

Using Photographic Picture Books to Better Understand Young Children's Ideas of Belonging: A Study of Early Literacy Strategies and Social Inclusion

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This study examined the ways young children (3 years 11 months to 7 years 9 months) talk about and demonstrate their understanding of social inclusion through the use of self-produced family photograph books. One hundred eighty-seven children from the Greater Toronto Area participated in the study by first sharing their personal photograph books with a small group of peers and then exploring books produced by children unknown to them. A mixed methods approach was used where children's understanding of vocabulary was documented and small focus group discussions were transcribed and analyzed. This article focuses on the study's qualitative findings that children spoke about and conveyed their understanding of concepts surrounding social inclusion (inclusion, diversity, respect, acceptance, understanding) based on (1) their learning of the social inclusion vocabulary, (2) their personal experience with social inclusion, and (3) their talk of social inclusion in relation to social identity. These themes and their implications for early childhood education are discussed.

Our world today is more interconnected, dynamic, and socially conscious than ever before. The crossing of borders through

immigration, leisurely travel, and internet browsing have made the recognition, acknowledgement, and appreciation of diverse experience and existence more apparent. Canada's population has rapidly changed in recent decades (Malenfant, Lebel, & Martel, 2010). Statistics Canada reports an increase "in the proportion of persons born abroad, persons whose mother tongue is neither English nor French, and persons belonging to visible minority groups" (Malenfant, Lebel, & Martel, 2010, p. 3). Issues surrounding multiculturalism and our responses to diversity have never been more relevant to our everyday lives. Increasingly diverse populations and urban demographic shifts toward more cultural integration have resulted in an increased awareness of the value of social inclusion. Our classrooms are mirror reflections of larger society, and it is children's understandings of social inclusion that illustrate the essence of multiculturalism in a learning community. For example, in the Greater Toronto Area it is common to have over forty languages and an equally wide range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds represented in a school. It is important that children understand and recognize their contributions to diversity and inclusion. Educational research has begun to explore the role and value of social inclusion through understanding children's perspectives (e.g., Pelletier, Morley, & Messina, 2010).

Our study was based in Toronto, Canada, one of the world's most diverse cities. More than 200 different ethnic origins were counted in the metropolitan area of Toronto in the 2006 census. A major factor contributing to this diversity is the high number of immigrant families living in the city, most of whom (81.9%) belong to a visible minority group (Statistics Canada, 2006). As Toronto moves toward even greater multiculturalism, school populations mirror this diversity. Children from diverse families and social identities come together in a classroom to interact and learn from and with one another. Teachers in communities across Toronto work with students from a wide range of cultural, racial, cognitive, gender, linguistic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Within this diverse context, many teachers spend a great deal of time and thought creating inclusive environments where students are affirmed, engaged, and respected.

Social inclusion is a key component in developing social relations and a strong self-image among students. The Ontario Ministry of Education and school boards long ago established equity policies on social inclusion in educational settings, which, it is hoped, will result in children feeling included, valued, and appreciated. To understand and support this process, our study focused on educational settings in the early years with the goal of gaining

greater insight into young children's constructs of social inclusion. Knowledge of how students process concepts of inclusion is critical in our efforts to improve teachers' practices, including the development of effective curricula, to foster social inclusion. To obtain richer understandings of young children's inner thoughts of social inclusion, this research examines and illustrates the interpretations of children's thoughts and voices. Through sharing students' experiences and personal stories and thoughtfully reflecting on the meaning behind these words, we hope that purposeful changes can be made to the current curriculum to support the learning of social inclusion in the early years' classroom.

Significance of the Study

London and colleagues (2002) write: "As our society moves toward greater cultural heterogeneity, children from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds will be interacting with one another on a larger scale in school, work, and play" (p. 61). The movement toward cultural heterogeneity reminds us of the value that inclusion plays in our ability to foster and promote community building and a sense of belonging for all. According to London et al. (2002), in order for individuals to work toward creating attitudes that foster and promote a positive reception for people from diverse backgrounds, they must understand and relate to one another, and to do this, they must learn about each other's backgrounds. Some research describes how older children and adults understand social inclusion (Kumashiro, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995); fewer studies have looked at how children in the early years understand this concept. This study contributes to the expanding research literature that explores social inclusion and the young child. Previous studies show that young children have understandings of and preferences for particular social identities. For example, Mehta's (2010) research showed that young participants of diverse ethnicities, in an interview task using ethnically

diverse puppets, were more inclined to choose the puppet representing the white-skinned, blue-eyed, blond-haired child over the puppet that they most closely self-identified with. Vuckovick (2008) argues that "children's attempts to understand the social world must be respected and adults working with children should be ready to provide them with opportunities to explore and understand a diverse range of social contexts" (p. 9). Social environments, such as the home and school, should provide children with opportunities to explore diverse perspectives and traditions. However, without a comprehensive understanding of how children in the early years understand social inclusion, very little can be done to foster and develop this construct in our classrooms.

