

YOUNG ELEMENTARY STUDENTS PERCEPTIONS ON
DISABILITY AND DIFFERENCE

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Abstract

Inclusion, the opportunity for all students to be educated together, is becoming the norm in many schools. As students are being placed in inclusive classroom, they are developing ideas around difference and disability. But what exactly are these students learning from this experience? This thesis examines my class of Grade 1 and 2 students' perspectives on disability and difference. Through interviews with the students, observations and my own self-reflections two key themes emerged. Firstly, the students were unlikely to notice a difference of autism and just see a friend. Secondly, the students' understanding of difference was derived from their own personal experience. It was also determined that effective inclusive practices are lead by teachers and educational assistants. The environment that teacher and assistants create can influence the academic and social success for all students. This environment may then also aid in all students understanding of disability and difference.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to “Timmy” and his classmates. These wonderful students showed me how powerful inclusion can be and how a classroom of caring and support can be fostered. These students have changed me as an educator and it is with many thanks to them, that I was able to turn this wonderful experience into a thesis.

I would also like to dedicate my thesis to my wonderful family: my husband, Paul Cutting and my parents: Greg and Val Haase. My family supported me throughout the entire process and always encouraged me. I love them with my whole heart and am proud to be able to dedicate my thesis to them.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Review of the Literature

Inclusion is the opportunity for all students to be educated together and for all students to be treated equitably (Loreman, McGhie-Richmond, Barber & Lupart, 2008). Baglieri and Knopf (2004) as well as Schwarz (2006) described successful inclusive practices as those that promote students learning from each other. A classroom that supports equality provides students with tools for success. Not all students will receive the same support but rather the learning and social needs are met through adaptations made by teachers. Teachers differentiate lessons to meet the academic needs of all students. This opportunity to be in an inclusive classroom not only benefits the students with disabilities, but benefits their classmates as well (Loreman, et al.). Indeed, Loreman, et al. state that there are both academic and social benefits to being placed in an inclusive classroom. Further to that, students may develop different positive ideas about disability and difference after being in an inclusive classroom. This study explores the benefits of being placed in an inclusive classroom as well as the strategies that are used to create a positive inclusive classroom. Further to that, the purpose of this study is to determine what students may learn from being in an inclusive classroom. In particular, I am interested in establishing an understanding of what strategies may be effective in promoting positive dispositions towards those with disabilities.

What is inclusion?

Lawrence-Brown (2004) stated that inclusion has become common practice; many students with disabilities are being placed in mainstream (or inclusive) classrooms. As a result of this, classrooms are more diversely populated. Huber, Rosenfeld and Fiorello (2001) maintained that in the United States *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* has influenced inclusion by requiring students with disabilities to be taught in general education settings as much as possible. Similarly, Dworet and Bennett (2002) revealed that Canadian provinces and territories “have compulsory education laws, which allow for the inclusion of students with special needs” (p. 22). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2009) created policy guidelines for inclusive education. These guidelines described inclusion as a vision of universalizing approaches to educate all children and to promote equity in the classroom. These approaches are more than making adaptations for those labelled with disabilities. In fact, they are strategies that influence the success of *all* students. UNESCO emphasized inclusion as being “the process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners” (p.8). As a result of legislation, policy and guidelines, schools and other social institutions are attempting to meet the needs of all learners and are making steps to create an environment where students learn to respect their classmates’ differences (Salend, Garrick Duhaney, 1999).

In his professional lecture *Inclusive Education and Teacher Education*, Barton (2003) spoke about inclusion from the particular lens of disability studies

in education (DSE). Barton described inclusion in terms of how educators understand and constructively engage a classroom full of diverse learners. “Inclusive education is about why, how, when, where and the consequences of educating all learners. It involves the politics of recognition and is concerned with the serious issue of who is included and who is excluded within education and society generally” (p. 14). Barton also defined three key perspectives that influence an inclusive classroom in order that it be successful. The first guiding practice, not surprisingly, is for the teacher to find balance and meet the needs of all students simultaneously. Though the students vastly differ from each other, and some may pose challenges to the school, the teacher needs to find opportunities and strategies to meet the needs of all students in this classroom. Barton goes on to speak about providing opportunities to ensure the successful participation of all students. It is imperative for all students to feel success. Lastly, Barton describes inclusion as being a process that schools can create action around and ultimately can change the school’s atmosphere.

Somewhat similarly, Baglieri and Knopf (2004) described a successful inclusive school as reflecting “a democratic philosophy whereby all students are valued, educators normalize difference through differentiated instruction and the school culture reflects an ethic of caring and community” (p. 525). Baglieri and Knopf (2004), Barton (2003), Lawrence-Brown et al. (2004) indicated that an inclusive classroom is one where all students’ needs are met and where students can feel that sense of community. Inclusion is about all students in the

class working together and developing strategies that allow for all children's success.

What are the Outcomes of Inclusion?

As previously indicated, inclusion is the opportunity for a diverse population of students to work together in a classroom setting. This section examines the benefits for all children who are placed in an inclusive classroom. Wiebe Berry (2006), Fitch (2003) and Loreman, et al. (2008) discussed the social benefits of inclusion and its effect on the school's overall environment. When a student with a disability is placed in an inclusive classroom, reportedly, they feel like they not only learned more, but also that they developed increased peer acceptance and "richer friendship networks" (Wiebe Berry, p. 490), had higher levels of self-esteem and had higher feelings of self-efficacy. Erwin, Alimaras and Price (1999) revealed how friendship may impact students with a disability. These friendships give children, who may struggle socially, natural opportunities to connect with their peers. According to Wiebe Berry, these "richer friendship networks" (p.490) may result in possible lifetime benefits such as higher paying jobs and greater independence as adults.

Further to the social benefits for those with disabilities, Erwin, Alimaras and Price (1999) and Salend and Garrick Duhaney (1999) described the social benefits of an inclusive classroom on non-disabled students. A positive inclusive classroom may increase the acceptance of diversity and therefore, also decreases teasing and bullying of non-typical peers. Students without disabilities may develop appreciation of diversity and therefore students who have physical

or ability differences may be more readily accepted (Erwin, et al.). Indeed, Salend and Garrick Duhaney also indicated that students felt that an inclusive classroom helped them develop an understanding of differences. Similarly, students without disabilities learned to make connections between their experiences and the feelings of their classmates with disabilities. These connections enhanced their understanding of their peers. When young students do not have the opportunity to be exposed to diversity they are more likely to face the possibility of becoming “thoughtless, condescending, adults” (Schwarz, 2006, p. 6). The positive inclusive classroom may therefore decrease this chance and possibly help create a society more accepting of disability and other differences.

Chandler-Olcott and Kluth (2009) found that there are also academic benefits in inclusive classrooms and that involving students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in a rich, inclusive literacy environment promoted greater social interaction. Though some students with autism may not be able to respond verbally, they are able to make gestures that answer the questions asked by other students and the teachers. Through these lessons, students learn to develop mechanisms to interact with non-verbal students and, as a result, develop an understanding of physical cues. This inclusive practice becomes not only about accepting peoples’ differences (i.e. it is not only social) but also becomes a great tool to demonstrate knowledge in other ways. Further, Chandler-Olcott and Kluth also determined that if students on the spectrum are introduced at an early age (pre-school and kindergarten) to a welcoming

environment, they develop literacy skills and construct narratives through role-playing, story-telling and art and become an active part of the Language Arts classroom community. Chandler-Olcott and Kluth also suggested that students with autism may make teachers aware of areas of difficulty and require teachers to adapt, not only for themselves but for other students as well.

Wiebe Berry (2006) also explored the academic benefits of inclusion. When students with disabilities are included in a mainstream classroom, they are exposed to more age-appropriate learning. Not surprisingly, if the teacher is able to differentiate lessons, students with disabilities learn more effectively than in a segregated classroom. Wiebe Berry also indicated that as students with disabilities are exposed to more age-appropriate learning, they are reported to have positive educational experiences. As a result of this exposure, the students will make “gains in academic achievement” (p. 490).

A common concern among parents and adults of students placed in inclusive settings is that instructional time will be compromised for those without disabilities. Salend and Garrick Duhaney (1999) took up this issue in research and found that placing students with disabilities in an inclusive classroom *did not have an effect* on the amount of instructional time the teachers had to allocate to the students without disabilities. According to Salend and Garrick Duhaney, with the help of cooperative groupings, educational achievement can be seen in both students with and without disabilities. To benefit all students in the class, teachers used a variety of teaching methods to meet their students' wide range of needs. The use of large and small group instructions, educational assistant

support, circle of friends, and co-teaching, has aided in all students' academic gains in reading. McDonnell et al. (2003) revealed that students without disabilities placed in an inclusive classroom were likely to have gains in their reading and have no notable changes in math, language and spelling. The use of effective teacher strategies in an inclusive classroom enables teachers to make a consistent collaborative environment so that all students are getting their requisite educational opportunities.

What Impacts Inclusion?

There are both academic and social benefits to those with and without disabilities in the inclusive classroom. There are obviously issues that do impact the success of inclusive practices. A particular issue that seems to be reported upon quite frequently in the literature is paraprofessionals in the classroom (Tews & Lupart, 2008). In an inclusive classroom students with disabilities are often supported, not only by their classroom teacher, but also by educational assistants (as well as other related educational professionals). Tews and Lupart and Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren (2005) explored the role paraprofessionals (also known as educational assistants) play in supporting positive inclusion. They indicate paraprofessionals may directly impact the child's ability to make friends and develop social skills. Being in an inclusive classroom with this support may alter the student's perceptions about their classmates with disabilities and the educational assistant, perhaps in negative ways. "Attitudes held by peers toward individual paraprofessionals [has] been

found to impact the extent to which peers interact with a student with a disability (Tews & Lupart, p. 43).

Similarly, Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren (2005) also caution that paraprofessionals may potentially become a barrier that may cause many non-disabled students to avoid students with disabilities. If an educational assistant seems unfriendly or strict, students are less likely to want to interact with that student. If an educational assistant seems warm-hearted and happy, then the students will welcome more opportunities to work and play with the students with disabilities (Tews & Lupart 2008). Tews and Lupart described how students who receive paraprofessional support developed what may at first seem surprising perceptions of themselves and their abilities. Some come to be dependent on the educational assistant, perhaps due to the lack of the opportunity to initiate interactions with peers on their own. As previously stated, the social benefits of being in an inclusive classroom are potentially many. Therefore, it is important for the educational assistant to foster and provide opportunities for social interaction between peers. Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren (2005) found that it is a problem when students with disabilities view their educational assistants as their friends. A friendship connection between the educational assistant and the student may suggest that there is “a lack of sufficient, social network of age-appropriate classmates” (p. 44). If necessary, educational assistants can facilitate these peer-interactions and provide opportunities for student interaction (Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren).

How educational assistants support students is only one of the (potential) barriers that can impact inclusion, another significant issue is how students think about other kinds of supports provided for them. For example, Arnett (2008) explored students' (with disabilities) perspectives and desire to fit in with their non-disabled peers. Students may be "reluctant to ask questions about content in front of the class" (p. 70) because students have the desire to be seen as competent. Arnett also found that students' perceptions of the teacher impacts comfort in receiving support in class. If the teacher is seen as friendly and happy students appreciated his/her openness to offer assistance and were more likely to ask questions. Therefore, a proper inclusive classroom at least partly relies on a positive educator who creates an environment where students feel like they can ask questions and where assistance is an acceptable norm.

Supports made available to students can differ greatly from elementary school to middle school. Knesting, Hokanson and Waldron (2008) examined the transition of students with disabilities from elementary into middle school. Through this study, Knesting et al. examined how students with disabilities perceived available supports, particularly since in middle school support may be delivered in significantly different ways than in elementary school. In this study students with disabilities were given the opportunity to attend regular classes with additional supports. In addition to basic classroom support, if students with disabilities needed help there were special education teachers that ran a student support centre. Students with disabilities had mixed feelings about the centre. Some students cherished the opportunity to receive support, while others did

not. Those who cherished this level of support perceived this program to be a great place where they could get help reading and completing assignments. Those students who felt awkward cited being uncomfortable about being perceived as different from their peers and did not want to stand out. (Similar to Arnett's findings described above). They feared that their friends would find out and would regard them as "different [and] stupid" (Knesting, et al. p. 273). In these cases, students were more likely to seek in class help rather than support at the student support centre.

How to Create a Positive Inclusive Classroom

It follows then, that creating a positive inclusive classroom is fundamental and as Arnett (2008) explained, student perception of the inclusive classroom is essential to their success. The value of inclusive education "comes from mixing and sharing with other children" (UNESCO 2001; p. 72). The teacher's role is to thoughtfully encourage these interactions, so that students with disabilities are not isolated within their classes and their schools. Hardin (2002) examined three key educational strategies used to create the desired positive, inclusive classroom environment; peer tutoring, cooperative learning and understanding disability.

Peer Tutoring

Peer tutoring may give students a framework to feel successful by working together and allows for friendship-building in the process. In addition, this strategy provides an effective way for students at all ability levels to get extra

support (Hardin, 2002). When students work together they are provided with the opportunity to see each other's strengths, and hopefully develop an understanding of each other—and perhaps even build a friendship. If done correctly peer tutoring can highlight the gifts of all students. Peer tutoring is done correctly when the interactions are reciprocal and the students with a disability are not always the recipient of help, but are also the helper sometimes. This creates successful classroom moments. Hardin (2002) suggests that celebrating the strengths of all students helps create a positive classroom climate that fosters respect for all differences.

