre-teaching children classroom expectations and referred to it as

frontloading.

Teachers also noted how classroom discussions about differences helped promote

understanding and acceptance of children who might be learning to interact appropriately with

peers. In terms of having discussions about differences and acceptance one teacher said:

> It was always back to a carpet meeting. That he's our friend and we're not going to talk
> about this [an episode of challenging behavior that led to the child being removed from
> the classroom] when he comes back in. How can we move forward? They really adjust. I
> feel like kids get it. They know. They know there's something wrong with Keith, but they
> know that he's our friend and that he's getting help. (Julie, District Alfa)

A little later another teacher in the same focus group commented:

> I just feel like if you pre-load the kids to know that this particular child has these issues,
> and this is how we handle them, then I feel like they do okay with it. You talk to your
> kids about people being different on the outside and people being different on the inside.
> If your kids see wheelchairs or kids going through chemotherapy, you talk about it. It's
> kind of the same thing. I find that they [peers without disabilities] are very forgiving of it
> and they just are very accepting, If you let them know that this is just how life is, that
> some kids are different on the inside, and that they can't control it. (Michelle, District
> Alfa)

Additionally, teachers from three of the four participating districts (i.e., Districts Alfa,

Charlie, and Delta) discussed how implementation of a class-wide social-emotional curriculum

by their school social workers or psychologists helped them support children's peer interactions

and learn appropriate social behaviors. Details about the implementation of these curricula are

mentioned below in the section *Facilitators and Barriers to Supporting Peer Interactions and*

Relationships for Children with Disabilities.

Lastly, teachers discussed establishing a "family-like" atmosphere in their classrooms by building relationships with children. These relationships contributed to the creation of an accepting, safe, and supportive community that teachers felt helped support children's development of peer relationships.

The academic curriculum can wait. Teachers from all four focus groups were in agreement that children's social-emotional development was central to their work in kindergarten. Many stated that they felt a strong responsibility to teach social interaction skills. One teacher said, "I do find that in kindergarten, you know, as we all know, social skills are very important to teach" (Julie, District Alfa). A teacher from District Bravo said, "I feel much more responsible for teaching your child social skills and how to behave at school, then for your child knowing the alphabet" (Sallee).

Expressing their passion for curriculum and instruction that supported peer interactions, the teachers from District Alfa recalled having to fight for elements of their curriculum that they thought were important for kindergartners. They shared:

Hyejin: We had to fight for centers because when all-day kindergarten came in . . . Do you remember this? That meeting? It was like, "Oh, no, there will be no house play. There will be no . . . "

Michelle: Building block areas. There will be nothing.

Hyejin: I'm like, "Oh, no, no, no. They're five. They still need to play with the fake bologna and the little piece of cheese." So we did fight for those and so we do have those.

A teacher from District Charlie shared a moving story about a time when she set aside the academic curriculum to help a child with a disability make connections with her classmates. Before she began the story, she said, "We all have a story like this, so it's not just me" (Catherine). In the story, which lasted for several minutes and brought a majority of the teachers to tears, Catherine explained how a girl with a disability, who was learning to use more

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expressive language, exclaimed she wanted an Easy-Bake™ Oven. This occurred when a group of her peers were talking about what they wanted for Christmas. Surprised by the complexity of the girl's comment the teacher said she felt like she was "going to burst into tears!" because it was rare for the girl to use language in the way she did and express her feelings to others. The teacher said that she immediately went to other teachers to tell them the story and said, "She's getting an Easy Bake oven!" The teacher went on to explain how the girl was from a poor family and who was growing up under rough circumstances. The teacher knew the girl's family would most likely not be able to afford an Easy-Bake™ Oven, so she was determined to give one to the child.

The teacher anonymously gifted the Easy-Bake™ Oven to the little girl over winter break by leaving it on the family's front porch. The teacher described how she was worried that someone might steal it, but when school resumed in January the little girl ran up to her the minute she got to school and said, "Do you know I got an Easy-Bake™ oven?" The teacher was elated. Over time, however, it became obvious that the little girl had not played with the oven for reasons unknown to the teacher. So, the teacher asked the child's mom if she would send the oven to school. The child's mom did and the teacher created time for the little girl to play with her oven at school with some of her peers who also were interested in baking. The girl's brother, who also attended school in the same building, was invited to come to the classroom and taste the finished baked goods. The teacher said he was, "so excited!"

As the teacher finished her story, others said that they too had stories like that one. An excerpt from their conversation follows:

Catherine: It's so much more than academics.

Emily: That's what I was going to say.

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Catherine: It's so much bigger than that. It is so much bigger than that.

Emily: We could be here until midnight telling those kinds of stories.

Another teacher said how impressed she was with how Catherine approached the situation with the little girl, giving the young girl a reason to talk with her peers and share an exciting activity with them. This teacher said to Catherine, "you have given her [the little girl] a story more than once. You have allowed her to have something to interact with her peers about" (Alicia). Alicia went on to say that *providing children with a story* so they could engage with their peers was something she had learned from Catherine. Alicia said that she learned that children with disabilities or children who came from lower socioeconomic families could not "compete on their peers' social level without a story."

Pairing and grouping children. When it came to pairing and grouping children together, teachers from all four districts discussed the importance of assigning children to groups rather than having children select their own partners or groups. Teachers tried to group children with peers who they thought would be positive role models. Teachers discussed carefully planning who should be seated by each other, who should be partners, and regularly rotating groupings to promote socialization among peers. As teachers from District Bravo described the process, they noted that they wanted children to use their social interaction skills with many peers and did not want to contribute to the creation of cliques among children in their classrooms. An excerpt from their conversation follows:

Sallee: I usually use it [knowledge of children's social interaction skills and friendships] when I'm pairing kids up for their stations. I kind of use what I know about who is friends with each other. I mean, if they work well together, there's a good chance they'll get to be at the same station at the same time or they might get to be partners**.** But, I usually don't put good friends together as partners because I want them to be practicing their social skills. You know, including other kids.

Charis: Broaden.

Sallee: Otherwise, it just becomes a little clique with the two of them. You know. Feelings get hurt. It's just not pretty. I learned that my first year. I usually use it [knowledge of children's social interaction skills and friendships] when pairing kids together or even grouping them at their seats and tables. Some of the instruction is done while they are in their seats at their table and that's, especially during writing and math time, that's the time they're most tempted to talk to each other, when they may not always get the . . . the extra few minutes to do that. So, I use that [knowledge] to make seating charts and pair kids together based on . . . just how well they work together. It's not even necessarily about friendships, but just how well they work with each other.

Another strategy that teachers from Districts Alfa and Charlie discussed using was peer buddies. Teachers explained that they chose peer buddies for children who were struggling to engage appropriately in activities and routines. Sometimes the decision to partner children together occurred incidentally, in the moment, and other times it was planned well in advance. Teachers reported that children remained buddies for various amounts of time. Sometimes children would be buddies for the length of a specific activity or routine, or sometimes for a week, or even longer. One teacher from District Alfa described the children she selected as positive peer models as *preschool-bred kids*. In an excerpt about peer buddies, two teachers shared:

Michelle: Like the first couple of weeks of school, I pick one of my pre-school bred kids who knows the routine already within the first day. I just say, "You're their buddy for the next week or two. It's your job to make sure they are outside playing with you. It's your job to make sure they're in line every day."

Hyejin: I will tell the child who got to the center first, because he finished the work first, almost basically, "You're in charge. It's this week. This is going to be your buddy. Come on, let's go." The child brings the peer along with them.

Along with intentionally pairing and grouping children together, a couple of teachers across the focus groups commented on letting children choose their own partners. One teacher from District Delta described how and when she let children pick their own groups. She said,

Sometimes we pick the groups and organize them, and other times we don't. It just depends. Children think it's more of a free day when they get to pick their own group [for

centers], but we always know who they want to partner with. We don't always allow that, but some days we do. (Chris)

Two teachers from District Alfa and one teacher from District Charlie also mentioned that they allowed children to choose their own partners. For two of the teachers this opportunity occurred during independent play/free choice time. For the other teacher, opportunities for children to select their own partner occurred during the Daily Five™ literacy framework when children were required to "Read to Someone." Colleagues reminded this teacher that even though children could choose their own partners during the "Read to Someone" time, children could only choose classmates who were at the same reading level and therefore children's partner choices were limited.

One insightful comment came from a teacher in Distict Delta. Her comment did not specifically address intentionally pairing or grouping children together, but she described getting peers involved while teaching certain skills to children with disabilities. In the example she gave, she was working with a child to increase the number of verbal requests he made. In the scenario she described, she asked a peer to hold onto a pencil the child with a disability would need during a seatwork activity. She prompted the child with a disability to ask his peer for the pencil and the peer gave the child the pencil upon request. The teacher said she often involved peers in this way. It should be noted that the teacher who shared this example was the only one, across all focus group participants, to graduate from a Special Education department.

Overall, teachers reported they were in charge when it came to grouping children together. They mainly focused on making sure children who were struggling could engage in their work and interact with peers who were good role models.

Monitoring and intervening. Teachers from two districts (i.e., Districts Charlie and Delta) stated that observing children's peer interactions, social-emotional skills, and positive

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behaviors was somewhat easy. Most of the teachers felt like observing children's peer

interactions were just a part of their day. Some teachers from these two focus groups could not

fathom how other teachers could struggle with monitoring or knowing the children in their

classrooms. Teachers from these focus groups also shared that they observe children across the

school day (e.g., centers time, recess, whole group, transitions, play time) and during any social

opportunity that children had to engage with peers.

On the other hand, teachers from two districts (i.e., Districts Alfa and Bravo) felt that

they observed children as best as they could with help from paraprofessionals, specialists, or

school staff who spent time in their classrooms. However, teachers from these two groups

reported more incidents of struggling to observe children's peer interactions and to know

children's classroom friendships than teachers from the other focus groups. Teachers who said

they had lower levels of confidence in identifying children's friendships mentioned the

constraints on their time made it difficult to observe children's peer interactions. One teacher

from District Alfa described it like this:

> *LaShorage:* I would almost say off the top of my head, I would be one of those really
> low-ranging people (not confident identifying children's friendships). Just
> because I put you two in the same group, it doesn't mean that you consider
> yourselves friends. But at the same time, they're five and they almost
> consider anyone that they play with a friend except those that butt heads.

A little later, the teacher continued her line of thinking:

> *LaShorage:* You can't watch and just see when they're at their centers or their choice,
> because that's when you're pulling kids aside. "You have no idea what I just
> taught you, so come let me" or you're dealing with kids at a center because
> they're fighting over a book.
>
> *Natalie:* The guided reading time.
>
> *LaShorage:* You don't have time to just sit there and say, "Well, who is choosing who?
> Who is playing with who?"

Again, LaShorage brought up this idea a little later in the conversation:

I think we'd have to set aside time based on the fact that we're supposed to get in all this guided reading time which we can only do when the kids are at centers and they're working independently. That would be the time that I would think, okay, if I have to watch who they're playing with and who they're interacting with on their own, that's when it's going to be. But I have these other demands put on me.

This teacher felt, and others from District Alfa agreed, that their roles, responsibilities, and instructional decisions could ultimately decrease the amount of time available for them to observe and facilitate peer interactions when needed. Teachers from District Bravo supported this idea and felt that their roles and responsibilities made it difficult to monitor children's social behaviors. They also mentioned how their classroom roles and responsibilities made it difficult to teach social skills and foster positive peer relationships during appropriate teachable moments.

When children were engaged in learning center work, teachers such as those in District Bravo, usually led instruction with a small group of children. If, while leading a small group lesson, the teacher saw a situation where children could use support to guide their social-emotional development and prevent challenging behaviors, she was left in a predicament. She had to determine if she should intervene to capture the positive learning opportunity and help the children practice their social skills and facilitate a positive interaction between the two children, or should she ignore the behavior, continue to lead instruction, and let the children solve the problem themselves. In situations like this, one teacher asked herself, "Am I being fair to the child [who is going to engage in challenging behaviors] if I just let it ride" (Anne)? The teacher said she often tried to stop her work with the small group so she could facilitate and teach social skills during teachable moments, but added, "we can't always intervene when we need to."

Teachers reported that barriers such as limited adult support, and large class sizes made it difficult to teach social skills in naturally occurring moments. Due to this, one strategy mentioned by a few teachers was to prevent negative peer interactions from happening in the first place. Teachers described preventing negative peer interactions by removing children with

disabilities from the proximity of their peers. For example, teachers discussed that this could

happen when children were unable to interact appropriately at tables during seatwork or centers.

One teacher said, "I have kids who get moved. For the rest of this time until you get your paper

done, you have to sit over here at the writing center because you can't multitask and get your

work done" (LaShorage, District Alfa). Another teacher said,

> I have a child who sits at a table of four, but three of his seatmates leave the classroom during Daily Five™. This leaves him alone to do his Daily Five™ literacy centers. He says, "I'm alone. I have nobody to go to centers with." I go, "Exactly." He does his best work. He can't fight. He has nobody to pick on. (Hyejin, District Alfa)

Sallee, a teacher from District Bravo described using this strategy in the excerpt below:

> There's a whole bunch of different stations that children can go to and there can be four or five kids working at the same station. This year I have an odd number of kids, so I have one kid . . . I either have to put him in a group of three, or working alone because he just can't get along with people, so he has to work by himself this year. Usually children all have a partner or a group of three.