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For these reasons, researchers and practitioners alike have called for further inquiry into young children's understanding of social inclusion. A recent report titled "We All Belong: The Effects of Photograph Books to Enhance Literacy Development and Social Inclusion in Early Years Classrooms (Pelletier, Morley, & Messina, 2010) examined young children's understandings of social inclusion through the use of family photograph books. The report included quantitative measures of children's language and literacy learning related to social inclusion terms and general comprehension. The findings suggest that through explicit and intentional instruction of concepts related to social inclusion using family photograph books, young children can enhance their understanding of social inclusion. The findings inform inclusive educational practices and the integration of social

inclusion into the curriculum. In this article, we share qualitative, descriptive findings gathered in the report in the form of children's expressions of their understandings of social inclusion. We consider the children's words to explore what we—as researchers, educators, and parents—can do to support children's understandings of social inclusion. The findings shared here extend the findings of the Pelletier, Morley, and Messina report by adding detailed insights directly from the children's voices and connecting those details to the literature on social inclusion. Thus this study contributes to the literature on diversity, early childhood education, and inclusion by analyzing children's discourses of inclusion.

Social Inclusion

Until recently, the term *social inclusion* has been used to describe integrated schooling in a special education setting (Evans & Lunt, 2002). As Topping and Maloney (2005) state, "all commentators now agree that inclusion should mean much more than the mere physical presence of pupils with special education needs in mainstream schools" (p. 5). The present study follows the path of many scholars in the field who conceive of inclusion in this broader sense (Ainscow, 2008; Dei, 1996; Kosnik & Beck, 2009; Kumashiro, 2002; Melnick & Zeichner, 1997; Topping & Maloney, 2005; Verma, Bagley, & Jha, 2007). The term *social inclusion* now encompasses a much wider social context, including any individual who is vulnerable to exclusionary pressures (Ainscow, 2008). The increasing level of diversity in our communities, coupled with the revised interpretation of social inclusion, highlights the importance of this concept and the need for further research on how to foster inclusion in classrooms. In our study, social inclusion is defined as "students experiencing a sense of belonging in a classroom where all the students are achieving and participating in equitable ways regardless of their social identities" (Cleovoulou, 2010, p. 8). We very intentionally included the concept

of equity in the definition to highlight the importance and value of issues of power within social inclusion. In this study, social inclusion was operationally defined through the use of five related terms: inclusion, diversity, respect, acceptance, and understanding. The terms were chosen because we believe them to be important words for young children to understand in discussions about social inclusion. Based on collaborative discussions with practicing early years and primary level teachers, the terms were defined as follows:

- *Inclusion*: Welcoming all people such that everyone feels a sense of belonging, everyone feels equally part of a group.
- *Diversity*: Seeing differences in people and places; acknowledging that differences are special, that we benefit from diversity, and that we can be different in some ways and the same in some ways.
- *Respect*: Recognition of other people's choices as their right; regard for the feelings, wishes, rights, and traditions of others.
- *Acceptance*: Willingness to welcome people and to like them for who they are; all people can be themselves.
- *Understanding*: Knowing that we are different and the same; relating positively to someone else's choices and thinking (perspective taking); wanting to know about what other people think and do.

Theoretical Perspective

Building on the definition that social inclusion is a broad concept that considers any person vulnerable to exclusionary pressures (Ainscow, 2008), we bring critical theory to our discussion of this investigation's findings. Critical theory adds to the definition of social inclusion by its emphasis on the issue of power as it relates to inclusion. Kumashiro's (2000) anti-oppression framework for thinking

critically about the "other"—"other" being any marginalized group or person—provides a broad theoretical frame for considering the ways young children talk about aspects of inclusion. Kumashiro's framework also provides pedagogical opportunities to teach young children about inclusion and exclusion while maintaining the natural and authentic discourses that young children experience daily. In addition to Kumashiro, we include Ladson-Billings' (1994) and Gay's (2000) work in culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy to discuss how institutional curriculum can be altered to be inclusive and to support the learning of social inclusion, and how educators can raise students' consciousness of issues of social inclusion.

