Inclusion Understood From the Perspectives of Children With Disability

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This study explored the perspectives of children with disabilities regarding the concept of inclusion in physical activity. Participants were children (two girls, nine boys, M_age = 10 years, five months, age range: 8–12 years) with disabilities, including cerebral palsy, fine and gross motor delays, developmental coordination disorder, muscular dystrophy, nemaline myopathy, brachial plexus injury, and severe asthma. Children’s perspectives on inclusion in physical activity (e.g., sports, games, and play) were explored through semistructured interviews. Interviews were digitally audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed through content analysis. Three themes emerged from the data: gaining entry to play, feeling like a legitimate participant, and having friends. These themes were associated with feeling included to varying degrees in sports, games, and play. In essence, it was the actions of others that were the prominent features identified by children that contributed to feeling more or less included in physical activity contexts. These results are discussed in relation to inclusion in physical education, recreation, and unstructured free play.

“I know it’s being ‘included’ but you just don’t feel like you’re included.”  
This is a quote from Brandon, a 12-year-old boy with cerebral palsy who took part in the study described in this paper. The paper begins with this quote because it highlights what we consider to be the most critical feature of inclusion, that inclusion is primarily a subjective experience. A subjective experience is an experience considered unique to the individual and may involve her or his perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and interpretations (Schwandt, 1997). Therefore, inclusion understood as a subjective experience requires investigation from the perspective of the child who is “to be included.” While various definitions and interpretations of inclusion have been put forward (see Block, 2007; DePauw & Doll-Tepper, 2000; Reid, 2000; Sherrill, 2004), Stainback and Stainback’s (1990) understanding of inclusion as...
a sense of belonging, acceptance, and value is used as the conceptual framework guiding this study. As a conceptual approach, this understanding is in line with the position that inclusion is a subjective experience and central to its understanding are the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of children with disabilities.

The viewpoints and experiences of children with disabilities participating in inclusive physical activity have received relatively little attention in adapted physical activity (APA) research (Blinde & McCallister, 1998; Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000). This small body of research, however, has tended to focus on physical education (PE) settings and not explored other physical activity contexts where children with disabilities are also located (e.g., recess, community sport, free play). Block and Obrusnikova (2007) reviewed and analyzed ten years (1995–2005) of PE inclusion research. Of the 38 studies contained in their review, only five placed significant emphasis on the perspectives of children with disabilities (e.g., Blinde & McCallister, 1998; Goodwin, 2001; Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000; Hutzler, Fliess, Chacham, & Van den Auweele, 2002; Place & Hodge, 2001). Research exploring disability has tended to examine its impact on others (Charlton, 1998). This is particularly evident in PE research that has highlighted the impact of inclusion on teachers and peers and the impact of teachers and peers on inclusion (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007; Hutzler, 2003). Acknowledging the perspectives of children with disabilities in the conceptualization of inclusion moves away from notions of children with disabilities as “others” (Charlton, 1998) and “passive” (Hogan, 2005) to one of experts on their own lives (Kiernan, Guerin, & MacLachlan, 2005).

The primary purpose of this exploratory qualitative study was to examine inclusion from the perspectives of children with disabilities in physical activity. According to Creswell (1998) the role of theory in guiding qualitative work can vary significantly. This qualitative study was primarily exploratory in nature and therefore not theory dependent (Patton, 2002). This approach was particularly well suited to this investigation as it allowed theory to enter at different points in the study without requiring the application of a deductive framework (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, Sandelowski (1993) stated that “although theory is always present in some guise in qualitative work . . . it may be either central or only peripheral to the target phenomenon under investigation” (p. 215). The rationale for examining inclusion from the perspectives of children with disabilities was threefold. This study was carried out to (a) acknowledge the importance of children’s perspectives congruent with Stainback and Stainback’s (1990) understanding of inclusion, (b) contribute insight to a small but growing area of research in the field of APA, and (c) expand that area of research away from solely the domain of PE to also take into consideration other relevant activity contexts for children with disabilities, such as recess, community sport, and free play.

