"SHE IS OUR LITTLE SISTER": Reflections about inclusion

by Nora Thompson

Nora Thompson has been a teacher at Galileo Early Childhood Center in Mason, Michigan for four years. Nora's undergraduate degree is in special education and her graduate work is in child development. She has been teaching since 1980 in a variety of settings, including an early childhood program for children with physical impairments in Lansing, Michigan and a county-wide home visiting program for infants and toddlers with disabilities. Operated by Ingham Intermediate School District, Galileo ECC is housed in an old house on three acres and has two classes with 15 children per class. Each mixed-aged class (children from two to five years old) includes three children with special rights. Nora participated in a study tour of the Reggio Emilia preschool program in 2001. She is also the North American Reggio Emilia Alliance (NAREA) Michigan membership coordinator.

When I was a child growing up in suburban Detroit, I had a friend named Michael, who had muscular dystrophy. I used to swim with him in his pool, and eat jelly sandwiches with him and his mother. He did not attend our local school but, instead, had to take a bus in order to attend a school for children with disabilities, in a segregated setting. I never understood this and always felt sad that he could not come to our school. This childhood friendship and experience inspired me to pursue work as a teacher in an inclusive setting, where all children could be together.

My reflections on inclusion are a result of my personal experience as a teacher in an early childhood center, where children with special rights are included fully as members of our classroom community. Galileo Early Childhood Center's philosophy includes the following assertions:

- Children are strong and capable, and are competent authors of experience, knowledge and meaning.
- Children with disabilities have the right to be included with typically developing peers in the community.
- Partnerships between families, community members and the center are fundamental to the growth of children.

We prefer to use the term "children with special rights," as suggested by Reggio educators, instead of "children with special needs." We believe that children are capable and full of potential. We don't see them as "needy." We believe that this is a stronger way to view such children.

I have found that it is essential for educators working in inclusive settings to have a strong knowledge of child development as well as various strategies for listening and responding with great sensitivity to children with special rights. At Galileo, our professional development is ongoing and includes regular collaborative meetings. We work together with parents in observation, evaluation and planning. Parents and teachers view the education of the children as a shared responsibility. For us, the concept of professional development has been extended to include the importance of learning from parents, therapists and the children themselves.

We have learned that our environment must be flexible, accessible and encourage communication. At Galileo, we choose not to use institutional furniture from catalogs for children with special rights, which would set them apart from the others, unless it is absolutely necessary. For example, in the inception of our program, I purchased wooden chairs with arms for all the children to use, instead of buying one specialized chair for a child with special rights, who needed extra support. If it is necessary to adapt materials for a particular child, we often make the same adapted materials for everyone. All therapy, such as physical therapy or speech therapy, is offered in the context of the classroom and whoever wants to be involved in the therapy session is welcomed.

At Galileo, children are offered multiple options for learning, which takes place in the context of daily routines. Specific skills are targeted and learned by embedding them within the experiences of the day.

Through the years, I have learned much from my direct experience with children and from listening to their voices, spoken and unspoken. These voices have shaped my work. I believe it is important to truly look at the image of the child we all hold. I look at children as capable, and I believe they possess thoughts and ideas of great value. If this is true, we must rely more on children as we include those with special rights in our community. The following are some reflections and experiences about children's abilities and sensitivities.

Establishing Friendships

Some of the reading I had previously done on inclusion, suggested setting up "friendship groups" of children, in order to help include those with special rights more fully. For these groups, teachers are encouraged to pick children that would be most compatible with the child with special rights and provide activities that would develop their friendship. In my experience, I have found that we can trust children to create these groups on their own and we do not have to structure groups for them.

I would like to share a story about children's capabilities in this regard. There is a child in our program named Melina, who is three years old. Melina has William's syndrome, a feeding tube and is small in stature. She is a little wobbly climbing stairs and can be easily disturbed by loud noises. She likes to talk and interact with others. If I were to structure a friendship pair for her, I would choose a somewhat

quiet child, who wouldn't disturb her with loud noises and one that would be sensitive to her fragile nature.