Bringing a critical theory framework to early years learning about social inclusion adds a complexity and layering of thoughtful decision making on the part of the teachers. For example, decisions around use of words, choice of language, exposure to explicit sensitivities that may or may not be realized by the children, and responses to children's thoughts play a role in framing the study and the analysis. Overall, a focus on social inclusion was used to capture the understandings of young children's ideas surrounding inclusion, and a critical frame was central in the analysis and discussion to explore more deeply and profoundly the case for social inclusion in the early years.

The Study

Methodology and methods

Initially intended as a quantitative study that looked at social inclusion vocabulary acquisition in the early years, the study also generated qualitative data that went beyond the scope of the quantitative findings. As researchers interested in the qualitative findings, we studied, analyzed, and discussed, through a critical lens, the descriptive accounts of children's talk during the focus group discussion. This article reports on the qualitative findings and shares the details of two of the

research questions from the larger study. The questions we explored and report on here were:

1. How do children talk about social inclusion using family photograph books?
2. How do children in the early years understand social inclusion when referring to specific vocabulary?

There were three stages involved in the study. In the first stage, team members developed a research plan designed to examine young children's understanding of social inclusion. To extend previous research involving the creation of photograph books to foster home literacy practices and children's reading, it was decided that the same quantitative methodology would be used to help children pay attention to—and, in doing so, develop a deeper understanding of—issues of social inclusion.

Junior kindergarten to grade one children from six schools in the Greater Toronto Area varying widely in their sociodemographic profiles were invited, through information and consent letters sent home to parents, to participate in the research study. The parents of 187 children consented to the research (95 boys, 92 girls with an age range of 3 years 11 months to 7 years 9 months). The sample is relatively large and includes children from a wide variety of social backgrounds (race, ethnicity, economic status, language, religion) and classroom settings.

Two of the participating schools are associated with a university; one of these offers a reverse integrated kindergarten program that integrates typically developing children with children who have physical challenges in a unique learning environment and the other is a private school. The public schools in the study varied in demographic location, from subsidized housing communities to middle-class suburban neighbourhoods. When describing and analyzing the findings, we refer to the dominant and

most common responses as “the children’s responses.”

The second stage of the project also involved quantitative methods. A vocabulary measure pertaining to social inclusion was developed by the primary school teachers from one of the participating schools. “Inclusion” terms were generated during collaborative meetings with the research team and then were rank-ordered by the group of primary teachers. The teachers selected terms they felt would be important for young children to understand and manageable to track and record. The top five ranked terms—*inclusion*, *diversity*, *respect*, *acceptance*, and *understanding*—were discussed in detail, and a shared definition was established for use by all the researchers. A teaching protocol for introducing and discussing these terms with the children while using the family photograph books was created. This was done to assess children’s understanding and learning of particularly vocabulary.

The third and last stage of the project drew in the qualitative methods. The family photograph books were used as part of a focus group discussion that targeted the five inclusion terms and drew children’s attention to their own and other children’s books. A series of photographs was collected from each child to construct the family photograph books. The books, identical in terms of their layout and design, were printed and bound. Additional copies of some books were made to ensure that the children in the book study group received books that were from children from different schools during the second session. The children who participated in this study were divided into two distinct groups: book study and control. It is important to note that the groups were not randomly assigned. The specific collaborative nature of this study necessitated the involvement of the university-associated classrooms in the partnership research. Seven groups participated in the focus group discussions.

On the first day of the focus group discussions, the children were given their own books to look through while the researcher drew their attention to similarities and differences among the books, following a detailed script. These books were designed to represent a wide range of items that may be significant and easily identifiable to young children. These items included name, family, favourite animals and toys, neighbourhood and shopping places, favourite activities, toy preference, favourite place, favourite pet or animal, and dreams. A photograph represented each item and each photograph was specifically linked to a particular inclusion term. For example, the term *inclusion* was explicitly discussed when viewing the photographs pertaining to neighbourhood places and shopping; the term *diversity* was explicitly discussed when viewing the photograph of the child and their family. All group discussions were recorded and transcribed.