As mentioned, previous studies that have examined inclusion in physical activity from the perspectives of children with disabilities have typically taken place within PE. In a study with children with physical disabilities, Blinde and McCallister (1998) identified two primary outcomes generated through children’s responses to questions about their integrated PE experiences. First, limited participation in activities was a frequent outcome as most children reported few opportunities to meaningfully take part. Some children described complete exclusion from activities, while others mentioned taking on outside roles such as a line judge or
observer. Second, negative emotional responses such as sadness and anger emerged as a result of being excluded and feeling like an outsider. While some students reported wanting to be included in activities, others said they felt embarrassed because they were unable to complete skills and would prefer not to attend PE at all. Lack of teacher implemented activity modifications and negative behavior of classmates were seen as primary contributors to the negative experiences reported. Positive and negative experiences were also reported in a study by Goodwin and Watkinson (2000) who examined inclusive PE with elementary school children with physical disabilities. These positive and negative experiences were coded as themes within the ideas of “good days” and “bad days,” respectively. Themes that emerged under good days included a sense of belonging, having opportunities for skillful participation, and sharing in the benefits of physical activity with classmates. Themes that emerged under bad days included having competence questioned by peers, being restricted in participation, and social isolation. Social isolation was also echoed as a theme for children with disabilities in integrated PE in a study by Place and Hodge (2001). In this inquiry, the authors reported that students with and without disabilities rarely engaged in social interactions. Students with disabilities shared feelings of exclusion, resulting from neglect, being seen as objects of curiosity, and feeling awkward in social interactions with peers. Similar to the findings of Blinde and McCallister (1998) and Goodwin and Watkinson (2000), feeling included or not included appeared to be largely dependent on the children’s views of their interactions with others (Place & Hodge, 2001).

Hutzler et al. (2002) found that social interaction and relationships to others were consistent features of children with disabilities’ perspectives on inclusion and empowerment. A dichotomy of supporting and limiting mechanisms to inclusion that were tied to social interactions with others was revealed. For example, some children provided information about being encouraged by their peers to take part in activities. In contrast, children also reported being ridiculed, teased, and excluded by their peers. The role of peers also emerged as a salient feature in a study by Devine and Wilhite (2000) that examined children’s experiences of inclusion in leisure contexts (e.g., sport, recreation, PE). These authors found that children felt most included when they were treated equally, had reciprocal friendships, felt accepted, and were in settings where abilities of participants were matched. Competitive sport and recreational physical activity, where abilities were unmatched and required accommodations, were often associated with limited opportunities, not being perceived by others as capable, and separation from peers.

These studies reveal much about children’s experiences and in particular the importance of meaningful interactions with others to positive experiences. These results provide generalized support for an understanding of inclusion that begins with children’s perspectives and support for Stainback and Stainback’s (1990) conceptual framework of inclusion as a sense of belonging, acceptance, and value. The importance of social interaction has been acknowledged by researchers in APA and recreation and leisure for some time now; however, despite efforts to promote social inclusion, it appears that often children with disabilities do not feel included in integrated activity settings. Continuing to investigate children with disabilities’ perspectives on inclusion in various activity settings is particularly important for the field of APA, wherein teachers and coaches often bear significant responsibility for the creation of inclusive activity settings (Block, 2007).
Investigating inclusion in physical activity from the perspectives of children with disabilities is a relatively new phenomenon. As a result, recommendations of strategies to accommodate children with disabilities in PE, team sports, and other structured activity settings are largely based on a body of research that has not emphasized their perspectives (Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability, 1994; Block, 2007; Kasser, 1995; Morris & Stiehl, 1999). To gain insight into what factors contribute to a more inclusive experience, one where the critical components of the inclusion model, such as a sense of belonging, acceptance, and value are considered, the perspectives of children with disabilities must be at the heart of the investigation. As long as we limit our evaluation of inclusion to the viewpoints of others, we limit our understanding of what inclusion is and of the factors that may contribute to meaningful and inclusive opportunities for children with disabilities to be physically active. Although children have been asked about their experiences in “inclusive” physical activity, primarily in PE, they have yet to be asked about what inclusion means to them and what are the salient features that contribute to feeling included in a broad range of physical activity contexts. Understanding inclusion as a subjective experience of the child, informed by the child, may provide guidance for the kinds of activities and settings that best support true inclusion in physical activity. In addition, this approach may also provide specialists in APA with new ideas and strategies of how best to facilitate inclusion in a variety of activity contexts.

**Method**

**Participants**

A purposeful sampling approach using the strategy of maximum variation was used to recruit the participating children (Creswell, 1998). This strategy aims to capture individual differences and to identify shared patterns of experience or phenomena that cut across diversity (Patton, 2002). Eleven participants (two girls and nine boys) between 8 and 12 years of age with different disabilities took part in this study. Additional demographic information is presented in Table 1. All children were independently ambulatory with the exception of one child who was a regular wheelchair user and two children who used wheelchairs on occasion. All participants had or were currently attending general education schools. At the time of this study, two children were being home schooled because the school boards were unable to meet their needs. Participants were recruited from two specialized sport and activity programs outside of the regular school system in a Canadian city. These specialized programs offered a wide range of physical activities. For example, wall climbing, badminton, tae kwon do, soccer, sledge hockey, and horseback riding, among others. In addition to their specialized sporting experiences, all children had experiences in integrated physical activities, such as school physical education and/or community based activities. Some examples of these activities included soccer, hockey, skiing, and swimming. Approval for this study was granted by a university research ethics board and treatment of the participants was in accordance with the standards of the American Psychological Association. Only children for whom informed parental consent was provided and who were willing participated in the study.
Perceived Inclusion

Design and Data Collection

Children’s perspectives were the focus of this investigation. Therefore, the design of this study was idiographic, exploratory, and descriptive. Two sources of data, individual semistructured interviews and reflective field notes, were used as methods of data collection.