Later, Sallee continued by saying,

> My little guy started doing it [engaging in challenging behaviors with peers] within the first week of school. He was somebody who would, mid-coloring, just grab [another child's crayon] and start coloring with it. At first I didn't see it because there are 30 kids at the beginning of the year. I'm lucky to know who's who, but a couple parents came and complained so I really started watching. I couldn't believe he would do that! I talked to him about it and then finally it just got to the point where he was hurting other kids. Now he has a desk all by himself in the back.

One more time, Sallee brought up how she would intervene to support a child who struggled to

interact appropriately with peers. This time she commented on her decision-making process by

saying,

> Sometimes when I know that a particular child is going to have a hard time that day . . . you know, we start out the day calling everybody stupid. I just know center time is not going to go well, so I'm tempted to say [to myself], "Okay, let me just put him with an iPad today or let me just put him on the computer so I can just avoid those bad social situations that I know are bound to happen." But in the back of my mind, I also know if he doesn't have those bad experiences, he's not going to learn from them. It's finding the balance between how much can I put up with and what do I want to subject the rest of the kids to?

The struggle that Sallee described resonated with other teachers in the District Bravo focus group. In light of this, teachers from District Bravo as well as teachers from District Alfa said they were more apt to prevent the negative interactions from occurring in the first place by removing children from close proximity to their peers and making sure they would not have opportunities to interact with less than ideal role models.

In terms of monitoring and intervening to support children's peer interactions, teachers from District Bravo discussed their difficulties documenting that a child may need additional social-emotional supports. They referred to an unwritten school policy that children's challenging behaviors had to impact their academic development before more intensive supports could be provided. An excerpt highlighting this conversation follows:

Jamie: A lot of times that is the magic thing: Is it effecting their learning? It might not be. At this level, at kindergarten, it might not be at that moment or it might not show that much of a difference. So, we don't address behavior. But then children will go to first grade, second grade, and then you see that divide. Now it really is effecting academics. But we've waited so long that now when we finally do get interventions for children, they're a grade level behind. They're a year and a half behind. They're always behind. Then how are they ever going to catch up? If we had gotten to this child when that kindergarten teacher said in October there's something not right here, would that child have ever fallen behind? Or would they have fallen behind that much?

Sallee: As teachers and educators, I think we have said multiple times in our conversations with each other that you have that teacher instinct. You have that gut. You can tell as soon as the student starts the first day of school who is going to need the most support and who is going to need those extra interventions throughout the year.

Sallee went on to describe her experiences this year trying to get additional supports for a child in her classroom who engaged in persistent challenging behavior with peers. She described the experience as a "tiring process to prove that . . . yes, I see these behaviors and I know they are going to impact his academics." Sallee described how the young boy had gone to preschool and was doing well academically when he entered kindergarten so it looked like, "he knew a lot of

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letters and sounds." She found it difficult to prove that the boy's challenging behaviors and poor peer interactions were impacting his learning.

However, Sallee continued to proceed with interventions she could implement by herself in the classroom such as pairing him with a peer who would have "enough determination and self-help skills that she would be okay even if he said, 'No! I don't want to do that!'" Sallee finally felt like she had reached a point when nothing she was doing improved the child's behavior and she went to her building's behavior support team. In December, Sallee reported she finally received outside assistance; a social worker started visiting her classroom to implement a class-wide social-emotional curriculum, once a week for 30 minutes.

In hearing this, another teacher from District Bravo reported that several kindergartners in her school could benefit from small group, social skills instruction. However, she said the school's social worker, "is pulling out [students] who are in need of more social-emotional support from other grades for different kinds of support groups, but we don't have it for kindergarten. She's not willing to do it for kindergarten." Consequently, the teacher volunteered to give up one of her preparation periods to implement a social skills group for the kindergartners, but the school's administration would not allow her to do that for working during a preparation period was not permitted. Therefore the children who were identified as needing additional, targeted social-emotional supports did not receive them.

There were other difficulties that teachers in the focus groups mentioned when it came to monitoring and intervening to support children's social-emotional skills and peer interactions. One such concern was about children who neither exhibited obvious, challenging behaviors with peers nor engaged in below average amounts of peer interaction. Rather, teachers were concerned that limited opportunities to monitor peer interactions might lead them to overlook

kids who were struggling to interact with peers and build relationships. Teachers from District

Alfa described this dilemma in this way:

> *Hyejin:* When the child is the opposite and is going to be that quiet, nobody notices I'm in this classroom. Seriously. I'll say to somebody, "Couldn't you talk to her? She looks so lonely." Peers will say, "Oh! I didn't even know she was there." It's because five-year-olds live in their five-year-old world. You could do whatever you want. I won't even know that you're there unless you're like the child who is going to disrupt the whole classroom. It's those children, though, that as a teacher you have to be able to see them when you're in whole group . . . when they're lining up. You have to just get them interacting with somebody. Otherwise, unfortunately, . . . What do you call those . . . the children who fall . . . .

> *Michelle:* Who fall through the cracks.

> *Hyejin:* They're just quiet.

Overall, the teachers who struggled to monitor children's peer interactions and did not have a lot

of support for interventions felt as if they were "not meeting children's needs" (Charis, District

Bravo).

Parents' interest in children's friendships. Teachers across all four districts mentioned

that friendships were something many parents asked about. Often times these conversations took

place during school conferences. For one teacher from District Alfa, it was a question that she

did not enjoy receiving. She said, "I absolutely hate it. Parents ask every year" (LaShorage,

District Alfa). She described the question as "so awful" because she was not confident in

identifying children's friendships. In light of this feeling, the teacher described how she *pre-

loaded* herself with this knowledge every year. She asked the children in her class, "Who are

your best friends? Who do you think you work really well with? Who do you want to have at

home for a play date?" Another teacher, in response to parents' questions about children's

friendships, described a brief interview process she completed with the children to learn about

their friendships. Armed with this information, the teacher said, "I put it in the children's file and

then the parents will see it" (Julie, District Alfa). A couple of teachers from District Bravo

mentioned that some parents would even ask them to make special arrangements (e.g., have

children sit next to each other) in the classroom to accommodate budding friendships. Teachers

reported that they were reluctant to give into parental requests, because, as previously stated,

they did not want to contribute to cliques forming.

Teachers said that questions about children's friendships were most commonly on the

mind of parents whose children struggled to interact with peers. This was especially true if

children were diagnosed with a disability, such as ASD where poor social interactions is a

primary deficit. One teacher said, "The parents of my children with special needs, especially my

kids with ASD, they always want to know about the social interactions. The social interactions

are the main thing they focus on" (Michelle, District Alfa).

Despite the fact that many parents inquired about their children's friendships, some

teachers thought there were still a few parents who were not aware of the importance of peer

interactions and rarely, if ever, inquired about them. Additionally, some teachers felt like

families in their schools did not view peer relationships as a priority or concern. An excerpt of

this discussion from the teachers in District Bravo follows:

Jamie: Our parents . . . they do care. They love their kids. But a lot of our parents are working two, three jobs. They have six kids. For a lot of them survival is the main priority. Being involved in their children's school, as much as they would want to, is not a luxury they have.

Sallee: Right. It comes down to the hierarchy of needs. Do I have food? Do I have shelter? Do I have an income? Okay, if I've got those things then that's what I have to focus on for right now. The teacher can focus on . . .

Jamie: The academics.

Sallee: The academics and make sure my child is learning and growing and behaving.

In fact, District Bravo teachers reported that parents were most inclined to bring up situations where their children were having negative interactions with peers or if they thought their children might not be safe in the classroom.

Overall, teachers' responses to questions about their roles and responsibilities related to supporting the peer interactions and relationships for children with disabilities revealed that they felt it was extremely important. Teachers' confirmed this belief with their answers provided in the anonymous focus group implementation questionnaire. Answers to the three forced-choice questions about teachers' views about the importance of, level of comfort, and amount of time available to create social opportunities and facilitating peer interactions for children with disabilities can be found in Table 8.

Table 8

Participants' Feedback to Questions About Creating Social Opportunities and Supporting Peer Interactions for Children With Disabilities

Questions and multiple choice responses	Frequency of responses ($n = 20$)
1. How would you describe *the importance* of creating social opportunities and supporting the peer interactions of children with disabilities in your classroom?	
(a) I feel it's extremely important.	($n = 20$)
(b) I feel it's somewhat important.	($n = 0$)
(c) I feel it's not important.	($n = 0$)

Table 8 (continued)

| | Frequency of responses |
Questions and multiple choice responses	($n = 20$)
2. How *comfortable* do you feel creating social opportunities and supporting children with disabilities to socially engage with their peers in your classroom?	
(a) I feel very comfortable.	($n = 18$)
(b) I feel somewhat comfortable.	($n = 2$)
(c) I feel uncomfortable.	($n = 0$)
3. How would you describe *the amount of time* you have to focus on creating social opportunities and supporting the peer interactions of children with disabilities in your classroom?	
(a) I have a significant amount of time.	($n = 5$)
(b) I have a modest amount of time.	($n = 14$)
(c) I have no time at all.	($n = 1$)

Interpretation of Findings Regarding Teachers' Roles

Interestingly, the categories that emerged from teachers' responses to questions about their roles in supporting peer interactions and relationships for children with disabilities and their classmates align with the National Association for the Education of Young Children's five guidelines for effective teaching (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). These guidelines highlight the key aspects of teachers' roles and include: (1) creating a caring community of learners, (2) enhancing development and learning through teaching, (3) planning curriculum to achieve important goals, (4) assessing children's development and learning, and (5) establishing reciprocal relationships with families. From the teachers' responses, it appears that they all valued supporting children's peer relationships, most felt comfortable doing so, and they taught these social interaction skills to children within the context of caring classroom communities. From the focus group conversations, the complex and interrelated nature of teachers' roles in

regards to intentional teaching, planning the curriculum, assessing children's learning, and engaging in reciprocal relationships with parents became clear. As teachers shared their thoughts and ideas about supporting young children's peer-related social competence, the five aspects of effective teaching emerged throughout the focus group sessions. Due to this finding, the five elements are revisited in the interpretation of the other research question findings as well.

Opportunities That Kindergartners With Disabilities Have to Interact With Peers in Their General Education Classrooms

During the focus groups, teachers were asked to reflect on what it meant to create opportunities within their classroom for all children to socially interact and form relationships with each other. Teachers were asked to describe what those opportunities looked like and to discuss times in their schedule when children had opportunities to interact with each other. Teachers also were asked to what extent children with disabilities had the same opportunities for social interaction as their classmates without disabilities.

Three categories emerged from teachers' discussion of opportunities children with disabilities have to interact with their kindergarten classmates. These categories included: (a) all children have the same opportunities; (b) opportunities occur during everyday routines and activities; and (c) the same opportunities exist, but at different levels of engagement. The definitions for these categories are presented in Table 9. A synthesis of the focus group conversations by category is presented next.

All children have the same opportunities. Across all four focus groups, there was little conversation on this topic because teachers were in widespread agreement that all children, regardless of ability, had ample opportunities to socially interact with each other as evident by this excerpt from District Alfa:

Lead Moderator: Do you think children who have disabilities have the same opportunities to interact with their peers?

Group: Yes! Yes!

Hyejin: Yes. I have heard from many, many, many parents about how much inclusive full-day kindergarten has changed their child. Now is it all smooth sailing? No. Especially when you have a child with ASD . . . Overall, the growth of the children, I think, is probably because they're able to interact and socialize with a regular peer.

Table 9

Teachers' Perspectives About Opportunities Kindergartners With Disabilities Have to Interact With Peers

Category	Definition
Same opportunities	Teachers discuss how children with and without disabilities have the same social opportunities in the kindergarten classroom.
Teacher created opportunities	Teachers discuss the ways they create opportunities for children with and without disabilities to interact in their classroom. This includes discussion of routines, activities, rules, physical arrangements, and activities that take outside of the classroom (e.g., P.E., recess, lunch) that provide opportunities for peer interactions.
Same time, not the same opportunity	Teachers discuss that children with disabilities may need more support to fully engage and take advantage of opportunities for peer interaction.

Overall, the teachers described the kindergarten schedule as inherently social with "full," "equal," and "many" opportunities for peer interactions. In fact, some teachers found it hard to imagine children not having the same opportunities. As one teacher from District Delta put it:

> You spend so much time on emotional and social in kindergarten. That's the majority of the time spent . . . at least for the first quarter, if not the second quarter. How to get along, how to interact and play, and how to move about the environment where everybody's enjoying themselves and enjoying the activity . . . .It's hard to imagine anybody excluded . . . any child who has such difficultly being excluded, because it's just a natural part of kindergarten. (Laurie)

Additionally, in the anonymous follow-up questionnaire all but two teachers identified feeling comfortable creating social opportunities and supporting children with disabilities to socially engage with peers. The two teachers who reported feeling somewhat comfortable came from Districts Bravo and Delta. Lastly, on the anonymous questionnaire, teachers were asked to describe the amount of time they had to focus on creating social opportunities and supporting the peer interactions of children with disabilities in their classrooms. The majority of teachers said they had a modest amount of time. Five teachers reported having a significant amount of time (i.e., District Alfa = 3, District Charlie = 1, and District Delta = 1). One teacher from District Bravo reported having no time at all. The teacher from District Bravo added to her response by saying, "Not as much time as I would like!" All results from the anonymous questionnaire can be seen in Table 8.