On the second day of the focus group discussions, the children received books belonging to children from other schools. A detailed script was once again used to ensure consistency and structure throughout the duration of each discussion. The children discussed what they noticed was similar and different about their own books compared to the other children’s books. The detailed script directed the children through a meaningful review of the family photograph books, which involved the explicit discussion of the five inclusion terms. Group discussions were transcribed and detailed field notes were taken by the researchers to capture children’s talk of social inclusion.

Analysis

Since this article reports on the third stage of the study and the findings related to it, we will only mention here the analysis process for the third stage. The analysis involved multiple reviews of the transcripts and the detailed observational notes taken by the researchers. Fifteen interviews (one transcript was unrecoverable) were completed and used for the qualitative

analysis. After the completion of the interviews and the transcribing process, the researchers organized the transcripts according to grade, teaching sessions (1 and 2), and school. Once the data had been organized, researchers read and reviewed the transcripts repeatedly to gain insight and to discuss strategies by which to further organize the data. The data were further arranged based on the five inclusion terms by assigning each term a colour code and highlighting the sections of each transcript where the term was explicitly discussed. Repetition, description, and explanation of the vocabulary were highlighted and coded.

Once the text had been identified by inclusion term, each researcher was randomly assigned to a term and proceeded to examine that term independently through a cross-analysis (across schools and grades). Each researcher repeatedly reviewed the notes associated with their assigned term. Descriptive observational notes were made, which drew attention to emerging themes. The emergent themes are reflected in this paper’s discussion. The researchers met several times over the course of several weeks to discuss findings and emergent themes across each of the terms. The terms were later analyzed as a whole, through group discussions, to identify and address shared themes and patterns as well as interrelationships between the terms. The themes that emerged from the text helped the team to develop interpretive theories and understandings about the data (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005).

Limitations

The large nature of this study offered benefits and constraints in relation to the third stage of the study—the qualitative focus groups. On the one hand, this study affords strength in its large number of participants. The data acquired of 187 young children in small focus groups, across six different schools and with a four-year age span across participants, provides several opportunities for analysis and discussion. We were able to explore

what children of different age groups said about the various social inclusion terms and compare what children across school settings had to say about social inclusion. The large number was helpful in acquiring more data by way of more children participating in the focus group, and offers strength in transferability. On the other hand, the constraint of such a large-scale study was that its original nature, a quantitative methodology, limited the time and scope of the qualitative methods. For example, because there were so many focus groups, less time was spent with each group.

The first two stages of the study were designed for quantitative methodology from a developmental psychology background. This provided an inherent tension when it came to engaging in qualitative analysis through a critical lens in stage three. Nevertheless, there is much to be gained through this research because the critical lens used in the framework and analysis of the findings offers a great deal of information to the fields of psychology and the early years with regards to how children talk about social inclusion in a natural social setting.

“to take my hand and walk me all the way to the golden section ... where there are pears.”

Another limitation of the third stage specifically was that the structure of the interview script limited the number of opportunities children and researchers had to explore additional themes. The structured nature of the interviews, while very helpful for the quantitative findings, posed limitations to the qualitative findings given that interviewers did not veer away from the script or probe children's responses. Also, the brevity of the focus groups resulted in limited opportunities to explore in any great depth some of the themes that emerged in the discussion.

Results and Discussion

Social inclusion is a dynamic concept. Academics, educators, and parents work hard to understand its complexity. Aspects of social inclusion, varying definitions, and how they are enacted in educational practice are explored at all levels of education. In this study, young children from vastly diverse backgrounds demonstrated similarities and differences in the ways they spoke about varying aspects of social inclusion. There are several factors that influence the ways children respond to questions and demonstrate their understandings. For example, the local community, the family, the school, and the classroom all contribute to the way children experience and respond to ideas of social inclusion. Methodological factors in any study—in this case, the administration of the teaching scripts—also contribute to children's responses.

Our analysis leads us to share that through young children's talk, complex understanding of social inclusion is evident. We chose to explore social inclusion through a critical lens as a way to push the boundary of what it means to explore and understand social inclusion through the words of young children. Insights are made that demonstrate the complexity of young children's awareness and understanding of social inclusion. This complexity is portrayed through children's understanding of words associated with social inclusion and their talk of social inclusion in relation to some aspects of social identity. The results of our research are described and discussed below.