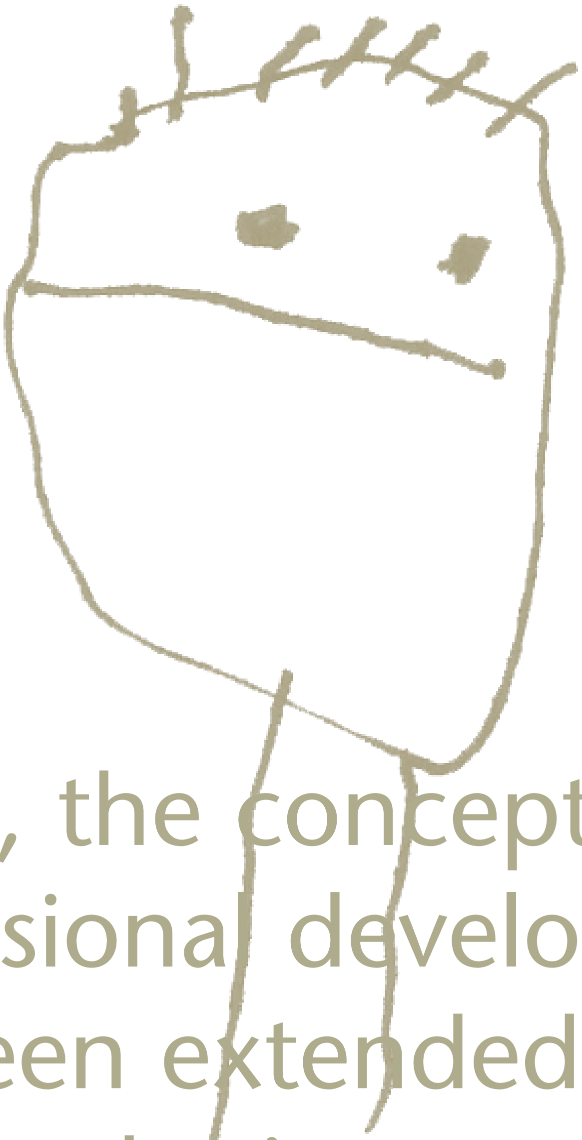
Also in our program is a child named Eli, who does not fit this description. He is a child of limitless energy who bursts into school each day. He is loud and active, and likes to jump off furniture and pretend to kick like a Ninja turtle. I would not have picked him as a friendship partner for Melina. One day, the children and teachers were outside participating in a parachute activity. Melina was watching, and seemed a little intimidated by the parachute. Eli noticed her and walked over, beckoning her to come under the parachute. He put his arm around her and gently spoke to her until she finally joined him. This was the first of many moments of kindness and affection between the two children.

Eli has invited Melina to join him in dance activities and dramatic play ideas. He has accompanied her when she has a class "job" like holding open the door, in order to provide support. Once, when Eli and another boy were eating pretend food, Melina watched briefly and left the area. Eli noticed she had left without participating. He took a banana and followed her to where she had gone, giving it to her to "eat." When he returned, the other boy asked why he had left to give Melina the banana. Eli said, "She is our little sister." He considers Melina to be an important member of our school family.

Once, when Eli was hurt at school, Melina immediately came to him. She was worried about him and remained with him until he stopped crying. She put her hand on his shoulder and said, "Are you okay, honey?"

