Literature Review

The current trend in public education is to promote inclusive education in the general education environment for students with disabilities, rather than having those students’ school experience be in a self-contained class) for children with disabilities (Digest of Educational Statistics, 2010).

Statistics from a recent U.S. Department of Education report on special education and inclusion indicate that placement of kindergarten students with special needs in an inclusive education setting has increased from 31% in 1989 to slightly over 60% in 2010, doubling participation in just 12 years (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). This means refining inclusion policies and support is necessary to satisfy needs of all students, not just those with IEPs (Jimenez, Graf, & Rose, 2007).

All students can benefit from the inclusion of students with special needs within the general education environment (Jimenez, Graf, & Rose, 2007; Maryland State Department of Education, 2001). Students who are typically developing have the opportunity to receive their education in an environment that more closely mirrors the diversity in their community (Taub, 2006). Although these students do not have an identified educational need, they can benefit from strategies employed in the classroom to support students with IEPs (Flores, 2003). Teaching social skills within the classroom environment helps all students develop skills needed for school success. Opportunities to model and mentor for their peers with disabilities reinforce concepts of collaboration and empathy, while receiving modeling from students with disabilities reinforces the
understanding that everyone is unique and can contribute (Bianchi & Lancianese, 2005; Inclusive Schools Network, 2009).

**Defining Inclusion vs. Mainstreaming in Education**

Inclusive education, that is, the inclusion of students with an IEP in a general education classroom is the literal interpretation of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), as set forth in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). Criteria for determining placement and defining LRE for each student are based upon the individual’s strengths and areas of need (California State Department of Education, 2010).

Benefits of inclusion include being identified as part of the school population as a whole, rather than being segregated literally and figuratively in a smaller special education classroom or setting.

To create a climate for success, careful, ongoing assessment and support are required for students with special needs participating in a general education classroom (Elliott & Gresham, 2007). Designated instructional support (DIS) is provided by professionals from various disciplines, such as speech and language pathologists (SLP), occupational therapists (OT), and resource specialists (RSP), either on a “push-in” or “pull-out” basis. Push in refers to service providers who support students in the classroom during regular class activities. Pull out refers to working with students in a separate room, such as an OT clinic. Therefore, inclusion is often characterized as having a multidisciplinary model, because specialists from different disciplines support students by working on specific skills to support progress toward IEP goals and meeting grade-level standards.
The same model is applied in an SDC/mainstream setting as well, but with DIS support provided in the self contained class.

All students have the right to be perceived as people first, by peers and adults at school and in the community, regardless of label or disability. Research suggests this may be difficult to achieve and maintain when a student is identified at school as coming from (belonging to) an SDC class, even though they have access to mainstreaming for a portion of their school day (Bianchi & Lanchianese, 2005; Newman, 2006). With this continuum of mainstreaming from a self contained classroom to being fully included in general education, the need for students to develop the social skills necessary to participate fully is extremely important. Being socially competent in class enables students to access curriculum and learning, both individually and collaboratively. Because class size is larger, and academic standards are rigorous, the ability to navigate the social constructs of the classroom environment is a skill set that must be taught to students who demonstrate a lack of competence due to disability or delay.

School success, that is a positive experience for each student in which he or she feels like they belong, can learn, and contribute, depends upon many factors, but one important factor is a student’s ability to participate constructively and appropriately in a group setting across environments within the school day (Taub, 2006).

**Self Contained Classroom Placement**

For some students, placement in a smaller class with specific supports to facilitate learning is an appropriate choice. It is, by definition, a more restrictive placement. Nevertheless, students in a self contained class are given opportunities to participate in
the general education class environment for at least a part of the day, depending on each student’s IEP. These opportunities can range from participating in a general education P.E. class, math, English, social studies, art, music, and/or other classes and activities. The benefit of mainstreaming is that students can be in a general education class for part of the day, and return to an self contained class for part of the day, depending on what kind and how much support is needed. When children need support for some areas of learning, they should be supported, but the expectation that they have the potential to succeed should drive decisions on mainstreaming and inclusion, erring on the side of LRE (Calabrese, et al., 2006; Maryland State Department of Education, 2001).

**Inclusion in the General Education Classroom**

Many parents and education professionals define best practice for students with special needs and LRE as placement within the general education classroom to serve all students. Hallmarks of successful inclusion classrooms include: grouping students strategically to give and receive peer modeling; teaching activities that create access to curriculum across different learning styles; collaboration among professionals across different disciplines; meaningful home/school communication that is respectful and reflective of family culture and beliefs (Jimenez, Graf, & Rose, 2007 Newman, 2006; Santamaria & Thousand, 2004).

However, current actual practice is primarily focused on supporting students’ academic progress in school. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act has a rigidly defined set of academic standards and criteria for making progress toward proficiency. Curriculum is designed to teach acquisition of specific skills and knowledge set forth in
the NCLB Act. There is no content area focused solely upon learning the social skills necessary to participate successfully in the general education environment. These skills are commonly referred to as the “hidden curriculum”, and for some students, may be difficult to learn without targeted teaching and practice. It is hoped that as inclusion practice increases, best practice will be better defined and supported (Jimenez, et al, 2007; Leatherman, 2007; Press, Foote, & Rinaldo, 2010).