Examples of children's understandings of concepts of social inclusion

Children have a good sense of what inclusion is and is not, and are able to describe their understandings of term related to inclusion with ease. Many of the children's comments about their understandings of social inclusion were described through personally relevant

examples. We organize and describe their talk here according to the five terms of social inclusion (inclusion, diversity, respect, acceptance, and understanding). Following the descriptions we discuss implications.

Inclusion

It means it doesn't matter if you're from a different country.

It means we don't exclude anyone.

Inclusion means that you don't, that you let people join, and if you don't, then you're not doing inclusion.

I would welcome you in.

Bringing people into your favourite places.

Everyone can come.

If you have a soccer ball and they ask you to play, you say yes for first, second, and third recess.

You can go with me and come to Wal-Mart.

It's pretty much like being nice to people and welcoming them into our space.

Be nice, welcome them, and show them around. . . . If you're playing a game with someone else you should let everyone play because if you want to be by yourself and you're playing with someone else it wouldn't be nice.

If you had a house, if someone lived in Vancouver, if you didn't allow them to come over but if you did it would be inclusion.

You don't need to include him because we already go to the same place.

In an interesting example, on the page about a favourite store is a picture of a grocery store. The interviewer asked a child how the boy who made the book could make them feel welcome at the grocery store. The child replied: “to take my hand and walk me all the way to the

golden section ... where there are pears.”

Children’s understandings of inclusion focus on the idea that others are welcomed or are actively part of the larger social group. For example, many of the definitions and examples provided by the children surround the idea of allowing or welcoming someone into a physical space, such as a department store or someone’s home. In a couple of statements, children described a geographic place. Children did not provide particular reasons as to why other children would not be included, but they did provide a number of examples based on their contextual understanding of place. In other words, students did not articulate that inclusion was important regardless of social difference or identity, just that inclusion was important and the nice thing to do. One young child stated, “You don’t need to include him because we already go to the same place,” suggesting that inclusion only matters when exclusion occurs or could occur.

Diversity

Some families come from different countries.

Some are tiny families, some were Chinese, and some are purple like hair.

It means different.

Diversity means a lot of different things together.

Diversity is what it is when there are a lot of differences.

God made everybody different.

Jesus makes us different.

Like “Bill” where we don’t match (their shirts) so we have something different.

Everyone’s name is different. In all the world there are different names and if there is another Angela you have to call them Angela 1 and Angela 2.

People don’t look the same, they look different. Mom and dad look the same;

they have same eyes, but some people have blue and brown eyes.

Mom and dad don’t look alike because mom came from different family and dad came from different family.

Short discourse among students and interviewer:

Student 1: They’re [people in two photograph books] not the same ... why?

Student 2: Because they are not the same age.

Student 1: And they are not wearing the same clothes.

Interviewer: Different from our families?

Student 1: They are different, yes.

Student 3: Some are dark and some are light.

Interviewer: Are we all different in this room?

Everyone: Yes.

In most instances of talking about diversity, children demonstrated some understanding of the term as defined in this study. Children understood the term diversity to mean that, while things are not the same, they do come together. Children noted differences between themselves and others in a variety of ways, such as the clothes they wear, the number of letters in their names, and the colour of their skin. Children recognized social identity as a factor of diversity among other traits such as different toys and letters in names. This could be attributed to the nature of the script, and the discussions from the photographs on the page. The family photograph books allowed children to learn about others and to celebrate their similarities. This practice is similar to Kumashiro’s (2002) principle of educating about the other as a way of developing affirming communities: “By increasing students’ knowledge of the Other, and perhaps helping students see similarities between the groups, this approach challenges oppression by aiming to develop in students an empathy for the Other” (p. 42).

Respect

I could show how I respect someone’s pet. I would ask if I could see it for a long time.

If you want me to show respect you could come to the house and have a play date and show my favourite toy.

I would play with others’ toys nicely.

How you show respect is you have to look after the toys.

Even if you don’t like it don’t say that because they would feel sad.

You could do a white lie and say you do like it.

Not laugh. Say you like it. You can lie.

If it wasn’t respect you called it stupid pet, that wouldn’t be nice. But if you called it a lovely pet that would be nice.

Say “I like your hair.”

It doesn’t matter what you look like.

By supporting everybody else in your family and all your friends and all your cousins.

Don’t rip the toys.

Give the fish some food.

[Even though people’s toys may be different from your own] I would just love to play with them and have fun and try new stuff.