Although not an example of peer tutoring, Smith (2003) examined working relationships between disabled students and non-disabled university students. These relationships relate to Hardin's (2002) notion of peer tutoring. As students were encouraged to work together and establish positive peer interactions they deepened their understanding of disability and gained understanding of different strengths of all participants. In her study, Smith created groupings where university students were paired with students with a severe disability. In these relationships, students were to spend two hours a week together and as a result friendships were formed. Through these inclusive interactions the university students learned a great deal from their new friendship. A key understanding was that though someone may not be able to talk, that did not necessarily mean that they could not comprehend (Smith 2003). Smith's study revealed the mutual value of these working relationships. These new friendships created a reciprocal learning environment and allowed the students to develop an appreciation for

each other. The success of peer tutoring was that no student played teacher over the other. Therefore, this adapted notion of peer-tutoring led to the success of all parties involved. The students learned from each other and the reciprocal relationship allowed students to develop a deepened understanding of each other's strengths.

Cooperative Learning

Moore-Abdool (2010) and Hardin (2002) described cooperative learning as providing all students the opportunity to learn the material at their level. Within successful cooperative learning groups all students need to have a specific job and a productive role (Hardin). Hardin suggested that no student should take the lead; ideally, all students work together and come to rely on each other.

Cooperative learning groups are a great strategy to facilitate students meeting curriculum objectives. "If a student (has) difficulty performing a task, like reading a set of directions, another member would assist the student having the difficulty" (Moore-Abdool, p. 161). Similar to peer-tutoring, when students have the opportunity to work together they build on each other's strengths and learn to appreciate each other. As with all students, those with disabilities have many strengths, and in a typical direct instruction teaching approach these strengths may not be seen. In a group setting, students realize that students with disabilities are able to do things too: such as read or draw beautiful pictures.

Understanding Disability

An additional strategy Hardin (2002) suggests to create a successful inclusive classroom is to provide opportunities for understanding disability. This strategy provides non-disabled students with the opportunity to participate alongside students with disabilities, hopefully developing an understanding and appreciation for their peers. Hardin suggests that promoting an understanding of disability is much more than placing students (with and without disabilities) in a classroom together. Such facilitation might include the opportunity to play a game of wheelchair basketball, or trying to learn sign language. The UNESCO document (2001) lists several ideas that illustrated the importance of educators finding ways for students with special needs to join in. For example, in a classroom that has a child who is blind, a teacher might find a simulation game where all students are blindfolded in order to provide the sighted students the opportunity to participate in the experience of being visually impaired. When this strategy is effective it creates an understanding and a healthy inclusive classroom (Hardin 2002).

Practical Hands-On Teaching

Further to these three strategies, peer tutoring, co-operative learning and understanding disability, teachers also need to prepare their classrooms and their lessons to support the success of all students in other, very practical, ways. The lay out of the physical classroom can hinder or benefit the students with disabilities; desks or tables can be arranged so that students can easily have access to support (UNESCO, 2001). Creating an environment that supports the needs of all students may involve a student with a visual impairment at the front

of the classroom or “set[ting] aside an area of the classroom so that [he/she] can work with certain children on a one-to-one basis” (UNESCO 2001, p. 78).

Students may need their desks placed in groups for cooperative learning and peer tutoring. If students are grouped effectively they have supports available to them throughout the day.

Additionally, actively involving students through authentic instruction is important, particularly for those with various disabilities (Lawrence-Brown 2004, UNESCO 2001). By educating students with disabilities in “real-life applications of [the] general curriculum” (Lawrence-Brown, p. 52) students may develop a deeper understanding of the content that is being learned. Objects and/or activities available for students to see or feel (UNESCO), and field trips may heighten their understanding. Lawrence-Brown gave an example of linking science and plants. The teacher provided opportunities for students to go to a botanical garden and develop some project based learning rather than simply learning the curriculum in an abstract, classroom based way. As teachers take the time to plan meaningful experiences for their students, they will develop a heightened understanding of the curriculum. With lessons that are adapted to meet the needs of all students, every child may feel success and feel like a contributing member of the classroom community.

Circle of Courage

This final section of the literature review focuses on the Circle of Courage, (Brendtro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 1990) which also has been enormously

helpful to help me create the kind of classroom where each of my students may meaningfully contribute and participate. The Circle of Courage is a First Nations epistemology and not usually invoked when discussing inclusive practice and disability per se. More so it is employed when discussing students (generally) at-risk. Nevertheless, the Circle of Courage is an important aspect to my own inclusive practice. Larson (2006) reported “ ‘The Circle of Courage [to be] a holistic approach to reclaiming youth, which is grounded in resilience science and [places] values of deep respect for the dignity of children’ ” (p. 83). Larson, Brendtro and De Toit (2005), and McDonald (2010) described this philosophy as centred around four areas where humans need to feel success: belonging, mastery, independence and generosity. This philosophy has been adapted and adopted by my school division and teachers are using it to help them meet the needs of all their students. I find the Circle of Courage a useful tool to encourage a positive inclusive classroom. This philosophy enables my students to develop holistically and successfully in all four-quadrant areas: belonging, mastery, independence and generosity. Belonging relates to the human need to have friendships. Larson, Brendtro, De Toit and McDonald suggest mastery is important because it is the opportunity for students to experience competence, while independence is their ability to do something on one’s own. Larson, Brendtro, De Toit and McDonald also state that generosity is important because it allows students to share with others. These four quadrant areas are equally important and aid in developing a safe space and learning environment for students in my classroom.

By providing the Circle of Courage as a framework, Larson (2006), Brendtro and De Toit (2005), and McDonald (2010) give teachers opportunities to understand how to make their classrooms welcoming environments, ways to make the classroom a place where they have the opportunity to connect with their students and to develop respectful relationships with all students through the course of the year. By developing awareness around these issues, McDonald revealed that the Circle of Courage aids in developing a healthy classroom environment. In particular, belonging is important because all children need to feel like they are important to someone. Feeling loved and appreciated is important at home, and also important at school (McDonald). When students lack a sense of belonging they may act out and hurt others. Developing a positive sense of belonging is accomplished through developing opportunities for building trusting bonds and positive human attachments (Brendtro, De Toit). Such opportunities to foster a sense of belonging in the classroom may (ideally) allow all students, no matter their ethnicity, their ability levels, their gender, and so on, to feel like they are a contributing member of the class.

To model belonging, I lead by example and illustrate to my students that each child is an important part of the class and has something unique to offer. By offering this attitude I hoped that my students gained an increased understanding of the students that make up our class, therefore establishing a healthy classroom community. Roland (2008) described communities as being defined by human relationships that are “derived from a feeling of belonging in the context of a diverse range of societal groupings” (p. 55). I emphasized to my

students the importance of honesty, integrity, compassion and empathy and according to Roland (2008) this practice leads to students developing a strong moral character where they can be happy with who they are, and hopefully more accepting of their peers.

The mastery quadrant of the Circle of Courage challenges teachers to think of ways to share teaching strategies and assessment procedures to ensure all students have the opportunity to feel successful and are given the chance to celebrate in their positive achievements (McDonald, 2010). Of course, mastery is not exclusive to the academic domain. It is important for students to feel like they can solve problems and accomplish goals. Brendtro and De Toit, (2005) highlighted the importance of goal setting beyond academics. They describe it as being pivotal to students' success. Since some students struggle in the daily academic tasks, they need to be afforded the opportunity to feel success; otherwise they may act out and disrupt the class (Brendtro & De Toit). These disruptions can create an environment that is not conducive to accepting diversity. Sometimes, it can even create an environment where differences in ability level are enhanced and seen in a negative light.

This literature review demonstrates the impact of effective inclusive practices has on students with and without disabilities. Through these strategies stated above, students with and without disabilities are provided with opportunities to understand and hopefully accept each other. Currently, there seems to be a lack of research developing an understanding of young elementary student's experiences in inclusive classrooms. This study explores

inclusion on the ground, from both the students view and those of my own, as an educator. This research will take place in a Grade 1 and 2 classroom. Part of the goal of this research is to determine how young students' experiences in an inclusive classroom influence their perceptions on disability and difference.

Purpose

As a researcher, I am passionate about this topic, perhaps since teaching in an inclusive classroom has been a very rewarding experience. The students in my inclusive classroom seemed to develop a positive understanding of diversity and difference—at least their actions demonstrate so. In my classroom of caring students did not just tolerate a student with autism but appeared to become his friend. Students often asked to sit with him on the bus or to read with him. In conducting this research I wondered what students gained from being in this inclusive classroom. As previously indicated, there seems to be a lack of research examining inclusive classrooms from the perspective of young elementary students. When conducting this research it became important for me to examine my elementary classroom experiences and relate my findings to the research in older grade classrooms. This research (a) explores how being in an inclusive classroom influences young elementary students' perceptions of disability and difference and (b) examines my own practice.

Chapter Two: Methodology

Being a teacher *and* researcher is an exciting and challenging endeavour. Wang, Kretschmer and Hartman (2010) explained that for research to be useful it needs to affect both the teaching and learning in a classroom. When teachers take ownership of the research, they determine the needs of their classroom and themselves, and in this way they initiate an investigative focus. Using self-reflective case study methodology, I examined my own classroom environment. Rossman and Rallis (2003) define a case study as an in-depth and detailed exploration. "Case studies seek to understand a larger phenomenon through intensive examination of one specific instance" (p. 104). Stake (1995) further defines the case study as being a bounded system, examining the complexity of a "specific, functioning thing" (p. 2). Merriam (1998) described case studies to be particularistic, descriptive and heuristic. Through the thick description of a particular situation case studies "illuminate the reader's understanding of the phenomenon under study" (p. 30). When conducting my research it was important for me to describe the classroom setting and illustrate how the culture of the classroom and the students' understanding of difference has led to this case study. Understanding the perspectives young students have on disability and difference was the goal of this research.

As stated, this research occurred in my inclusive classroom. I examined my inclusive practices and how they impacted my students. I was interested in my students' actual expressions about difference and disability. By providing them with this opportunity, I deepened my understanding of inclusive practices.

Using a reflective case study methodology enabled me to not only look at my students understanding of difference and disability but examine my own practice as well. Dinkelman (2010) stated that “self-study serves...as a means to promote reflective teaching” (p. 1). When teachers take the time to reflect on their teaching they have the opportunity to become more effective educators. In this way, self-reflection can be a positive tool to support professional development (Dinkelman, 2010).

Data Collection

Three forms of data collection were utilized in this study. I explored my students' perspectives and my own practice through a self-reflective research journal, classroom observations, and student interviews. As I conducted this research with my own students, I needed to install precautions to ensure the trustworthiness of my data, but more importantly, the protection of my students. (These safeguards will be described in detail after descriptions of data gathering tools).

The research journal provided me with the opportunity to reflect in a more structured way upon the successes and challenges of days as an educator. Altricher, Posch and Somekh (1993) describe a research journal (or diary) as one of the most important data gathering methods for teachers. I used a tape recorder to record my thoughts. Reflecting on my recordings allowed for insight in to my classroom environment: I thought about what I had actually done to contribute to a classroom atmosphere that fostered respect for disability, diversity and difference. As issues arose throughout the research period, I

recorded significant issues through this digital device and later self-reflected and problem-solved in ways that best meet the needs of students. This deliberation provided insight into a teacher's dilemmas. In my self-reflections I wanted to demonstrate and explain the strategies I employed in my classroom work, what they looked like and what, if any, issues arose from them.

Secondly, throughout the research process, I also conducted classroom observations. Observing behaviours of the students was one of the most valuable tools of my research. Standing back and examining interactions with Timmy became a very authentic way of determining students' apparent friendships with him. This method of collecting data enabled me, as a researcher, to see how the strategies we used in the classroom to develop a positive environment influenced the students' relationships or understanding in non-structured times such as recess. Similar to the research journal, I recorded the observations by talking into a digital recorder. After recording my observations, I would usually reflect on what I witnessed.

The third source of my data collection was from the students through semi-structured interviews (See Appendix A for the questions). In this class of twenty-five students, was a diverse population of very caring, compassionate children. The privilege to interview them provided me the opportunity to understand how students developed knowledge around something as complex as "diversity". Van Manen (1990) and Merriam (1998) described one of the important functions of the interview as the occasion to understand people's feelings. It was interesting to explore students' ideas around difference and

disability. The interviews allowed me to examine how (and if) students noticed differences that existed in this class, more particularly, if they developed an understanding of autism and how they developed friendships with those who struggle to communicate. In engaging in conversations with these six and seven year olds, I developed an understanding of their awareness and perceptions of difference. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Ethical Safeguards.

