



# Inclusive Play-Based Learning: Approaches from Enacting Kindergarten Teachers

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## Abstract

Policies related to the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms have led to questions regarding how teachers can help cultivate inclusive learning communities where all children are supported and valued. In play-based kindergarten programs, teachers are tasked with ensuring goals for children's learning and development are cultivated in play. However, debates persist regarding the optimal role of the teacher in play and how to meaningfully support the play of children with disabilities. The current multiple case study explored the perspectives and approaches of three kindergarten teachers who highly valued, and strived to enable, participation and inclusion in play-based learning, referred to here as enactors. A minimum of three hours of observation were conducted in each classroom in the fall, and semi-structured teacher interviews were conducted in the fall and spring of the school year. Enactors shared some common themes related to implementing play-based learning to promote inclusion, including a balance of child agency and teacher guidance, involvement that is child-centred and flexible, and the importance of supporting social interactions in play. These views informed both common and unique practices observed in play, including one-on-one conversations, supporting small groups, becoming an active play partner, and collaboratively addressing problems that arose in play. These results illustrate ways enactors gave meaning to the concept of inclusion through their play practices, providing salient examples of play alongside teachers' craft knowledge to help support inclusive play-based learning practices going forward.

**Keywords** Kindergarten · Inclusion · Play-based learning · Disability

## Introduction

Over the past few decades, there have been significant changes surrounding the education of young children. First, policies related to the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream classrooms have led to more diverse communities of learners (Brodzeller et al., 2018). Increasingly, inclusion is being recognized as being more than a placement; about facilitating meaningful social and academic participation among all children (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). However, there continues to be a lack of agreement on how to define and promote inclusive practices in the classroom

(Brodzeller et al., 2018). Meanwhile, several kindergarten programs (3–6-year-olds) internationally have mandated play-based learning, where all children's learning and development is to be fostered in play (Pyle et al., 2017). Kindergarten teachers have also reported challenges with play-based learning, including feeling unsure how to implement teacher-guided play and a lack of resources and training about learning through play (Pyle et al., 2018). Teachers are required to develop knowledge and skills to support children with a range of intellectual, physical, social, and emotional needs so they can play and learn together. One source of information to support this endeavour is the craft knowledge and practices of teachers who demonstrate a commitment to inclusion (Black-Hawkins & Florian, 2012). As a result, the objective of the current study was to explore the perspectives and classrooms practices of three kindergarten teachers who highly valued, and strived to enable, participation and inclusion in play-based learning for children of all abilities.

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## Inclusive Education

Since the 1970s, there have been significant legislative shifts in Canada and internationally towards placing children with disabilities in mainstream educational classrooms (Sokal & Katz, 2015). Inclusion in education has been conceptualized not only as a civil rights issue, but as an important step toward improved learning outcomes and acceptance of individual differences (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007). However, there remains little agreement about how inclusion should be defined and implemented (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). Researchers have pointed to the importance of designing and modifying classroom learning activities so that all children can access the curriculum, referred to as academic inclusion (Brodzeller et al., 2018). In addition, it is important to foster positive interpersonal relations and a community that promotes respect, equity, and acceptance, referred to as community inclusion (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). Taken together, successful inclusion hinges on the participation of all children in classroom learning activities, and being valued members of a classroom community.

Inclusive classroom placements have demonstrated some positive outcomes for children, including higher levels of academic performance, higher scores on measures of language and social competence, and greater acceptance towards children with disabilities (McDonnell & Hunt, 2014; Noggle & Stites, 2018). However, there continue to be concerning gaps between children with disabilities and their peers, including fewer friendships, lower levels of peer acceptance, and greater social isolation during play periods (Guralnick et al., 2006; Kasari et al., 2011). Early experiences of isolation increase the risk for poorer physical and social outcomes (Segrin, 2019), highlighting the importance of fostering inclusive social participation in early education.