If you have a pet and you don’t like another one, you don’t have to say it, you can respect it.

You show respect for someone’s game when you say it is the same game as mine and everyone’s game is fun.

Respect was the most described and defined of the five terms. The children defined respect by treating both things and people nicely. Children stated that respect was about saying nice things, being careful with other people’s things, not breaking things, and not hurting people’s feelings.

The ways in which children demonstrated their understanding of respect most closely resembles a less critical perspective. Similar to literature in the area of character education, children describe respect through a set of universal values (Lickona, 1991). Lickona (1991) draws attention to universal moral values such as treating all people justly and respecting their lives, liberty, and equality. “We have a right,” he claims, “and even a duty to insist that all people behave in accordance with these universal moral values” (p. 38). Ideas of sharing, fairness, and the need to build community by playing nicely with one another’s games were reflected in the children’s responses.

Acceptance

Accept the things that other people say.

You like it but you might not want to play with it all the time.

[You can show acceptance] ... by being nice.

By letting people come with you to the park and store.

I would say “hi” and introduce her to everyone and I would let her play a game and if she wanted to be by herself I would let her.

Understanding

You can understand people and if you’re really smart you can understand people’s brains.

Understanding means I understand your pictures. I understand your hair. I understand everything.

To understand about someone else.

Listening. (This was repeated several times by several children at different schools.)

Understanding school rules.

Making people happy.

If parents say “go clean your room,” you

go clean your room.

To understand someone, what they want, and listen to them.

A child kissing their book “momma” and again states “I understand about my mommy and daddy.”

The last two terms, acceptance and understanding, were less about social inclusion based on social identity and difference and more about understanding the actions for fostering social inclusion—to be understanding and accepting. Children demonstrated their knowledge of these words in relation to their own lives and made clear assertions of what they should do. Much of their understanding is similar to more traditional views of what it means to be socially inclusive, that is, to employ universal values of fairness, listening, sharing, and being nice, as suggested in the work of Lickona (1991).

Overall, children demonstrated a complex understanding of the five terms of social inclusion. They were able to define the terms and, in most cases, provide examples of them. What is less evident is students’ ability to relate notions of social identities, such as those outlined in Topping and Maloney’s (2005) framework (race, class, gender, ethnicity), while talking about social inclusion. Children did share their understandings of some socially constructed identities, and those understandings are discussed next.

In addition to children’s ability to define terms of social inclusion, a closer look at the ways in which they talked about social inclusion in relation to themselves and others further demonstrates the complexity of their understandings. The results show that, across the five terms, students were able to identify their own social positions—their likes and dislikes and their personal belongings and experiences. When students compared themselves to others it was often based on the similarities students shared.

Additional analysis led us to an understanding that young children are

able to talk about specific attributes of themselves in relation to others. On the second day of discussing the family photograph books, children shared some insights of their understanding of social inclusion based on social identities. There are several ways people socially identify; the social constructs that children made were mainly in reference to family structures, race/ethnicities, and religion.

Family

This family has glasses and this family doesn’t.

They are the same because they are all family.

“A” is different because she has a brother and I have a sister.

That’s your family? Only your mom and your dad?

Our families have different names.

Their families have lots of family. Other people have more people in their family and some people have short people in their family.

Some of our parents broke up with their real dad and met another dad that is our step dad. This is my real brother (points to his photo). . . . I have two stepbrothers, and my dad’s girlfriend is having another one right now in her tummy, she has two babies.

Pictures are different and families are, too.

Two children were exploring a photograph book in which the mother had a boyfriend; both children laughed and placed their hands over their mouths. In keeping with the premise of equity, diversity, and inclusion, the interviewer asked: “What is funny about that? Moms are allowed to have boyfriends and this may mean the parents are not together anymore and that’s okay. That is what makes families diverse.” Another child responded, “That’s so weird.”

Race/Ethnicity

[when exploring a photograph of a neighbourhood] *Lots of people here are Chinese.*

Yes, the Ocean Super Store—it has Chinese people, too.

Some people are white and some are different colours, some have blond hair and some have black hair.

Some have blue eyes, some have green eyes.

In her book, her mom is not wearing a hijab and in mine, my mom is.

Religion

My [favourite place] was my church, this [person's] was Baskin Robbins. God made us different.

A child shared his favourite place as being the temple and talked about the gods and the golden dresses. Another child responded that she had been to that temple before and the child replied that she knew they attended the same temple.