Stake (1995) emphasized how it is “essential to obtain special written permission from parents” in order to confirm their informed consent. (p. 57). Because this research was conducted in my classroom while I was teaching my students many precautions were considered to meet the needs of my students and my research. The dual role of being both a teacher and a researcher in this classroom required extra thought and planning. To ensure parents did not feel pressured into having their child participate, the vice-principal wrote a note explaining the situation that accompanied my information and permission slip (see Appendix B). Each student was handed a brown envelope with all the details inside. Whether parents agreed to have their child participate or not, the student returned the envelope sealed. Inside there would either be signed permission slips indicating their child could be interviewed, or the forms returned unsigned indicating they would not like their child to participate. All envelopes looked identical and were handed to the vice-principal for her to examine.

I did not see what was in the sealed envelopes. In this way, as the teacher I was not privy to whether the students were given permission by

parents/guardians or not until after my report cards were completed. Once the report cards were handed in, the vice-principal and I met and I was given the list of students that I could interview. To further ensure that the research did not impact my teacher role, the principal read my report cards in June to ensure fairness and that any information I was given during the research did not bias my assessments.

Interviewing young elementary students is an uncommon process that many teachers and researchers do not undertake. In fact, Thompson (2008) stated that “most researchers constrain their investigations by interviewing teachers only” (p. 151). When researchers do interview children they are usually “typical” students only (Watson-Barnett, 2007). Because there is little information on interviewing very young students, it was very important to conduct this research appropriately and effectively and to document the process to benefit future researchers working with similar participants. Parents were provided with the opportunity to sit in on the interviews if they wished. Although no parents selected to attend the interviews, it was imperative to provide them the opportunity. Further, after the interviews were conducted, parents were provided with a copy of their child’s transcript to examine. Parents had the opportunity to remove their child from the study at any point during the research process if they wanted.

Not only did parents give permission for their child to participate, but students gave their written and verbal permission as well. They were required to sign the form, which would indicate that they would be willing to participate, and

also give verbal consent before their interview was recorded. I explained the process in plain and age-appropriate language. Additionally, all students were given a pseudonym to ensure their anonymity. All precautions undertaken to protect students in my dual-role as teacher and researcher were approved by the University of Regina Research Ethics Board. So, in conclusion, many steps were taken to ensure not only the protection of the students' education but the trustworthiness of my data.

Chapter Three: Results: My Classroom and My Reflections

Background to the Project

The 2009-2010 school year provided me with my first privilege to teach in an inclusive classroom. That year turned out to be the most rewarding school year of my life and changed me as an educator, allowing me to experience the power of an inclusive and diverse classroom. It challenged me as an educator to establish an environment where all students felt a sense of belonging. It also helped me develop an understanding of autism, as well as helped me develop an appreciation for the diverse population of students that made up the classroom.

This opportunity was my first taste of differentiating lessons where I adjusted assignments to meet the academic needs of all students. In this Kindergarten classroom, I was empowered to reflect on my lessons and create unique ways to understand an activity in order to meet the needs of a little boy with autism as well as the immigrant students who were English language learners. The most inspirational aspect for me was the opportunity to explore the power that an inclusive classroom had on developing positive peer relationships and students' acceptance of diversity and disability. I was amazed most days as this little boy with autism, and many of my students, were so thoughtful and accepting of each other. This level of caring in my inclusive classroom inspired me to continue to challenge myself as an educator to develop programs and opportunities for these students.

As stated, there are many social and academic benefits for students with and without disabilities in an inclusive classroom (Erwin, Alimaras & Price, 1999; Loreman, McGhie-Richmond & Lupart, 2008; Salend & Garrick, 1999; Wiebe Berry, 2006). Because I had the opportunity of teaching in an inclusive classroom, I became intrigued to explore further these benefits and to understand of how students' perceptions of disability and difference were influenced by being in such a classroom. Since that first year, I have continued to teach in an inclusive classroom. To me, being in an inclusive classroom provides students with the chance to explore differences and acceptance. This research was designed to examine the effects of being in an inclusive classroom, and to establish a knowledge of what each student gains from the experience

My Classroom Setting

Educating students in an inclusive classroom requires thoughtful preparation of the physical classroom lay out as well as the classroom's ethos. In the 2011 and 2012 school year, upon entering my classroom one observed twenty-six desks divided into six groups. Each table group was a heterogeneous group of students providing assistance for others at any given time. At the back of the room there were two tables, one round and one horseshoe shaped. These tables were used to give students flexible groupings so they could receive assistance when needed. Additionally, there were a variety of sensory, attention and memory learning tools in the classroom in order to help students focus. These included two rocking chairs, two swivel chairs, one exercise ball, two

hokey chairs and a variety of study carrels and head phones to also help with focusing. These tools were accessible to all students and they were encouraged to recognize the tools they needed to use to help make their learning successful.

To create a positive classroom climate, I modeled and encouraged caring and support using the Circle of Courage framework (Larson 2006). The Circle of Courage focuses on four areas: belonging, mastery, independence and generosity, which will be further elaborated on in the next section. The Circle of Courage played an important role in setting up an accepting, inclusive atmosphere. I taught the concepts belonging and generosity, in direct ways so that students might demonstrate an attitude of caring and support for each other. For example, when students were given opportunities to work with partners, I explicitly taught the students strategies for being kind and finding opportunities to work with everyone in the class. When picking partners, once eye-contact was made with a classmate, that was their partner. Students were taught that If you would have liked a different partner, you never showed your disappointment so that everyone felt a sense of belonging. The students in this class appeared to master this concept and students always worked with a variety of classmates.

After teaching the concepts, six charts adorned the classroom walls where group points were awarded when students demonstrated leadership in these areas. When students demonstrated a positive attitude, such as respectfully listening, being a good friend, or helping out, they earned points for their team. When a student struggled to make good choices, such as not listening to classmates or a teacher when they were talking, they may have been

required to erase table group points. At the end of every week, points were tallied and the team with the most points earned a prize from the treasure box. Further to that, a classroom Circle of Courage diagram was cut into pieces and students earned a puzzle piece when they showed strength in any of the four quadrant areas (i.e. belonging, generosity, independence and mastery). Students were encouraged to be a good friend to all students, which could earn them puzzle pieces in belonging and/or generosity. By working hard and being a respectful student, students could earn puzzle pieces in independence/and or mastery. Once the Circle of Courage was full, students received a reward. These rewards varied from a movie afternoon, to a friendship cooperative game afternoon, to a weird science day, or to field trips. Students worked very hard at earning puzzle pieces and table group points which made the classroom a calm and respectful space for all.

As stated, this classroom was a diverse population. It appeared as though no students stood out as different and no students seemed to be stigmatized for their differences. The class included 11 Grade 1 students and 14 Grade 2 students. Five of these students were English as an Additional Language Learners (EAL) and one Grade 2 student was Timmy, the boy with ASD. I had taught many of the Grade 2 students in Kindergarten so this was the second time I had taught them. The students in the class appeared to be understanding and accepting; they demonstrated respect for each other and helped out in many ways. Our class celebrated the daily successes. Every student had many friends and each student appeared to have a sense of belonging.

The Circle of Courage in My Inclusive Classroom

Before I was introduced to the Circle of Courage, my classroom was focused on mastery—measuring my students' success. I found myself focused on students reciting the alphabet or counting. Brendtro and De Toit (2005) reminded me that academic goals are student centered and that each learner has diverse educational needs. Adept teachers learn the strengths of each student and provide numerous opportunities for students to showcase their strengths (Brendtro & De Toit 2005). Though mastery is very important in my inclusive classroom, I now have a broader understanding of what constitutes mastery and see it as a means to contribute to the successful inclusion or belonging of all students. I will never forget the day in Kindergarten when Timmy read to his classmates. Being one of the only students in the class who could read at that time, it illustrated to the class that each student had unique gifts that deserve to be celebrated. The classroom of 5 year olds were awestruck, a chorus of "he can read!" resounded as Timmy did so. This event impacted not only myself, as a teacher, but the students as well—in that moment they appeared to understand that everyone has strengths. McDonald (2010) emphasized the importance of independence and how it forces teachers to create environments where students can develop responsibility, self-sufficiency, and "insight into their feelings and emotions" (p. 17). As students gain self-knowledge, understand their emotions and gain control over them, they are more successful in developing positive relationships with others. As previously discussed by Wiebe Berry (2006), and Loreman, et al. (2008), positive peer

relationships are just one of the significant benefits of the inclusive classroom. As Brendtro and De Toit (2005) emphasized, I fostered independence in my classroom by providing students with pro-social outlets. I afforded them the opportunity to develop an understanding of control over their emotions. Often we discussed how our feelings influence how we learn. Together, my students and I attempted to understand the different personalities that existed in our class. For example, we worked to help Timmy when he was fixated on sharpening his pencil, or help another student who had shut down because she was frustrated. As students learned to control these emotions and developed a voice to explain how they felt, it taught them appropriate ways to express themselves. It then allowed us to work together to develop an understanding of how differences are a normal part of society and that everybody feels the same things; however, people may deal with these emotions in different ways.

The final Circle of Courage quadrant is generosity. Generosity involves teaching students about the power and pleasure of giving (McDonald, 2010). To facilitate generosity in my students, I attempted to create opportunities for them to develop a sense of purpose, care for others, and to develop empathy. For example, the students shared their strengths with their classmates. When the students were working in Math and some were struggling, I fostered the ability of the stronger students to help the others. The students were aware that everyone has strengths and that sharing these strengths is showing generosity. This sharing was reciprocal and all students shared their strengths with others whether it was Math, Language Arts, Science or playing at recess. As Brendro

and De Toit (2005) revealed one of “the greatest thing [a student] can give to another student is friendship” (p. 50). In my classroom, generosity taught my students to find opportunities to help and befriend each other.

“Environments that fail to provide belonging, mastery, independence and generosity cause great pain to children and are toxic to positive development” (Brendtro & De Toit, 2005, pg. 15). Brendtro and De Toit suggest that this is why it is important for teachers to meet these needs of their students. As teachers develop a classroom climate that generates belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity, students are engaged and encouraged to accept the differences that exist in a diverse classroom. In my view my students were an example of the benefits of centering the class around these four pillars. Most of these students appeared to be accepting of everyone, found opportunities to help each other and on a daily basis referred to the Circle of Courage when discussing issues that arose in the classroom. For example students would come up to me and say “Miss Haase, I helped Timmy with his sense of belonging because he was in the wrong line and I nicely showed him where to go”. Teaching the Circle of Courage provided opportunities to change behaviour by providing encouragement, raising questions and listening to students when they have something to say. Creating this environment enabled positivity in my classroom.

The Circle of Courage framework provided me with the opportunity to address the diverse needs of my students in my inclusive classroom. Brendtro and De Toit’s (2005) work played an important role to help me develop a classroom of caring and support where students worked together to create an

enabling environment. This also allowed for my students to develop a common language and work together to understand the gifts of each student. The research in the following section illustrates how the Circle of Courage impacted my students and allowed them to use their knowledge to work with each other in a successful and meaningful environment.

Teaching Belonging through Literature

Being a teacher in an inclusive classroom requires time and effort to create an environment that promotes belonging for all students. For my young students to understand difference and to accept diversity, I often used literature to teach them lessons. I read books such as *My Friend with Autism* (Bishop, 2002) and other stories, not necessarily specific to ASD, but to teach students about judging others. In order to teach my group of young students about difference and autism I used a variety of literature. Fiction and non-fiction stories provide teachers with the opportunity to use the proper wording and address questions using child-friendly language. ASD is at least partly the inclusionary focus in this study, and therefore the selected books explain autism. The use of these stories hopefully allowed my students to recognize how to help or befriend a student with autism.

My Friend with Autism, by Beverly Bishop (2002) is one of the most useful tools I have used for sharing knowledge on autism with my students. Bishop begins by explaining, in child-friendly language, that children with autism have strengths in certain areas, such as auditory, visual and gustatory capabilities. These sensory systems may operate differently in autism, but Bishop posits

these differences as gifts. Though these gifts are not indicative of all children with autism—certainly not the in exact same way the issues Bishop described related to Timmy, so this book was a very useful tool. Not only did Bishop characterize these attributes as gifts, but she provided insight into some of the tools children with autism use because of these gifts. For example, children with autism may wear sunglasses when they go outside to aid with their sensitivity to light. More significantly, Bishop provides strategies that peers can use to befriend a child with autism. For example, she notes strategies that children can use to play games with a child with ASD; such as: games with lots of movement, games with counting, reading or spelling, or toys that have movement. In the second half of this book, Bishop addresses areas typically difficult for someone with ASD such as talking, maintaining friendships, understanding feelings, sharing, and change. Again she provides helpful techniques such as reminders to sit quietly and the use of pictures. A memorable quote from the book for me is: “most of all, my friend [with autism] loves to have friends” (p. 18).

Friendships seem to be an important part of childhood and growing up. For an inclusive classroom to be effective creating an environment conducive for all classmates to develop friendships becomes a very important objective. When reading literature on autism, students were encouraged to relate what they know about Timmy to the book. As observed in October 2011 students made such connections. Some students suggested that “Timmy wears sunglasses and a hat when he goes outside, that must be because the sun is too bright.” Further, students identified that Timmy was not always great at recognizing feelings.

Sometimes he would laugh when students were crying. Discussion around feelings became very important because the class could talk about such topics as whether or not Timmy understood that someone was sad, or whether or not Timmy actually thought the situation was funny if someone was crying (i.e., comparing thinking and doing/saying). Timmy was not in the classroom when we read Bishop's book. In this way students had the opportunity to ask questions about autism or Timmy after reading the book.