## Kindergarten Education and Play-based Learning

Curricula in Canada and other regions (e.g., China, the United Kingdom, Australia) have mandated play-based learning in mainstream kindergarten classrooms (Pyle et al., 2017). Play-based learning is centred around children's play and the teacher's role in enhancing the learning that takes place in play, including both developmental (i.e., social skills, self-regulation) and academic (i.e., literacy, math) skills (OME, 2016). The extent of teacher involvement in play has been conceptualized as occurring on a continuum, including play that is entirely child-directed (free play), activities that are co-directed by teachers and children (guided play), and activities that are entirely teacher-directed but where children remain active players (teacher-directed play) (Zosh et al., 2018).

Researchers have uncovered connections between different types of play and the development of children's self-regulation, social and emotional skills, and academic learning (Fisher et al., 2013; Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). Play serves as an engaging context where children practice a range of cognitive skills through active exploration and negotiating with others, including problem-solving, critical thinking, flexibility, and self-control (Bodrova et al., 2013; McInnes et al., 2009). Guided play in particular has been endorsed as an optimal learning context, leveraging children's enjoyment in play while concurrently supporting the learning of curricular content and skills (Weisberg et al., 2013). However, concerns have been shared related to the engagement of children with disabilities in play, as well as the optimal teacher role in play.

## Play and Inclusion

Although play has been touted as an optimal learning context for typically developing children, discussions surrounding play and disability have been more negative. Both skill deficits related to play and the surrounding physical and social environment have been noted to limit the positive social play experiences of children with disabilities (Barron et al., 2017; Movahedazarhouli, 2018). For example, studies observing play in inclusive classrooms have highlighted children with disabilities engage in more solitary play and less cooperative play with peers (Reszka et al., 2012). Although many researchers have pointed to underlying skill deficits (Movahedazarhouli, 2018), kindergarten-aged children have also been found to identify peers with disabilities as being different, difficult to understand, and as less preferred playmates (Chen, 2017). Furthermore, play environments are often designed with typically developing children in mind and may present barriers for children with physical or sensory limitations (Barron et al., 2017). Therefore, it's important to consider the broader social and physical environment surrounding children's play interactions, as well as ability differences.

It has been proposed that supporting children with disabilities in play involves a balance of providing for everyday play experiences in natural contexts, alongside the strategic integration of more active support and teaching for specific skills both in and out of play (Conn, 2014). However, knowing how to achieve this balance may be difficult in practice. For example, teachers have cited the diverse play abilities of young children as a barrier to the effective implementation of play-based learning (Howard, 2010), and early childhood educators have expressed uncertainty regarding how much facilitation should be offered to children with disabilities in play (Manwaring, 2011).

## Teacher Involvement in Play

Although play occupies an important role in kindergarten education, the extent to which teachers should get involved in play continues to be debated. Researchers and teachers focused on developmental benefits have highlighted the importance of nurturing child-directed play to support children's autonomy, self-regulation, creativity, and social learning (Miller & Almon, 2009). In this case, direct teacher involvement is framed as a disruption to the positive influence of play and has been discouraged (Ghafouri & Wien, 2005). Alternatively, some researchers have endorsed teacher involvement in play as an optimal learning context (Weisberg et al., 2013), where teachers can pose questions, make suggestions, and/or design activities to promote active learning. Although providing opportunities for both child-directed and teacher-guided play may be the optimal resolution, teachers have also shared concerns with implementing guided play, including feeling uncertain how to occupy a meaningful role in children's play (Pyle et al., 2018).

Overall, researchers examining engagement and inclusion in kindergarten have concluded that setting up activity areas and providing materials may not be enough to promote social engagement and acceptance toward all children (Reszka et al., 2012). Rather, teachers occupy a critical role in supporting inclusion across contexts, including in play. Through facilitating meaningful social play experiences among children with and without disabilities, teachers can help to support both academic and community inclusion, as play supports cognitive and social engagement central to learning as well as the formation of positive peer relationships (Theodorou & Nind, 2010).