Opportunities in everyday routines and activities. Teachers' discussion about which routines and activities provided children with opportunities to interact were aided by reference to their lesson plans, which they brought to the focus group sessions.

When examining data across focus groups, there was disagreement about the social aspects of everyday activities and routines. This may have been due to the variety of curriculum and instructional practices present across school districts. Also, teachers discussed how within

content areas (e.g., math, reading, writing) different lessons, activities, and routines could be more or less social as determined by the goals for the lesson and how it was taught.

Activities and routines identified across focus groups as opportunities for peer interactions, without dispute, included physical education, art, recess, breakfast, lunch, bathroom breaks, morning meetings, and free choice times. Activities and routines identified across focus groups as not providing opportunities for peer interactions, without dispute, included music and library times. Numerous routines and activities received mixed reviews about the extent that they provided opportunities for peer interactions. Those activities included math, writing, science, social studies, reading, listening centers, snack, computer, calendar, seatwork, learning centers, and transitions.

From the teachers' perspectives, opportunities for peer interactions could be fluid and each week a particular routine or activity provided any number of opportunities for social interactions. Additionally personal preferences for instruction could influence the social aspects of activities and routines. For example, some District Alfa teachers saw snack as a social time and others stated that it was not an opportunity for social interaction because they read a book aloud to the whole class at that time.

Teachers created other opportunities for peers to interact by the expectations they held and the rules they created. One teacher described creating the rule, "Ask three before you ask me" (LaShorage, District Alfa), which required children to ask at least three peers for assistance prior to asking the teacher. Another strategy commonly mentioned was the use of a "Pair-Share" approach during morning meetings that required students to partner with a classmate and talk about a teacher-specified topic (e.g., share with your neighbor the poem you wrote and the illustration you created). A similar strategy mentioned in three focus groups was having students

read with a partner. Teachers called this time either "Read to Someone" or "EEKK" which stands for "elbow, elbow, knee, knee." Teachers reported using "EEKK" to describe to students how they should sit. That is, children were advised to sit side-by-side with one partner's elbow touching the other partner's elbow and one partner's knee touching the other partner's knee.

A forth strategy that teachers spoke about was to assign partners as completed classroom jobs. One teacher explained how she partnered children for a job during snack time by saying, "When I assign jobs, I always have two snack servers. I might have one strong child who's a role model and the second child can kind of mirror, mimic, and follow" (Emily, District Charlie). A fifth strategy that one teacher reported using to support peer interactions was to assign table captains who were responsible to interact with peers at their table by passing out papers, crayons, and other needed materials.

Same opportunities, but different levels of engagement. Teachers from two focus groups questioned the extent to which children with disabilities engaged in peer interactions during social aspects of daily routines and activities. For instance, during District Alfa's focus group two teachers said:

Melinda: Well, and here's my thing. They all have the opportunity. They don't . . .

Michelle: Engage.

The conversation shifted to another topic after this exchange and the idea was not explored further. In District Bravo's focus group, a few teachers mentioned a similar concern. In response to the question, "How many of you feel that children with disabilities have the same opportunities to socially interact in the classroom as typically developing peers?" the teachers said:

Anne: I want to say they do.

Jamie: I want to say . . . I'm trying to phrase this. I'd say the time's the same, but the supports or what they might [need] aren't always there. Am I saying the right thing?

Sallee: Right. Everybody's granted the same time, but how well they, kids who have disabilities or kids who have undiagnosed disabilities, can use that time to socially interact with other kids is different.

Jamie: Yeah, that's what I'm saying.

Sallee: Because you don't have the supports in place for them to be able to have those conversations.

Jamie: So they might have the same time, but they might not have the same opportunity.

In this excerpt, the word *opportunity* was used to describe children's engagement in peer interaction. On the anonymous questionnaire completed following the focus group session, one teacher from District Bravo wrote, "I provide them [children with disabilities] with many opportunities to interact with each other, but they don't necessarily have the supports they may need to have good social interactions with peers." These comments show that while teachers believed all children had the same opportunities available to socially interact with peers, a few teachers felt that children with disabilities did not participate in those opportunities to the same extent as their peers.

Interpretation of Findings Related to Opportunities for Children to Interact

As teachers discussed opportunities for social interactions among children with and without disabilities, their responses centered around the five guidelines for effective teaching (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), especially the elements connected to teaching practices and planning curriculum. It was surprising to discover that all teachers believed that if there were

opportunities for children to interact with each other in the classroom, they were equal opportunities for all children regardless of ability. This belief may have been supported by the fact that all teachers felt that they created caring classroom communities, which may have led them to believe that equality was a dominant characteristic of their classrooms.

Additionally, it was interesting to see that teachers grappled with identifying particular parts of their day as being more or less social. In an era of increasing accountability, experts have advocated for teachers to approach early care and education with a "both/and" perspective versus an "either/or" perspective (Bredekamp, 2013). For example, in the literature, experts have noted that with a "both/and" perspective, teachers are urged to think about how their curriculum and teaching supports *both* social-emotional *and* cognitive development while teaching content areas such as reading and math. This is in comparison to a mindset where teachers view their curriculum and teaching practices as supporting *either* social-emotional *or* cognitive development, but not *both*.

While the teachers who participated in this study reported that their curriculum and teaching strategies were based on important goals related to children's developmental needs, and most teachers felt confident that there were modest opportunities for children to develop peer-related social competence, it is impossible to assess the extent to which their practices and curriculum provided opportunities to enhance *both* social-emotional *and* cognitive development. Furthermore, many of the opportunities teachers described as ideal for children to develop peer-related social competence within their classrooms occurred at times when adults were not able to teach or observe interaction skills (e.g., opportunities occurred during center time when teachers were busy leading small group reading instruction). Thus while there may be equal and modest amounts of social opportunities provided to all children, those opportunities may occur during

times when children cannot receive the type of instructional support and monitoring necessary

for enhanced social learning, especially if children have social skills delays or disabilities.

Additionally, as suggested by teachers' responses, social opportunities alone may not be enough

to support access to and engagement in peer interactions for some children with delays and

disabilities.

Facilitators and Barriers to Supporting Peer Interactions and Relationships for Children With Disabilities

During the focus groups, teachers were asked to reflect on what influenced their ability to

plan or create opportunities for children with disabilities to interact with their peers. Teachers

were asked to consider elements of the school environment that facilitated or prevented the

promotion of social interactions and relationship development between children with and without

disabilities.

Three categories emerged from teachers' discussion of facilitators and barriers to

supporting peer interactions and relationships for kindergartners with disabilities were: (a)

curriculum and instruction, (b) observing and knowing the children, and (c) child characteristics.

Definitions for each category are presented in Table 10. A synthesis of the focus group

conversations by category is presented next, with facilitators highlighted first followed by

barriers.

Curriculum and instruction: Facilitators. Teachers who taught in full-day kindergarten

programs agreed that the time allotted to them in full-day kindergarten enabled them to support

peer interactions because there were more opportunities for children to interact with each other in

partners or small groups. One teacher from District Alfa said,

> One of the benefits of doing an all day program is you can do math for an hour. If you do
> math for an hour, you do have many components to it. You can do reading and language

arts for over an hour. So there are going to be times where it's teacher-focused and there's no social interaction and there are going to be times when it's child-focused and teacher-focused times. Both instruction and discovery: we have the luxury of doing that. (Natalie)

The teachers from three districts (Bravo, Charlie, and Delta) agreed that their district and school-approved curriculum or instructional methods for certain subjects provided additional opportunities for supporting peer interactions. For example, teachers from District Bravo thought their district's emphasis on teaching literacy and math through centers gave children more opportunities to interact with each other. The teachers stated that using centers gave them an opportunity to integrate social-emotional learning outcomes into the academic part of the school day. Teachers reported that they often had to justify their decisions to administrators, but that children enjoyed the opportunity to interact with each other in a play-like format while learning math and literacy concepts. An example of this is featured in the excerpt below:

Table 10

Facilitators and Barriers to Supporting Peer Interactions and Relationships for Children With Disabilities

Category	Definition
Curriculum & instruction	Facilitators: Teachers discuss facets of the kindergarten curriculum and their instruction that facilitate peer interactions and relationships for children with disabilities. This includes discussions about teachers allowing children to choose partners or groups, teachers' decisions about grouping children, full-day kindergarten programs, related services and supports being provided within the general education classroom, teachers valuing inclusive education, physical arrangements of classrooms or schools, importance of teaching social-emotional skills in kindergarten, multitiered system of positive behavior supports, children being treated as equals, and implementation of a social-emotional curriculum. Barriers: Teachers discuss facets of the kindergarten curriculum and their instruction that act as barriers in terms of supporting peer interactions and relationships for children with disabilities. This includes discussions about a lack of adult support, inappropriate size or layout of the classroom, limited access to social toys/materials, half-day kindergarten programs, not enough time to teach social-emotional and academic content, and having administrators who do not value social-emotional development or instruction that will support it.
Observing and knowing the children	Facilitators: Teachers discuss how observing and ultimately knowing the children facilitates their ability to support peer interactions and relationships for children with disabilities. This includes discussions about learning about children's friends, finding time to observe peer interaction, being observant, being confident about who children's friends are and knowing the children well. Barriers: Teachers discuss barriers that limit their ability to observe and ultimately know children. Teachers discuss how these barriers impact their ability to support peer interactions and relationships for children with disabilities. This includes teachers' discussions about the dynamics of children's friendships, children with disabilities being pulled out for related services during social times, inappropriate or insufficient supports for children with disabilities, limited opportunities to observe children, lower levels of confidence when identifying children's friendships, and limited opportunities to converse with children.

Table 10 (continued)

Category	Definition
Children's characteristics	Facilitators: Teachers discuss characteristics of kindergartners that facilitate peer interactions and relationships for children with disabilities. This includes teachers' discussions about the nature of children (positive characteristics such as kindness, caring, empathy) with and without disabilities (e.g., helper-helpee relationships).
	Barriers: Teachers discuss characteristics of kindergartners that act as barriers to positive peer interactions and relationships for children with disabilities. This includes teachers' discussions about the nature of children (negative characteristics such as bossy, mean, selfish) with and without disabilities, isolation from peers that may occur as a result of a child's behaviors, children's delayed development in certain social or play skills, and unstable friendships (e.g., children who often move in and out of friendship with each other).

Anne: Well, I went ahead and opened up a store with my kids in the classroom. It's in the math center.

Jamie: There you go. We find ways to justify. It's almost like we have to sneak this stuff, but I find ways to justify it in my lesson plan too. It's connected to this, this, and this standard.

Charis: Then the kids will be like, "This is the best day of my life."

Jamie: Yeah.

Anne: Oh, they do say that.

In this focus group session, the District Bravo teachers described working hard to integrate social-emotional development and opportunities for peer interactions into their everyday routines, activities, and academic curriculum. They even mentioned opportunities that arose for children during, what they thought were, developmentally inappropriate activities.

Charis   Now we're doing bubbling-in math. You know, [bubbling-in] their answers. Five-year-olds, I'm sorry, I don't think they're cheaters or liars, but I think they just want to make it right. They're going to see what their neighbor has [for an answer]. Then, if they're having trouble, the neighbor's going to say the answer is this one [pointing as if to show a neighbor the right answer]. You know, and show [the answer] because they want to help each other.

Jamie: Or you look at the girl who leans over and fills out his paper for him.

Charis: Because developmentally, this stuff is inappropriate.

Anne: Well, I had one that did that the other day. He says, "I'm using my resources!"

Teachers from two districts (i.e., Districts Charlie and Delta) commented on how their school-wide positive behavior support (PBS) models provided comprehensive help to support children's positive peer interactions. In District Charlie, teachers taught children behavioral expectations including skills essential for positive peer interactions (e.g., problem-solving, taking turns). They also monitored their students for the first four weeks of school and nominated children who they believed could use extra social-emotional support. These children participated in small (e.g., 2 to 3 children) social skills groups. One teacher described the process by saying,

"I think it's our responsibility. At the beginning of the year, we try to identify children who might need some specific social help, counseling, or whatever" (Catherine). The social skills groups were partnered with a class-wide, 16-week social-emotional program implemented by school psychologists for all kindergartners (i.e., school psychologists visited kindergarten classrooms once a week for 20 minutes). District Charlie teachers reported that children who required further support could receive additional social-emotional instruction later in the school year in slightly larger groups of children (e.g., 6 to 8 children).

Teachers from District Delta also reported that their PBS model began with teaching children positive behavior expectations. A few school-wide activities that supported children's appropriate behaviors included a positive behavior "bootcamp" at the beginning of the year, weekly grade-level assemblies to celebrate positive behavior, and the implementation of a social-emotional curriculum in classrooms. However, the implementation of the social-emotional curriculum in District Delta was noticeably different from that of District Charlie. That is, teachers from District Delta were uncertain how frequently or in what ways the curriculum was implemented in various classrooms within the school and questioned whether it had been systematically implemented over the school year. One teacher said,

> This school year we have seen a major decline in the use and integration of the social-emotional curriculum. The school social worker has a designated 30-minute time slot to visit each classroom to instruct a lesson with this curriculum. With an overwhelming amount of students and only one social worker and principal, there are very few opportunities for her to actually come into the classroom. Through conversations with other teachers, I can assume that she has not been into each classroom more than three or four times this school year. She currently has access to the curriculum and workbooks that serve as a student resource tool. (Kim)

District Alfa teachers shared that social-emotional curricula were implemented in some kindergarten classrooms, but reported an irregular use of them. An excerpt from their conversation follows:

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Michelle:	Two years ago, I had the Second Step program in my classroom. The social worker was new two years ago to the district. They did it. I had it in my classroom. But now if I wanted it, I would have to get the program and do it myself.
Natalie:	We had Superflex® come into my classroom last year.
LaShorage:	Our social work intern comes in once a week for half an hour to do the Second Step program now.