**Interviews.** Individual interviews were carried out with each of the children. As a rapport building activity and to delineate the domain of interest for the study (physical activity), the interviewer first engaged the participants in a conversation about the kinds of sports, games, and activities they liked to play (Eder & Fingerson, 2003). A semistructured interview guide was then employed to explore to the concepts of interest to this study. This guide provided a framework to develop and organize questions while allowing flexibility to pursue participant responses in greater depth (Patton, 2002). Several questions were outlined before the interviews with the order and wording of follow-up questions emerging within each interview. The initial questions were generated following a procedure designed by Watkinson, Dwyer, and Nielsen (2005) and were reviewed by two experts in the field of APA. This procedure involved asking participants to theorize from the perspectives of fictional children “like them” before asking participants about their own perspectives. As recommended by Stone and Lemanek (1990) and in keeping with the procedure used by Watkinson et al. (2005), fictional children were used so that participants would not have to disclose their own feelings early on in the interview. This open-ended approach was also designed to allow children to generate their own ideas and encourage the verbalization of personal points of view (Ginsburg, 1997). Finally, in order not to constrain children’s responses to one particular setting (e.g., PE), the terms “sports,” “games,” “play,” and “activities” were used by the interviewer to refer collectively to physical activities and activity

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Boy/Girl</th>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Disability</th>
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settings. While this set a very broad context in which to explore inclusion, it also encouraged children to think of a range of participation domains. On average, the interviews took approximately 30 min.

Two pilot studies took place with two 10-year-old girls. One of these participants had a disability. The purpose of the pilot interviews was twofold: (a) to confirm the children’s understanding of the questions and (b) for the researcher to practice her interviewing skills. Based on the results of the pilot studies, several questions were reworded. The following questions were used in the final version to explore feeling included/not included in general and then specifically in sports, games and play:

1. Can you tell me what you think included means?
2. What kinds of things do you think would make a kid like you feel more included/less included?
3. What about in sports, games and play? What kinds of things do you think make kids like you feel more/less included in those kinds of activities?
4. Can you give me an example of when a kid like you might feel included/not included in those activities?
5. Now, what about you? Can you think about a time when you felt included/not included in sports, games, and play? Can you tell me about it?

Reflective Field Notes. Immediately following each interview, the interviewer recorded reflective field notes. These notes were taken postinterview so as not to detract from the interview process and the focus of both the participant and the researcher (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2003). According to Patton (2002), field notes should be descriptive, contain quotations, and the researcher’s own feelings and insights. Descriptive information, such as the time, date, location, and details about the physical setting was recorded. The researcher also documented the events that transpired during the interview and participant responses to questions. This included impressions of the child and her or his behavior during the interview. Finally, the researcher’s own experience and feelings, as well as initial interpretations, were noted. This information served as a beginning analysis, a reminder of the interview during later analysis, and verification of data interpretations (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002).

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, resulting in 183 pages of data. Content analysis served as the basis for the data analysis. This approach was selected as it is useful for identifying core consistencies and meanings from a large quantity of qualitative data (Patton, 2002). Initially, each interview was read with the researcher taking notes as a preliminary sorting-out process (Creswell, 1998). This resulted in the initial tagging of 455 pieces of data. A line-by-line analysis was then carried out in which words, sentences, and paragraphs were examined and grouped by topic (Morse & Field, 1995). Once all the data had been grouped, themes were developed until saturation was reached and no new data were emerging.
Trustworthiness

Standards of quality and verification are key issues in qualitative research (Creswell, 1998). The trustworthiness of this study was sought in various ways. The researcher/interviewer had experience interviewing, observing, and working with children with and without disabilities in various physical activity programs for over 20 years. This included the roles of program director, volunteer activity leader, coach, and researcher. These experiences enhanced the researcher’s ability to develop rapport with the children and her understanding of the various activity contexts children referred to in the interviews. In addition to conducting two pilot studies, two sources of data (interviews and reflective field notes) were collected to establish credibility. Dependability and confirmability of the findings were established using a second reader who independently coded the data. The second reader, a researcher in physical activity and health, had experience in qualitative data analysis. Differences in the coding were discussed, and changes were made until consensus was reached. Finally, an audit trail was used to document these and other decisions made throughout the study.

Results

The findings of this study are reported in the children’s own words. Children used first, second, and third person, employing inconsistent use of pronouns in their responses. In making reference to a child who was “like them,” children often appeared to be referring to themselves. When discussing feelings of exclusion, all children used the terms “not included” or “not feeling included.” Finally, each of the children was given a pseudonym for reporting purposes.