In opening up the dialogue about autism, students were able to reflect about what they were seeing and not judge negatively the student with the exceptionality. In asking questions, students were then learning about autism and becoming little experts on this subject. In my class at least, when I was open and willing to discuss such differences with my students, difference became acceptable. I believe that if autism was not addressed, my young students would regard it as something different and, more importantly, in a negative light. We read books several times throughout the school year, sometimes just to refresh students' memories. Autism was not the only difference we discussed as the year progressed. We also read lots of books on other differences as well. One example of this is when Clara brought a book to school about living with asthma. She brought this book because she wanted the class to learn about her difference. Because the nature of this study revolves around autism, the examples from the books used will pertain to ASD.

I found it important to share these stories and literature with other classes because I hoped to encourage the understanding throughout the entire school.

Though Timmy spent most of his time with his classmates, there were other age alike and close-aged peers he interacted with at recess. Because we tried to foster a school of caring and acceptance (belonging), it became important to go through the same steps to create acceptance of differences throughout the whole school. Though Bishop (2002) only addressed autism, reading this book opened dialogue to examine other differences that existed in the classroom and the school. Timmy was the only student with ASD at the school and everyone appeared to know who he was. I felt it was important to provide the students with the opportunity to develop knowledge of autism, and therefore with Timmy's Mom's permission read Bishop's (2002) book to my class as well as the other classes where students interacted with him.

Of course, I also addressed how Timmy's peers may feel in the classroom. *Timmerman Was Here* (2009) provided the opportunity to discuss the impact of rumours and pre-conceived judgements. This story grabbed the students' attention instantly - is it okay to not to like someone before you get to know them? After reading this story and the initial discussion on judging people, Timmy's autism came up and how at first meeting Timmy, people might judge him and not realize the many great things he brings to our classroom.

Outcomes: Key Observations

Obviously, it is not possible in an endeavour like this to suggest that techniques that I employed as a teacher made direct changes in my students' attitudes and behaviours around difference, diversity and in particular to the

difference of ASD. I note here certain key observations that exemplify some hopeful interactions between Timmy and his classmates.

On April 14th 2012, I was outside with Timmy and he was standing beside me when one little girl, Maria came over and asked Timmy if he would like to play tag. She then began to teach him how to play. She would run up to him and say “now you are it, come and get me now”. As this game progressed more and more little girls came and asked if they could play too. As the group grew bigger and more people would ask to play, Maria would always explain “we are teaching Timmy to play tag so you need to tag him or run slower so he can tag you.” After she would explain this to her peers everyone was excited to participate in the game of tag. The students found it exciting to join in an activity that Timmy enjoyed so much. After this initial game of tag the students were always thrilled and excited to play tag with him, whenever Timmy was at school, ready and willing to play. It may be worth noting that at recess there is generally more freedom than in structured class time, and students chose what and with whom they would like to play.

As recorded in my teacher researcher journal on June 6, 2012, the class was outside for an early recess. A group of four athletic boys decided to include Timmy in their game of basketball. They passed him the ball, encouraged him to shoot it and cheered him on. When he was struggling to share the ball they reminded him, “no it’s my turn, it will be Timmy’s turn again soon”. In my class, there are many athletic boys who were always pleasant to Timmy. However, they did not often include him in many of their activities during unstructured

times such as recess. I encouraged everyone to find opportunities to include Timmy and sometimes it appeared that girls were more patient and understanding. What was significant about this incident was that I did not instigate the game, Timmy went up to them, stood there and then they immediately included him by passing him the ball and encouraging him to shoot. It appeared that the boys welcomed the opportunity to include Timmy and were sensitive to Timmy's needs. They included him so perfectly.

Of course, there were other children with learning differences in my classroom. Among my Grade 1 and 2 students, was a little girl named Payton. Like Timmy, Payton struggled to make friends and often preferred to spend time either by herself or with her older sister. In January it became apparent that Payton liked Timmy. Their desks had been placed beside each other and Payton had a gift for helping Timmy without doing everything for him. As the year progressed their friendship grew. Payton looked for opportunities to interact with him during class time as well as at recess. One beautiful day in May, I took my students outside and encouraged them to play with a new friend or play on a piece of playground equipment they did not usually play on. Payton took Timmy to the swings and the two of them played together for thirty minutes. Timmy was engaged watching tricks that Payton would do and then he would copy her. At one point they were playing sky diving, laying on their stomachs spinning in their swings! Payton made a great friend because Timmy listened and played with her.

Though Timmy seldom initiated interactions with peers, he did respond to such initiations and seemed to enjoy opportunities to play with his classmates. When left on his own, Timmy would usually choose to play on the slide, rather than play with a friend. Because he appeared to struggle with initiating social interactions, Timmy required support to develop this skill. For example, some days Timmy would be encouraged to choose three friends and ask them to play in the gym with him. Timmy would be guided through the process, first, he would go up to his chosen classmates, and ask, "Kelsey, (for example) would you like to go to the gym?" Then he would be reminded to listen and wait for their response. During the lunch recess I would then take the four students to the gym and we would play a cooperative game, usually chosen by Timmy. He often would choose basketball. We would work on turn taking and peer interactions.

Again my goal in my inclusive classroom was to encourage students to recognize that difference is okay. Part of accepting difference in the context of disability entails reminding students not to do everything for those labelled disabled. Remembering the Circle of Courage, independence for Timmy is an area that is just as important as it is for my other students. From time to time the class we would have discussions on ways to help Timmy and ways that we are not able to help him. It was suggested that when we help Timmy we can get him headphones, encourage him to read and stop him from sharpening his pencils, as he did this often. I reassured my students that it is great to help him but we cannot do things for him: instead of getting his agenda out for him, ask him to get his agenda out. As the year progressed many students became masters of

encouraging his independence. They were able to recognize what he needed and provided him with many opportunities to try new things on his own. As a result of these interactions Timmy appeared to develop more confidence. This confidence enabled Timmy the opportunity to provide support for other students. He would quickly answer math questions, he would help with reading and he would support his friends.

In short, students welcomed opportunities to ask questions to clarify their understandings, as well as welcomed interactions with Timmy. Students appeared to have a positive view and acceptance of “difference”. Indeed, to me it seemed as though these young students recognized and appreciated diversity better than their older siblings or older students throughout the school. I believe this was shown by their comfort and perceived friendship and acceptance with Timmy. Timmy and all classmates were surrounded by an environment of caring and support, but just what was *their* understanding of diversity, I shall explore that in the following section.

Outcomes: Student Interviews

Some of the key observations just described seemed to support the notion that difference was normalized within my classroom. However, I was also interested in exploring my students’ notions of disability and difference more directly. I asked them a variety of questions to get a broader picture of their understanding. Interviews were semi-structured, and occurred at lunchtime. Students were encouraged to answer questions as best they could. On some occasions, dialogue would open and a few additional probes would be asked.

Most times, students answered the pre-determined questions. Because these students were a little nervous and young, interviews were fairly short. Students who were given permission to participate were taken to the library, to provide a quiet environment without interruption. All participation was voluntary and, as already stated, students gave their consent before the interview was conducted. A few students were nervous to participate whereas others were eager and excited.

The questions asked focused on autism and also included questions on general differences and friendship. These interviews provided me the opportunity to see how effective the strategies we include in the classroom routines, to increase acceptance, are. Did the students develop a sense of understanding? Could they explain what autism is? Could the students define qualities of a good friend? (See Appendix A for the Interview guide) The following are tabular descriptions of the conversations I had with students around the interview questions. I have chosen to present findings in tabular format so that the reader will be able to more easily discern significant student responses; salient issues will be highlighted from the data. When presenting student answers, I have attempted to use as close as reasonably possible their own words, or more accurately, an amalgam, of several participants words.

question one: what do you think it means to be different?

When the students were asked what they think it means to be different a variety of answers were given. The table below illustrates the answers the students gave.

Table 1

What do you think it means to be different?

Answers to the Questions students	Grade 1 Students	Grade 2
Do not be mean	1	
You are special/unique		3
Nervous		1
Does not mean anything ~ we are all the same in a way and all different too		2
It is nice to be different because people are not copying you		1
You might have more friends		1
You speak different languages	1	
You have different skin colours	1	
I don't know	4	

As Table 1 illustrates some students provided strategies like “do not be mean”, whereas others indicated skin colour as being the main difference indicator. Interestingly, no student indicated autism as being an indicator of difference. Two Grade 1 students recognized skin colour and language differences as being the main factor of being different than their peers; there were none such responses from Grade 2 participants. In this class, even the twin girls indicated that the main difference between one of them and her twin was

the colour of their skin, with Lindsay's being darker. It appeared as though their responses were based upon visual cues. To these children what stood out as being different is the visual difference.

This Grade 1 and 2 classroom was populated by a diverse group of students. Some were born in Canada while others were refugees and/or immigrants. Three boys in this classroom came from the same country and spoke the same language. These boys sometimes talked to each other and often amazed the students with their abilities to do the splits or climb really high in trees. Some Grade 1 students who participated in the interview were more likely to indicate their understanding of these boys as an indicator of difference rather than a behavioural difference in the student with autism. Probably, it is easier for young students to notice the children speaking a different language rather than the student who needs support to complete tasks. The more overt or physical characteristics of people appeared to be more noticeable to some in this group of young children.

Some Grade 2 students were able to recognize that difference means uniqueness or that difference is what makes people more special. Interestingly, all Grade 2 participants in the study were able to provide an answer to this question. Whereas four Grade 1 students struggled to comprehend the meaning of difference.

question two: what differences do you see in our classroom?

This question, what did students notice as different, was very important for this research. It was very valuable to understand if students could normalize difference. They seemed to in their actions, but I was curious as to whether they could talk about (at an age-appropriate level). I was interested in knowing if they saw autism as a difference, or if students still be more inclined to recognize skin colour and language differences as being the main diversity indicator in the classroom? Because this Grade 1 and 2 classroom was full of diverse learners with diverse needs, the answers to this question could be endless and provide me with enriched knowledge to apply to my future teaching. (The reader will note that in Table 1, I attempted to use students' words, in Table 2, I used categorical names for students' responses to questions.)

Table 2

Differences in our Classroom

Answers to the Questions	Grade 1 Students	Grade 2 students
Appearance Based Answers		
Age	1	
Black & White		1
Big Kids & Little Kids	1	
Skin, eye & hair colour	3	3
"Clara" is different	1	
Other Answers		
People are good at different things		1
Timmy	1	6

Different people doing different things		1
Some students struggle in subjects		1
Some kids are from Regina ~ others are from another country	1	
I don't know	1	

Table 2 illustrates how many students recognize appearance as a notable difference, Classroom differences between the students in Grade 1 and 2 that they indicated ranged from age, height, ability levels and skin colour. Of the eight Grade 1 students interviewed, only one Grade 1 student indicated that Timmy was different. John explained “sometimes you are born with black skin or something” (interview April 24th, 2012) to explain his ideas around difference.

One Grade 1 student and six Grade 2 students indicated Timmy’s label of ASD as one of the differences. Interestingly Emma concluded that though Timmy has autism “it doesn’t really mean that he is different. It’s just that his brain might think of questions [or], he might have different answers” (interview April 18, 2012). She explained this immediately after noting that Timmy was different. It is intriguing how she expanded her answer because, in my opinion, she did not want to make him stand out negatively. Emma offered reasons as to why autism is okay.

Charlie, a very bright and gifted Grade 2 student quickly expressed too that Timmy has ASD, which is a difference she sees in the classroom. Charlie continued, remarking that she sees people who struggle with some subjects. For her it seems that noticing students who are having difficulties where she does

not, is how she defines difference. In this way Timmy is different to her. Though some students may be inclined to address autism as different, some were also inclined to explain about autism and find opportunities to befriend Timmy. In this class very seldom was there a student who got angry or annoyed with Timmy. In fact, more than likely, they would attempt to help cheer him up when he was sad or get him tools he needed to succeed.

question three: is it okay to be different?

After the question regarding what it means to be different, I explored their understanding of acceptance. I asked students if it is ok to be different. This question encouraged students to reflect on their thoughts of difference and to think if it is okay to be different from the peers, and if it is okay to stand out. All but one student indicated that it was okay to be different. Despite many students stating it was OK to be different, most were unable to provide reasons for their positive endorsement. This may not be surprising, given students' ages. For the few students who did indicate reasons why it is okay to be different, their reasons appeared sound, consistent with my curriculum content around difference.

When asked the above question Emma did not hesitate, to her difference is okay and she was able to expand and explain why. She indicated that being different makes you more special; "you are different than everyone else and stand out" (interview April 18th, 2012). Emma is a calm, quiet girl who comes from a very stable and supportive home. Often, she was always the class volunteer, and worked with anyone who needed extra support. Not only did she

celebrate the differences of those in our class but she would often try to be a little different herself. One example of how she tried to be different was the way she dressed. She always liked to combine unique combinations of clothes, which others would not wear. Uniqueness was good quality to have, as she stated in her interview “you are specialer if you are different” (Interview April 18th, 2012). Further to that, other students suggested that when you are unique you are not copying others, you are your own person and that makes you extra special.