Learning the social skills needed to participate in academic activities may be easier when in the more structured environment of the classroom for students with disabilities. Topic maintenance, turn taking, and sharing may be more difficult for the student with special needs to generalize to a less structured environment, such as recess or lunchtime. As a result, these students may be avoided or ridiculed by their peers during unstructured social times, with increased likelihood of negative consequences in the classroom due to the lack of social acceptance in other environments. (Lavoie, 2005)

**Classroom Practices that Support Learning Social Skills**

Teachers implement strategies in their classrooms to motivate students as they participate in learning. For example, part of each kindergarten day--at least at the beginning of the school year--is spent on helping students learn expectations for classroom behavior, as kindergarten is a new environment and experience for most five year olds, regardless of preschool experience. One of the primary things teachers can provide for their students are clear, consistent expectations. Rules are set up in a classroom to facilitate learning and create a positive atmosphere. Teaching can be
accomplished throughout the day using a variety of methods. Children can be asked questions during language arts time regarding labeling the feelings of a character in a story. Children can participate in paired dialog sessions, each taking turns to listen and respond to the other, as another part of language arts. During math, students can share materials, or work in pairs, to facilitate sharing and cooperation. These interactions have the added benefits of facilitating from one’s peers, as well a developing social relationships that can extend beyond the classroom (Brusnahan & Gatti, 2010; Winterman, 2011). However, teaching social competency within the curriculum must be systematic and consistent to be successful. Studies link social competence with academic success, so it makes sense to teach social skills in the classroom (Steedly, Schwartz, Levin, & Luke, 2008). As previously stated, it’s important to embed social learning within the context of daily activities, so that students understand the relationship between school expectations for behavior and the cues that would inform them. (Brusnahan & Gatti, 2010; Winterman, 2011)

For children with disabilities, this may be sufficient support for classroom success, but difficult to generalize when environments and expectations change during unstructured times within the school day. This causes a potential gap in student success in school, which widens as years and expectations increase. Some children with special needs need both direct and indirect instruction and practice in social skills to learn how to participate appropriately with peers and adults across environments.
Why Social Skills are Important

Research gathered suggests that academic supports are more easily implemented and measured by educators and staff in the classroom for all students, not just those with an IEP. However, adding training for social competency with a classroom population in which special needs is an increasing component in the diverse make up of students is more difficult to implement consistently. This may be due in part, to demanding daily curriculum and inconsistent staff preparation and training (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Huang & Evans, 2011; Jimenez et al, 2007; Winzer & Mazurek, 2011).

Recent research suggests deliberate embedding of social skills training within daily tasks is a promising practice to be expanded upon (Elliott & Gresham, 2007; Steedly, Schwartz, Levin, & Luke 2008). It is a critical component of inclusion support that these at-risk students receive specific teaching in social skills, to be successful and accepted in the larger, more demanding environment. (Durlak et al, 2011; Winterman, 2008)

Social Skills and the Hidden Curriculum

Children develop social skills in a sequential order that corresponds to expectations for typical growth and maturation. (Joseph & Strain, 2003) Experiences also play a role in the development and perception of social skills in individuals. Students with special needs may have difficulty with reading social cues, whereas their typically developing peers may not, or at least, not to the same degree. What some students with
special needs may lack, is the ability to “intuit” what their peers are thinking and feeling. This can lead to problems with acceptance by peers, both in the classroom and on the playground.

Within the classroom, being able to read social cues and interact appropriately with peers supports learning overall, which occurs, for the most part, in a group setting. Conversely, problems or deficits in social skills can result in exclusion within the inclusive setting. (Steedly, Schwartz, Levin, & Luke. 2008).

High Scope is a well-researched early childhood curriculum that identifies Key Developmental Indicators (previously identified as Key Experiences) in teaching and learning social skills (Joseph & Strain, 2003). Among these are: expressive communication, problem solving, collaboration, and making and maintaining relationships with peers and adults. Evidence has been gathered on the efficacy of the curriculum, both during participation and longitudinally. The evidence suggests that students who are provided with the experiences and teaching to support social development have a statistically greater chance of success, both in preschool and later on in life (Schweinert, 2003). Other early childhood curricula, such as Bright Beginnings and Creative Curriculum identify similar social competencies for young children, however, research to support evidence of success in developing social competencies has been limited (Joseph and Strain, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Social Indicators of School Success

Studies completed by experts in the fields of child development, psychology, education, and special education (CASEL; Joseph & Strain, 2003; Steedly, et al., 2008)
have identified the following social competencies as predictors of school success for students from preschool through high school:

**Intrapersonal Skills**

*Self awareness:* understanding that one is a unique individual, awareness of one’s own thoughts and feelings

*Identifying strengths:* awareness of one’s strengths; working to build upon and enhance one’s areas of strength

*Ability to set goals (self-determination):* identifying and working toward a desired goal, seeking help and strategies to deal with challenges that come up along the way

*Self regulation:* the ability to identify one’s emotional state, and choosing appropriate means to deal with one’s feelings and regulate behavior (CASEL, Elliott & Gresham, 2007; Whitted, 2011).