The purpose of this study was to examine inclusion from the perspectives of children with disabilities in physical activity. The content analysis of the interview data resulted in the emergence of three themes: (a) gaining entry to play, (b) feeling like a legitimate participant, and (c) having friends that represented the information most prominently shared by the participants. These themes were identified in this way as they illustrated children’s perceptions of what inclusion is, what it means to feel included, and the salient features within physical activity contexts that lead to these feelings. The themes emerged when children were asked to theorize and generate their own ideas about feeling included in physical activities described as sports, games, and play. Also evident in their responses and theorizing was the idea that feeling included was a relative concept that depended heavily on the three themes. Children indicated that they could feel more or less included depending on features that were tied to gaining entry into the play environment, feeling like a legitimate participant, and having friends.

Gaining Entry to Play

A critical aspect of feeling included for the children in this study was associated with gaining entry into the activity environment to play with other children and take part. Of the 11 children interviewed, 10 referred to situations where they were entering playgroups or attempting to join in. In this regard, aspects of feeling
included were characterized by acceptance or rejection by other children when making attempts to enter playgroups. Being invited to play was linked to feeling included. Not being asked to play or having others say no to a request to take part were associated with not feeling included.

In theorizing about feeling included, Nathan said, “Like if you’ve ever played a basketball game before and you’ve nothing to do at recess, you go ask the people that are playing basketball if you can join them and they say yes,” suggesting that permission given by other children to join in would make him feel included. In contrast, he explained that not feeling included would occur “when there’s a group of kids that don’t like you and nobody likes him because they don’t like people and you want to play with them and they say no.” Not being allowed to play also contributed to feeling not included as demonstrated in the following dialogue with Jamie.

Jamie: Well, if someone said that you can’t play, then you’re not included in the game.

Interviewer: And how would that make a person feel?

Jamie: It would make them feel really sad and not important and like they don’t belong or don’t anything. It makes them feel like they’re treated like an insect or something.

Jamie then recounted a past experience at recess when he did not feel included:

Jamie: Well, I asked if I could play tag with them, and they said, “no you can’t play with us.” I went to the teacher, the teacher told the kids to let them play and then I asked after the teacher even said that, and they still said “no, you can’t play.” So I came to the teacher again and I kept going on and on and on until I just walked away.

Interviewer: So you never got to play in the end?

Jamie: No.

Interviewer: And how did that make you feel?

Jamie: Really mad.

Interviewer: Really mad? So you were angry that you didn’t get to play?

Jamie: Yeah, because it was like freeze tag and I like freeze tag.

Sam similarly theorized that not being allowed to join in a game would make others not feel included. “Like when they want to play a game and one of the sports, like hockey and they don’t let you, [they] just ignore them” but that they would feel included “if they let them play hockey.”

Brandon explained feeling included when children let him play, and having mixed emotions when they did not let him join in. “And they would let me join in games and that made me feel really, really good and I was all happy and everything. Like sometimes they wouldn’t let me join, but sometimes I wasn’t okay with it and sometimes I was,” he said. In Hallie’s own words, she said she
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felt included when “some of my friends at school ask me sometimes if I want to play, but they don’t normally ask me.” Jessica said that being “invited to come and play” would make her feel included because “it makes you feel like they want you to play with them.”

Adults in addition to peers were identified as influencing opportunities to participate and to feel included. Isaac recounted a personal story of not feeling included when his parents would not allow him to play basketball with the other children. He stated, “I was really disappointed [when they said no.]” Likewise, Tom shared how the decision of an adult could make a child feel included or not. “When the coach lets them join the team [a kid would feel included] . . . but sometimes they wouldn’t, before the coach didn’t let me try out.” Finally, despite having a teacher intervene on his behalf, Jamie’s peers did not let him join in playing tag at recess.

Feeling Like a Legitimate Participant

Feeling included or not included in sports and activities was also characterized by a sense of legitimacy as a participant, or lack thereof. Children associated making contributions and taking on important roles with feeling included. Adult intervention and few opportunities to take part were associated with feeling not included. Children’s feelings of legitimacy and inclusion appeared to stem from a sense of importance, perceived competence, and value in the activity setting. These feelings were compromised when activity was adult initiated or when children perceived few opportunities to make meaningful contributions. Feelings of legitimacy depended not only on how the children felt about their activity roles (sense of self), but also their perspectives of how others viewed and treated them within the various activity contexts.

Brandon shared a past experience of playing goalie in soccer at recess. He explained that making a contribution to his team and having a valued role made him feel included:

But, I went like this and I felt the ball hit my hands and I opened my eyes and it bounces back and I’m like “oh, yeah, I saved it!” And then Jim does it again and he hits the crossbar and then it was the end of recess. And then I was on the other side the next recess and Danny’s a really good player and he can score on me but this time he was like one foot away from me, no actually about two of your feet [pointing to the interviewer’s feet] away from me, and he kicked the ball and he was hoping to go over my head but I caught it, like this, and he’s really, really, really good at soccer so I was pretty proud.