Matt is another student who confidently responded that difference was acceptable and expanded on it to address friendship. Matt is a Grade 2 student who tried very hard to fit in with the athletic boys stated “you can still be friends with people that are different” (Interview April 20, 2012). Kind hearted, Matt related well to Timmy. He attended Cubs with Timmy and sometimes considered himself as an expert on autism. Matt invited Timmy to his birthday party. Despite the fact that that they may not have interacted with each other at recess daily, Matt appeared to accept Timmy’s differences and would randomly welcome Timmy to participate in a game of soccer or basketball. Matt appeared to appreciate the differences in Timmy, and recognize that they could still be friends.

question four: what is autism?

After asking students about difference, I wanted to understand what autism, in particular, meant to them. Their responses suggested that the students understanding of autism was drawn chiefly from personal interactions

with Timmy. Despite the many resources used to explain autism and help develop an understanding of Timmy, when these students were asked about autism they were more inclined to name aspects about their classmate with autism rather than “my” normalizing curriculum. Many students related knowledge to past things they noticed about Timmy. For example: Timmy being sensitive to noise. It is surely gratifying that students talked about ASD in concrete terms drawn from their personal experience. I had thought that some of the knowledge they had learned from lessons may have been more directly alluded to. In the past, Timmy struggled to attend assemblies because they were very loud. In my opinion, when students were stating “him being sensitive to noise” they were relating to these experiences when Timmy would leave assemblies or wear head phones to muffle the noise.

Table 3 below indicates the variety of answers given when students were explaining what autism meant to them. As illustrated, Grade 2 students were confident in describing autism, whereas some Grade 1s were more hesitant. James, a Grade 1 peer, answered “I don’t know” (Interview May 15th, 2012) when asked about autism. The Grade 1 students who did provide an answer would give one example of what autism was, whereas the Grade 2 students would give numerous ideas. I wondered if this were the case since the Grade 2 students have developed more of an understanding of ASD as this is the third year some have been in his class?

Table 3

What is autism?

Answer to the question Students	Grade 1 students	Grade 2
Hear Better	1	4
See Better		1
Laugh sometimes but don't mean it	1	2
Push sometimes but don't mean it		1
Their brain works differently		1
They need help with some stuff		2
Need to go for breaks		2
Something you are born with		1
Makes some things hard to do		1
Don't understand what people are saying all the time		3
Sometimes they are hard to understand	1	
Want to do things they have already done		1
Talk different		1
They are smart		2
Timmy says hi to people a lot	1	
Timmy doesn't know people's names	1	
They are different	1	
They do all their work	1	
I don't know	3	

Timmy is a very happy boy, and would often giggle and laugh, sometimes at inopportune times. On certain occasions when a student would be sad or hurt,

Timmy would laugh. It became important for me to explain how a child with autism may struggle with emotions and social cues. Though it appeared that Timmy may be laughing at you or your friend, he was, in fact, not laughing at them but struggling with knowing what to do or how to help. These incidents were mentioned in many of the interviews. Several students indicated his laughter and reiterated information that I had given.

Ann, Timmy's best friend, had many facts she loved to share about autism and what she had learned from Timmy. She commented that "sometimes they might want to do something that they already did and they want to do it again...like how [Timmy] wants to do math again" (Interview May 17, 2012). Given Ann's age this is an insightful connection about ASD. As Ann recalled, Timmy often would ask for "more bell-work" or "more math." These were two things that he enjoyed very much. Quite often when math period was complete, Timmy would get upset. He was very gifted at math and he knew his addition and subtraction facts. The hour we spent in math daily was his favourite time because he understood it and was one of the strongest students in the class. Ann recognized Timmy's love of math and in fact, for Timmy's birthday Ann gave him math booklets. The day after his birthday party Ann shared how much he loved his present and how he wanted a pencil to do math right away. Ann's responses were the most in-depth of any student. Timmy adored her and the feeling appeared to be definitely mutual. She recognized that he is unable to understand some things. In her interview, Ann conveyed all the fun things she does with Timmy on their play dates. From playing Wii, hide and go seek and

iPad, they always had a great time whenever they were together. At the end of the school year the students were doing a writing assignment about their favourite person. Ann's project was, perhaps not surprisingly, about Timmy. She recorded that Timmy is her favourite person because she likes to play with him on the play structure. Whereas other students were writing about their parents or family member, Ann decided to do her project on one of her great friends. This project seemed to demonstrate how being in an inclusive classroom has been a wonderful experience for Ann.

Two other students explained autism by referring to how Timmy is and how he knows a lot of information. However, they stated that, sometimes, he needs to "take breaks" and may need help from a teacher to complete tasks (Interviews April 2012). Sarah recorded that autism was something Timmy was born with and that it was also something that made certain things hard for him to do (interview: April 24, 2012). Similar to Sarah, Hudson indicated that Timmy's brain works differently (interview: April 20, 2012). These two students seemed to have developed an understanding of autism and how it impacts the learning of their peer or they may have been repeating what was taught in the classroom. Both Sarah and Hudson accept Timmy and provided supports if they noticed he needed something.

question five: why is having a sense of belonging important?

As an inclusive class centered around the Circle of Courage, I provided opportunities for students to develop a sense of belonging, to help others develop a sense of belonging, and to become friends with each other. As the

philosophy indicates, students who do not have a sense of belonging may act out and hurt others (Larson, 2008). Creating a classroom of support and care demands focus on ways and means of promoting meaningful participation or a meaningful sense of belonging (Larson, 2006; Brendtro & De Toit, 2005; and McDonald, 2010). Table 4 indicates my students understanding of belonging and the variety of answers they gave.

Table 4

Why is having a sense of belonging important?

Answers to the Questions Students	Grade 1 Students	Grade 2
Answers involving actions:		
Treat others how you want to be treated		2
It's nice to be nice to other people	1	2
So you can be a good friend	1	
So you have people to play with		2
It means you work really hard	1	
Answers involving feelings:		
A classroom is like a family everyone should feel like they belong		1
It makes people feel better		1
You don't want to feel left out		1
Everyone has feelings & we need to respect them		1
Everyone gets to be friends.		1

Everyone is my friend	
It wouldn't be nice to not be friends with one person but be friends with another	1
So you won't feel lonely	1
I don't know	1

Why is having a sense of belonging important? The golden rule *treat others how you want to be treated* -is a good fit with the quadrant of belonging and two students recognized and identified this as being one of the key factors in having a sense of belonging. Respect and caring are important and many students appeared to live by this model every day. Marie suggested that a class is "like a family" and everyone should feel important, like they belong (Interview April 18, 2012). Paul expressed that a sense of belonging "makes people feel better". He recognized that when people feel the sense of belonging they feel happier. Within our Circle of Courage inclusive classroom, we often talked about belonging and how the classroom is a happier place when all students feel cared about. When issues arose in the classroom or at recess we related it to the Circle of Courage. I would say "do you think that person has a sense of belonging right now?" Paul seemed to understand these lessons and related happiness to this.

Sarah articulated that a sense of belonging makes it so students do "not feel left out" when they are part of the group. She was a good friend to two other girls, and as in many groups of three, one friend might feel left out. Sarah related a sense of belonging to her personal experiences, and her own need to fit in.

Having a sense of pride for one's school is an important part of creating a positive schooling experience. When students are happy to be at school and feel a sense of belonging they are more likely to be nice to other students. In his interview, Tye explained that our school is a place where "everyone gets to be friends." (Interview May 15, 2012). Tye recognized that not only is he surrounded by friends but everyone is.

question six: what makes a good friend?

Friendship appears to be essential for a child to feel a sense of belonging. Having someone who supports and cares for you makes all the difference in making a classroom a happy place for all students. As an adult, it is easy to identify characteristics of people who we feel are good friends. However, for a child it may be more difficult to identify specific attributes of people they like. Friendship in the young elementary school grades is more fluid. Sometimes children may play with one friend at recess and someone different the next recess. I wondered what students felt was important in their friendships; Table 5 below depicts the variety of answers the students gave around friendship.

Table 5

What does it mean to be a good friend?

Answers to the Questions Students	Grade 1 Students	Grade 2
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Answers involving feelings

Say nice things		2
Being nice	4	3
Sharing	1	1
Respectful	1	

Answers involving actions

Encouraging positive behaviour		1
Stand up for you against a bully		1
Taking turns		2
Playing with each other	1	4
Not being mean		1
Someone who will help you		1
When they are a friend to me	1	
Helping	1	
I don't know	1	

Emma stated that a good friend is someone who “encourages you”, is nice to all people, and would stand up for you against a bully (Interview April 18, 2012). These are all explicit lessons we talked about throughout the year. Emma is also a student who has strong friendships. She played with the same friends everyday so her answer was consistent with the attributes she values in her friends. Marie, her closest friend, had the same ideas about friendship. It was intriguing, yet not surprising, to note how these two peers valued the same attributes in friendship.

Five students commented that playing games is an important part of friendship. Taking turns and deciding what to play together was further explained as an attribute of positive interactions. In my opinion, this was listed because turn taking and playing are very important to young students. Some students choose to play with different peers every recess if it means that they still get to play tag, whereas others in the class were more attached to their friends so sharing ideas on what to play seemed essential to maintaining friendships.

question seven: what makes a classroom a good place for everyone?

From a teacher's perspective, an effective inclusive classroom is one in which every students' needs are met, such as learning, social and essential life skills. A teacher is required to create an environment where students not only receive the academic supports they need but where they also feel cared for and successful. Students' answers about a good classroom may be something quite different. As Table 6 demonstrates the breadth of ideas about what a good classroom is. Only one answer was repeated by two students. These two Grade 1 students answered that "respect" (John's Interview April 24, 2012) and caring are important.

Table 6

What makes a good classroom?

Answers to the Question	Grade 1 Students	Grade 2
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Students		
People being nice to everyone ~ including those that are different		1
Nice kids & an awesome teacher		1
Doing good deeds	1	1
Helping people when they are hurt		
Having friends		1
Getting help when you need it		1
Being respectful to teacher and kids		1
Show people around		1
Learn together		1
Having lots of different people, who like different things so everyone has friends		1
Having fun		1
Respect, caring about everyone	2	
Toys, things to draw with	1	
School	1	
A clean space	1	
I don't know	2	1

Some students regarded the physical space as significant. Indeed one student suggested more toys for a more positive learning environment. I believe that for her, a classroom needed entertainment and fun. Another referred to a clean classroom as a significant feature of a good classroom space. The Grade 1 students who answered this question have a love of playing and strived to have opportunities to play games. They are the students who are more likely to play with different friends at recess, rather than the same friend consistently.

Therefore, in the classroom playing is important to them too. If there are games to play they will be happy and other students will interact with them too.

In contrast to the physical space as important a classroom where “everyone cares about everyone else” (Connor’s Interview May 14, 2012) was listed as being a significant factor in creating a positive classroom environment. This answer related to the Circle of Courage and how it was important for us to have a class centred around belonging. Because, Connor is a very sweet and kind-hearted boy it is not surprising that he would suggest that a climate of care as being essential. Connor often will say great things to students and teachers throughout the school making everyone around him feel cared about.

There were several other reasons that students provided that contributed to a positive classroom environment. Zach suggested that “helping someone when they are hurt” as being important. Further to that, Ann suggested that “helping someone” on an assignment could be a contributing factor for a positive classroom space. For Ann, who sometimes struggles academically but never gives up, support is essential and makes her feel happy. Tye suggested an environment where students “learn together” and therefore grow together as being important. Doing good deeds and having students who are good friends who foster the sense of belonging was also listed as being very important.

Twelve out of nineteen students indicated positive behaviour or positive peer relationships as being a key indicator in what makes the classroom a good place for everyone. It appears as though these students recognize the powerful lessons that have been taught and understand the importance of being a good

friend. Whether or not the students developed strong friendships with everyone in the class they do recognize how to respect themselves, their classmates and their teachers. By creating this environment of respect the students believe the classroom is a good place for everyone.

question eight: why is it important not to judge someone before you get to know them?

This is a tough question for this age group, but I was interested in the notion of preconceived ideas around disability. When students rush to an opinion of others before they get to know them, they may miss out on the amazing characteristics that make other students exciting and unique. Through the teaching of the belonging quadrant in the Circle of Courage we have focused quite often on being friends with many students and always find time to get to know someone new. This question was posed to see if students were able to independently recognize the need to not judge others before they get to know them.

Reading the book *Timmerman was Here* (Debon & Sydor, 2009), as previously discussed, established the opportunity for students to understand what judging others means. When asked, all students could identify that it is important not to judge someone. However, some struggled to express why this may be so. The students were able to recognize the importance of getting to know someone first in ways that make sense to them. They were not all able to provide reasoning as to why it is important. The students do however, appreciate that judging someone could hurt their feelings or how it is mean to judge.

Hudson expanded on those ideas and explained that that if you judge a new classmate you might be missing out on someone who is “actually really nice” (Interview: April 20, 2012).

Tye considered judging others to be really “mean”. He was very adamant in his answer and almost appeared disgusted with the idea of judging others. Lindsay had similar ideas with Tye, and also explained how someone could look scary or could look mean but they may actually be a very nice person, that is why it is important to get to know someone first. Matt related judging others to the friendship question; he responded by stating well if you are mean to them and judge “then they won’t be your friend” (Matt interview April 20). Lee a little boy in Grade 1, was very specific, and suggested that if you “judge them you don’t show belonging.