District Charlie teachers credited one other school-wide form of instruction as a facilitator to supporting children's peer interactions; a school-wide literacy program. Following a response to intervention model (Curenton, Justice, Zucker, & McGinty, 2013; Greenwood et al., 2011), for this program, children across kindergarten classrooms were grouped together by a particular literacy skill for which they needed additional instruction. Not only were children across classrooms grouped together based on need, but teachers could potentially instruct children who were not on their classroom roster.

Teachers felt that the literacy program provided students with opportunities to meet and interact with children beyond the peers in their classroom. One teacher stated that before the implementation of the literacy program teachers thought, "Your kids are your kids are your kids." Now, she said, "because we share them during the literacy program, they're our kids" (Emily). Overall, the District Charlie teachers felt that the literacy program provided them with an understanding and familiarity with all children in their kindergarten center unlike anything they had experienced before. They felt that this newfound familiarity added their ability to facilitate peer interactions and relationships between children across the kindergarten classrooms in the school.

Curriculum and instruction: Barriers. Teachers' perspectives from two districts contributed to this category (i.e., Districts Alfa and Bravo). One of the barriers teachers from

District Alfa mentioned was that when a child's IEP indicated that he/she needed assistance from a paraprofessional, support was only provided for half-day. Two teachers described this issue:

Michelle: The problem is that the district is still half-day kindergarten because that's what they can offer for all. So children with an IEP, whose parents choose for them to go all day, they are only given the same services as a half-day kindergartener because that's what the policy is.

Hyejin: That's all they have to provide.

Michelle: That's all the district has to provide.

Hyejin: Because it all comes down to money.

Michelle: You could have a child with severe ASD who only gets an aide for half the day. And the other half of the day, you're just with them.

Another barrier to supporting peer interactions and relationships that all teachers from District Alfa mentioned in the anonymous follow-up questionnaire, was the amount of academic curriculum they had to get through during the kindergarten year. Because this topic was mentioned after the session ended, the teachers from this first focus group could not elaborate on their written responses.

Likewise, District Bravo teachers felt that their current curriculum and instructional methods did not focus enough on the social-emotional and social interaction skills that children needed to get along with their peers. On the anonymous questionnaire one teacher wrote, "I feel that we are doing a disservice to our students by not allowing them to develop socially." The teachers believed that their curriculum and instructional methods did not provide them with time to teach social interaction skills. Nor did it provide opportunities for children to practice and master social interaction skills. As one District Bravo teacher said:

It's not just time for peer interactions, but time to teach those skills, too. I think we don't have enough time in our day to say, "I've noticed this is happening. How can we approach this situation better? How can we say nicer things to somebody?" We don't necessarily always have time to address those problems because, well, we've got to get math done today. (Sallee)

Teachers from District Bravo also reported that time once available for them to work on children's social interaction skills (e.g., playground/recess time) was slowly being eliminated from their half-day kindergarten program as a result of administrative pressure. These teachers stated:

> *Charis:* My principal asked me how often I take them on the playground. I said, "On non-gym days, I take them out for about 15 minutes. We have one day of gym a week for 30 minutes." My principal said, "Oh, that's too long. Ten minutes is the max." We don't get out four days a week for 10 minutes.
>
> *Jamie:* We're not supposed to take them out.
>
> *Anne:* No.
>
> *Jamie:* That's wasting time. I worked it [playground/recess time] in with our PBIS (i.e., positive behavior supports and intervention model). When they [children] earn so many classroom paws from special teachers [group contingency program for positive behavior], that's my class prize. You get 25 [paws], then we get 20 minutes outside. That's how I justify outside times.
>
> *Charis:* It's ridiculous.

One teacher described how she incidentally supported children's peer relationships in light of these demands on her time.

> I have a couple children who are on the spectrum. [They have difficulty] knowing how to interact and I usually . . . there's one little girl who says, "I don't have any friends." So, what I'll say is . . . I'll stop whatever we're doing. "Who wants to be Marie's friend?" Everybody [raises their hand], because I raised my hand. I say, "Look at all your friends." Then we move on. That does seem to help a little bit. (Charis)

Charis went on to explain why she thought children struggled with peer interactions and making friends in the classroom.

> They don't know how . . . and because we don't have play in our classroom, the oral language is gone. The interactions are gone. Our district is scared, I think, because we're behind. They tend to push more academics and think that if we can teach them more academics in kindergarten, then they'll do better in first grade. But they're missing that other part. It's hurting our students.

Along with barriers present due to their schedules and demands to fit in academic instruction, District Bravo teachers reported that accessing external resources to extend their curriculum and support children's social-emotional development and peer interactions was challenging. As mentioned in more detail earlier, one challenge that teachers from District Bravo faced when trying to access additional supports for children who struggled with their social-emotional skills was documenting children's need for additional help.

Another barrier that the District Bravo teachers identified was that they felt an often-suggested intervention for supporting peer interactions might not be feasible in a half-day kindergarten program or developmentally appropriate for kindergartners. For example, the teachers stated the "Check-In, Check-Out" strategy was the first intervention suggested for teachers to try. Some teachers said they did it, even though they did not think it helped kindergartners. Others refused to try it because they did not think it was developmentally appropriate or the amount of time needed to use the strategy did not fit in their half-day kindergarten program.

The last curriculum and instructional barrier to supporting children's peer interactions mentioned by the teachers from Districts Alfa and Bravo was the scarcity of, and unequal use of, social-emotional curriculum materials available in their district. Teachers reported that social workers across the school district had to share the social-emotional curriculum materials and there were not enough for each school's social worker to have their own. This meant that even if a building support team or a teacher thought a child might benefit from this type of support, it might not be accessible to them.

Observing and knowing the children: Facilitators. Teachers' perspectives from two districts contributed to this category (i.e., Districts Charlie and Delta). It is important to note that

teachers' beliefs on this topic also were presented earlier when discussing the category of *Monitoring and Intervening*. To recap, the teachers from these two districts felt that monitoring the peer interactions and social interaction skills of children with disabilities was a fairly easy task to undertake.

Teachers from Districts Charlie and Delta mentioned that their extra responsibilities that took place outside of the classroom aided their ability to observe and get to know the children. Extra responsibilities the teachers described doing included helping with lunch duty, supervising recess, and assisting with pick-up and drop-off times. The teachers believed that being a part of these daily activities helped them learn more about children, especially children who were not in their classrooms. As one teacher said, "If you work the drop-off and lunch times, that are additional to your usual recess duties, I think that you get to know not just kindergarten students, but you know some first graders and some preschoolers (Christina). Teachers reported that this knowledge helped them build positive relationships with the children, which enabled them to better support children's peer relationship development by facilitating connections between students during shared times of the day (e.g., lunch, recess).

A teacher from District Charlie was surprised that some teachers did not know the friendships of children in their classrooms. She said, "you would have to be totally out of tune with your class, in my opinion, to not know that" (Alicia). Other teachers from Alicia's school agreed with her. Teachers from District Delta held a similar perspective saying that being observant was a major part of what helped them support peer interactions. One teacher from District Delta described her school's philosophy by saying, "I think we really do have to have that family atmosphere in our classrooms, that sense of community . . . a sense of caring about your . . . knowing your kids and caring about your kids" (SeonYeong).

Observing and knowing the children: Barriers. Teachers' perspectives from two districts contributed to this category (i.e., Districts Alfa and Bravo). Again, it is important to note that teachers' beliefs on this topic also were presented earlier when discussing the category of *Monitoring and Intervening*. To recap, the teachers from these two districts felt that monitoring peer interactions and social interaction skills of children with disabilities was a rather difficult task.

Teachers from Districts Alfa and Bravo felt that they tried to observe children's peer interactions whenever possible (e.g., transitions, centers, independent work), and some teachers even asked children questions that would help them about classroom friendships. However, teachers from both districts felt that monitoring peer interactions was not an easy task. Teachers from District Alfa felt that their half-day kindergarten colleagues faced the biggest barrier to observing and knowing children well enough to support peer relationships as there was limited time in the day for social-emotional activities, to observe children's peer interactions, and to get to know the children well. An excerpt of this conversation follows:

Natalie: So you have them for an hour and 15 minutes.

Hyejin: For nothing. You're able to have so much more of the social [time in full-day kindergarten]. You know?

Michelle: Now the half-day teachers, they struggle with even trying to get 10 minutes of social time in a day because it's so academic.

Hyejin: But at the beginning . . . when I taught half day, children would raise their hand and say, "You know last night" and [I would say] "Honey, I'd love to listen to your story, but I can't because I can't listen to everybody's." I didn't listen to anybody. We didn't have big morning meetings.

Michelle: You didn't. They're [half-day kindergarten is] just so cramped on time, which is why the all-day [kindergarten] is so nice. It gives you that time for children to still do games, puzzles, and play. A little bit of play. Not a lot, but a little bit. Just a little. Even for like 20 minutes a day.

Half-day kindergarten teachers from District Bravo confirmed this sentiment held by teachers from District Alfa. Teachers from District Bravo felt that due to the time constraints of a half-day program and a curriculum that was void of opportunities for play, they had limited opportunities to socially engage, observe, or get to know their students as well as they would like. The teachers described how these constraints left them feeling disconnected from students and unable to facilitate the children's social interaction skills or relationships with peers. One teacher described it like this:

> I feel personally . . . I've been teaching for a long time and I feel like I know my kids less than I ever used to. When we used to have play and have an opportunity to talk, that was when they really brought out their feelings, their thoughts, and their thinking process . . . everything. Now it's just too rote. (Charis)

Other teachers attributed large class sizes as a reason why they could not observe, interact, and know their students well. One teacher said, "I feel like I don't know my kids very well this year because there are just so many of them" (Sallee).

Unlike the teachers from Districts Alfa and Bravo, teachers from District Delta felt that they, and other teachers in their school, had an adequate amount of time to observe and know children from both within and outside of their individual classrooms. However, they felt that some teachers were too critical of children with disabilities. The teachers from District Delta reported that other teachers held children with disabilities to a higher standard compared to their same-age peers and were quick to call out the children's inappropriate behaviors. The teachers felt that their colleagues' biases against children with disabilities fueled and supported peers' biases against children with disabilities. The teachers' actions, they believed, hindered positive peer interactions and relationships between children with and without disabilities. Teachers from District Delta mentioned this idea again when discussing child characteristics that were barriers

to supporting the peer interactions of children with disabilities and when offering suggestions to improve the school environment.

Child characteristics: Facilitators. While teachers across all four districts agreed that children with disabilities, who did not have age-appropriate social skills, experienced greater difficulty forming friendships and relationships with their classmates, they felt that kindergartners were naturally accepting, forgiving, and understanding of peers' differences. Several teachers offered stories to support their belief of peers' acceptance and positive attitudes towards children with disabilities. Child characteristics mentioned as facilitators of positive peer interactions for children with disabilities included children being empathetic, kind, helpful, loving, and caring. Teachers from three districts (Alfa, Charlie, and Delta) described kindergartners as being innately egocentric which they thought aided in children's acceptance of peers with differences because children were more concerned about themselves than other students. Additionally, the teachers from Districts Charlie and Delta felt that peers did not notice differences between themselves and children with disabilities.

Teachers from Districts Alfa and Charlie described some students as being very helpful to and watchful of their peers who were struggling socially and emotionally in the classroom. Teachers described these children as *mother-hens*. One teacher said,

> For example, I have a little girl this year who's a selective mute and all of my little girls mother her. If she were to come over, and Mrs. Finney was asking her something, she wouldn't talk, so the girls would answer for her. They just kind of help those kids accommodate, sometimes too much. They sometimes mother them a little too much, but never is it, "I'm not playing with you because . . . " It's always, "Oh, come, come, come." (Alicia, District Charlie)

Alicia went on to clarify that *mother-hens* or *mothering* might not be the correct term to describe exactly what she had seen in her classroom. She described a relationship between two boys, one boy who had a visual impairment and another boy in the classroom who had good social-

emotional skills. Alicia said, "I want to make a point that it's not just the girls who will mother. It's the boys, too, and that mothering is probably not the right term."

Child characteristics: Barriers. Across all four focus groups, teachers felt that many children came to kindergarten without the social-emotional or play skills needed to engage successfully with peers or adults in the school environment. Teachers from District Alfa focused their discussion primarily on how children identified as DLLs entered kindergarten with the most social-emotional needs. Teachers from District Bravo pointed out that sometimes the characteristics of children with disabilities led to peers choosing not to interact with them. A teacher described this scenario by saying,

> A child I have this year, he has a really severe behavior issue. He's very defiant and he's a compulsive liar. He will lie about everything: who threw something, the look somebody gave, or if he's sticking his tongue out at somebody. He just lies about everything, so it's hard for him to make friends with peers because they see how he . . . you know, how he lies about everything and how he's so defiant. When you ask him to do something, he just will not do it. So he can't make friends even though he supposedly wants friends in kindergarten. He can't make those friendships because nobody wants to be friends with somebody who does those things. But he doesn't make that connection. (Sallee)

When asked how she knew the boy wanted friends Sallee said,

> Oh, he'll say, "I just want to have friends. I want friends." [I'll say] "Okay, well, how do we be a good friend?" We'll talk through those situations and he just goes right back to throwing things, hitting people, pushing, sticking his tongue out, and lying to people.