Aidan talked about how making a contribution to his team by getting goals and winning made him feel included, but that not getting any goals made him feel like he was not very included. Likewise, Tom shared that being “in a big game,” in a position to contribute was part of feeling included.

In addition to personal performance, how other activity participants treated them also influenced the degree to which the children felt like legitimate participants. Nathan expressed the importance of contribution and being taken seriously in a game, in that others tried hard against him “instead of soft.” To explain his feelings he described the following past events:
Nathan: There’s this one guy, like talking about a different guy, he had like his arm amputated, so everybody was really good, but everybody was just taking soft on him because he was on the other team and we were afraid—so they wouldn’t really steal the ball, and one guy actually did steal the ball and he tripped him and the kid hit really hard because he didn’t have anything to stop him. So yeah, every kid was yelling at the kid that tripped him.

Interviewer: But do you think that the kid who got tripped, do you think that that maybe made him feel more included that the kid went hard after him?

Nathan: Yeah, like when I was at a game and people know I have a disability, they’ll go easy on me, they’ll go slow, they won’t hurt me, they’ll try to be nice, right. But once I steal the ball, once I slide, once I throw the ball—it was like on a slant on this hill and I threw the ball and it would always hit off their player and go out. We got like a corner kick from doing that. I made it from half corner to a corner.

Interviewer: So all of a sudden they’re like, wait a second, this guy is pretty good?

Nathan: Yeah.

Interviewer: Now how did it feel like before they realized you were pretty smart and pretty good at it? How did it feel when they were taking it easy on you?

Nathan: It didn’t feel really good because it felt like they didn’t really need to do anything.

Interviewer: So it’s just not feeling included by your team, you need to feel included by the other team?

Nathan: Yeah.

Nathan, Isaac, and Luke explained how they could be involved in a game or on a team but still not feel very included. Nathan explained that a child could be playing a game but not feel included because it was initiated by a teacher or parent. Isaac said that just being on a team was not enough to feel included, particularly if a child did not get any playing time. “I think they would feel left out,” he said. Brandon also talked about playing time and feeling like a legitimate participant:

Brandon: In any sport, if the coach benches you and then when you’re down by one point, say in soccer, then he puts you on, you feel not right. Like if he puts you on for at least half the game or a quarter, maybe.

Interviewer: You mean that you get put on because you’re losing anyway? Is that what you mean?

Brandon: Yeah, because they’re losing and he’s the only player left. Say in basketball, all the others got injured and he’s the only player left and they’re losing and the coach finally says, you know what, you know like in baseball if the coach says don’t swing, don’t swing, just take the walk.
Interviewer: He’s not asking you to try hard?

Brandon: Yeah.

Interviewer: So you don’t have an important part on the team?

Brandon: Right. It’s not like being included. I know it’s being “included” but you just don’t feel like you’re included.

Also highlighted in this dialogue is Brandon’s recognition of the difference between being included in a game and feeling included in a game. This demonstrates the difference between traditional definitions of “inclusion” and inclusion understood as a subjective experience of the individual. Finally, Luke said that “when you get picked on a team and you’re not always picked last” was important to feeling included because it meant you belonged somewhere. He continued, “when you’re always picked last, you’re sort of like the leftover player no one wants,” referring to the lack of legitimacy surrounding his selection by default.

Having Friends

The final theme that emerged from the interviews was “having friends.” Having friends was viewed by the children in this study as significant to feeling included and to opportunities to take part in activities. Friends were more likely to extend invitations to play and to offer encouragement. In contrast, not having friends was associated with feeling not included, being teased, and limited engagement.

Isaac shared that having friends in sports could make him feel included because as he said, “it’s nice to have friends and not to feel left out and someone you can actually trust . . . because friends make you feel comfortable with yourself like because there’s always someone there for you.” Brandon shared how his school friends helped him to feel included:

They were all cheering for me, “yeah Brandon!” and in kickball they know I have a disability and they’re very cheerful, they’re like more cheerful for me, they cheer me on more, with me, than with other players. I mean, they still cheer them on, but like for me they know I have a disability and I can’t do that much and everything.

Gaining entry to play was often evident in children’s discussions of friends. Jacob demonstrated how friendships could facilitate play, and play could facilitate friendships in the following quote:

And usually, well, usually, they just walk up to me and they ask “can I play with someone” and that’s how I make new friends. I play with them. Well, there’s two reasons why. Sometimes I’ll go up to them and ask them “if I can be your friend,” once I get to know them, I ask them that. And then, another reason to make friends with them is to play with them when they ask “if they want to play.” And whenever they do that I always say to them, “sure, you can play.”