## Current Study

The current study examined three kindergarten teachers and their approaches toward fostering inclusion in a play-based learning framework. These three 'enactors' highly valued, and strived to enable, meaningful participation in play for children of all abilities. The craft knowledge and practices of teachers are a critical source of information on how inclusive ideals can be applied to meet the needs of diverse learners, offering important insight to support further research and training for less experienced teachers (Black-Hawkins & Florian, 2012). To this end, the current study was guided by the following questions:

- (1) How do enactors view and implement play-based learning in an inclusive classroom environment?
- (2) How do enactors support children with diverse abilities in classroom play contexts?

## Method

A qualitative multiple case study was employed to explore the perspectives and practices of three kindergarten teachers in Ontario, Canada. A case study approach can provide a vivid picture of teacher perspectives alongside naturalistic classroom play contexts, furthering our understanding of how teachers incorporate considerations for inclusion within children's play. This approach was guided by an appreciative lens (Kozik et al., 2009), or a focus on positive and productive strategies, to aid in the continued research and promotion of inclusive classroom pedagogy.

## Context

In Ontario, a full day, play-based kindergarten program (3–6-year-olds) was fully implemented in 2014. This is a 2-year program (junior kindergarten for 3–4-year-olds and senior kindergarten for 5–6-year-olds), where both levels are often placed together in the same classroom for the duration of the program (OME, 2016). An inclusive model of education is followed where children with disabilities attend mainstream programs as much as possible (OME, 2009). In this kindergarten program, play is outlined as the optimal context to support all children's learning in developmental and academic areas (OME, 2016).

## Participants

Data for the current study were taken from a larger study looking at teachers' implementations of play-based learning in 11 mainstream kindergarten classrooms. A subset of three teachers were invited for follow-up interviews as they each shared a strong commitment to inclusion in play-based learning and endorsed strategies for supporting participation and learning in classroom play contexts. For the larger project, known kindergarten teachers were recruited based on personal and professional contacts, and were invited to forward study information to other practicing kindergarten teachers following a snowball sampling approach. Once a teacher agreed to participate, consent was sought from parents of children in their classroom. All names of teachers and children are pseudonyms.

Rowan had been a teacher for seven years and a kindergarten teacher for four of those years. He described experiences teaching children with both physical and developmental disabilities within his mainstream kindergarten classroom, including children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and limited language abilities. He completed ten additional qualification courses, including

ones on special education, ASD, and learning disabilities. In his current classroom, he reported many children were English language learners and had needs in terms of their social communication in play.

Sonya had been a teacher for 20 years and a kindergarten teacher for six of those years. Although she reported little formal training in special education, she completed several additional qualifications courses related to kindergarten education and was currently teaching a kindergarten specialist course. She had experience teaching children with a wide range of abilities in kindergarten, including children with developmental disabilities. In her current classroom, she reported one student with a suspected developmental disability and one student with a suspected learning disability.

Kathryn had been a teacher for 24 years and a kindergarten teacher for seven of those years. She completed several workshops related to inclusive education and additional qualification courses related to play-based learning. In previous years, she taught children with developmental disabilities in her mainstream kindergarten classroom, including children with ASD. In her current classroom, she reported that children had high needs in terms of their self-regulation and had sought out additional information on supporting self-regulation development (see Table 1 for a summary of participant demographics).

## Data Collection

Classroom observation data were collected in the fall and interview data were collected at two different time points in the school year. A minimum of three hours of naturalistic observation was conducted in each classroom, with visits taking place over 3–4 days (lasting approximately one hour each). This resulted in a total observation period of approximately 9 hours across the three classrooms. Research assistants collected written field notes, photographs, and video recordings of day-to-day activities. Video recordings focused on play periods and play interactions among children and teachers. A total of 4 hours and 6 minutes of classroom video recordings were collected, with the remainder of the observation time spent documenting notes, photographs, and transitioning between video clips.