Teachers from District Charlie discussed the issue of children entering kindergarten without age-appropriate play or social interaction skills at length. An excerpt of their conversation follows:

> *Moon:*   Well, I just don't feel like they have play skills. In the nine years I've been teaching, it feels like when they . . . 9 years ago, they came in and they really had a good idea of how to play with one another. Now I feel like it's a lot of just grabbing a toy and running around the room and screaming. They look like they're playing, but they're not actually interacting [several teachers in unison: "No interacting!"].

> *Catherine:*   No.

Emily: No imagination, no creativity. No recreating what they've seen or been exposed to in the past. I'm one of the few classrooms in this building that still has a drama/housekeeping area. It's the first choice that the children make whenever we have free choice because they really want that opportunity to be exposed to that. To watch them while they're in that center is very eye-opening.

A teacher from District Charlie added to this conversation a little later by saying that watching the children play together when they first entered kindergarten was like "watching cavemen play" (Moon).

Teachers from District Delta commented that some of the children with disabilities in their classrooms struggled to interact with peers because of similar delays in their social interactions skills and the presence of challenging behaviors. Teachers stated that while children were learning more appropriate skills and behaviors, their peers' characteristics were what created a barrier for children with disabilities to form relationships and friendships. Teachers said that peers were judgmental towards children with disabilities and disapproving of their behaviors. They stated that peers would over report children with disabilities' inappropriate behaviors to teachers. Teachers described peers' behaviors as being similar to *police officers* who spotted behavioral offenses of children with disabilities more often than other peers without disabilities. Yet, unlike due process of the law, teachers said peers often assumed children with disabilities were "guilty before proven innocent" (Laurie). A teacher from District Delta described an instance when this occurred on the playground:

> I charged myself with keeping my eyes on the child [with a disability] the entire time. What happened was, he was chasing the kids around. Yes, he was doing that, but he was not spitting . . . .Two kids came up to me and said he was doing that [spitting]. I said, "No, he's not. I watched the whole time. He's not doing it." They left me and went to another teacher and told her. She came over and told me. I said, "No, I've been watching him this whole time. He's not doing it." So . . . it's not like he's going to hide and sneak spitting . . . . Peers get this mindset that this is what the kid [child with a disability] does and they expect it from him. They start seeing it whether it's really there or not. (SeonYeong)

Other teachers from District Delta, who had similar experiences added to the discussion:

> *Jenna:* Or they begin to kind of like label the kid.
>
> *SeonYeong:* Yeah.
>
> *Jenna:* I know even with the child with a disability in my class, he's done a great job of keeping his hands to himself. If we're on the playground and he's just running, some kids just run. He doesn't mean to hurt you, he's just excited to be outside and he runs. Teachers will say, "He pushed so-and-so down." I'll say, "No, I saw what happened. No. I'm here. I know the difference."
>
> *SeonYeong:* He doesn't mean to hurt. He truly doesn't. He just doesn't know how to interact. We've tried working on that.
>
> *Chris:* He's just a little bigger, so when he starts running, he's going to knock peers down. He doesn't mean to.
>
> *Kimberly:* It's like you said, the kids associate it, too. So even the slightest tap is a full on . . .
>
> *SeonYeong:* If he touches them, they're like, "He pushed me!"
>
> *Jenna:* It's with Aidan, too. It's not even just with your students.
>
> *Laura:* Mine is Monica. Everybody blames Monica.
>
> *SeonYeong:* Yeah. It doesn't matter if they [children with disabilities] do it or not.

Overall, teachers identified child characteristics, both of children with and without disabilities, that could act as a barrier to helping children with disabilities experience positive peer interactions.

Interpretation of Findings Related to Facilitators and Barriers

Interpreting these findings in relation to NAEYC's five guidelines for effective teaching (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), we see that four key elements were discussed when addressing facilitators and barriers to supporting peer interactions. First, the interrelated and interwoven nature of teaching, planning curriculum, and assessing children's development and learning

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came to the forefront during teachers' discussion of facilitators and barriers to supporting peer interactions. For example, teachers who felt that their curriculum and instruction adequately supported children's acquisition and fluency of social interaction skills reported that assessing children's development in this important domain was easy. Likewise, teachers who had difficulty finding time to provide instruction to extend children's social interaction skills and/or had difficulty embedding opportunities to teach social interaction skills during planned curriculum, routines, and activities felt that monitoring children's development was problematic and unlikely to occur.

Even the focus groups participants who felt that they had the time to observe, teach, and integrate social interaction skills lessons into ongoing curriculum, routines, and activities reported that there were barriers that impeded their ability to adequately support social interaction skills development for children with disabilities. In the area of teaching, some kindergarten teachers stated that they needed external coaching and advice to learn how to best teach social interaction skills to children with significant social delays, disabilities, and challenging behaviors. Further, some teachers mentioned how difficult it was to document children's level of social skills performance and subsequently access external support for both themselves and children. Lastly, in the area of planning curriculum some teachers mentioned that the required curriculum and standard mode of curriculum delivery made it difficult to embed opportunities for social skills instruction or to individualize the curriculum to scaffold children's social learning. Additionally, when schools planned for professionals such as social workers and school psychologists to deliver social-emotional curricula, they faced barriers to implementation such as professionals' limited availability and an inadequate supply of curriculum materials.

As previously reported, all teachers in the study felt that they excelled in creating a caring community of learners. However, while the majority of teachers noted that classroom peers were overwhelmingly accepting of children with social interaction delays or disabilities, some teachers reported that peers were highly observant and critical of classmates who deviated from classroom expectations for social behavior. This being said, even in the presence of a caring classroom environment, teachers may face barriers presented by children with significant social delays and disabilities and critical peers who may not understand the social behaviors of other classmates (Yu, Meyer, & Ostrosky, 2013).

Changes to the School Environment to Promote Peer Interactions and Relationships for Children With Disabilities

During the focus groups, teachers were asked to imagine that their school board was considering changes to the kindergarten program and curriculum. They were to think about their school environment and consider changes that would support their ability to facilitate peer interactions and relationships for children with disabilities.

Five categories emerged from teachers' responses to these questions: (a) adult help, (b) more time for social-emotional instruction, (c) physical arrangements, (d) smaller classes, and (d) other. Definitions for each category are presented in Table 11. Next, a synthesis of the focus group conversations by category is presented.

Table 11

Teachers' Perspectives About Changes to the School Environment to Promote Peer Interactions and Relationships for Children With Disabilities

Category	Definition
Adult help	Teachers discuss a need for more adult help. This includes discussion about the need for more paraprofessional/aide support, increased related services provided to children within their general education classroom, using district or school related service providers more wisely, and having additional staff implement a social-emotional curriculum and/or interventions.
More time	Teachers discuss a need for more time in their schedule to teacher social-emotional and social interaction skills. This includes conversations that focus on more time for play in the curriculum, a lesser focus on academic instruction, more time in the schedule to privilege both academic and social domains of development, and creating time for teachers to converse with and observe children.
Physical arrangements	Teachers discuss a need for changes to physical arrangements in their school environment to promote peer interactions. This includes changes to the school, such as more space for gross motor play during inclement weather and changes to their classroom to aid in their observation of children or to provide space necessary for play and social interaction activities.
Smaller classes	Teachers discuss a need for smaller class sizes or a more manageable teacher: child ratio.
Other	Teachers discuss other suggestions for changes to the school environment that do not fit within the other categories.

Adult help. Across all four districts, teachers were in agreement that they needed more adult assistance in their classrooms to best support peer interactions and relationship development for children with disabilities. Since many study participants felt that children struggled with their social-emotional skills in kindergarten, they thought having another adult in the classroom to take advantage of teachable moments and facilitate children's social skill development would be very beneficial. When alone in the classroom, teachers said that they could not always capitalize on opportune moments to teach social skills. One teacher from District Charlie stated that she would prefer to stop academic instruction in order to teach a social skill lesson in context. Her belief was to "trashcan the academics and everything stops" (Emily). However, another teacher from District Charlie countered with a statement about how teaching social skills in the moment is not always feasible. She said,

> Well, I would, too [trashcan the academics and teach a social skill in the moment], except . . . I'm thinking specifically of my year last year, when I had a little guy who was extremely manipulative. If you said to him, "Stop." It would be a 20-minute conversation as to why he didn't have to and why his mother was going to support him while my whole classroom was falling apart. To have an extra pair of hands where I could actually curb that behavior . . . I did last year. I was blessed because he came with an aide. But sometimes you don't have that. This year I have another child who doesn't have an aide and we can still have those 20-minute conversations. (Alicia)

Teachers reported wanting more adult help from professionals such as more social workers and speech language pathologists in their general education classrooms. Furthermore, teachers felt that it would be beneficial if special services such as speech language therapy was delivered in the classroom setting. This was especially important if children were working on a skill that was related to social-emotional development or peer interactions (e.g., receptive or expressive language). One teacher from District Alfa described a time when services were provided in the classroom and other teachers agreed that they would like to see that happen in their classrooms more often. She said,

She [the speech language pathologist] gets to play the games [at centers]. She talks to the children and makes them use "I can" statements. Feeling statements. To do that one-on-one without being in the moment, it's hard to teach children that, so she comes in once a week. (Melinda)

More time for social-emotional instruction. Teachers from all four districts noted the need for more time devoting to teaching social-emotional skills. While the teachers from District Alfa did not discuss wanting more time in their school day, year, or schedule to focus on social-emotional curriculum and instruction, four of the six teachers did mention it in the anonymous follow-up questionnaire. As previously mentioned, these teachers wrote that they thought there was too much of a focus on the academic curriculum during the kindergarten year. When the teachers from other districts made this point during focus group discussions, they suggested that more time be allocated for social-emotional instruction.

Teachers wanted more time built into the day for children to learn through active exploration and play. First, teachers felt that more time for social-emotional instruction would provide students with experiences they may not have at home. One teacher said,

Our kids have Internet . . . or not Internet . . . have computer games at home and have TV at home. They don't have any real toys. They don't have any real interactions [with peers]. If we don't provide it for them at school, it's a missing link in their development. (Charis, District Bravo)

Second, the teachers thought that more time for teacher-child interactions would ultimately assist them in supporting peer interactions for children with disabilities. Teachers thought that with more opportunities for social-emotional instruction and play, "just a few minutes a day . . . just enough to know them [children]" they might be better equipped to facilitate children's friendships (Charis, District Bravo).

Teachers stated that with the expectations of today's kindergarten curriculum and standards they needed more time to emphasize play and social-emotional skill development. Some teachers felt that skills in these areas were just as important as academic skills and were

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often overlooked or underappreciated by others outside the early childhood/elementary field. To address this issue, one teacher from District Charlie offered a suggestion for creating more time. An excerpt from her conversation with colleagues is presented below:

Alicia: Well, here we go . . . I would like year-round school. I would like a balanced calendar.

Emily: I would go for that.

Alicia: And I would like to add about 30 minutes to our day so we could give children pure playtime. So we could . . .

Catherine: I'd go for that!

Alicia: Because right now, we have such a tight schedule with the curriculum that we are expected to finish. With the standards the way they are. I would be perfectly fine to add just that much more time so that I felt like I could get it all in and still let them have more opportunity for just play.

Catherine: I would go for that.

Emily: I'm not mad at you about it. I can support it because I'd like too.

Catherine: I think it's an effective . . . I think it would be so much more effective.

   Physical arrangements. Teachers from two districts (i.e., Districts Alfa and Charlie) offered suggestions on their schools' physical environment. To begin, teachers from District Alfa were most concerned about the dimensions of their kindergarten classrooms. These teachers were grateful to have some of the largest rooms in their school building. However, they felt that these large rooms made it tough to monitor and support peer interactions. The size of their classrooms coupled with 24 students in each room and limited adult assistance created problems for the teachers. An excerpt from their conversation follows:

Hyejin: I have the room that goes like this [draws a large shape in the air with her finger] . . . .this is a nice big room. It goes like this and it turns. I'm at my area over here and a child can be all the way around here. You have no idea what they're doing. None. And, there's an exit door right here. So sorry! See you. I'm going out.

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LaShorage:	My room is just this big rectangle. In the middle is a giant island. The kids learn really quickly that if they are sitting within three feet of the island, no matter what side of the room I'm on, I cannot see them. That is why, we had some children show their private parts to each other. I had to hear about it in an email. Because they were sitting . . . they were hugging the island because they knew I couldn't see them. It was right after lunch when all they needed to do was change their shoes, get a drink, and sit on the carpet. You'd think I wouldn't have to be running around because they know how to do those three things, but that's when they learned to show those parts because I couldn't see them.
Lead Moderator:	Literately the structure of the classroom would have to change?
Natalie:	Literally the structure. We've all said that there are too many children for one person in that kind of space.