Sam highlighted the importance of having friends in facilitating the opportunity to play and feel included. He said, “cause sometimes if you’re not friends with any
of the people you’re playing with, sometimes they don’t even let you play.” Jamie, Aidan, Tom, Luke, and Hallie all agreed that having friends could make you feel included in sports and games. Hallie also shared how friends could limit participation and contribute to not feeling included when they made fun. In response to a question about why a child might not feel included, she said, “because you were playing and you blew it and all your friends could laugh at you and I don’t really like how that feels when people laugh at you . . . and make fun of it . . .”.

In Jacob’s response to a question about what might make another child not feel very included, he cited the lack of friends and also provided an example of a child being teased.

Interviewer: Now can you think of an example of when a kid might not feel very included in sports?

Jacob: If someone would call him chicken or something.

Interviewer: So if someone called him chicken— is that like teasing or something?

Jacob: Well, like calling names and things. Like being, acting like a bully to him.

Finally, Jessica provided an example of a child not feeling included and in doing so, also captured the importance of friendship in facilitating opportunities to play. She said, “When they’re left out a lot, [they] don’t get to do as much. They don’t have any friends, they don’t have anybody to play with, or invited—like don’t invite them to play with them and you feel left out.” Later in the interview she added, “you know when nobody wants to be your friend or anything you don’t feel included. You feel left out and lonely,” reemphasizing the critical role that having friends plays in feeling included.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore children with disabilities’ perspectives on inclusion in physical activity settings. The three themes, (a) gaining entry to play, (b) feeling like a legitimate participant, and (c) having friends, illustrated children’s feelings of inclusion in various physical activity contexts. The interview procedure was useful for asking children about topics of a sensitive nature. The questioning strategy encouraged participants to share their thoughts in a way that was most comfortable for them. Children unanimously provided explanations and examples that corresponded to an understanding of inclusion as acceptance, belonging, and value as outlined in Stainback and Stainback’s (1990) conceptual framework. The results of the current study extend our understanding of inclusion to other activity contexts beyond PE.

Congruent with the findings of Goodwin and Watkinson (2000), people played an important role in the positive and negative experiences of the children in this study. In particular, peer support, social isolation, and negative emotions harmonized with aspects of each of the three themes (Blinde & McCallister; Devine & Wilhite, 2000; Goodwin, 2001; Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000; Place & Hodge, 2001). Each of these themes was associated in some way with the role of others. Children referred
to positive and negative experiences associated with social interactions and lack of interactions. Feeling included was closely tied to gaining entry to play, being treated as and actually seeing oneself as a legitimate participant, and having friends. The opposite was revealed in children’s responses of feeling not included. It was not unexpected that peers and others would be important to the children’s sense of belonging, acceptance, and value given the nature of physical activity, sports, games, and play. The significance of others appears to be an overarching theme of inclusion research from the perspectives of children with disabilities. This concept is also evident in inclusive leisure literature examining the importance of social acceptance (Devine & Lashua, 2002).

Social acceptance was apparent in the theme of gaining entry to play. Echoed in this theme were aspects of restricted or limited participation and the importance of a sense of belonging as revealed in the work of Goodwin and Watkinson (2000) and Blinde and McCallister (1998). Children in this study responded that not being asked to play by other children and being told that they were not welcome to take part led to feeling not included. Participants did have a sense of belonging and importance when others asked them to take part. Similar to research that identified the significance of an invitation to take part through the act of being picked for a team or to partner with someone in PE (Suomi, Collier, & Brown, 2003), being asked to play was also very salient for children in free play settings.

Gaining entry into play environments, especially the less structured ones such as recess, may be very challenging for children with disabilities. Taub and Greer (2000) found that children with physical disabilities valued their unstructured play experiences but also reported being excluded by their peers in these settings. A number of children in this study relayed experiences of attempts to enter into activity environments that were met with rejection by their peers but also highlighted the meaningfulness of “being asked to play” in feelings of inclusion. Unlike PE, in free play settings other children could often dictate who participated and who did not through the extension or withholding of an invitation to play. This highlights what appears to be a major difficulty in the promotion of inclusive free play settings for APA specialists. In adapted PE or regular PE, the teacher bears significant responsibility for facilitating inclusion (Block, 2007), whereas in free play, opportunities to feel included appear to be child directed and determined. Identifying strategies of how to influence the unstructured activity setting to be more inclusive, without interfering with the unstructured nature of the environment, appears to be a major challenge for practitioners.

Feeling like a legitimate participant, according to the children in this study, meant having important, appropriate, and valued roles that led to contribution and were associated with feeling included. This idea of holding valued roles is reminiscent of the concept of social role valorization. According to Wolfensberger (2000), social role valorization is the idea that an individual’s welfare depends to a significant degree on the social roles they hold. If these roles are valued by others, then the people who hold them will be well treated. Conversely, if these roles are devalued, then those who hold them will be poorly treated. In this study, feeling like a legitimate participant in sports, games, and play was associated with the perception of holding a valued role. Analogous to what Wolfensberger predicted, children suggested that having an important role and being in a position to make a valued contribution were associated with a sense of acceptance, belonging, and
value in activity settings. Likewise, when children were not given important roles or when others underestimated the types of roles they were capable of holding, they were treated differently and subsequently did not feel included.