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with each teacher, once in the fall and once in the spring. In the fall, teachers were interviewed in their own classrooms and questions centred around play-based learning (e.g., What is the purpose of play in a kindergarten classroom? What is your role in children's play?). Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. In the spring, due to school closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were interviewed in their own homes via an online telecommunications platform. Questions centred around teachers' views on promoting inclusion in play-based learning for children with disabilities (e.g., What does inclusion look like in a kindergarten classroom? How can teachers support students with disabilities in the context of play?). Each follow-up interview lasted approximately 75 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

## Data Analysis

Within-case analysis was conducted following steps set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) for qualitative thematic analysis, followed by cross-case analysis and presentation of results guided by Stake (2006). For within-case analysis, six steps were followed: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In step one, collected data were reviewed for each classroom individually and initial impressions were recorded. In step two, codes were assigned to interview and observational data in an inductive manner based solely on collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In step three, relationships between codes were grouped into potential themes. In steps four through six, a final list of themes was organized, refined, and presented in relation to the broader research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

After within-case analysis, cross-case analysis was conducted to identify what was common and what was particular within each case (Stake, 2006). The presentation of findings is centred around these cross-case themes. Firstly, common perspectives toward play-based learning are highlighted. Secondly, discussed and observed strategies toward supporting inclusion in play are outlined. Here, both common and case-specific themes will be presented, detailing

**Table 1** Participant Demographics

Teacher	Educational background	Completed workshops/training	Years of teaching experience	Years of teaching kindergarten
Rowan	Bachelor of education	Special education	7	4
Sonya	Bachelor of education	Kindergarten	20	6
Kathryn	Master of education	Special education; play-based learning	24	7

examples from each case illustrating the theme as well as particularities regarding each teacher's approach in play.

## Results

In examining enactors' perspectives toward play-based learning, themes were identified that illustrated common approaches, including the balancing of child agency and teacher guidance in play, and ensuring teacher support is child-centred and flexible. With respect to observed practices, enactors prioritized the integration of visual supports in play, demonstrated different approaches to supporting children's social interactions in play, and engaged in collaborative problem solving of issues that arose in play. Each of these primary themes will be discussed in turn.

### Balancing Child Agency and Teacher Guidance in Play

Previous research has uncovered differing approaches toward play among kindergarten teachers, with some teachers equating play-based learning with child-led free play and others occupying a more directive role in play (Pyle & Danniels, 2017). In the current study, all three enactors viewed inclusive play-based learning as a balance between honouring children's agency and providing thoughtful support in play. "The more we're able to tap into their voice, the better we can setup provocations that tap into who they are...An inclusive approach is to honour their voice as well" (Kathryn). Rowan talked about the importance of navigating the tension between teacher-direction and child-direction in play to reach an optimal middle ground to support learning: "If there's tension, it creates this almost balancing act for me of, is this really fun or is this not fun? ...I'm pushing more for that centre point" (Rowan). Entering into play was viewed as an important skill for teachers to develop: "Knowing how to enter into their play...it's knowing the right questions to ask. And that's hard to do, it takes time to develop that skill" (Sonya). Furthermore, this involvement was critical to children's social participation: "To be the guide that allows other interactions to happen, I need to insert myself from time to time" (Rowan).

In their enactment of inclusive play-based learning, while Rowan endorsed following children's lead and providing choice, Sonya and Kathryn also discussed the importance of co-creating play spaces and play activities with children. For example, children in Sonya's classroom showed an interest in bridges, so she developed a bridge building activity and partnered children together for support. "We've been talking about working collaboratively, and we've been building bridges...They're working together, but we're giving them particular materials to build with and partnering them up,

a good partnership that will get it done" (Sonya). In Kathryn's classroom, both play spaces and activities were co-constructed by the children, which was viewed as integral to promoting inclusion. "The space is always co-constructed. We are not setting up the spaces, we're doing that with the children. That's another way of incorporating inclusion" (Kathryn). This year, Kathryn and the children co-created a doctor's office after the children expressed interest: "They were actually having a conversation about...why do we have doctors? And how do they help? They were talking about [medical] charts and I pre-made some charts based on some of the discussions" (Kathryn). Enactors emphasized inclusive play-based learning as a thoughtful balance between honouring child agency and providing supportive teacher guidance in play.