The student explained they go to the temple but sometimes “D” and “A” go to the temple but he does not. The student went on to explain that he has his own place where he would go to respect God.

When it came to discussions that included talk about social identity, students most often made comments that directly noted how they were similar to others rather than how they were different. When prompted to explore differences, students were able to identify differences based on family structure, race, and religion. This supports earlier findings in which children defined the word *inclusion* as “everyone feels that they belong; when everyone feels that they are equally part of a group; welcoming people even though they have different names or look different.” The first two parts of the definition are

reflected in children’s talk (how we are similar) but the latter one (how we are different) required prompting. When children were prompted, they were able to identify differences.

The findings related to issues of social identity show that children are able to recognize difference and, when prompted, they are able to identify what the differences are. Young children’s capacity to recognize social difference is evident. In most cases, children simply stated what the differences were without judgment; in a few examples, students felt uncomfortable when difference was based on an identity outside traditional norms. For example, when one child shared that her mother had a boyfriend, both the child and another giggled at the photo and one of the children said, “That’s so weird.”

Pedagogical Considerations for Social Inclusion in the Early Years

These findings give us a great deal to consider when thinking about learning environments for the early years. Do we encourage explicit discussion of issues related to social identity and social inclusion? Should we? How do we talk to children about social issues that move beyond traditional norms? Kumashiro’s (2000, 2002) approach of teaching about the other and for the other works to question “normalcy” and provides a way to foster social inclusion. To create affirming spaces where students not only understand but appreciate diversity and to foster learning environments that are safe and welcoming, teachers and students must not presume normalcy but rather question it and be explicit with students about it. Differences must also be embraced.

There are a variety of ways of talking to children about embracing difference. Kumashiro (2000), for example, focuses on questions of social identity and on students who experience oppression. A close look at social identities and the systemic power inequities in classrooms and in the community that prevent

students from experiencing inclusion is but one way. He suggests revamping the ways in which students think about certain identities by teaching about differences (p. 28). He also argues that schools should provide resources and spaces where students can “receive advocacy” (p. 28). Several scholars (Banks, 1990; Dei, 1996; Kosnik & Beck, 2009; Kumashiro, 2002, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Osborne, 2005) who promote social inclusion as pedagogical practice stress the inclusion and integration of content that represents the social identities of students in the classroom and people in the community. The representations of social identities need to be affirming and positive; they also need to represent people’s past and present experiences. These scholars also stress that bias, prejudice, and discrimination that provoke inequity should be addressed. The findings in this study show that young children do have a sense of social inclusion and that their understandings are complex.

Children’s learning of social inclusion vocabulary

Each social inclusion term (inclusion, diversity, respect, acceptance, understanding) was taught both implicitly through natural discussion about the children’s family photograph books and explicitly through a standard teaching script. For example, while looking at the books children were explicitly asked, “Can you show us how your family is different from this family? Diversity means that we can be the same in some ways and different in other ways but we all still belong.” Children were then asked to give other examples of diversity using their books. The results showed that the terms diversity and inclusion were less understood by children at the pretest in contrast to the terms understanding and respect. In other words, the participants had the most to learn about the terms diversity and inclusion. The quantitative results also showed that targeted teaching of these terms in conjunction with the use of their own family photograph books significantly increased their

knowledge of these terms. This finding suggests the value of explicit, intentional instruction of social inclusion as well as the importance of teachers knowing which words children know and need to know in order to better understand social inclusion. Anti-oppression pedagogies work directly and explicitly to end the exclusion of groups and individuals who experience marginalization. The aim is to foster inclusion by changing individuals' perceptions of what is dominant and/or "normal." In his work that builds a framework for anti-oppression pedagogy, Kumashiro (2000) advocates for explicit discussion about the "other." He defines "other" as "those groups that are traditionally marginalized, denigrated, or violated (i.e., othered) in society. . . . They are often defined in opposition to groups traditionally favored, normalized, or privileged in society and as such, are defined as 'other than' the idealized norm" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 32). Kumashiro (2002) describes four principles of anti-oppressive practice: (1) education for the other; (2) education about the other; (3) education that is critical of privileging and othering; and (4) education that changes students and society. This family photograph book study addresses several of Kumashiro's principles in relation to children in their early years and demonstrates how explicit teaching of key concepts related to social inclusion can develop children's understandings of themselves and others in relation to issues of inclusion.