In addition to holding important roles, making contributions also appeared to be linked to children’s own perceptions of competence in these physical activity domains. While perceived competence is typically associated with theories of motivation (e.g., Harter, 1978; Nicholls, 1989), it also appeared to play a role in these children’s views of themselves as legitimate participants and subsequently in their feelings of inclusion. Feeling like a legitimate participant was therefore dependent on the behaviors of others that could enhance or challenge a child’s sense of belonging and value as a participant, as well as the child’s own view of his/her contributions. Acceptance by others in sports, games, and play, through such things as exerting effort and recognizing the strengths of the child with a disability, appeared to enhance feelings of inclusion. These feelings of inclusion were challenged when, for example, a child was not fully engaged in activities as illustrated by not being passed to in soccer, lack of playing time, or others failing to exert full effort.

Acceptance by others has also been recognized in the PE and recreation inclusion literature, examining the importance of friendships from the perspectives of children with disabilities (Hutzler et al., 2002; Place & Hodge, 2001; Wilhite, Devine, & Goldenberg, 1999). The theme of having friends permeated much of the children’s theorizing around feeling included and not included in sports, games, and play. The potency of friendships could compensate for a lack of perceived and actual competence, as well as the contexts within which children played. Encouragement, support, and having fun were associated with friends and feeling included. By comparison, being teased, bullied, and made fun of by others were especially salient in feeling not included. Friends appeared to be a significant, if not the most significant feature of feeling a sense of acceptance, belonging, and value for children with disabilities in physical activities.

The importance of “others” in children’s feelings of inclusion highlights the social nature of sports, games, and play. Social inclusion is recognized as critical to the experiences of children with disabilities in physical activity (Taub & Greer, 2000). In their study, Place and Hodge (2001) used Academic Learning Time for Physical Education (ALT-PE) and the Analysis of Inclusion Practices in Physical Education, Form S (AIPE-S) to document student behaviors and interactions in PE classes. Although similar in terms of time spent in motor activity, students with disabilities spent 29% of their time waiting compared with the 13% of their peers. Data also revealed that interactions between students with and without disabilities were extremely limited. Only 2% of the time was spent in social talk and less than 1% in others interactions such as praise, use of first name, feedback, and hands-on assistance. In reflection, Place and Hodge (2001) asked the question, “What can be done to increase the occurrence of social interactions between students with and without disabilities, and in turn promote social inclusion?” (p. 402). Recommendations for teacher facilitated inclusion in PE such as peer tutoring, changing the nature of activities (e.g., using collaborative rather than competitive practice), and modifying equipment, among others, reflect an effort to enhance children with disabilities opportunities to take part successfully and to feel socially included by their peers (Sherrill, 2004). The children in this study,
however, suggested that adult intervention does not lead to “true” inclusion and may at times even undermine it. While there is a significant amount of literature in the area of APA on the role of the teacher as facilitator in making inclusion a reality in PE (see Block & Obroušnikova, 2007), the children in this study shared that forced participation on their own part, or the part of others, is not the same as feeling included. The quote from Brandon that begins this paper clearly illustrates this point. When the coach gave Brandon playing time because the team was already losing, Brandon recognized that his presence on the playing field was not inclusion in the sense of feeling acceptance, belonging, and value. Similarly, Nathan expressed that when participation was teacher or parent initiated he could be involved in a game but still not feel included.

Unlike the review of studies presented at the beginning of this paper, the findings of the current study are situated within a broader context of physical activity, beyond PE. There were no instances where children referred directly to PE in their theorizing, although references to recess did occur. In speculation, it may be that despite efforts to create inclusive environments in PE, by referring to out of school experiences, children may be indirectly saying that they do not consider “inclusive physical education” and possibly other structured contexts as true inclusion because they are constructed by adults. Taub and Greer (2000) found that normalizing experiences in physical activity for children with disabilities were more often associated with spontaneous play with peers and less likely a result of participation in PE classes or sports programs. They hypothesized that the child-directed nature of spontaneous play was adaptable and better accommodated the needs of the children with disabilities, though at times, negative experiences still occurred. Similarly, Blinde and McCallister (1998) found that children with disabilities generally experienced more enjoyment in activities outside of PE. As a recommendation, these authors suggested that teachers listen to “what students with disabilities have to say about their needs, desires, and experiences in [PE] class” (p.67).