All the lessons taught indicated previously in this section, where I was taught the students about friendship, judging others, and belonging, occurred in the context of a safe classroom environment. In this space, students could be encouraged to try to get to know someone before they judged them because they were in a caring and supportive classroom already.

Timmy’s perspective on friendship...(from the Interview and Observations)

Obviously an effective inclusive classroom is just that—inclusive of all students. Knowing that Timmy is young and has ASD tempered how I asked him the interview questions. Nevertheless, it was important that I interview him as I did all other students whose parents had consented. The following description is

based more on recorded observations of Timmy in my classroom, but also the interview.

Timmy established close friendships in the class during the year. However, his view of that appeared different than it did to other students. He never used words to explain how he felt. However, when anyone looked at Timmy, he had a smile on his face. The students respected Timmy and his responses suggested that he felt this respect and created bonds with students throughout the class.

Whether he was running up to someone on the playground or saying “hi” from across the classroom there were students with whom he appeared to feel connected. Sometimes children with autism, struggle to maintain and engage in friendships because they may “lack the skills necessary for successful social interactions” (Kluth, 2010, p.15). Timmy bonded with many students in class, and this may be due to the lessons I gave to his classmates around normalizing difference as much as it did his social skills. Indeed, there were three students that he became especially attached. He would initiate interactions with these three. Timmy copied them, for example, if he observed one of them getting their book box he would also get his, other times he would observe them playing on the spider web at recess and he would join them and do exactly what they were doing. Copying was unique to these three students. Timmy was unlikely to copy others unless they initiated the interaction first. Timmy would also always say hi to his friends many times throughout the day, and would always list them as his favourite people when asked who his friends are.

Among these three, Timmy's most significant friend appeared to be Ann. Though they were not together in Kindergarten, their association has appeared to deepen in the last two years. Whenever Timmy saw Ann he had one of two reactions. Sometimes he would giggle and hide behind an adult. If Ann came in close proximity to Timmy, he would grab that adult and hide his face. Other times, Timmy would continuously run up to her and say "Hi Ann." As soon as he said hi to her, he would then run away. His excitement to see her was evident as he would sometimes say "hi" to her as many as thirty times in one day! Whenever there was a partner activity, Timmy often chose Ann to be his partner. Whenever Timmy was asked who his friends were, Ann was always the first on his list. During the research interview on June 19, 2012, Timmy stated that he liked to play with Ann on the play structure. He also indicated that he enjoyed having her to his house to play and that they always had fun together. In his writing about Ann he also indicated he likes when they hug.

The Ann and Timothy friendship was, and continues to be, strong and continually growing and developing. Ann is very kind hearted and treated Timmy as she would any one of her other peers. She took time to play with him almost every day and that appeared to make Timmy feel very special. Timmy would listen to Ann without argument. If he was sharpening his pencil for the fifth time and she caught him, he would look at her and say "sharpening is for teachers, and not for Timmy." Sometimes the teachers in the classroom do not get him to react to strategies as quickly as she could.

Dylan was another of Timmy's great friends. Everywhere Dylan went, Timmy would follow. In fact every morning they would greet each other with a good morning hug. Dylan was a small Grade 2 boy who was in foster care. Because Dylan was in foster care with an adult who does not have a car, he did not have the opportunity to see Timmy outside of school. Their friendship was strictly school-based. Dylan and Timmy shared an educational assistant and over the two years they had been together they had really bonded. Because both boys require some support, they have connected to each other on a different level. Dylan understood what it is to need a break and like Timmy, sometimes needed tools to be successful. This commonality between the boys really linked them and their friendship was strong. Dylan described Timmy as his best friend, as he stated one day when running into Timmy and his mom at the pool. Dylan very excitedly dragged his biological parents up to Timmy during a visit and he introduced Timmy to his parents as his best friend.

In his interview Timmy expressed the same friendship towards Dylan. He stated how he likes sitting with Dylan "in [his] desk" (interview June, 2012). Throughout their entire Grade 2 experiences the two boys usually sat beside each other and would go on breaks together. They worked well beside each other and seemed to find comfort in having each other so close. Timmy also expressed how he liked to play soccer with him. Dylan is a little athlete and every recess he would play sports with other children outside. When Timmy saw Dylan, he ran towards him and tried to join the game. Dylan was usually willing to let Timmy join, he was patient, and he would give him many turns with the

ball. Timmy also said that he liked to “go for a walk” with Dylan (interview June 19, 2012). When both boys would finish their work then they would ask to go for a walk together. Quite often they bonded on these breaks. Timmy would do ten jumps on the trampoline, while Dylan did ten steps on the stepper, then they would switch. After their breaks or walks, as Timmy called them, they would always come back ready to continue working.

Payton, the little girl who has been previously described as an introvert who struggled to interact with her peers was another important person to Timmy. They bonded with each other after Payton was moved to sit beside Timmy at his table group. Payton expected Timmy to do his work and aided him without “babying” him. Timmy was willing to let people to do things for him. However, he appeared to like when people challenged him to do things himself. Payton would be the voice who reminded him to get his agenda out, or to come to the story corner. She didn’t try to hold his hand and recognized that he was an independent person who had many abilities. When Payton arrived at school in the morning she would often find Timmy and play with him.

Timmy indicated that Payton was important to him and expressed how he liked to play on the play structure with her. Together the two of them would stand on top of the structure and watch the swarms of loud children run all around. I believe they found comfort in finding a place away from all the commotion going on around them. Payton, as a shy and quiet girl, did not like the loudness and unpredictability of all the excited, running children. Timmy didn’t enjoy the lack of structure and two hundred kids moving around so early in the morning. They

stayed together by trying to find a quiet space where they could watch people yet be away from it as well. Timmy also stated a love of “swinging” (interview June 19) with her. Based on my observations, Payton would often seek out opportunities to play with Timmy at recess. It was evident that they enjoyed each other’s company, as both Timmy and Payton consistently seem to have fun together.

There are many other students who were important to Timmy. This included the boys he went to Cubs with and who he sometimes interacted with at recess. There is also the group of girls who played tag with him in the morning before school started. There are also the boys who included him in their game of soccer or basketball. In addition, there were also the students who engaged with Timmy during Daily 5 literacy activities. Timmy was constantly surrounded by love and support, whether he was outside at recess or in the classroom. Many students looked for opportunities to befriend him throughout the day every day. Like other children in school, Timmy appeared to appreciate the attention he received from all students, but his favourite peers were who he chose to play with.

Chapter Four: Discussion

As the teacher in this inclusive classroom, I wondered what my students learned from the experience. I discovered things based upon my careful observations, but I also interviewed my students. Together the interviews and observations helped me to understand my young students' conceptions about disability and difference. Throughout the year I attempted to normalize difference within the classroom through formal and informal lessons. Since I wanted students to feel comfortable in the interviews in particular, I tended to use similar language in the interviews as I did in the formal lessons. Also, the topics in the interview, belonging and difference, were the same discussion topics throughout the school year.

Autism was a part of our classroom, my educational assistant and I attempted to make this difference ordinary. It appeared that the lessons around autism allowed students to not only accept this difference, but also befriend their classmate so diagnosed, Timmy. Students understood Timmy in a way that was not possible without my daily interventions. Indeed, the students seemed to understand the uniqueness of many of their peers, and simply to accept that. This acceptance is significant in my opinion, since the class was a Grade 1 - 2 split—a situation in which learning differences tend to be noticed. Obviously, the educational assistant and I worked hard to create an inclusive classroom, inclusive of many differences, so I did not want to undermine our efforts when conducting the interviews. I did not want to emphasize autism only, or Timmy as being the sole example of diversity in the classroom. Therefore, the interview

guide consisted of a variety of questions. I wanted to see how students expressed their opinions on friendship, belonging, difference and, eventually, autism. In this way I hoped not to over emphasize autism, it was included in one or two questions.

Through interviews, students indicated that they appeared to gain a positive understanding of disability and difference. They developed an outstanding sense of friendship and belonging. One emerging theme in this research is not only the student's acceptance of difference but what seems like an inability for many students to recognize autism as a significant difference in the classroom. Perhaps their hesitance to recognize autism as a difference is due to the many hours we spent during the school day, normalizing ASD, or perhaps, it is because visual differences are more apparent to children, as will be explained soon.

Although Grade 2 students appeared to have a deeper understanding of difference and autism, again all students appeared to develop acceptance of all differences, including Timmy's. Also, it was noted during the interviews that students were very excited to share their knowledge on autism. In fact, it appeared as though students were celebrating the opportunity to explain their understanding of autism.

The philosophy and practice of inclusion has been the greatest gift to me as a professional. Having a child with autism in my class has allowed me to see students become more appreciative of diversity. It seemed as though Timmy

brought out the best of his classmates and helped them develop an appreciation for diversity. Most were patient with him, most were accepting of his differences and most took time each and every day to create a sense of belonging in Timmy. Not only had the students been accepting, but they also became protective and helpful toward the students who required assistance. It was not uncommon to hear a Grade 1 or 2 student explain to a person on the playground that Timmy has autism and that makes his brain work a little differently.

Theme One: Difference, What Difference? I Just See a Friend

It has been said that an emerging theme in the data is how these young students are more inclined to recognize visual differences rather than the differences in ASD. Further to that, the differences in Timmy may seem unnoticeable or they are easily accepted and as a result, many students would find opportunities to socially interact with him.

Having an inclusive classroom has also shown me how a young introverted student, like Payton, can become a leader and find friendship. One of the many outstanding things about Timmy was that he accepted all of his peers. He may have had his preferred friends but he was always available to be someone's partner if required. Timmy did not typically say no and would work with any student without argument. For someone like Payton, this seemed to give her comfort and to calm her fear of rejection. It seemed as though Timmy's easy-going nature allowed her to step out of her comfort zone and become a leader in this friendship. This positive relationship between Payton and Timmy

encouraged Payton to be less introverted in class. It appeared that Timmy provided Payton with contentment and enabled her to find companionship in this diverse class. For her, Timmy became a close peer and she did not recognize him as being different. In this way, Payton and Timmy's relationship exemplifies the theme of acceptance of differences.

Another example of this theme comes from James, a Grade 1 student. When interviewed, James identified that there was a child in our class with autism, but then named a girl of a minority ethnic origin, a student whose visual difference in this setting were evident. James did not name Timmy as the student with autism. It seems as though to James, visual differences were more apparent than any learning differences that Timmy has. Perhaps this student was developing a concept of difference.

James's reaction poses an interesting question. Teachers may struggle with the implications of highlighting a difference that may not be noticeable to some, and then teaching all students that the difference is "no different," or to normalize the heretofore, unnoticed fact that Timmy is diagnosed with ASD. Positive relationships are important at every age and the interviews showed what the students cherished in a good friend. When completing the interviews, I was intrigued to understand what qualities my students looked for in a good friend. For the students who appeared to have a strong companionship with Timmy it was noted that characteristics listed were behaviours that were exhibited by Timmy.

As the students' definitions of friendship correlated with their personal experiences with Timmy, it became apparent why these children considered Timmy to be more than a classmate. Ann's main friendship indicator was based on someone to play with. To me, it reveals why Timmy and Ann appear to have a good relationship. Both Ann and Timmy stated they like to play with each other both at school and on play dates. Ann is very patient and always encouraged Timmy to take turns. On the reverse side, Timmy was willing to take turns and play with her. These interactions were always mutual and led the other students in the class to recognize positive ways to interact with Timmy.

Marie was another student who described Timmy as a friend and someone with whom she enjoyed being in a class. One of Marie's main friendship indicators is someone who lets the other pick a game. Turn taking and sharing is not typically easy for someone with autism. However, Timmy was always more than willing to undertake an activity that someone else had suggested. He enjoyed anything that was designed to be fun and exciting and would always participate willingly. I have noticed that unobtrusive, "low-key" students, like Marie, were often eager to share new ideas with Timmy. Marie appreciated how she could become a leader and as a result of this, she appeared to value these opportunities to interact with Timmy more so than her peers.

In my experience, a Grade 1 and 2 split class creates an interesting dynamic: the Grade 1s are just learning to read and the Grade 2s, particularly in this class, were academically strong students. It did not surprise me that the

Grade 1 students were more inclined to recognize the differences between themselves and those in Grade 2, who were older and more advanced. It did surprise me however, that more students in general did not talk about the specific differences of autism in their interviews. Through my observations it was noted that many Grade 1 students were exceptionally understanding and patient with Timmy.

It appears that autism was too abstract of a concept for most Grade 1 students to comprehend. To them Timmy was their peer and that is all that mattered. It was often the Grade 1 students who would notice that Timmy needed a pair of headphones to muffle out some of the loud noises, or be the ones who would say to him “blowing is for candles, not for friends.” These Grade 1 students were exceptionally understanding of his differences and would make adaptations for him without prompting. Perhaps because these students had never been in a class with Timmy before, they were less likely to refer to him as being different or as previously stated to these young students his exceptionalities were not as noticeable as someone who had a visual difference. They appeared not to see their interactions with Timmy as relating to someone with autism, rather they were just befriending another classmate.