Children as Interpreters

Children seem to have the ability to interpret what other children say or mean at times when we, as teachers, have difficulty. There are several children in our program who have apraxia and their speech is very difficult to understand. I used to struggle during community group meetings to understand what they



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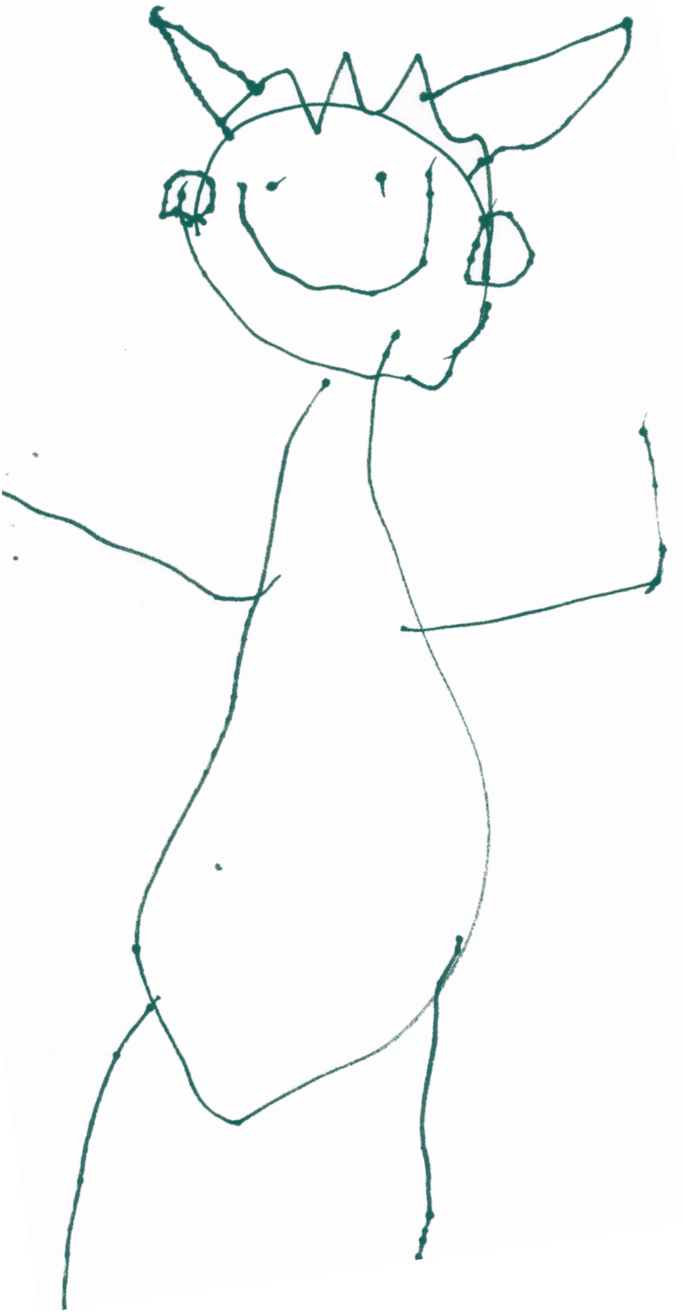
were saying. I have found that the other children can interpret for them, and assist them in either showing or saying what they mean. The children will also accept whatever is said by a child, who is difficult to understand, as though it was perfectly understandable. There is a strong thread of respect in our group meetings for what each has to offer.

Acceptance

When children with special rights are included in a program, the other children may ask questions about their particular disabilities. In our community meetings throughout the year, we emphasize the fact that there is something special about all of us. Some of us are afraid of dogs, some of us wear a hearing aid and some of us don't like to be touched by others. This establishes an atmosphere of acceptance. Once, when Melina had her shirt pulled up, a child saw the feeding tube in her stomach and asked about it. Melina told the child what it was and her explanation seemed to satisfy him. He seemed to accept that Melina's tube was her special something and was glad to know what it was. I didn't feel it was necessary to have a class discussion on feeding tubes or to give a more detailed explanation. I trusted the children would take care of this on their own.



I find children are much more accepting of differences than we expect them to be. There was a child in our program, who wanted to wear a dishtowel on his head all day. He always wore it in a particular way, with the point of the towel facing a certain direction. I wondered if children would tease him or pull off the towel but I never saw anyone do this. In fact, if he was upset because his towel had slid off center, other children would help him straighten it out, and ask him if they did it right.