**Interpersonal Skills**

*Ability to receptively and expressively communicate:* comprehending communication in a variety of forms, including nonverbal cues

*Perspective taking:* understanding that other people may have other desires and ideas.

*Ability to form and sustain relationships:* successful interactions with peers and adults in social and work situations across the school day.

*Awareness of diversity:* understanding that everyone has differences and similarities

*Respect for others:* treating others in a positive manner

*Conflict resolution:* the ability to appropriately deal with conflicts in a respectful and positive manner (CASEL, Elliott & Gresham, 2007; Whitted, 2011).
Critical Analysis Skills

ability to follow through on a decision not to engage/participate in negative or unsafe behaviors and activities: being safe regardless of social inducement from peers

personal accountability: being responsible for one’s decisions and actions

problem solving: given a set of facts, using prior knowledge to arrive at an appropriate solution (Elliott, & Gresham, 2007; CASEL; Whitted, 2011).

Attainment of these skills is not only important for a child’s academic educational performance, but also has implications for success in life as a contributing adult in society (Winterman, K. 2008). Goal setting and self determination have direct correlation to motivation. Respect for others and awareness of diversity help people to work together to achieve common goals. Conflict resolution and problem solving relate to the ability to persevere in the face of obstacles. Being able to say “no” to unsafe/negative behaviors is a precursor to developing self-advocacy skill. Finally, perspective taking and empathy empower the individual to have and sustain relationships with others (Bianchi & Lancianese, 2005; Brusnahn & Gatti, 2011).

For students in primary grades, these skills will set the foundation for continuing success in an environment which offers increasing challenges along with benefits. For younger children, competence is determined at age-appropriate expectations. For example, in intrapersonal skills, appropriate mastery would consist of: recognizing and labeling emotions, identifying the steps in goal setting, and identifying and describing preferred activities (CASEL, 2005).
Learning Occurs in Relationship

Learning occurs within the context of relationship (McKloskey, 2010). Within the context of learning social skills for school success, what is learned should reinforce a positive identity for the learner as an individual and respect the values and practices of his/her family and community. This enables the learner to connect home with school and feel good about both (Bingham & Abernathy, 2007). Supporting learning, therefore means that educators have an understanding that education doesn’t end when the bell rings at the end of the day, but is an ongoing continuum in which the learner uses knowledge from both home and school, and applies it across environments (Laluvein, 2010; McKloskey, 2010). To foster learning within meaningful relationships, educators must work with families to create strategies that are a good fit with family priorities and concerns, while supporting the learner to achieve his/her educational goals. Strategies should be embedded within typical home activities to add context and value for the learner. Although this is considered best practice for young children with disabilities prior to entering preschool years, the focus shifts to a classroom-based model thereafter (Yanhui, 2010).

Family Preferences for Inclusion

An important consideration in determining placement in a general education classroom for children with special needs is that of honoring families’ stated preferences for their child (Laluvein, 2010; For example, some families may have more than one child, and want their children to attend their home school together, rather than being sent to different schools in the interest of appropriate environment for their child with special
needs. It is important for families to have access to their child’s school and to activities and opportunities for school-home involvement that enrich a child’s educational experience and connects families to their child’s education as active participants. This can be difficult when children from the same family attend different schools. Although it is obvious that children will eventually attend separate schools when one leaves elementary for middle, or high school, when both or more siblings are in elementary school, families often prefer to keep them together if possible. Seeking to understand a family’s preference for placement has equal value with other criteria for placement options. In studies created to develop an understanding of family concerns for their child in an inclusive classroom, several important themes have been identified by researchers:

**Respect for Family Culture, Traditions, and Values**

To create an environment for learning that is reflective of, and responsive to, each student’s experience, teachers should gain an understanding of their students’ family systems, beliefs, and practices. Information may be obtained in many ways—conversations, observations and questions. For example, How do families interact with one another? How do they communicate? What is the child’s role within his immediate family, and within larger contexts? Does the family value independence for their child—a western educational construct—or do they value and practice interdependence? Does the family home consist of a single family, or is it multigenerational? Teaching and learning a set of social skills must be relevant to the environment in which they will be used. Although individuals require and use different skills for different environments and contexts, the reasons for the use of a specific set of social behaviors should be understood
and respected by all who interact with the student. In other words, school understands, respects, and supports social expectations for the student at home, and the family understands, respects, and supports social expectations for their child at school. Issues surrounding discrepancies between home/school expectations are viewed as opportunities to gain clarity and build collaboration between family and school (Bingham & Abernathy, 2007).