Theme Two: Heightened Knowledge from More Personal Experience

Although students, particularly those in Grade 1, tended to act as though Timmy were any other student, when *asked* about what autism was, the interviews revealed that students’ understanding of autism came foremost from their personal experiences with Timmy. In fact, they spoke comparatively little

about the lessons and resources throughout the year. It seems quite natural that it would be easier for students to relate to an event that has taken place, rather than provide a definition of autism. For example most Grade 1 and 2 students acted in ways that indicated they understood Timmy and reflected on their personal experiences with him quite fondly. Even a student who did not interact with Timmy daily would bring him headphones if he/she noticed that he had placed his hands over his ears to muffle the loud noises of the class (Again, noise sensitivity is a feature of ASD). Such acts may indicate that students were simply aware that Timmy needed assistance, and so headphones were provided. It may not speak to an awareness of characteristics of ASD. However, I believe that such assistance was guided, at least in part, by my in-class explanations around noise sensitivities and autism. In this way, it may indicate how the students understanding of ASD is drawn from their personal experiences with Timmy.

As mentioned, the Grade 2 students seemed to have a deeper understanding of difference and ASD. Also, as just described, students were more inclined to relate their knowledge of autism to their experiences with Timmy. In the transcripts the Grade 2 students would provide numerous answers about their ideas around autism, whereas the Grade 1s would give one example. I believe this is because the Grade 2 students have had more experiences with Timmy. Because the Grade 2s have been in Timmy's class for 2 - 3 years, they have more personal experiences to draw on when explaining ASD than the Grade 1 peers.

Teaching in a diverse classroom has many implications for teachers. As my research indicates, my students learned about autism as much in their day-to-day interactions with Timmy than my formal lessons. Because of this, it is important to reinforce positive classroom expectations and experiences. We as teachers cannot read a book about difference and think that we are doing enough to acknowledge it. As the data indicates, it's the ongoing everyday interactions that form students' opinions, and how we as teachers deal with and support those interactions. Therefore, teachers need to take time to allow students to experience diversity in order for difference to be accepted, and also for it to be celebrated within the class. As the students have more positive experiences learning about differences, their knowledge deepens and hopefully their acceptance too.

As Timmy's teacher, I attended many meetings about autism. These meetings have helped me to focus on accommodating his needs in the classroom. Therefore, as the teacher in an inclusive classroom, Timmy's autism is a difference that is visible. Contrary to this, the students in the inclusive classroom do not have the same vantage, which therefore allows Timmy's difference to be less apparent. To me, Timmy is the amazing student with autism. To the students, he is their classmate and friend.

Learning From Timmy: Inclusive Instructional Practices Work for All

Timmy has been a wonderful gift to me as an educator. Learning to teach him has provided me with the opportunity to learn strategies to work with students of all different levels and behaviours. For example, in using visual

supports, I provided Timmy with a picture schedule on his desk and a token system for the pencil sharpener. Other students benefited from similar tools. One student had a chart for getting to work on time, while another had one about not interrupting. Because these tools for success were used throughout the class, I believe it normalized the differences that existed in the classroom. Timmy may have had a picture diagram but so did others. Kluth (2010) describes visual supports as being “a very effective teaching tool” (p. 270) and I believe that the visual schedules displayed in my classroom were helpful to all my students.

Just like the visual supports used in the classroom, there were other tools used to create a successful environment for Timmy and his peers. As previously indicated when the students were interviewed, some were able to recognize Timmy’s autism as being a difference in the classroom. Once the students verbalized Timmy having autism, many students then also provided examples of tools he needed to make him successful in the classroom. Rachel recognized that he may need “to go for breaks and he needs help from the teacher” (Interview May 15, 2012). There was no resentment in any of the students’ voices as they identified these facts. Rachel, and many others, appeared to understand that some students need aids to make them successful and that they can still be smart whether or not they need supports. It was interesting to see how these students recognized that Timmy sometimes needed a modified learning environment. Though we never vocally expressed when Timmy was going on a break, the students appeared to notice and continued doing their work.

To create a successful working environment for all students in the classroom, I used a variety of tools. On days when Timmy seemed to need to engage in self-stimulatory behaviours, he would spend some time in the rocking chair or the hokey chair. On other days when the classroom was quiet and seat-work was required, students might put up writing folders as study carrels. There were also a number of headphones in the class to help students focus. All these tools for success were available to all students throughout the day. Perhaps that is why students like Tye and Rachel understood that sometimes Timmy needed help or breaks to get him ready to learn. It is quite likely that because self-regulation tools were made available to all students, the needs that Timmy had were not seen as different or unusual. Rather, he was just another student in the class with self-regulation tools for success. I learned from Timmy to have these resources available to help create a successful working environment for everyone. I believe the students learned that these tools were a part of the class and it was ok to use any support at any time.

Learning Together: A Classroom of Support & Caring

The interviews indicated that students gained knowledge from being placed in a classroom centred around acknowledging and accepting difference. This section looks to examine the questions that were asked in the interview, as well as my observations. In doing so, it might help determine what students see as creating a positive environment and positive relationships with their peers. A large number of students listed respect or amiability as being the main qualities of a good friend. Because the students stated that they valued respect in their

friendships, it may partly explain how this group of students were as understanding and compassionate as they were. If they all recognize kindness as being important, they tended to exhibit this characteristic in their interactions with each other. When we read books that explored friendship the students were always quick to point out the positive and negative qualities of the characters in the stories. As a classroom centered around respect, it is then not surprising that many students befriended Timmy. This appears to illustrate their acceptance or unawareness of diversity. All students in the class appeared to be the most understanding, wonderful, and kind hearted students that I have ever taught. Perhaps these characteristics are because these students placed such high value on the golden rule and respect. They were all each other's support whether or not they consider themselves good friends. They surrounded Timmy with this same kindness and respect. They appeared to cherish every moment together and relish the opportunities to celebrate everyone's accomplishments.

Based upon my observations, all twenty-five students in the class, including Timmy, had one or more children whom they would consider a cherished friend. Many students throughout the day would find opportunities to interact with Timmy. Students interacted with Timmy on numerous activities, such as building patterns with him in math, or playing word work games with him. On April 2, 2012, for example, our class was celebrating the end of our Dr. Seuss unit, we watched a movie. Students were both quiet and excited. About an hour in to the movie, Marie shouted out "Miss Haase, Miss Haase, Timmy is cutting his hair." There Timmy was holding his hair up with his left hand, with the

scissors in his right hand and as soon as I looked he cut a large amount right off. I believe that Timmy had a network of caring around him and despite the fact that the students were all watching a movie, Marie was still watching out for the welfare of Timmy. This classroom was a place of true caring and belonging for all students attending to each other's needs.

Of course, establishing a positive environment must be led by the teacher. In a truly effective inclusive classroom, students follow the teacher's lead to co-create a community of caring and support. My twenty-five students did just that. I attempted to foster a positive classroom environment and implemented strategies to enable my students to do so. My entire class of students accepted this challenge. Because these students recognized respect as being essential, they endeavoured to respect all of their peers. Perhaps that is why they could identify the great attributes in Timmy, acknowledge what they know about autism, but yet, not let Timmy's autism define him. They simply saw him as another friend in their class.

These students appeared to accept Timmy without judging. If he was really sad and crying the students surrounded him with love and support. In fact, it was not uncommon for Dylan to run over and give Timmy a hug. Classmates did not hug Timmy only. They hugged and supported other classmates as well. However, Timmy would often be the recipient of more hugs, perhaps because he would initiate them himself. For the students who have been with Timmy for at least a year, they were non-judgmental and looked for opportunities to help him. Being in a class with a student with autism is a prime example of why pre-

judging is undesirable. To create a safe classroom environment for all, it is important to instill a non-judgemental attitude. If opinions had been made of Timmy before students got to know him, then students would have missed out on some pretty amazing opportunities. It is interesting that this group of six, seven and eight year olds recognized how the judgement of others is inappropriate and showed deep respect for everyone in the class.

When students are encouraged to accept and understand difference, it creates an environment where diversity is normalized. In this accepting classroom, students may then struggle to recognize difference. It is very interesting how seven students could not verbalize what it means to be different. For the students that did have knowledge on difference some explained it just meant “you are more special” (Emma interview: April 18, 2012) or that difference “doesn’t mean anything” (Hudson interview: April 20, 2012). Students were not only friends with the child with autism in the class but many hesitated to even call him different. These students accepted all of the different needs throughout the entire classroom and therefore, no one student stood out negatively. In this classroom of twenty-five, every student had multiple friends and every student had developed some understanding of autism.

On June 9, 2012 I took an opportunity to see what the students learned about being different. We had spent the entire year accepting differences, learning about autism, English as an additional language and exploring the diversity among the students. For this lesson I read two books: *The Hueys in the New Jumper* by Oliver Jeffers (2012) and *Being Wendy* by Fran Drescher

(2011). Both books are about people or creatures who did not want to be the same as everybody else. Throughout both books one character tried to make his/herself different from everybody else. After we finished reading the books, as a class, we discussed whether or not it is okay to be different. During the discussion, students first gave standard answers like “It’s okay to be different because we are all different”. However, after further prompting, students became more inclined to answer the question with more detail, some even decided to write on the topic.

The written activity provided me with a window into seeing my students’ appreciation of diversity. One student chose to discuss Timmy, and demonstrated how despite being different he still fit into the class and had many great gifts to offer. Other students explored how they were different than their peers illustrating the unique gifts that they had to offer. One little girl in the class wrote how it is acceptable to be different because if everybody had the same personality the “world would be boring” (Interview June, 2012).

One of the most profound answers about difference came from a little boy named Kye. He wrote “God didn’t make people to be the same. He made people to be themselves and live a happy and fun life” (Interview June 2012). This seven year old recognized that if you just care about who you are and live your life you will be happy. In my opinion, this ties into accepting others. Perhaps if you can recognize the differences in yourself and love who you are, you are more inclined to understand the uniqueness in others.

Further to this written activity the students that participated in the research

got to answer questions concerning difference during the interview. Marie is another student who often provided inspiring answers. When asked about difference and why it is okay she talked about different personalities and concluded by saying that people should “Always be or do what they like. Be a leader not a follower. Be what you want.” (Interview June 2012). Marie was a wonderful, mature Grade 2 girl, who lived by the answers she gave and became a leader in the classroom. With her leadership, the girls followed her example of being positive and caring, creating the classrooms’ strong sense of belonging.

The experience of this lesson gave me perspective of understanding what my students had gained from being in our inclusive classroom. I believe that their answers were profound because of their experience with diversity. Autism had given them the perspective that although someone may not understand and express themselves the same way that they do, they still have many amazing skills and characteristics to offer to the classroom. Children with autism may act differently but I believe it is through this difference that students begin to recognize the differences in themselves as well.

Chapter Five: Putting it all together

The research provides evidence that students have a positive view of disability and difference at least in my classroom. Perhaps it was because they had been provided many opportunities to learn about autism or perhaps because they were surrounded by diversity. Either way, students had gained a well-rounded perspective on friendship and differences. As Kluth (2010) indicated, it is the teacher's responsibility to believe that all students can learn and implement strategies "that make this expectation come true" (p. 43). If the teacher believes in all students and creates an environment that meets their needs, not only do the students gain academically, they gain socially as well (Kluth, 2010). As the students pick up on their teacher's positivity they are more inclined to accept the differences in their peers. An environment that celebrates the success of all, gives each student a sense of pride. It seems that students in a teacher-guided cheerful classroom are more inclined to be cheerful themselves and to be pleasant to their peers.

Reflecting on Strategies

Using Hardin's (2002) strategies to create a positive inclusive classroom; peer-tutoring, cooperative learning and providing opportunities for understanding disabilities, may account for my students' positive ideas around disability and difference.

Firstly, as previously described, the students were placed in heterogeneous table groups. In these groups the students were encouraged to

work together and help each other. Each student had the opportunity to feel successful and every student played an important role in his or her group. I would often create table groups where one person would be a student who showed great strength in belonging and generosity. This student would make every student feel like they are safe to express their ideas with the group. Another group member might have great mastery in reading or writing to record their groups' ideas. Another group member usually would be someone who was independent and would be willing to share their group's ideas with the class. Effective use of peer-tutoring was described by Hardin (2002) as the opportunity to see all students' strengths, which would hopefully create a positive classroom climate that fostered respect for all differences. Also, for cooperative learning to be effective Hardin (2002) suggested that all members of the group need to have a productive role. The table group format allowed for both of these aspects to be present. In some situations students would work directly with their classmate seated beside them, whereas other times the students would work together in a large group. Whenever they were working with their partners the activities were designed for all students to feel successful at one or more parts of the activity. I believe that this table group format enabled students to accept the diversity amongst their peers. As previously indicated, this classroom was a Grade 1 and 2 split, and the learning differences between these two age groups were quite varied.

I believe one of my students, Charlie, talked about how groupings made each group member feel included when she said "...they [students with autism]

don't always know what to say but they can also have abilities too." (Interview May 17th, 2012). Though Charlie did not elaborate, I believe that she understood the unique gifts Timmy had to offer. As previously revealed when Timmy was in Kindergarten he amazed his classmates by reading a book to them and he is also very efficient at answering math equations. When Charlie referred to abilities that persons with autism possess, I think she was remembering these specific abilities of Timmy.