Unlike District Alfa teachers, teachers from District Charlie commented that their classroom spaces could benefit from being larger to fit the increasing number of children in their care (e.g., class sizes of 26+) and to include appropriate spaces and materials for learning and exploration (e.g., dramatic play).

District Charlie teachers also offered two more physical arrangement suggestions that differed from District Alfa teachers. The first suggestion was to create a school that not only contained pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms, but also grade 1 and possibly grade 2 classrooms. These teachers felt that the inclusion of older students would provide their kindergartners with older peer models. Their second suggestion was to redesign the school's infrastructure to better meet the social and physical needs of kindergartners. This suggestion included the creation of an indoor play and recreation space that could be used solely for motor activities instead of utilizing one space in the school for several activities (e.g., a room that accommodated lunch time, physical education, and indoor recess).

Smaller classes. Teachers from all but one district (i.e., District Delta) shared their thoughts about the need for reduced class sizes. The teachers from Districts Alfa, Bravo, and

Charlie thought that smaller classes would help them meet the social interaction needs of children with disabilities. In District Alfa, class sizes were capped at 24 kindergartners per class. However, the teachers felt that to meet the social, academic, and peer-relationship goals for kindergartners they would need smaller class sizes. While the group was mixed on what the preferred class size would be, two suggestions were made. One teacher suggested, "One to 12 adults to child" (Natalie) and two others simultaneously suggested "or four less [children]" (Melinda and Julie). District Alfa teachers felt comfortable with either suggestion as long as their class sizes became smaller.

Teachers from District Bravo also said they would advocate for smaller class sizes. The teachers stated that they would make it clear to their school board that their suggestion should not be confused with a request for more adult support in the classrooms. Teachers described the justification of larger class sizes in their district with the addition of a classroom assistant. Yet, they thought this solution was comparable to a "Band-Aid" for a much larger problem. An excerpt of their conversation follows:

> *Sallee:* I think the general perception is that these problems can be solved by putting an assistant with you or getting you a co-teacher or giving you time with the social worker. That's going to be the solution to the problem. [However] it doesn't matter how many adults are in the classroom, if there's still 30 kids in the classroom, you're going to have these situations. You're still not going to have the time to address them all. I think our school board, their general attitude is we have large class sizes and we're going to address that by putting assistants in the classrooms . . . .I think that's the general attitude from our board . . . that's how we're going to solve the problem of [large] class sizes. That isn't a good solution.

> *Jamie:* It's not a solution. It's a Band-Aid.

Other suggestions. Teachers from all districts offered suggestions that were not corroborated by participants in the other focus groups. The unique suggestions are grouped by school district and shared next.

District Alfa. Teachers from District Alfa made two unique suggestions. The first

suggestion was to integrate more technology (e.g., iPads) into classrooms to support children's

social-communication and peer interactions. An excerpt of the teachers' discussion follows:

Melinda: They do have to learn how to share and they do talk to each other [when using the iPad].

Natalie: Right. You can't get them not to.

Michelle: They do help each other. They'll be like, "Oh, how did you get there?"

Julie: Exactly. Yeah.

Michelle: So they do encourage each other and help each other out. Even on the laptops they do a little bit of that, too.

Hyejin: Well, I go to the computer lab, where they're all on it. And my DLLs are interspersed between all children and they'll go like this [teacher models leaning over to help or show something to person next to her]. That's interacting.

Natalie: Yeah. Exactly. When I taught older grades in the computer lab, it had to be silent. You had to really be silent. There is no such thing as silence with technology and five-year-olds.

LaShorage: They whisper.

Julie: As much as you try. That [silence] is the expectation, but you also like to see them helping someone else.

The second suggestion from District Alfa teachers was to *balance* the distribution of

children with significant needs across the school district. Five of the six District Alfa teachers

described having a significant number of DLLs in their classrooms. The teachers were distressed

by the reality that some of the children who were identified as DLLs were not only learning

English, which could impact their ability to socialize and communicate with their peers, but that

many of the children were refugees who came to kindergarten without having spent time in a

structured preschool experience. Additionally, some DLLs had obvious developmental delays.

The teachers discussed how, for some of them, half of their students were identified as

DLLs (i.e., 12 students) and how that number of DLL students in one kindergarten classroom

would never be allowed in older grades. The teachers suggested making full-day kindergarten

classrooms across the school district *balanced.* To the teachers, *balancing* the class roster would

require bussing children to different schools to equalize the classroom population or the creation

of a kindergarten center. This conversation gave rise to these comments about the organization of

full-day kindergarten classrooms in the district:

Hyejin: I have 9 DLLs in my room alone.

Melinda: Yeah.

Natalie: We all know that if we had a kindergarten center where all the kindergartners
             would go and you could divide them up nicely [between classrooms] it would
             be perfect. But we don't even pass the referendums for the preschool center.
             So . . .

All the teachers thought that the *balance* of students with significant social and academic

needs across the district's full-day kindergarten classrooms, described as children identified as

DLLs, was unequal. Teachers attributed the unequal balance to school boundaries, the "first-

come, first-served" registration associated with the tuition-based, full-day program, and because

the district's efforts recruiting DLLs for full-day kindergarten was far more superior than were

the district's Child Find efforts for early intervention and early childhood special education

services. Teachers credited the meager Child Find efforts to the variety of languages spoken in

the district and that district staff "can't translate it [standardized tests to measure developmental

progress] into that other languages or find an educated person to give children the test in their

native language" (Melinda).

District Bravo. Teachers from District Bravo offered two unique suggestions. Their first

suggestion was for the school board to provide them with materials essential for creating social

interaction opportunities and play for children. The teachers stated that they would be statisfied

with any type of toys or materials that children could use together, such as puzzles, games made

for two players, or any resource that would promote conversations and interactions between

children. One teacher commented, "I don't think it has to be a housekeeping center or materials.

It would be nice, but I don't think it has to be" (Charis).

The second suggestion that teachers from District Bravo wanted to make to their school

board would be to hire administrators who understood early childhood education. The

administrators in this school district were getting ready to introduce full-day kindergarten during

the upcoming school year. Two of the focus group participants were members of a district-wide

committee to prepare for the transition to full-day kindergarten. These teachers were in charge of

a number of details including the creation of the full-day kindergarten schedule. A teacher

described an instance when an administrator did not understand what a "free choice" period

meant in kindergarten:

> One of the administrators said, "I don't really like this bottom portion here where you put
> it's tub time and free choice time for the kids. To have that time every day, I don't see the
> use in that. We should put in technology time instead." The kindergarten teachers looked
> at each other and we were like . . . [teacher gave a look of confusion] (Sallee).

Teachers from this district were the ones who reported that their district administrators

prioritized academic instruction over social instruction because their students were academically

behind children from other area school districts. The teachers from District Bravo all agreed that

they needed administrators who understood developmental milestones and who could recognize

that their students were entering kindergarten without age-appropriate social and academic skills.

An excerpt of this discussion follows:

> *Sallee:* They [administrators] need to look at the needs of the kids and realize shoving
> more academics down their throat isn't really going to help them. You have to
> give them social skills, give them problem-solving skills, and give them time to

grow and develop. They don't have a lot of the preschool experiences that kids from other districts have . . .

Charis: Or home experiences.

District Charlie. There were two unique suggestions made by teachers in District Charlie. First, teachers called for a change to their program's building arrangement as described in following excerpt:

Moderator: What would you campaign for? What would you want to change?

Catherine: Either do kindergarten and first grade, kindergarten through second grade, or a pre-kindergarten through first grade building. We [the children] have no peer models. They have nobody to model behavior. For example, nobody can model bathroom behavior or walking down the hall behavior.

Hyejin: You can't model a big kid. You can't mimic somebody older. There are no siblings that you model after. There's no next year's group kind of thing.

The second suggestion was written on the anonymous questionnaire administered after the focus group session. One of the four teachers wrote that she would suggest having a "more formal social skills training [for children] with opportunities to re-teach [skills] in context as needs arise." Since this suggestion was written on the questionnaire, no further conversation about the suggestion could take place. This was not a suggestion brought up during their focus group session.

District Delta. Teachers from District Delta made three unique suggestions. The first suggestion was to address teachers' biases against children with disabilities with additional workshops about the philosophy of inclusion and strategies for including children with disabilities in general education classrooms. The teachers who participated in the focus group session felt that adults' negative attitudes about "those kids" (i.e., children with disabilities) was a barrier to supporting full inclusion, acceptance, and opportunities for peer interactions in their

school. The teachers suggested that such workshops be available to all staff members (e.g., secretaries, bus drivers, paraprofessionals, librarians, custodians, etc.) as well as teachers.

Their second suggestion was to implement a home visiting program that teachers across all grades would participate in. The teachers felt that while home visits were not required at their school, visiting children's homes "gives you a whole new perspective" (SeonYeong). Additionally, they felt that conducting home visits helped build relationships with families and let family members know "you're in it together with them" (Laurie). They felt that strong parent-teacher relationships were foundational to supporting children's peer interactions.

The last suggestion came from one District Delta teacher on the anonymous questionnaire administered after the focus group session. This teacher wrote that she would like to see more school-wide activities conducted so that everyone, children and teachers, could get to know each other. Again, since the questionnaire was implemented after the focus group session, no further discussion on this topic occurred.

Interpretation of Findings Associated with Suggested Changes to the School Environment

Once more using NAEYC's five guidelines for effective teaching (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), the changes suggested by all focus group participants centered around improving their teaching, planning curriculum, and assessing children's development and learning. In addressing these elements, many suggestions were aimed at altering the physical, social, or temporal environments of their schools given current realities (e.g., large child-to-teacher ratios).

Teachers provided many similar suggestions to address these issues. For example, all teachers recommended increasing the amount of adult support they received in their classroom. For some, this solution would help with monitoring children in large classroom spaces (i.e., a

context-specific issue). Across all teachers, they believed that additional adult help would enable them to devote increased attention to teaching social interaction skills to children and monitoring progress. Collectively, the suggestions from all focus group participants solved the perceived problem of not being able to individualize teaching, curriculum, and assessment practices to support the diverse social-emotional and academic needs of children with and without disabilities in their classrooms.

Conclusion

As seen from the categories that emerged and the participants who contributed to the category development, across all the four focus groups, teachers held very similar beliefs to one another. Additionally, teachers within focus groups also held similar beliefs. In two focus groups (i.e., Districts Alfa and Delta) teachers commented about this on the questionnaire. For example, one teacher wrote that she had learned "Many teachers had similar experiences and could relate" (District Alfa). Interestingly, when teachers were asked on the questionnaire to describe their knowledge level regarding the topics discussed during the focus group session, 18 out of 20 teachers said they understood all the issues (see Table 5). The two remaining teachers came from District Delta and stated that they had learned some new things from the discussion. This is not surprising since teachers from this district had the least amount of teaching experience compared to other focus group participants. One of the two teachers stated that she learned about "Opportunities students with disabilities have to interact [with other peers] and ways to promote and improve their [peer] interactions." The other teacher stated that she learned "Some techniques other teachers used to interact with students who have disabilities and to promote their social and peer interactions." A discussion of two key themes that emerged across

all the results, how they extend the current literature, implications for future research, and

recommendations for practice are presented next.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The current study extends previous research by being the first to use focus group methodology to explore kindergarten teachers' perspectives about classroom practices that support social interactions skills and positive peer relationships for children with disabilities. This is in comparison to other researchers who investigated teachers' perspectives on this topic using survey methods (e.g., Hamre-Nietupski et al., 1994; Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Rheam & Bain, 2005; Vaughn et al., 1999) or small case, observational studies (Janney & Snell, 1996; Winter & Van Reusen, 1997). Focus group methodology provided the chance to explore a range of characteristics specific to supporting peer-related social competence of kindergartners with disabilities during an educational era that has seen a diminished emphasis on children's social-emotional development (Bishop-Josef & Zigler, 2011). Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the discussion that follows focuses on issues that emerged related to two key themes: (a) moving beyond class-wide instruction, and (b) school-level barriers to providing social interaction interventions. These themes are discussed in relation to current literature, followed by a discussion of the limitations and implications for research and practice.

Moving Beyond Class-wide Instruction

This study extends the research showing that teachers value creating social opportunities and supporting the peer relationships of children with disabilities in their classrooms (Hamre-Nietupski et al., 1994). Additionally, teachers in this study reported that they felt very comfortable in both of those roles. Given participants' level of confidence in creating and supporting peer interactions between children with and without disabilities and their years of

experience, they might have discussed how they used a range of systematic peer interaction interventions when children with or at-risk for disabilities struggled in developing peer relationships. However, this was not the case, and even with probing during the focus group discussions the teachers did not describe delivering more individualized or intensive instruction. A few teachers discussed using teaching strategies such as social stories, social skills groups led by school staff, or implementing a positive behavior "Check-In, Check-Out" system, but this was rare. The only teacher to discuss intervening through the use of small group instruction, one-on-one support, or using more individualized instruction (e.g., teaching social scripts to children with disabilities to facilitate peer interactions) was the one teacher who graduated with a degree in special education and who worked in a co-taught kindergarten classroom. This participant's teacher education program or professional experiences may have increased her knowledge of specialized practices to support peer interactions between children with and without disabilities. Additionally, her collaborations with a co-instructor may have increased the feasibility of using specialized social skills development and social interaction practices.