**Families as Experts**

Families are partners in their child’s learning and development (Bingham & Abernathy, 2007; McKloskey, 2010). They have a wide range of expertise and knowledge about their child and their interactions in more diverse settings, apart from the school day. As such, family priorities and concerns are extremely important factors to consider when creating and implementing educational support for their child with special needs (Taub, 2006). When teaching social competencies in school, it is important to consider the student’s ability to generalize what he/she learns outside of class. Family interactions with each other, extended family and friends, their neighborhood, and community offer information that will help both educators and parents as equal stakeholders in their child’s education to craft and implement practical strategies for developing social skills. Furthermore, families have opportunities to teach social skills incidentally, that is, as opportunities arise, which adds context for the learner (Durlak, et al, 2011; Elliott & Grisham, 2007; Lavoie, 2005).
Developing Collaboration That Honors Family Priorities and Resources

In the U.S., a core value in public education is that of empowering families as active participants in their child’s education. As of 2007, special education credentialing in 22 states required demonstration of skill in facilitating parent involvement and empowerment in their child’s education (Bingham & Abernathy, 2007). It is extremely important that educators empower the families served to advocate for their child in ways that are supportive to each family. Some factors to consider are:

Family makeup—how many children and adults are present in the home, how do they interact with each other?

Family demands—single, working parent, both parents working, stay at home parent? Or, perhaps more than one child with special needs? What are the time constraints for this family?

Socio-economic level should be considered, as this has a direct correlation as to how family resources are prioritized, and what kinds of resources—both school and community based—the family may want to have access to, or know more about.

Religious and cultural beliefs and practices regarding family values and interactions within their community (Bingham & Abernathy, 2007). Each family has their own way of living out their beliefs and practices, so stereotyping should be avoided, as it devalues a family’s unique identity.

An important aspect to consider is the social skill or skills the family values and wants to work on. Social skill learning is more successful when one specific skill is identified and addressed (Bloom et al, 2007; Lavoie, 2005).
Ongoing, Meaningful, Communication

Collaboration comes from good communication between family and school. Factors that facilitate communication include: openness, respect, willingness to change, availability, shared power, shared knowledge, and desire to understand. Factors that must be considered in developing strong communication are: understanding and reflecting the communication style of the family, respecting cultural communication traditions and practices, understanding family’s view of the school’s role and family’s role in their child’s education, awareness of family’s experiences with home/school communication, as these shape perceptions, understand your own experiences with home/school communication, and the perceptions and biases you may bring to the table, understand family boundaries regarding communication v. intrusiveness. (Laluvein, 2010; Taub, 2006)

Shared Power and Responsibility

The school has a responsibility to families to seek their wealth of knowledge and expertise about their child. Educators need to share all of their expertise and knowledge regarding school performance, understanding that it is a piece of the picture of the whole child (Bingham & Abernathy, 2010; Jimenez, et al, 2007; Laluvein, 2010; Wanat, 2010). While parents and teachers may have differing views on what constitutes successful collaboration, again, the vehicle for collaboration is communication (McKloskey, 2010). Just as educators do, families see education and collaboration through their own cultural lens (Huang & Evans, 2011; Leatherman, 2007). Therefore it is important to come to a shared understanding of collaborative practice that reflects both school policy and
practice, and family priorities. This, of course means, that home/school collaboration may be expressed differently for each family served, while utilizing the existing supports and resources within the school. The art of collaboration comes from designing points of access to shared power for families that reflect their reality (Jimenez et al, 2007). When families have a voice in their child’s education, they become stronger advocates for their child, which can effect change in educational practice as a whole (Jimenez et al, 2007). Being able to create change from the “bottom up” empowers families to see themselves as agents of change, and to see the value of their knowledge and input in a larger context (Laluvein, 2010). When families and schools share power and responsibility for student success, both are enriched by the experience. Research shows that in the past, teacher credentialing programs have not adequately prepared teachers for collaboration with families. Citation. As programs are updated, more education for new teachers is being provided to support collaboration between school and home.

Teaching social skills within a familiar context incidentally as well as directly helps with retention and generalization (Lavoie, 2005). Although social behavior expectations have differences at home and school, the reasons for developing competence can be seen as having commonalities. For example, it is appropriate for a child to raise his/her hand when wanting to speak in class, and then, to wait to be recognized by the teacher before speaking. While this formality is generally not necessary at home, the reasons behind it, i.e., waiting one’s turn, being part of a conversation, speaking and listening, are the same. This is an important consideration when parents and school staff are working together to support a child’s learning (McKloskey, 2010; Myles, 2005).
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this case study includes the Theory of Mind (ToM), as defined by Simon Baron-Cohen (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985). Cohen describes ToM in normal development as acquiring the ability to understand that other people have minds, just as the individual does, and therefore have feelings, ideas and perspectives. This awareness allows the individual to understand the perspective of others, to empathize with the feelings of others, and to adapt one’s own ideas and beliefs to accommodate the ideas and beliefs of others. This learning comes through relationships and experiences with others in a child’s life, as a regular part of growth and development. For individuals with ASD or other developmental disorders/delays, the ability to develop a cognitive awareness of others’ ideas and beliefs is impaired by their disability(ies), and must be taught to the individual discretely, to foster social development and create opportunities for development of meaningful relationships with others in the student’s life.