Similarly, Tye recognized some of Timmy's strengths. He stated that "Timmy knows a lot and he is smart" (May 15, 2012). It appears that Tye and Charlie demonstrate how peer-tutoring and collaborative learning was effectively used in the classroom. These two students were able to recognize the skills that everyone, including Timmy, had to offer. They broadly explained the strengths of Timmy and could do so for the other students in the class as well.

Hardin (2002) also suggested that educators need to provide safe opportunities for students to understand difference to create a positive classroom environment. As previously described, I read numerous stories to explain and celebrate ASD. Ms. Willings (from the Autism Resource Centre) directed two activities with my students to help explain how Timmy's brain works. First, students attempted a-connect-the-dot through the mirror (essentially backwards), and secondly, asked students to make a forcton without any guidance. It was not until she gave them the picture cue to complete the forcton that the students understood she was asking them to build a ship out of blocks. These activities provided my students with knowledge—perhaps partly the

experience, of what it is like to learn being a person with autism. I observed that as the activities progressed students would shout “this is hard, can’t I just do it without the mirror?” Though this was just a brief experience, it helped students to develop an understanding, and perhaps an acceptance of Timmy. Recall that Grade 2 students had a deeper knowledge of autism, likely since they were in Timmy’s class longer. Further, students learned more from personal experiences than the books read about autism. Ms. Willings provided exercises that allowed students to experience (to some degree) first-hand some difficulties and in some cases frustration in what are typically simple tasks.

Kluth (2010), like Hardin (2002) also recommended it is important to educate around difference. Kluth stated that it is important to acknowledge differences that are in the class and give a voice to students about these differences. When teachers ignore the differences and learning needs of students in hopes that they blend in, it is doing a disservice to all students. Giving a voice to every students’ needs allows for a successful educational experience. Sometimes teachers are misled to believe that having no students stand out is a good thing. Rather, all students’ unique gifts and learning styles should be celebrated and therefore the differences accepted by students and teachers.

Recognizing differences has always been very important to me as an educator. I taught my students to celebrate their uniqueness and accept the differences in each other. As the interviews revealed, the students recognized it is important not to judge people before you get to know them. They also learned

how to relate to each other in caring and respectful ways. In my opinion, having children that recognized the importance of friendship is a key indicator that they have developed an understanding and acceptance of the inherent differences within each other. They ultimately recognized the need to be kind and to establish an understanding of celebrating the differences in their peers.

As my teaching career progresses, I will continue to educate my classroom about difference (Kluth, 2010; Hardin 2002) whether or not I have a student with autism. As students have opportunities to celebrate uniqueness and celebrate the diversity in the classroom, they deepen their appreciation of differences and disability. It is important to teach students acceptance in order to prevent them from turning into “thoughtless, condescending adults” (Schwarz, 2006, p. 6).

A way to address and celebrate each student’s unique qualities is beginning the year with an “All About Me” poster project. I would encourage the students to create a poster that represents them. On their poster they could include pictures, words, and other important things from their lives. These posters will provide students with the opportunity to celebrate themselves. In starting out the school year with these posters, students get to learn all about their peers. They will learn their favourite things, see pictures of them throughout their life, and learn other interesting facts. This will start the school year by allowing students to recognize the unique gifts that every peer has to offer. In addition to that, the students learn what they have in common with each other may help to develop stronger friendships more quickly. I believe it is paramount

to start of the school year positively and as Kluth (2010) suggests recognizing the differences in a classroom contributes to a positive classroom environment. This project may help create a classroom centered on belonging and acceptance.

I also believe that through the use of the Circle of Courage (Larson 2006), Brendtro and De Toit (2005) and McDonald (2010)) I was able to express to students the importance of friendship. Though as a teacher, I cannot “guarantee” students’ friendships, I can however, create an environment where I foster a sense of belonging. Again, I also emphasized what Brendtro and De Tiot (2005) expressed about generosity; teaching my students that the greatest gift they could give to another student is the gift of their friendship.

One of the most beneficial classroom management techniques I have ever used is a Circle of Courage classroom puzzle. This puzzle allows students to receive puzzle pieces anytime they demonstrate a success in any of the quadrant areas: belonging, generosity, mastery, and independence. When a child does something nice for a classmate they can receive a belonging puzzle piece. If another student shares their time to help a peer learn a new skill, then they can earn a generosity puzzle piece. Mastery can be earned if after many struggling hours trying to learn a new concept a student finally figures it out. Independence can be celebrated when a student does something on their own without reminders. Not only does this puzzle encourage positive behaviour, it also helps students to establish acceptance of each other through the belonging

and generosity quadrants. This technique promotes a positive healthy classroom and allows teachers and students to learn in a harmonious space.

I will continue to use the lessons I learned from the Circle of Courage, because it has shown me some unique ways to create opportunities to celebrate the unique qualities everyone brings to a classroom. This Circle of Courage model appears to foster the environment that is conducive to increasing students understanding and acceptance of disability and difference in an elementary classroom. In my classroom, it is not uncommon for students to celebrate each other's' successes and to recommend puzzle pieces for their peers. This illustrates the students' capability of recognizing the successes of their classmates.

Conclusion

Having a child with autism in an inclusive classroom becomes an opportunity for students to learn about diversity on a daily basis. As the teacher provides students with the opportunity to celebrate diversity, students may become adept at recognizing ways to show belonging and generosity with their peers. These lessons combined with each other encourage students to develop an understanding of disability and difference. Difference becomes normalized, uniqueness becomes celebrated. A classroom centred on respect and belonging creates an environment where everyone is special. This heightened awareness then allows students who are different to be accepted and become friends with their peers.

Being placed in an inclusive classroom can be a very rewarding experience. Zacher (2007) illustrated that by being placed in an inclusive classroom students are able to develop a confidence and also develop respect for other students in their class. As a teacher in an inclusive classroom it has been my responsibility to work with my students and help them develop positive working relationships with everyone. Dance (2008) expressed that as teachers help their students cultivate these friendships outside of their comfort zones, students will learn positive skills for interacting with people who are different. Mahatma Gandhi said “you must be the change you wish to see in the world” (Dance, 2008, p. 58). The students that were in this classroom make me believe in a bright, accepting future.

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Appendix A

REB Approval Form



OFFICE OF RESEARCH SERVICES
M E M O R A N D U M

DATE: March 15, 2012

TO: Cambri Haase
2850 Montague Street
Regina, SK S4S 1Z2

FROM: Dr. Bruce Plouffe
Chair, Research Ethics Board

Re: **How Does Being in An Inclusive Classroom Influence Elementary Students Perceptions on Disability and Difference (File #52S1112)**

Please be advised that the University of Regina Research Ethics Board has reviewed your proposal and found it to be:

1. APPROVED AS SUBMITTED. Only applicants with this designation have ethical approval to proceed with their research as described in their applications. For research lasting more than one year (Section 1F). **ETHICAL APPROVAL MUST BE RENEWED BY SUBMITTING A BRIEF STATUS REPORT EVERY TWELVE MONTHS.** Approval will be revoked unless a satisfactory status report is received. Any substantive changes in methodology or instrumentation must also be approved prior to their implementation.
2. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO MINOR CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and approved prior to beginning research. Please submit a supplementary memo addressing the concerns to the Chair of the REB.** Do not submit a new application. Once changes are deemed acceptable, ethical approval will be granted.
3. ACCEPTABLE SUBJECT TO CHANGES AND PRECAUTIONS (SEE ATTACHED). Changes must be submitted to the REB and approved prior to beginning research. Please submit a supplementary memo addressing the concerns to the Chair of the REB.** Do not submit a new application. Once changes are deemed acceptable, ethical approval will be granted.
4. UNACCEPTABLE AS SUBMITTED. The proposal requires substantial additions or redesign. Please contact the Chair of the REB for advice on how the project proposal might be revised.


Dr. Bruce Plouffe

cc: Dr. Scott Thompson - Education

** supplementary memo should be forwarded to the Chair of the Research Ethics Board at the Office of Research Services (Research and Innovation Centre, Room 523) or by e-mail to research.ethics@uregina.ca

Phone: (306) 585-4775
Fax: (306) 585-4893

Appendix B

Research Questions for students participating in the study:

Introduction Script to the students

Thank you for coming with me and I am really looking forward to learning what you think about disability and difference. Is it okay if I ask you a few questions? If at any time you want to stop you can just let me know and we can be done.

- 1) What do you think it means to be different?
 - Is it ok to be different?
- 2) What kind of differences do you see in our classroom?
- 3) What do you think makes us different?
 - If the students bring up autism ask:
 - Can you tell me what you think Autism is?
- 4) Why is having a sense of belonging important? (why is it important to be friends with everyone)
- 5) What do you think makes a good friend?
- 6) What makes a classroom a good place for everyone?
- 7) Why is it important not to judge someone before you get to know them?

Appendix C

Letter from Vice-Principal to Parents

Dear parents/guardians,

Cambri Haase is currently undertaking her thesis and is looking to understand your child's perceptions on disability, difference, friendship etc.

As this research places her in a dual-role (both as a researcher and as a teacher) precautions have been put into place to ensure that families do not feel coerced into agreeing to participate in the study. Also we would like to you to understand that if you do agree for your child to participate but change your mind later on, you are able to withdrawal from the study. Agreeing or not agreeing to participate in this research will not affect your child's education.

I have been selected to undertake the recruitment process for Cambri to alleviate any pressure you might feel. I have handed out all consent forms and if you are willing to participate I ask that you return one copy of the form signed in the brown envelope provided. If you do not wish to participate simply return the forms unsigned in the brown envelope. I will inform Cambri of the students that have agreed to participate in the study and she will conduct her interviews accordingly. Any parents who would like to attend the interview are more than welcome and we will contact you to inform you of the time your child is going to be interviewed.

Attached you will find a consent form and more details of Miss Haase's research. If you have any questions feel free to contact myself or Cambri for further details.

Thank you for considering supporting this worthwhile research,

Tannis Lowey-Chimilar

Learning Leader

Appendix D

Permission Handout

Cambri Haase
Graduate Student
University of Regina
Grade 1-2 Teacher

Project Title:

Students' perceptions on disability as difference.

Introduction:

I am currently undertaking my thesis and am excited to embark upon the research portion of my work. As a teacher I am often amazed at students and how they are so understanding and accepting of everyone. This current Grade One-Two classroom is no exception; in fact, it often leaves me speechless with their remarkable attitude, friendships and understanding and acceptance of everyone. As this is a diverse classroom, I am looking to further understand what these students ideas are on difference.

Data Collection:

This will be a case study where information is collected in two ways.

- 1) I will do a self-reflection and record my thoughts, ideas and experiences on a digital recorder
(I will never refer to ANY students by name in my reflections)
- 2) I will interview willing students to develop an understanding of their ideas around difference and disability.
(Students will only be referred to as a pseudonym)

Research Objectives:

- 1) Understand inclusion and the role it plays on students and accepting difference
- 2) Understand how being placed in an inclusive classroom teaches students about disability
- 3) Understand what perceptions students have about diversity
- 4) Reflect on what strategies work in our classroom
- 5) Learn about the benefits of an inclusive classroom

Your Role

In order to conduct my research I would be honoured to have the opportunity to interview your child. With your consent, I would like to ask your child a series of questions. The answers your child gives will provide valuable information pertaining to my thesis. The interviews will be recorded and I will provide you with the opportunity to see your child's transcripts.

I will conduct the interviews during the lunch hour, in the library, as to not interrupt any learning time. The interviews will be between ten minutes to thirty minutes in length.

It is important to note that I have a dual-role both as teacher and as researcher as I conduct research in my classroom. I take both roles very seriously and if you do not wish your child to participate in this research I understand. There will be no effects on their education with your or their refusal to participate.

Right to Withdraw:

You are free to withdraw your consent to this project at any time. If you choose to withdraw any information and interview data that was collected will not be used for the study. Your right to withdraw will apply up until the defense of the thesis at which point some of the data of the interview transcripts will be pooled together and the data will be analyzed.

If you have any concerns or questions I would be happy to answer them. Please do not hesitate to contact me.

Cambri Haase

Grade One-Two Teacher

Confidentiality and Data:

If your child participates in this study a pseudonym will be used to conceal your child's identity. Also, if you choose, the information disclosed in the interview can be confidential and your child will never be quoted.

You may quote my child using a pseudonym _____ (yes) _____ (no)

Please do not quote my child _____ (yes) _____ (no)

Ethics Approval

This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Regina Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the committee at 585-4775 or research.ethics@uregina.ca.

Consent Statement

Having read the above, I agree to allow Cambri Haase to interview my child. I also acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form. By signing this form you do not waiver the right to withdraw from participating in the study.

Signature of parent/guardian	Signature of child	Signature of Researcher
_____ (Date)		

Would you like to present for your child's interview? _____

In Order to provide your child's transcript back to you please provide me with your email address below. If you would rather me send a paper copy home with your child please indicate so.

Participants Email Address: _____

Please email me a copy of the transcript

Please send a copy of the transcript home with my child

Thank you so much for allowing your child to participate in my research. I greatly appreciate it!