### Teacher Involvement as Child-Centred and Flexible

With respect to teacher involvement in play, all three enactors highlighted the importance of support that is child-centred and flexible; qualities viewed as central to supporting children with disabilities. To provide child-centred support, enactors described the importance of observing play to assess children's developmental levels: "At this level, play is learning and learning is play. The purpose of it is to watch where they are developmentally" (Sonya). This observation informs how teachers can get involved to support children's learning and development in play:

We can look at the social aspect, the communication, or the interactions that happen...That leads to understanding where they are at developmentally. And it allows me to figure out how I can guide them further or what role I can play in moving them forward. (Kathryn)

Rowan discussed how observing play with a former student with ASD helped him to gather information on the child's needs and play preferences: "If you had a person three feet away from them, they're fine, but if that distance is close to two centimetres, they almost lash out...How many people can I allow this person to interact with until they are overstimulated?" (Rowan). Enactors endorsed child-centred support through observing and making considerations for children's individual development and needs in play.

Enactors also endorsed a fluid or flexible approach to play-based learning to support children of differing abilities. This approach is needed as children demonstrate different strengths and needs in play: "Their responses might, in play, show that they're not ready for that type of play or that rule of play. And it's okay, I understand, and I'll have to adjust the play accordingly" (Rowan). Sonya discussed the importance of observing and learning about children's specific play preferences, and then using these preferences as a starting point

to extend play: “It’s not just taking two cars and crashing them into each other. Not that that’s wrong. You want them [to consider], what can we do with those cars?” (Sonya). Kathryn discussed how she could use a child’s interest as a starting point for planning future activities:

I may have a child who loves to use connectors and build... We can sit down and have a conversation about the mathematics, which is what we normally do when we’re entering play and we’re observing. That can lead to me planning something very intentional with that child or particular groups of children that came out of that play opportunity. (Kathryn)

All three enactors believed support in play should be child-centred and flexible, being sensitive to the diverse strengths, needs, and interests of all children in play.

### Supporting all Children in Play: Visual Supports

To support children with diverse abilities, enactors discussed the importance of incorporating visual aids into play, primarily to help children with transitions, sharing, and social participation. For example, Rowan used hourglass timers to visually demonstrate the time remaining in play and help anticipate transitions. “I am consistently setting up schedules for students of exceptionality or non-exceptionality where they feel safe and included, where they know what’s coming” (Rowan). Rowan also used timers to help children take turns in play: “Are you able to set up the environment where you take turns? Can we bring a timer in?” During play, Rowan commented on how he was observing children in the drama centre using the timer independently: “They then pull the timer over and say, ‘We’re switching over’. That’s one way I can step back and allow them to look at the time”. Rowan valued the use of visual aids to help communicate clear routines and practice social cooperation in play.

Kathryn had a large visual schedule and a small portable visual schedule she showed to children in play. In one instance, a child (Tommy) had some difficulty transitioning out of play and into a period of quiet book reading. Kathryn approached Tommy and used the flip book to help him transition out of play:

Kathryn: I’m going to flip this and we’re going to see...so we reset the space [points to cleaning up picture], and now [flips to picture of children reading]

[Tommy points to picture].

Kathryn: [flips to next picture] And then we go for lunch! So let’s go find a favourite book, look around the class and see if we find a favourite book.

[Tommy walks over to bookshelf].

This visual aid helped Kathryn to support play transitions and foster children’s engagement and participation in daily activities.

After witnessing the exclusion of a child from play, Sonya worked collaboratively with the children to create a novel sign to help promote greater inclusion among peers. While designing the sign, Sonya and a child (Kelly) were approached by John, a child with a suspected developmental disability:

John: What are you doing there?

Sonya: We’re making a sign that’s going to say, ‘you can’t say...’

Kelly: ...you can’t play.’

Sonya: Alright? Because some people want to say that some people can’t play, like do we have that rule here at [name of school]?

John: No.

Sonya: Everybody can play, right?

John: Yeah.

Sonya: Okay. So.

John: [smiling, excited voice] Everyone can play over there [points] or the other way [points]!