The second theory is the Ecological Systems Theory, defined by Urie Bronfenbrenner, as consisting of multiple environmental layers which have an effect upon the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). These layers encompass that which the child is most intimately involved with, and outwardly expand to include the world at large and changes and experiences over time. The first is the micro system, which encompasses everything closest to the child; e.g., home, family, school, and friends. Following the micro system, and acting to connect to larger environmental systems is the meso system, which includes opportunities for families to actively participate in their
child’s education, and community-based activities that reflect the values and beliefs of a specific family, such as presence of churches, or cultural activities in the community that reflect family values and priorities. Next is the *exo system*, which includes external factors such as community resources, parks, access to public services, and also specific parental demands, such as work day away from home. The *macro system*, which includes larger factors that have an effect on the child’s life, includes local, state, and federal laws, beliefs and practices of the culture in which the family currently lives and interacts with. Finally, the *chrono system* describes the events that occur in the life of an individual and family over time, such as moving to a new home, a parent’s remarriage, a grandparent’s death. Maturational changes within an individual come under the heading of chrono system as well.

Each system affects the system beneath it, while the individual may be able to act only upon certain aspects, if any, of each system. For example, a child’s parents may choose to access the parks and recreation system in their community to enroll their child in sports activities, because sports are consistent with the family’s belief system for appropriate child-rearing practices. However, if within a community, there is no access to sports activities, parents cannot act, regardless of their values and beliefs. Therefore, a deficit in a family’s opportunities and access is experienced by the family because the larger environment does not reflect and support the family’s beliefs about sports for their child.

Social competency is an important aspect of an individual’s quality of life, not only in his or her immediate personal relationships, but in their interactions with the
larger community and diversity of environments and experiences. The next section of this paper describes the methods used to help a family as they support their child’s acquisition of a targeted social skill.
Methods

This case study was undertaken as a requirement by the Master’s program in Culture in Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) Project at California State University Northridge. The purpose of the project was to learn about cultural diversity in special education, its effects on current practice and implications for future practice. The family selected for this case study was asked to participate because the researcher has an interest in faith and culture, and because their child is in a general education kindergarten class, having transitioned from a self contained preschool class. The need for teaching social skills in inclusive education is a topic of interest to the researcher as well. To protect family confidentiality, their names have been changed.

Family background

The Smith family live in a suburb of a large city in southern California. Both parents, Bill and Jenny, are college educated and, prior to becoming a full-time homemaker, Jenny was an elementary school teacher. The Smiths have three children: Amy, who is 11 years old and in the sixth grade, Scotty, and Sara, who are seven years old and in kindergarten. Sara and Scotty are triplets. Their brother Shawn unfortunately did not survive.

The Smith family are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and regularly attend and participate in church activities. Also, the family participates in other events and activities offered in the community. The Smith children are involved in a variety of sports through the local Parks and Recreation Department.
Family Religious Beliefs and Practices

The Church of Latter Day Saints (LDS), places, as a core value, great importance on establishing and maintaining the traditional family. They believe that families are created to spend eternity together. (LDS official literature) The LDS church offers numerous resources that support families of its members. These include but are not limited to: economic support and guidance, care for elderly members, bereavement support, help for drug/alcohol, and other addictions, and resources that offer encouragement and support to families with members who have special needs. The LDS church also places great value on its members actively participating in bettering their own communities.

Description of case study student

Sara is an outgoing, friendly six year old girl who is in a general education kindergarten class. She is the product of a multiple birth, one of two surviving triplets. Sara was born extremely premature at 28 weeks gestation. As a newborn, she was in the NICU for 2 months before coming home with her brother Scotty. Sara is eligible to receive special education services under the criteria of Speech/Language Impairment. Sara exhibits a short attention span and benefits from sensory strategies to sustain attention and regulate arousal. She was enrolled in a special education preschool class for two years prior to entering kindergarten. Initially, a conversation was held with Sara’s mother to determine priorities and concerns about her child as she transitioned from preschool to kindergarten. Sara’s parents place a high priority on inclusion in the general education environment for elementary school with pull-out sessions for speech therapy.
and occupational therapy, as identified on her IEP, rather than placement in a self-contained class with mainstreaming opportunities. Parents are concerned that Sara could be negatively labeled as a special education student. Jenny’s’s experience as a teacher has provided her with context in formulating this value. However, the family recognize that there are benefits and challenges to both placements.

The following positive and negative aspects were identified and discussed prior to Sara’s transition to kindergarten:

**Placement in a general education classroom at home school**

For Scotty and Sara, being enrolled in the same kindergarten class is of great importance for a number of reasons. Both children are enrolled at their neighborhood school. Parents have prioritized placing both children in the same class for kindergarten and first grade. If Sara were to participate in a self-contained kindergarten class, she and Scotty would be at different schools, as special education kindergarten class is not offered at the family’s home school.