In this study, teachers discussed primarily using class-wide practices to support children's acquisition of appropriate behaviors or peer-related social competence skills (Brown, Odom, & Conroy, 2001; Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006; Sandall & Schwartz, 2008). For example, teachers discussed using developmentally appropriate practices and social-emotional curriculum, creating positive teacher-child relationships, and facilitating acceptance and positive attitudes towards peers with disabilities, but they did not address using systematic interventions to enhance positive peer interactions when children with or at-risk for disabilities struggled in this area.

For example, teachers rarely discussed using evidence-based, naturalistic peer interaction interventions such as incidental teaching of social behaviors (Brown, McEvoy, & Bishop, 1991) and friendship activities (McEvoy et al., 1988). Nor did they discuss using more intensive and individualized practices such as buddy skills training (English, Goldstein, Shafer, & Kaczmarek, 1997; Goldstein, English, Shafer, & Kaczmarek, 1997), social integration activities (DeKlyen & Odom, 1989), or comprehensive interventions that included environmental arrangements, peer-mediated practices, and plans to fade teacher support (Odom, Chandler, Ostrosky, McConnell, & Reaney, 1992). Taken together, the data from this study suggest that kindergarten teachers may not be systematically embedding peer interaction interventions into daily activities, routines, or transitions at a rate that could ultimately support the acquisition of social interaction skills and development of positive peer relationships for children with or at-risk for disabilities in general education classroom environments (Snyder, Hemmeter, McLean, Sandall, & McLaughlin, 2013).

Findings from the current study also illustrate that while teachers felt that kindergartners' school days were inherently social, participants thought they had only a modest amount of time to support children's peer interactions. Several issues are connected to this finding. First, as previously stated, even with prompts during focus group discussions the majority of teachers did not discuss systematically embedding learning opportunities for children to work on their social interaction skills across the school day (e.g., during routines and transitions, Sandall & Schwartz, 2008; Snyder et al., 2013) which may have contributed to their belief that there was not enough time to monitor and facilitate peer interactions for children with disabilities. Second, consistent with previous research, participating teachers reported that they spent the majority of their class time on literacy and math instruction (Miller & Almon, 2009), leaving little time to monitor or facilitate children's social interaction skills. Third, the majority of teachers described using

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instructional methods to teach academic skills that did not include opportunities for children with disabilities to practice social interaction skills or build relationships with peers.

Together these findings support the idea that the current emphasis on academic achievement in kindergarten may be impacting the amount of attention teachers provide to children's social development (Graue, 2009). Additionally, the findings support the interpretation that teachers may view academic and social-emotional instruction as a dichotomy (Bassok, Claessens, & Engel, 2014), which may contribute to teachers' feelings that too much focus on academic instruction results in limited time for social interaction instruction. These findings extend previous research that has demonstrated that even though kindergarten teachers view most social interaction practices to be acceptable, desirable, and mostly feasible to implement (Hamre-Nietupski et al., 1994; Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Rheams & Bain, 2005; Vaughn et al., 1999), they do not embed them in everyday practice (Winter & Van Reusen, 1997). The finding that teachers are not currently using many evidence-based, peer interaction interventions or social interaction practices might be attributed to school-level barriers, another topic that emerged from the data and is worthy of further discussion.

School-level Barriers to Providing Social Interaction Interventions

The current study extends previous research on barriers that prevent kindergarten teachers from monitoring and facilitating the peer-related social competence of children with disabilities. The school-level barriers mentioned by participating teachers have been previously described in the literature as barriers to supporting the inclusion of kindergartners with disabilities. These barriers include issues related to high student to teacher ratios, lack of adult

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support, and not having enough time to devote to play (Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Winter & Van Reusen, 1997).

Furthermore, the current study supports previous research that ecological barriers such as classroom features (e.g., curriculum, materials) and structure (e.g., physical space) impact children's peer-related social competence and teachers' abilities to support children's social-emotional development (see Sainato, Jung, Salmon, & Axe, 2008). This study also extends the research by identifying administrative characteristics (e.g., beliefs about early childhood education) as an additional ecological barrier that teachers felt negatively impacted their ability to appropriately monitor children's peer interactions and subsequently support children's peer relationships and social skills development. This study illustrates how teachers believed these barriers impacted the extent to which they could monitor and facilitate peer interactions for children with or at-risk for disabilities.

It is important to note that some of the barriers identified by participating teachers might be attributed to differences between full and half-day kindergarten programs. That is, findings from the current study support previous research showing that full-day kindergarten teachers may know and understand their students' needs better than half-day kindergarten teachers due to increased opportunities for observation and teacher-child interaction during the school day (Elicker & Mathur, 1997). This might explain differences in opinions found in this study between some full and half-day kindergarten teachers about opportunities to monitor and facilitate children's social interaction skills.

Finally, this study illustrates that barriers to appropriately monitoring and supporting children's peer-related social competence, coupled with school-level policy structures (e.g., when to request a case evaluation on a child, when to seek additional intervening supports) may

impact kindergartners' access to early intervention. For example, some participating teachers experienced difficulty obtaining additional supports for children with challenging behaviors when they could not prove that children's delays in peer-related social competence consequently impacted their academic development. While there are evidence-based, tiered intervention frameworks designed to support the social-emotional and peer-related social competence of young children (see Brown, Odom, & Conroy, 2001; Hemmeter, Fox, & Snyder, 2013), few teachers discussed implementing such models. Notably, these frameworks encourage progress monitoring and increasing the intensity and specificity of interventions as determined by children's individual social skills development. None of the models require evidence of children's lack of social competence impeding their academic achievement in order for increasingly intensive or specific interventions to be delivered. The findings from this study suggest that there is a research-to-practice gap regarding the implementation of these tiered intervention frameworks in kindergarten.

Limitations

To place this study in context, limitations need to be discussed. One main limitation was that none of the districts included in this study met AYP during the 2013 school year and were either issued an early warning or were on academic watch. One district was on academic watch for their seventh year in a row (i.e., District Bravo). A range of consequences is associated with specific AYP statuses (e.g., revising school improvement plans, providing professional development, implementing new curricula, extending the school day/year, see U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Consecutively not making AYP may have been a reason why so many of the teachers felt that their districts emphasized academics over social skills development. Taken

into consideration, the findings from this study may be most relevant to teachers working in similar school districts as participants in this study. Findings may not be applicable to teachers from districts that have made AYP.

Implications for Research

The two key themes that emerged from this study provide new directions for future research. First, teachers' reports of rarely using peer interaction interventions in kindergarten classrooms highlight the need for research on the social validity of using evidence-based social interaction practices in kindergarten classrooms. That is, future research should move beyond asking teachers to rate their perspectives on the acceptability, desirability, and feasibility of particular social interaction practices and peer interaction interventions (Hamre-Nietupski et al., 1994; Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007; Rheams & Bain, 2005; Vaughn et al., 1999), and instead examine the validity of the practices and interventions within the context of today's kindergarten programs (Schwartz & Baer, 1991). If existing evidence-based peer interaction interventions are determined to be socially unacceptable and incompatible by teachers, future research should investigate how those practices could be fine-tuned to fit within kindergarten programs and then empirically test the practices to determine their efficacy for supporting children's peer-related social competence and subsequent development of peer relationships.

Second, state-level policies influence the knowledge and skills expected of early childhood educators (e.g., certification requirements) and for young children (e.g., early learning standards). The personnel preparation of early childhood teachers is extremely important in making sure that classroom staff has the education and training to provide high-quality early childhood intervention (Fowler, Yates, & Ostrosky, 2011). The creation of high-quality early learning standards that include all domains of children's development are also essential to

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supporting positive outcomes for young children (Shaffer, 2013). Given the diversity of certification models used by states to guide the preparation of early childhood teachers (Stayton et al., 2009) and the diversity of social-emotional expectations included in early learning standards for young children (Shaffer, 2013), future research should examine state-level policies connected to certification models for kindergarten teachers and social-emotional expectations in early learning standards for kindergartners. This research could provide a better understanding of the knowledge and skills kindergarten teachers have to meet the needs of diverse learners who may enter school without age-appropriate social interaction skills and the expectations those teachers have for children with and without disabilities.

Third, future research could focus on the types of opportunities kindergarten teachers have to embed peer interaction interventions and practices into their daily schedules. This information could contribute to the empirical literature on treatment intensity, and provide direction on "dosage" needed to support children's peer-related social competence across multi-tiered models of instruction (Snyder et al., 2013). Such research also might focus on the early intervening supports provided to kindergartners who have limited peer-related social competence skills. Key stakeholders (e.g., administrators, specialists, parents, teachers) could be interviewed to describe how they make decisions related to treatment intensity and intervention decisions when kindergartners exhibit poor peer interactions.

Fourth, the teachers in this study who expressed the most dissatisfaction with their ability to meet the peer-related social competence needs of children with disabilities came from the district with the most economic and racial diversity. This school was also on their seventh year of not making AYP. The focus on academic achievement has said to be paramount in schools serving disadvantaged children (National Education Goals Panel, 1998). Even without empirical

research to support this course of action, the focus on academics may be attributed to stakeholders' beliefs that increased focus on academics is "a way to prevent future failure" (p. 25). Future research should examine whether teachers from districts that are less diverse or have met AYP express similar or disconfirming views from the ones held by participants in this study.

Fifth, a recommendation for conducting future research on supporting peer-related social competence for children with or at risk for disabilities is to consider the variety of kindergarten programs that exist in the United States. These programs vary in a number of ways. For example, some classrooms are located in elementary schools or kindergarten centers. Other factors to consider include the length of the program day, teacher-child ratio, age of students enrolled, and amount of adult support provided to classroom teachers. Taking into account these differences when sampling participants, designing studies, and reporting findings will contribute to the intervention literature by answering questions such as what practices work, for which kindergartners, within what type of kindergarten program.

Implications for Practice

The key themes that emerged from this study also provide implications for practice. Across focus groups, participants spoke of the need for more time to create and facilitate peer interactions for children with limited peer-related social competence skills. If teachers feel they do not have enough time to focus on teaching social interaction skills, professional development and networking with colleagues might be vehicles through which they can learn how to embed learning opportunities into everyday classroom activities, routines, and transitions (Sandall & Schwartz, 2008). A number of naturalistic strategies to support peer interactions have been identified that could be easily integrated into kindergarten schedules (e.g., during snack, lining-

up for transitions, during morning meetings; see Brown, Odom, McConnell, & Rathel, 2008).

Additionally, teachers may consider using peer-mediated interventions to support the

engagement and social interactions of children with or at-risk for disabilities during academic

instruction throughout the kindergarten day (e.g., during learning centers, seatwork; see Carter,

Sisco, & Chugn, 2012) thereby meeting children's academic as well as social-emotional goals.

Participants in this study also felt stifled by a number of classroom ecological barriers,

which led them to question if they were meeting children's peer-related social competence needs.

Teachers must "become powerful advocates-for themselves, their students, and their programs,"

which will help create settings where children's development *in every area* is given appropriate

attention (Graue, 2006, p. 10). Teachers can begin their journey to advocacy by networking with

one another and by becoming members of national organizations that provide support and

education about developmentally appropriate practices for kindergartners (e.g., DEC and

NAEYC) and specialized knowledge about meeting the needs of diverse learners. Teachers can

share the knowledge and resources gained from their membership in professional organizations

with each other within the contexts of professional learning communities (Hord & Sommers,

2008) and communities of practice (Wesley & Buysse, 2001). Sharing their knowledge with

other key stakeholders in their school districts might also influence change (e.g., school board

members, principals, parents).

In conclusion, the results of this study provide important information on kindergarten

teachers' perspectives about supporting social interaction skills and peer relationships for

children with disabilities. The results suggest that teachers may struggle with embedding peer

interaction interventions into the ongoing activities, routines, and transitions of kindergarten

classrooms. The findings also suggest that school-level barriers may influence teachers' ability to

provide their students with the level of intensity needed to support the development of age-appropriate social interaction skills. More research on the use of peer interaction interventions in kindergarten is needed to better understand the supports necessary to successfully embed interventions across daily activities, routines, and transitions, to overcome barriers that may be present in kindergarten classrooms, and to make sure that schools are ready for children with peer-related social competence needs.

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Appendix A

IRB Documentation

September 9, 2013

Michaelene Ostrosky
Special Education
Education Bldg
1310 S Sixth St
M/C 708

RE: *Kindergarten Teachers' Perspectives: Classroom Ecology Peer Interactions and Children with Disabilities*

IRB Protocol Number: 14149

EXPIRATION DATE: September 8, 2016

Dear Dr. Ostrosky:

Thank you for submitting the completed IRB application form for your project entitled *Kindergarten Teachers' Perspectives: Classroom Ecology Peer Interactions and Children with Disabilities*. Your project was assigned Institutional Review Board (IRB) Protocol Number 14149 and reviewed. It has been determined that the research activities described in this application meet the criteria for exemption at 45CFR46.101(b)(2).

This determination of exemption only applies to the research study as submitted. Please note that additional modifications to your project need to be submitted to the IRB for review and exemption determination or approval before the modifications are initiated.
We appreciate your conscientious adherence to the requirements of human subjects research. If you have any questions about the IRB process, or if you need assistance at any time, please feel free to contact me or the IRB Office, or visit our website at http://www.irb.illinois.edu.