There was another child in our center, who would come in each day and lie on the floor underneath a large cushion for about fifteen minutes, before he felt confident to begin the day at school. Children instinctively knew that this was his routine, and they were comfortable with it. They often left little offerings of a puzzle or a book, which he could use when he was ready to join the classroom community. When I think of these experiences and interactions, I wonder why we, as teachers, feel the need to intervene and explain so often. I think if we stood back and observed, we would see that the children are able to accept and include the others very well.

Benefits for children who do not have identified special rights

Many speak of the benefits for children who have special rights when they are in an inclusive classroom. I think that there are also many benefits for those children who are not identified as having a particular disability. I think about a little boy in our school, whose father was dying of cancer. This boy wanted to play doctor all of the time. He wanted the others to be with him as he lay on the little bed in our little house. He did this daily for many weeks. Some children were tired of this play but there was a little girl with Down syndrome who loved it. Each day, she would take her place as the doctor, donning a white coat and a stethoscope, in order to examine him. Her ability and interest in replaying this over and over met the very deep emotional needs of this other child.

Children with special rights can clarify and make visible, feelings and values that others hold. Once, a child with Down syndrome named Sam came down with a fever at school. He laid in our little bed until his mother came. We all went upstairs except for a student teacher, who stayed with Sam. As we were going up the stairs, a child who didn't usually play with Sam asked to stay and "protect him" until his mother came. He stood at the door to our little house, guarding the sleeping Sam and leaving little flowers and handwritten notes on the blanket for him. After Sam's mother picked him up, the other boy came upstairs. I asked him about his time with Sam and he responded, "I didn't know I loved him." These are moments that have enriched and strengthened our school community.

Recently, a child in our program demonstrated his awareness of all the different voice qualities of the children in the class. Some have mostly unintelligible speech, and some have raspy or very high-pitched voices. This child began to mimic these different voices aloud one day, noting how different they all sounded. I happened to be tape recording the children individually that day, as I was interviewing them about something we had been discussing in our community meetings. When I tape recorded this little boy, he asked me to play it back so he could hear it. When he heard his voice, he became very quiet and asked me to play it again. He looked up at me and said, "*My* voice sounds very different, too." The documentation of his own voice allowed him to feel more accepting of differences among the others. This reflection through documentation can be very powerful.

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Children Solving Problems Together

I also believe that we can tackle difficult issues we encounter at school, by depending on the children themselves to provide solutions and strategies. Several years ago, there was a child in our program, who was aggressive and often pushed the other children when we were outdoors. This happened repeatedly and became a school issue. We decided to address this problem as a large group, knowing that discussing this behavior with all the children was a little risky. I began the discussion by commenting that I had noticed children pushing outside and that other children were falling down. I asked how the group felt about it and the children said things like, "It hurts" and "I feel scared." Then I asked what ideas they had about how to stop the pushing. At this point, I was sure that someone would identify the one child who was the main culprit and was concerned the discussion might develop into a group attack on this one boy. But this did not happen. Instead, many solutions were offered, such as "Put your hand out and say stop!" or "Tell the person who is pushing that

you don't like it!" The one child who was doing most of the pushing even offered a suggestion. We wrote all of these suggestions down and reviewed them together. For the next day or so, the children tried the suggested strategies and met again to review their results. This went on for a few weeks as we worked through the issue. This process truly felt like community-based action. These very young children showed that they could work together to solve a difficult situation without pointing a finger at the main offender.

A while ago, one of our parents shared her thoughts about her daughter, who has ITP (Immune thrombocytopenia purpura). She said she had taken her daughter, Julia, in for one of her frequent hospitalizations. While at the hospital, Julia said, "I want to go back to my family!" and her mother responded, "We're here!" Then Julia said, "No, I mean my school family!"

My hope is to create a place at our school, where we all feel like family ... a place where we all know that we each have our own issues, our own special something about us, where we are all accepted as we are for who we are. To me, this is what inclusion is all about.