Research suggests that it is natural and appropriate for twins/multiples to be in the same class, at least in pre-school and early elementary grades, because of their shared pregnancy and birth, and therefore exhibit developmental needs common to multiples, but different from singleton peers (Preedy, 2006).

Jenny has been a volunteer at the elementary school for the past 6 years, and currently works in her children’s kindergarten class every Tuesday to support all of the students and teachers, which would be difficult if the children were at separate schools.
Amy also attended the school from kinder through 5th grade, and the family’s preference is that all their children do the same, as the family is a part of the school community and culture.

Currently, completing in-class assignments in the time allotted as well as homework time are areas of difficulty for Sara. However, Jenny works with her children at home to ensure that class and home work is completed. She feels her skills as an elementary teacher are very helpful in supporting Sara’s academic success.

**Placement in a self contained kindergarten class**

Participation in a class with a smaller teacher:student ratio; approximately 15 students with one teacher, and one or more assistants, in contrast to 27-31 students with one teacher in the general education class at her home school. Sara would also have mainstreaming opportunities into the general education class environment on site. Daily class work could be supported in a smaller setting, with more time for individual help and support if needed.

Having no guarantee that continued placement in a general education class will be the recommendation for first grade, Sara would be familiar with the setting at the site in which her SDC is located. Also, parents could apply for open-enrollment for Scotty as well, so that both siblings could go to first grade at the same school site. Although Scotty is currently exited from special education services, should the need arise, both children would be at the appropriate site to receive more intensive services.
At this time, Sara’s mother has concerns about her daughter’s peer interactions. Jenny states that Sara initiates interactions with peers and joins in activities of interest, but has difficulty sustaining engagement.

Several home visits and observations of the child at home were completed, as well as reviewing the child’s IEP goals, report card, and formal testing done in preschool to formulate a recommendation for kindergarten placement. In addition, a Social Skills checklist was completed by Jenny in December 2011, and again in April 2012. Because information gathered from the literature review indicated that targeting one specific skill to work on is better for the child and offers consistency in practice and measuring progress, the social skill of topic maintenance was selected as Sara’s mother stated concerns about her daughter’s “randomness” when conversing with peers at the beginning of the school year and continued to have concerns as the year progressed. Jenny’s observations of Sara in class when she volunteers are that Sara responds appropriately during structured in-class activities, but has difficulty during recess and unstructured times maintaining conversations with peers, due to off-topic comments or, to a lesser degree, perseverating on preferred themes, such as certain Disney characters.

**Identified challenges for Sara’s inclusion class**

Inclusion in a general education class for Sara presents both opportunities and challenges. Socially, Sara wants to engage with peers, and does, for brief periods. However, she perseverates on preferred topics such as Disney characters, and has difficulty expanding on her play to collaborate with peers, her attention drifts, or she makes “random” comments which her peers do not know how to respond to or work
with. Her mother Jenny is concerned that this makes Sara “stand out” during class activities and recess at school, which could have a negative impact on her acceptance among her peers. While she feels competent to support her daughter’s academic success, Jenny would like guidance and strategies to use to support Sara’s specific social skill needs at home.

**Purpose of Intervention**

The goal of the interventions created for this case study was to provide Sara’s parents with the tools they can use at home to support their child’s social skill development. Collaborating with Sara’s mother to create appropriate interventions that can be done within daily family activities will help strengthen Sara’s social skill development. Strategies to support social competency with peers, such as simple games, were implemented and modeled for parent to use with her daughter at home. A parent resource book with information and additional activities for Sara will be provided and added to as the case study progresses.

**Data Collection Measures**

Home visits were conducted to gather information from Jenny about her preferences for kindergarten placement and document any concerns she may have for her daughter. During these conversations, Sara’s progress in school and other activities, such as her soccer team were also discussed. Information was obtained regarding family priorities and routines in order to provide appropriate interventions that could be done in the home.
Sara was observed by her mother during recess with peers to get a baseline for peer interactions, as well as develop a sense of the social skills deficits at this time. Currently, per conversations with her mother, concerns regarding Sara’s social skill deficits stem from Jenny’s observations of her at recess and conversations with Sara’s kindergarten teacher, stating that she engages in brief episodes of social interactions with peers, but has difficulty reading social cues, sustaining a topic of conversation, and moving from her preferred themes to include ideas of other children.

The researcher observed Sara’s interactions with her mother and siblings in the home as they engaged in family routines. The researcher engaged in conversations with Sara and her siblings as well as introducing the interventions with Sara and coaching Jenny.

**Parent Interviews**

During the initial interview, Parent priorities and concerns for their child as she transitioned to kindergarten were discussed. Parents value placement in the general education classroom, because they do not want their child to be perceived as “being different” from her peers. They are comfortable with her receiving special ed. services either in the classroom, or in pull-out sessions. Also, because their child is a multiple, they want her to be in the same classroom as her brother, who no longer requires special education services to support his education and development.