**Conclusion**

In the current study, the words “sports,” “games,” and “play” elicited the sharing of experiences and theorizing in the contexts of free play, recess, and organized activity outside of the school environment. The inclusion of children with disabilities in physical activity has not only been a concern to adapted PE professionals but has also been of central importance to professionals in community and therapeutic recreation and leisure. Much of the research in these areas has been intervention based with a focus on developing activity/leisure, decision making, and social skills, using play and sports as mediums (Dattilo, 2000). Social interaction and acceptance have been acknowledged as central to positive recreation and leisure experiences for children with disabilities (Loy & Dattilo, 2000; Taub & Greer, 2000), yet there are few studies that speak to children with disabilities’ viewpoints of their own “inclusive” experiences. In the current study, interactions and relationships with others featured prominently in children’s descriptions of what it meant to feel included or not included. The social nature of sports, games, and play appears to underlie feelings of inclusion in various types of activity settings.

Although children referred to the role of adults (e.g., coaches and parents) in feelings of inclusion, it was peers who appeared to play the most significant role in
feeling included in sports and games. The uncontrived acceptance by other children was a significant contributor to children’s feelings of acceptance, belonging, and value as outlined in Stainback and Stainback’s (1990) conceptual approach. According to the children, friends were not only more likely to enhance the likelihood of gaining entry into the play environment through invitation or acceptance of a request to join in, but they were also more likely to enhance children’s feelings of legitimacy. Unlike PE or structured recreation settings, in free play, children tend to dictate who gets to play, what game is played, and how it is played. Community sport may also differ in significant ways from PE. Typically, these activities are competitive in nature and less likely to support the individual needs of children with disabilities. Given that individuals who lack movement competence are at greater risk of rejection by peers and social isolation (Schoemaker & Kalverboer, 1994), feeling included in free play and organized sport may be particularly challenging for children with disabilities.

Implications
Practically speaking, framing inclusion as a primarily subjective experience from the perspective of the child with a disability has important implications for researchers and practitioners in APA. For researchers, it may represent significant philosophical and methodological shifts. More often than not, information about children has been examined from perspectives other than their own (LaGreca, 1990). Employing a child-centered approach not only represents a redistribution of power from researcher to child (Naker, 2007), but also a reconsideration of the child’s contribution to research. These issues are closely followed by methodological challenges of how best to acquire information from children and how this information can be used to inform research and practice.

For practitioners, the information acquired in this study highlights what are significant challenges. The practitioner’s role in facilitating inclusion in physical activity for children with disabilities has taken place primarily within PE. While inclusion continues to be an issue in this domain (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000), how best to facilitate inclusion in unstructured settings is particularly daunting. The perspectives of the children in this study bring attention to the important role of peers in feelings of inclusion in ways and in settings that may be very difficult for practitioners to influence and requires further investigation. That said, it may be that some of the answers to facilitating inclusion in these less structured settings also rest with children.

Recommendations for Future Directions
Physical activity may provide important opportunities for the development of social bonds for children with disabilities (Taub & Greer, 2000). Understanding the best ways to facilitate these in settings outside of PE and structured recreation has received little attention. There is a significant need to investigate children with disabilities’ free play to promote lifelong activity in ways commensurate with what children perceive to be the critical features of inclusion. Including all children as part of the inclusion process may provide practitioners with ideas of how best to influence these settings in ways that resonate with children’s needs, desires, and abilities. For practitioners, recommendations to enhance children’s free play
experiences may also include (a) employing collaborative and cooperative learning approaches in structured activity environments in ways that transfer well to less structured play settings, (b) using peer-mediated strategies that emphasize the roles of peers over adults in intervention, (c) preparing the physical play environment in advance using environmental supports to ensure access, and (d) arming children with and without disabilities with the social skills required to navigate the free play environment successfully (Arthur, Bochner, & Butterfield, 1999; Doctoroff, 2001; Rodriguez, Smith-Canter, & Voyteci, 2007).

To gain a better understanding of what inclusion is and the factors that make significant contributions to its realization in physical activity, researchers may consider using approaches that begin with the child’s perspective, but also provide a more complete picture of the nature of the free play environment and of inclusion. This may be achieved by employing a blend of both qualitative (to understand individual experience) and quantitative (e.g., structured play observations and peer interactions) strategies using case study as a starting point (Stake, 1995). This type of inquiry would be well supported by an ecological framework where the individual and his or her experience is explored in a broader context that also includes interactions with family, peers, school, and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Subscribing to a view that inclusion is a subjective experience and information about that experience is best acquired from the child’s perspective, while adding complexity to the issue also enriches our understanding of inclusion and challenges researchers and practitioners in new ways to enact change. Obtaining information from children is essential to understanding their thoughts, feelings, development, and behavior, and their perspectives are valued and important contributions toward understanding them and their experiences (La Greca, 1990).

Limitations

Several limitations to the study must be acknowledged. First, while purposive sampling using a maximum variation strategy was used to recruit participants, almost half (five) of the participants had cerebral palsy, possibly lending itself to a greater likelihood of shared experience. Second, only two participants were girls and as a result no analysis by gender was performed. The need to investigate the perspectives of children with disabilities by gender has been acknowledged in the literature (Goodwin, 2001).

References