Sonya: Right! Whatever you want to play.

Sonya later presented the sign to the class: “You can’t say you can’t play. Everyone is welcome to play...So if someone would like to play with you, you say ‘of course’, and you show them what you are doing.” In this manner, Sonya co-created a visual aid with the children to encourage greater inclusion, while modelling positive language to be used by children in play.

### Supporting Social Interactions in Play

All three enactors discussed the importance of teachers monitoring and supporting children with diverse abilities in their play interactions. These enactors routinely engaged in positive social interactions with children in play in one-on-one and small group configurations, both by supporting from the side and by becoming an active play partner.

Rowan shared a strong appreciation for the teacher’s role in engaging socially with children in play, particularly to encourage positive social communication and extend learning. He regularly asked questions to children about their play, capitalizing on “those key teachable moments” (Rowan). For example, Rowan approached a child at the building centre and asked questions to extend the activity (“Where is your boat? Let’s make a boat. Put it underneath”), and to incorporate personal interests and experiences (“Does your family have a boat? Do you go and play on the water?”). In one instance, a child was playing by himself at the drama centre, to which Rowan commented: “He is normally a social child, but he was playing on his own,” demonstrating his

attention to children's social configurations in play. Rowan approached the child and asked questions about his play, checking in on why he was playing alone. In this manner, Rowan prioritized interacting with children in play to encourage positive social communication and occasionally to extend the play activity.

Like Rowan, Sonya articulated the value of supporting both children with and without disabilities in their social play interactions together:

I would take him [child with ASD] by his hand and we would see that children are playing and that he wanted to join. I would give him the words to say, and he would ask, and the kids were all lovely. They welcomed him in...I think you really support them by being there, giving him the words, and also supporting other students, helping them to engage this child. So it's both ways. (Sonya)

Sonya was often observed interacting with children during small group play activities. In one play period, two children (including one child with a suspected developmental disability, John) were working on a bridge building activity together. Sonya monitored the play, helped with needed materials, and asked questions to promote ongoing teamwork:

Sonya: I think you can use these...Yes, I will help you. There we go. What else do we need to do?  
 Brian: We need...  
 John: More tape, more tape.  
 Sonya: You need more tape? Let's make it stand. Does that work?...  
 [Brian whines]  
 Sonya: You don't like it?  
 Brian: No.  
 Sonya: Okay, I'm going to help you...Alright, you're holding it, Brian? Hold it a second...Do you think maybe if you had a block to put here?  
 Peer nearby: I'll go get another block.

In this case, Sonya supported the children's play by offering help, asking questions, and providing suggestions to help them build cooperatively together. Later on, John excitedly showed off the bridge to the research assistant: "Hey! [points to bridge] You go over here, and then here too. And don't fall off the water," sharing his enjoyment for the activity and what they had built.

Lastly, Kathryn discussed her approach to supporting children's social interactions in play by sharing her experience playing with a former student with ASD:

I would just play beside him. If he's using a car and it's at the sand table, I would just slowly come in and use my own car and mimic what he's doing...And then I

started adding a sound for example. I'd start making the sound that a car might make, and say it's going up and down and just modelling the language. After doing that for several times and creating a safe space, then we started noticing the child started to look up and to make sounds. (Kathryn)

Kathryn discussed how she would then model noticing and asking about what other children were doing to help facilitate peer interactions:

You can start saying, "look at what Sarah is building over there"... "Tell us what you're building." Sometimes even the kids would say, "do you want to play with me?" So, the children are modelling that, and you're there to be that person who is bridging that interaction. (Kathryn)

Kathryn regularly interacted with children in play both as an outside observer and as a play partner. At the collaboratively created doctor's office, Kathryn stepped into the doctor role to show some children how a thermometer works:

Kathryn: I feel the forehead and if it feels really hot [puts thermometer in child's armpit]...and I look at the numbers. 38.7, that means Quinn has a fever!

These enactors highlighted different ways they occupied a supportive role in children's play to promote positive social interactions among children with and without disabilities.