Because the interview process began while Sara was still in preschool, a decision was made to wait on selecting possible strategies to support Sara’s inclusion until she began kindergarten. After one month in kindergarten, her mother identified task
completion as one area of need for Sara, with the understanding that “tasks” included class homework assignments. Social skill deficits were also identified at this time. After two months in school, Sara’s mother felt comfortable with strategies she had developed to support her daughter’s completion of homework assignments and those not completed in class. Jenny felt that Sara continues to need support in developing social relationships with peers, and it was decided that the greatest area of interest to the family lie in learning strategies that help Sara develop positive relationships with peers at school, across a variety of environments.

Information gathered from Parent interviews regarding Sara’s ability relative to topic-maintenance was used to measure progress.

**Student Records**

A review of Sara’s educational records was conducted to identify previous and current social skills identified as areas of need on her IEP, as well as her progress reports and report cards. In addition, a review of the K-SEALS (Kaufman Survey of Early Academic and Language Skills) testing that was completed prior to Sara’s transition to kindergarten to identify baseline skills she had. In both mathematical and language/literacy subdomains, Sara had scores within the average range. A Vineland Adaptive Skills survey was completed by Sara’s preschool teacher prior to her transition to kindergarten. The survey answers revealed areas of concern in the domains of: social/emotional development; sensory processing; expressive and receptive language.
For the case study, Sara’s mother completed two Social Skill surveys; one prior to implementing any interventions, and one post. The information on the Social Skill surveys was compared to measure progress.

**Interventions**

Strategies to support social competency with peers, such as simple games*, were implemented and modeled for parent to use with student at home. Strategies may be adjusted, amended, changed, and/or new strategies may be applied based upon Sara’s progress. Although she does not have a formal diagnosis, Sara exhibits deficits in social skills similar to students with autism and ADD. Therefore, practices used to support the ASD population as well as students with ADD were selected and modified to support Sara’s individual needs.

After gaining an understanding of family social routines at home, an attempt was made to include a simple board game that would reinforce topic maintenance skills and turn-taking. The game was “Guess Who?”, a game of questions in which players identify which character card on a game board the other has selected. This did not work on a number of levels. The actual game was distracting visually, as well as structurally unstable. Secondly, the theme of the particular version of this game was a Disney movie, one that held no interest for Sara.

A simple category game was created. The elements of the game are: a card identifying a category of interest, e.g., farm animals. The components are: index cards (3) with topics written on them and/or stickers depicting a topic. The cards are placed face-down on the space between two players. A small bumpy ball is used to facilitate
turn-taking. The game is played as follows: the first player turns over a card, revealing a topic. The player is holding the ball. The player says a word or words relating to the topic. For example, if the topic is “school”, the player may say “computer”, “classroom”, “recess”, etc. The first player tosses the ball to the second player, who repeats the first player’s word and offers a different one, then tosses the ball. The phrase “You said ___. I say ____.” is modeled by the first player. Catching the ball cues the next player that it is his/her turn. Each player repeats the previous word offered as part of their turn. When an off-topic answer is given, a new topic card is selected by the other player. This game was somewhat successful when played with the case-study student and adult, in this case, the researcher. During regular family routines, such as Weekly Game Night, games and activities have been introduced and/or created that target topic-maintenance with modeling and support to enhance her skills in this area. A speech and language pathologist contributed two other activities which focused on pragmatics and topic maintenance, and also had visual and motor components, such as putting a marble in a cup when an on-topic response is given.
Findings

Initially, Sara’s mother indicated on the social skills survey completed in December 2011 that Sara had mixed skills in the social domain, and that topic maintenance was an area of weakness for her. Playing a game that focused on reinforcing topic-maintenance skill was somewhat successful when played with only Sara and adult, in this case, the researcher. Compared with “Guess Who”, this game was easier to implement and hold Sara’s attention because of the motor component of tossing or catching a ball to facilitate turn-taking. However, while she played the game with an adult well, when playing with another child (Scotty), Sara had difficulty sequencing the steps in the game and maintaining focus on the topic, indicating that her skill maintenance may be dependent upon the added support of a more competent adult/peer until she has developed more consistent ability with staying on topic. This result points to the need for more structured interventions for Sara at this time. Sara’s mother was able to include interventions within the family’s daily activities, such as dinner time, and family game night. Because the interventions were structured to fit within family routines, Sara’s mother reported that working with her daughter within the context of daily activities was more natural, and that strategies used during the interventions could then be practiced incidentally at other times as well.

The more recent survey, completed by her mother in April, 2012, shows that Sara’s topic-maintenance skills have improved at home. Sara has also matured since the beginning of the case study, and been exposed to peers who model appropriate social skills. It is likely, therefore, that all of these factors play some role in Sara’s
improvement in social skills. Sara’s mother reports that her observations of Sara in school during recess show that Sara continues to “frequently” initiate and join in play with peers for brief periods.

At the close of the case study, Sara’s mother completed a survey regarding her own participation in the process. She stated that she feels she is more knowledgeable, and better prepared to advocate for her daughter and collaborate with Sara’s teacher and service providers for her daughter’s educational benefit.