A unique finding emerged specifically in the kindergarten program. When a cross-school comparison was carried out, there was an unusual pattern for the word inclusion. The children who were part of the school community based on the integration of children with and without special needs had a significantly stronger understanding of inclusion in the pretest than did those in the other schools. Yet surprisingly, while all other schools increased in understanding of inclusion through the focus group, the integrated kindergarten program decreased. This suggested to us that the children's

very deep but specific understanding of inclusion in their setting had been confounded by the focus group discussion that suggested a much broader definition of inclusion. This finding may indicate the importance of explicit instruction and the need to be aware of the breadth of the instruction when considering social inclusion, specifically, the background knowledge of our students.

In addition to considerations of explicit discussion of social inclusion, the study demonstrates a consideration of student background knowledge and beginning points for discussing inclusion. Children from the school community based on integration of special needs understood the word inclusion in a very particular context that differed from children from other school communities. This finding leads us to consider the works of Ladson-Billings (1994, 1995) and Gay (2000) on culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy and how children in the early years may best acquire deepened understandings of social inclusion. Gay (2000) outlines four critical aspects of culturally responsive teaching: caring, communication, curriculum, and instruction. In explaining instruction, she argues that culturally responsive teaching includes multiple ethnic perspectives.

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According to Gay (2000), culturally responsive teaching means respecting the cultures and experiences of various groups and then using these experiences as resources for teaching and learning. This approach appreciates the existing strengths and accomplishments of all students

and enhances these strengths through instruction. Therefore, consideration for the social and schooling experiences of particular groups of students (e.g., special needs integrated school community, religion-based schools, low-income community, racialized community) should be taken into account when thinking about fostering social inclusion and its explicit instruction. Similar to Gay's work, Ladson-Billings (1995), in reference to African American identities, believes that culturally relevant pedagogy intends to "assist in the development of a 'relevant black personality' that allows African American students to choose academic excellence yet still identify with African and African American culture" (p. 17). One key principle of culturally relevant pedagogy is that students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order (p. 160). Children who develop cultural competence develop an awareness of themselves and the people around them while maintaining a strong sense of self. This awareness allows them to recognize social inclusion and exclusion. The family photograph books along with the standard script that explicitly taught social inclusion vocabulary provided some space for young children to explore their own identities and culture while also learning about others. While it did not go as far as explicitly exploring issues of inequity, when issues of "fairness" arose, they were discussed with children in more subtle ways.

Further Research

This study contributes to the growing area of social inclusion research in the early years. A range of research directions could build on these findings to continue exploring young children's understanding of social inclusion. The use of personal storybooks in the classroom provides a rich source for discussion and can facilitate young children's identification of difference and of how to better understand their peers and others. Areas for exploration could include how young children form and understand first impressions, kindergarten

children discussing salient features, and the reasons behind the prejudices and social choices children make based on their interpretations of these features. A particularly intriguing study currently underway will answer the question of whether young children have learned to conceal their prejudices and explore how they explain these preferences. In this study, the books may also be used as inspiration for children to write a story that features the child in the book they choose; this activity will enable attention to the attributes that are salient to young children and the basis of children's stereotypes. Deeper exploration of children's understandings of social inclusion could include additional group and dyad sharing of books and discussions, as well as open-ended interviews that invite critical perspectives to surface and be explored.

While many students come to school with various ideas on the topic of social inclusion, it is important to note that young children have the ability to understand its complexities and are able to form opinions. It is through exposure to materials dealing with social inclusion and the subsequent discussion that takes place that students are able to develop their own social identity and become aware of the social identity of those around them. The findings in this study open the door for further research in how young children's understanding of social inclusion can be developed using concepts of critical theory. The findings also present a useful entry point in helping educators decide where and how to talk about social inclusion with their students. The use of vocabulary is one starting point. The thoughtful planning of discussion with critical perspectives in mind is another. Friendly and Lero (2002) have stated that in the right context and with inclusion-sensitive educators, early childhood care and education (ECEC) can contribute to the support of social inclusion in students. Future research that invites in-depth examination of young children's social understandings has significant implications for all educators. Friendly and Lero (2002) have further explain that

in Canada we have yet to provide the right conditions for such change. Providing the right context and support for both ECEC and classroom teachers would allow children to delve into the complex and important topic of social inclusion.

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