Sincerely,
Dustin L. Yocum, Human Subjects Research Exempt Specialist, Institutional Review Board

c: Lori Meyer

Appendix B

Assistant Moderator Responsibilities

- **Take responsibility for refreshments.** Arrange the refreshments on site and clean up afterwards.
- **Help to arrange the room.** Arrange chairs so everyone can see each other. Be attentive to background noises that might affect the audio-recording.
- **Set up the equipment.** Verify that it is working properly.
- **Welcome** the participants as they arrive.
- **Sit in designated location.** Sit outside the circle, opposite the moderator and close to the door. If participants arrive after the session begins, meet them at the door and take them outside of the room. Give them a short briefing as to what has happened so far and the current topic of discussion. Briefly review the consent form with them, ask for their permission to audiotape their conversation, and ask for their signature. Then bring the late participant into the room and show him or her where to sit. If the participant refuses to be audiotaped, let him or her know that the primary researcher will be in contact within the next two days to schedule a 1:1 interview without audio-recording.
- **Be available** to child care provider.
- **Take notes throughout the discussion.** Be attentive to the following areas:
  - **Well-said quotes.** Capture word for word as much of the statement as possible. Listen for sentences or phrases that are particularly enlightening Place your opinions, thoughts, or ideas in parenthesis to keep them separate from participant comments. If a question occurs to you that you would like to ask at the end of the discussion, write it down in a circle or box.
  - **Nonverbal activity, Seating arrangement, Tone/climate** of the group or particular participants**, Interpersonal reactions** and relationships between participants**,** and **Major themes**
- **Monitor recording equipment.** Occasionally glance at the recording devices to see if they are still functioning.
- **Do not participate in the discussion.** You can talk only if invited by the moderator. Control your nonverbal actions no matter how strongly you feel about an issue.
- **Ask questions when invited.** At the end of the discussion the moderator will invite you to ask questions for clarification.
- **Collect demographic questionnaires, classroom schedules, and hand out the honorariums.** Be sure participants have completed their questionnaire, written their classroom schedule, and signed that they have received their honorarium. Thank participants for attending.
- **Debrief.** Following the focus group, participate in the debriefing with the moderator.
- **Listen to audio-tape from focus group session and re-check/type field notes.** Listen to audio-tape from focus group session. Then, re-check and transcribe field notes in a word processor as soon as possible following the focus group session (i.e., no more than 3 days after the session has occurred). Make sure codes are used in the transcription to maintain participant confidentiality. Email transcription to the primary researcher and provide the primary researcher with the handwritten copy of field notes to save in a secure location.

- **Provide feedback on focus group summary.** Read and provide primary researcher with feedback on the summary that will be sent to a focus group participant for member checking.

This assistant moderator list was adapted from Krueger and Casey (2009).

Focus Group Interview Guide

<u>Focus Group Structure</u>
- Schedule: no more than 2 hours in length.
- We will determine a mutually agreed on time/date/location for the focus group.
- Light refreshments will be provided along with child care.
- The session will be conducted in a location with adequate lighting and ventilation, and with sufficient privacy so the conversation will remain confidential.
- The chairs will be configured so that all focus group members can see each other (e.g., in a circle).
- Participants will be given a nametag.
- The focus group session will follow this agenda:
    - Welcome, Introductions, and thank you/Obtain Consent/Ask permission to audiotape
    - Review agenda
    - Review goals for the session
    - Review ground rules
    - Introductions
    - Questions/Answers
    - Wrap up and thank you
- The session will be audio-taped with the permission of focus group participants. The focus group moderator and assistant moderator will observe and take field notes.

<u>Ground rules</u>
1. It is my intent (the moderator) for all members of the focus group to participate as much as possible. Each member will be given the opportunity to respond to all questions and follow up questions.
2. I will do my best to (1) keep the group focused, (2) maintain momentum, and (3) get closure on questions.
3. I encourage everyone to converse with each other rather than directing your comments back to me.
4. To aid in audio-recording, please refrain from having side conversations and try to ensure that only one person speaks at a time.
5. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers.
6. You do not have to answer every question that is asked.
7. All comments made during the focus group session should be kept confidential. Please do not repeat what you hear in the focus group session. Please be aware of the possibility that other focus group members may repeat comments outside the group at some point in the future. With this in mind, I encourage you to be open as you can, while being aware of the limits I have to protect your identity and secure complete confidentiality. I advise you to think carefully about what you decide to share with the group, especially if there is something you want to remain private.
8. Also, to protect the identities of children in your class, please refrain from using their names during the discussion.

Focus Group Questions and Potential Probes (with approximate times)

*Review agenda, and discuss ground rules **(~5 minutes)***

1. Tell us who you are, where you teach, and what you most enjoy doing when you're not teaching. *[This question will be used to introduce everyone and give each participant the chance to speak. Information learned from this question will not be transcribed or analyzed.] **(~5 minutes)***

2. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the phrase creating opportunities in your classroom for children to socially interact and form relationships with their classmates? ***(~5 minutes)***
   • What do those opportunities look like?

3. Let's look at your classroom schedule. *[Activity question] **(~10 minutes)***
   • With a pencil, indicate times during the school day when children have opportunities to interact with their peers in your classroom. Mark the times, or activities, on your schedule with a "+" if you think the children have some or lots of opportunities and a "-" if you think the children have no or only a few opportunities to interact with peers.
   • Next, think of one of your kindergartners who has a disability and struggles with his or her social-emotional skills/peer interactions. Using a pen, follow the same coding system and mark when this child has opportunities to interact with his or her peers in your classroom during the school day.
   • Last, find the times/activities when you have written a "+". Indicate whether these opportunities are teacher- or child-directed. That is, if it is a time when children must independently engage in order to take advantage of the opportunity for peer interaction, mark a "C" for child-directed. However, if you or another adult are intentionally involved by supporting children's interactions and social engagement with peers during this time, mark a "T" for teacher-directed. *[Provide directions on a poster-sized visual for teachers to refer to during the activity.] Debrief activity once all teachers have completed coding their schedules.*

4. Examining your class schedule, what influences your ability to plan or create opportunities for children with disabilities to interact with their peers? ***(~15 minutes)***
   • What influences whether an opportunity is teacher- or child-directed?
   • Please describe why some parts of the day may have more opportunities than others?
   • How, if at all, do you plan for these opportunities to occur?
   • What, if any, changes to the classroom environment do you make for these opportunities to occur?
   • What, if any, supports are needed?
       ○ Materials
       ○ Adult Support
       ○ Education/Knowledge

5. How would you describe your role in supporting peer interactions and relationships for children with disabilities and their classmates? ***(~10 minutes)***

- What influences how you view your role?
  - Parents
  - Other Teachers
  - Child's Skills

6. In a previous study, we asked kindergarten teachers to identify the close friendships established between children in their classroom. We then asked teachers to report how confident they were in identifying children's friendships. On average, teachers reported levels of confidence that ranged anywhere from zero to sixty percent. What do you think of this finding? *[Exhibit question] (~15 minutes)*
  - What do you think about this in terms of your own ability to identify the close friendships of children in your classroom?
  - Please describe why it might be easy to feel confident about knowing friendships present in your classroom?
  - Please describe why it might be difficult to feel confident about knowing friendships present in your classroom?
  - Could you describe whether this is currently an important thing for kindergarten teachers to know (i.e., who the children in their class are friends with?)
  - How, if at all, does your view change if we were talking specifically about knowing the friendships of children with disabilities?

7. Think back to when you had a child with a disability in your classroom who was having difficulty interacting with peers or struggling to make friends, please describe what, if anything you in this situation? *(~10 minutes)*
  - Who, if anyone, did you turn to for support?
  - What, if anything, did you use for support?

8. When you think of your current classroom environment (e.g., space, materials, activities, actions you take within the environment) what things facilitate peer interactions and promote relationships development for children with disabilities? *(~10 minutes)*
  - Suggestions for change?

9. What elements of your classroom environment (e.g., space, materials, activities, actions you take within the environment) are barriers for children with disabilities to interact and form relationships with peers? *(~10 minutes)*
  - Suggestions for change?

Provide brief oral summary of the group's discussion (~5 minutes)

10. How well does that capture what was said here today? *(~5 minutes)*

Allow assistant moderator to ask any clarifying questions (~5 minutes)

11. Is there anything that we should have talked about today but didn't? *(~5 minutes)*

12. This is the first in a series of groups like this that we are doing. Do you have any advice for how we can improve? *[This last question was used with the first group only. This question was not transcribed or analyzed and was used to adjust the interview guide, as necessary].*

Introduce the demographic/focus group implementation questionnaire,
thank participants for their involvement in the discussion, and
explain the procedure for picking up their honorarium.
(~Last 10 minutes in the session)

Appendix D

Fidelity of Implementation Guide for Focus Groups

Name of Recorder: _____   Date: _____

Focus Group Start Time: _____   Focus Group End Time: _____

Number of participants present: _____

Focus group moderator took notes: Yes _____ No _____

Assistant moderator took notes: Yes _____ No _____

Classroom schedules were reviewed/collected from all participants: Yes _____ No _____

Assistant moderator was able to ask questions for clarification: Yes _____ No _____

Focus group moderator provided participants with a brief, oral summary of the discussion: Yes _____ No _____

Demographic/focus group implementation questionnaire was administered:
Yes _____ No _____

All questionnaires were checked for completion: Yes _____ No _____

Participants signed for and were provided their honorarium after completing their questionnaires:
Yes _____ No _____

Debriefing session was held and the following activities occurred:
_____: Reviewed notes/discussed major themes/incidents
_____: Added to field notes/discussed major themes/incidents or well-said points of view.

Focus Group Implementation Questionnaire

Questions about today's focus group session:

1. How would you describe the **flow of the discussion**?
    (a) There was so much discussion that it felt rushed to get through all the questions.
    (b) All members had an equal opportunity to speak at a fairly easy pace.
    (c) The discussion was dominated by a few people

2. How would you describe your **comfort level** in expressing your opinions during the focus group session?
    (a) I felt comfortable expressing my opinion, even if it was not similar to the other members' opinions.
    (b) I felt comfortable expressing some of my opinions, but I kept some thoughts to myself.
    (c) I did not feel comfortable expressing my opinions.

3. How would you describe your **knowledge level** in regards to topics discussed during today's session?
    (a) I understood all the issues that were discussed.
    (b) I learned some new things from the discussion.
    (c) I learned a lot of new things from the discussion today.

If you marked (b) or (c) above, please take a moment to note some of the things you learned today. If you marked (a), you may move on to question 4.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Questions about creating social opportunities and supporting peer interactions for children with disabilities in your classroom:

4. How would you describe the importance of creating social opportunities and supporting the peer interactions of children with disabilities in your classroom?
      (a) I feel it's extremely important.
      (b) I feel it's somewhat important.
      (c) I feel it's not important.

5. How comfortable do you feel creating social opportunities and supporting children with disabilities to socially engage with their peers in your classroom?
      (a) I feel very comfortable.
      (b) I feel somewhat comfortable.
      (c) I feel uncomfortable.

6. How would you describe the amount of time you have to focus on creating social opportunities and supporting the peer interactions of children with disabilities in your classroom?
      (a) I have a significant amount of time.
      (b) I have a modest amount of time.
      (c) I have no time at all.

Additional thoughts or comments:

1. How do you view your role in supporting peer interactions and relationships for children with disabilities?

2. To what extent do children with disabilities have opportunities to socially interact with peers in your classroom?

3. How do you monitor and support peer interactions for children with disabilities in your classroom?

4. When it comes to supporting peer interactions and relationships for children with disabilities in your classroom:

      (a) what are some facilitators?

      (b) what are some barriers?

5. What changes can be made to help promote peer interactions and relationships for children with disabilities during their kindergarten year?

Thank you!

Please turn in this questionnaire to the assistant moderator
to receive your honorarium.

Appendix F

Member Check Email

Date

Dear _____,

Attached you'll find a summary of the focus group's discussion during our session on
_____. This is basically a summary I've written based on the major issues, ideas, and
themes that emerged from the group's discussion.

This is an opportunity for you to verify that this summary accurately captures what was said
during the session. I ask that you keep the following questions in mind as you are read the
summary:
- Does this summary accurately reflect what was said in the focus group?
- Can you detect any subtle biases on my part in interpreting the focus group discussion?
- Do you have any additional comments?

This type of feedback is one way I can help ensure that I've captured the group's perspective and
that I have not incorporated my own opinions into the summary. By (*insert date here*), please tell
me if my summary of the group's discussion is valid.

Feel free to clarify or expand on the information presented as much or as little as you would like.
Your feedback will help to modify our analysis and interpretation of the focus group data.

You can send me your feedback by either: (1) using the Track Changes/Comments tool within
the Word document, (2) adding your comments at the end of the document, (3) sending me your
comments in a separate email, (4) handwriting your comments and sending them to me via US
Mail, or (5) calling me and discussing your comments over the phone.

You may email your feedback to me at erbreder@illinois.edu, call me at (815) 228-1355 or send
your handwritten feedback to:

Lori Meyer
(Address redacted)

Feel free to call me with any questions about this feedback process (815) 228-1355.

Additionally, in appreciation of your time spent on this task, a $10 Starbucks gift card will be
sent to you via US Mail (at your school's address) after I have received your feedback. Thank
you again for your participation in this study.

Sincerely,
Lori Meyer