The findings have described Sara and her family’s outcomes after participating in the case study. The following section will address the methods and findings as they relate to the literature.
Discussion

The purpose of this case study was to work with a family in developing and implementing interventions that would help their fully-included child improve a specific, parent-identified social skill at home. Collaboration with the family was important, because it gave the researcher understanding in crafting interventions the family could use within their daily activities. This would be helpful for their child in two ways: a) the child would have a context and meaning for practicing skills, and b), her parents would be able to include the interventions as a part of her day, rather than as “extra” homework. Collaboration with parents was also important because it built a shared power base in helping Sara achieve her goals. Sara’s mother continues to have concerns about her daughter’s social interactions. While her teacher reports that Sara functions well in class relative to class routine and behavior expectations, Sara’s mother recognizes that Sara’s ability to make and keep friends is important now, and also for her future as a student in a classroom community. Sara’s mother wants to be proactive in supporting her daughter’s social development.

For children with disabilities who are transitioning to kindergarten from preschool, the teacher can support appropriate social interactions in the environment via direct instruction, structure and routine, and peer/adult modeling of expected behaviors. During unstructured times within the school day, breakdowns in social skills become more apparent as the nature of interactions moves from being adult-directed to child-directed. Therefore, providing families with resources and strategies to support their
child’s social skills development is just as important as providing them with strategies to support math and literacy skills, as they relate to student success as a whole.

The case-study began while Sara was in preschool, and continued throughout most of kindergarten. Because of the transition, identifying social skills in need of support changed over time to fit the new environment and demands. Also, these strategies were implemented only at home, and may not be readily generalized by Sara to the school environment. Based upon the researcher’s observations and interactions with Sara at home, the expectation is that continued support from her speech pathologist at school to help with topic maintenance will help her to generalize skills practiced at home. A speech and language pathologist was consulted and contributed two other activities which focused on pragmatics and topic maintenance, which were introduced and discussed with the parent and included in the resource notebook.

Sara demonstrates areas of relative strength in social skills, such as empathy, that could be built upon. Within her daily activities, both at school and with her family, Sara has exposure to peers and adults who model appropriate social interactions. Sara has shown improvement in topic maintenance, and she has participated in interventions in which modeling was a key component. Given her ability to initiate interactions with peers, it would be beneficial for Sara to be partnered with peers who demonstrate competence in social skills that Sara needs help with, perhaps engaging in a preferred game at recess.
Limitations

This case study has several limitations. It was a case study involving one family and their child. The skill identified as an area of need for the individual student are reflective of the individual and not a general definition of social skills. Given limited resources and time, opportunities for generalization were not built into this case study. Sara’s current teacher was not involved in the social skills training, because the interventions were done in Sara’s home.

Implications for Practice

The California Department of Education identifies the following as core standards for kindergarteners: in language arts, under speaking and listening, that students will be able to communicate with peers and adults; in health, that students will be able to identify and interact appropriately in relationships with peers and adults.

Currently, kindergarten social skills that promote a positive learning environment, such as raising one’s hand before speaking, taking turns, walking in the classroom, and following class routine, are taught directly in conjunction with core content. Social skills involving peer social relationships, such as conversation skills, sportsmanship, and cooperation, are not taught within the classroom, or during recess, when teachers are not present.

Social skills should be an area of focus for kindergarten

Much research has been done to develop an understanding about the correlation between social competency and school success. The studies read have indicated a clear connection between the two, categorizing social skills along with nutrition and safety as
prerequisites for optimal learning. This would indicate that along with student nutrition, drug education, and other health-support programs, formal social skills education could be helpful in boosting academic achievement for students in need of support. Just as teachers support students’ progress in academic areas, support should be available to promote social competency.

**Teachers should have a comprehensive understanding of their students’ behaviors and interactions across activities and settings** Although recess isn’t considered instructional time, enriching the environment with access to activities and materials that promote social interactions between all class members can have a positive effect on students’ entire day in class. Also, consideration should be given to recruiting older students as mentors for kindergarteners, to foster inclusion within the larger school environment and model social skills for younger students.

**Home-based activities (homework) should be provided to reinforce social skills**

It may be beneficial to provide families with activities that support their child’s social skill needs, but again, the need for individual tailoring that reflect the student’s need(s) and the family priorities require ongoing communication and collaboration between teachers, families, and the community.

**Parent-Teacher collaboration** Teachers, families, and the community can collaborate to support social competency for students. By working together, students gain a sense of the connectedness between themselves and the varied environments in which they
interact. Also, teachers, community members, students and their families can reinforce pro-social behaviors, which support generalization of skills for the student.
Conclusion

Effective collaboration between families and educational professionals is critical to successful inclusion education for students with and without disabilities. Research has indicated that acquisition of social skills is a factor for overall school success for students. For students who require help with learning social skills, direct and incidental instruction within the general education classroom environment and at home may help support participation both in and out of the classroom. As inclusion becomes more the trend in education for students with special needs, and the ratio between students and teachers increases, it is clear that more research is needed to develop effective strategies that work in different environments.
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