### Collaborative Problem Solving in Play

One additional strategy Kathryn employed to support inclusion was to facilitate collaborative problem-solving with the children when issues arose in play. One problem that arose this year involved children knocking down each other's play structures. To address this, Kathryn engaged in collaborative discussions with the children regarding potential solutions: "We came up with some concise rules as a class of what needs to happen when we're building" (Kathryn). One rule involved the children placing masking tape down around structures to signal they did not want them to be knocked down, an idea suggested by one of the children:

One of the kids came up with this brilliant idea of using masking tape and putting the tape around the structures. Then we would practice walking around the periphery of the structure, and how we just walk around and use our eyes to look and we keep our hands [off]... The visuals really enhanced that understanding. (Kathryn)

In play, the children independently placed tape around the structures they had built. However, in one instance, Ben was

observed to knock down part of Derrick's structure. Kathryn talked to both children and they agreed on a solution:

Kathryn: That means you need to help Derrick fix his.  
Are you watching how Derrick is fixing so that you can give him a hand with it?

[Ben nods]

Kathryn: That was the agreement, you were going to help each other.

Through collaborative problem solving, Kathryn highlighted how she addressed social problems in a way that valued children's voices, promoting positive social participation and a respectful community for all children in play.

## Discussion

Classroom teachers occupy a critical role in translating the goals of inclusive education into everyday practice. In play-based kindergarten programs, a central goal becomes the promotion of inclusive principles within children's play activities. The current study explored key characteristics of three kindergarten teachers ('enactors') who espoused a strong commitment to inclusion in their play-based learning practices. These enactors shared common perspectives towards the implementation of play to promote inclusion, including a balance of child agency and teacher guidance, teacher involvement that is child-centred and flexible, and the supporting social interactions in play. These views informed both common and unique play practices, including engaging in one-on-one conversations, supporting small groups, becoming an active play partner, and collaboratively addressing problems that arose in play.

The current findings illuminate ways kindergarten teachers are translating inclusive policies into practice and how play-based learning can be a facilitator of, rather than a barrier to (Howard, 2010), inclusion in early education classrooms. Rather than focusing on how ability differences can limit the participation of some children in play, enactors focused on discovering children's unique abilities and preferences, honouring children's voice and agency, and valuing play and its role in inclusion. They recognized the varying needs of all children as a part of human diversity and focused on strategies that could support different needs in play to enable meaningful participation.

In a play-based learning program, play is framed as central to children's learning across all areas, including their social development, self-regulation, and academic learning (OME, 2016). As such, it is important to consider how teachers can help to promote both academic and community inclusion in play. Academic inclusion involves every child being able to participate and access available learning opportunities. Enactors highlighted the importance of

observing children's abilities and interests, and using this information to help extend their learning in play and plan future play activities. In this manner, enactors applied principles of differentiated instruction (Brodzeller et al., 2018) to play-based learning, adjusting their instruction, materials, and assistance to ensure that play activities were accessible and beneficial for every child. They promoted individualized support through observing play and getting involved in a flexible way tailored to specific children. Enactors also incorporated visual supports including timers and schedules in play, which can pose benefits for children's on-task behaviour and self-regulation abilities (Macdonald et al., 2018). Lastly, enactors endorsed the role of active teacher support in play, both as a guide on the side and as an active partner to support children's learning, which has been connected to improvements in children's academic and social learning (Fisher et al., 2013; Nicolopoulou et al., 2015). Kathryn's specific approach of imitating, vocalizing, and modelling play actions echoes recommendations made by empirically supported play programs such as the Integrated Play Groups Model (Wolfberg et al., 2012). Although more research is needed examining the benefits of guided play for children with disabilities in inclusive settings, these results demonstrate ways enactors strived to facilitate play activities to benefit all children in their classrooms.

In play-based kindergarten, community inclusion involves fostering social participation in play and building a community of respect and acceptance for all children. Enactors emphasized the need to observe and support social interactions among all children in play. Through observing children's needs and reflecting on the optimal level of guidance, enactors strived toward 'good-fit' interactions (Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2011) or interactions matched to children's developmental and contextual needs. These interactions are theorized to be optimal for promoting autonomous peer play and social interactions (Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2011). Rather than positioning young children with disabilities as in need of direct skill instruction to be socially successful, enactors emphasized the importance of supporting all children in their play and social communication, including coaching children on how to respond to peers who play in different ways. To foster positive play interactions in inclusive classrooms, it is critical that teachers consider the abilities and perspectives of all children and work toward a culture of understanding and acceptance toward individual differences in play.

Enactors strived to cultivate a community of acceptance and respect in different ways. After witnessing incidents of exclusion in play, Sonya developed a sign with the children to address their understanding of inclusion. In this manner, she addressed a core social norm and how children could demonstrate it within their play. Kathryn facilitated collaborative problem solving of issues that came up during play,

demonstrating respect by allowing children to have a voice in issues related to their play and social community. The teacher and children collectively agreed on positive social behaviours they would enact in play, including how to show respect toward peers and their building creations. In this manner, Kathryn prioritized the development of a respectful community where all voices were valued, and who collaborated to address problems that arose within the community.

Kindergarten teachers hold differing beliefs regarding the relationship between play and children's learning (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Rodriguez-Meehan, 2021). Consequently, some teachers may be hesitant to get involved in children's play if they believe that involvement disrupts the play (Ghafouri & Wien, 2005). However, in the absence of thoughtful teacher support, children with disabilities may remain on the periphery of play and social networks, and early social exclusion can lead to poorer social, academic, and mental health outcomes (Guralnick et al., 2006; Segrin, 2019). It is critical that the benefits of teacher involvement in play and what productive teacher support in play can look like in inclusive settings be disseminated to preservice and in-service teachers.

### Limitations and Future Directions

It is important to acknowledge the current study's limitations. The observational period within each classroom (3 hours over 3–4 days) was relatively brief. Attempts to engage in a longer observation period had to be modified due to school closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this brief period, alongside two in-depth interviews with each teacher, helped to illuminate perspectives and approaches toward supporting inclusion in play-based learning. Although results cannot be generalized beyond this group of teachers, it is hoped that they provide helpful and informative insights to relevant stakeholders in the field.

Secondly, the current study focused on teacher perspectives and practices related to play-based learning from a participatory standpoint, rather than with a specific focus on curricular learning domains. Enactors focused on ways to support the participation of children with and without disabilities in play, with an emphasis on social development and engagement. How specific areas of learning (e.g., vocabulary, literacy, mathematics) can be integrated into accessible play-based activities warrants further research, as these different areas are critical to the early school success of all children (Clements et al., 2021).

Lastly, the current study did not gather data related to children's perspectives or measures of child outcomes. It is important that future studies examine the effectiveness of different approaches to fostering inclusion with respect to meaningful social outcomes such as rates of engagement, classroom social networks, and peer ratings of acceptance.

It is also important to examine children's own perspectives related to feeling included and accepted in play; a critical facet of inclusion not often captured in educational research.

### Conclusion

As early education classrooms become more diverse, it is critical that teachers adapt pedagogical practices to support the meaningful participation of all children. Within a play-based learning curriculum, teachers and children need to create an inclusive and supportive space for children with and without disabilities to play and learn together. The current study illustrates how three kindergarten teachers gave meaning to the concept of inclusion through their play practices and strived to promote inclusion in a play-based learning framework. As they occurred in mainstream classrooms, strategies practiced by these teachers are likely to be considered acceptable and highly feasible, and those that align with previous empirical research could be incorporated into future teacher training opportunities (Bolourian et al., 2021). Overall, enactors provided insights into current understandings of inclusion in play-based learning, and what teachers may need going forward, to ensure that all children can be meaningfully supported and included in play.

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**Data Availability** Research data are not shared.

### Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

**Ethical Approval** This study was granted approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Toronto and all participating school boards.

**Informed Consent** Written informed consent was obtained from all participating teachers and from the parents of children in each teacher's classroom.

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