

# Benefits of Integrated Classrooms



Illustrations by Sara Martin

**BY CAROL CUMMINGS**

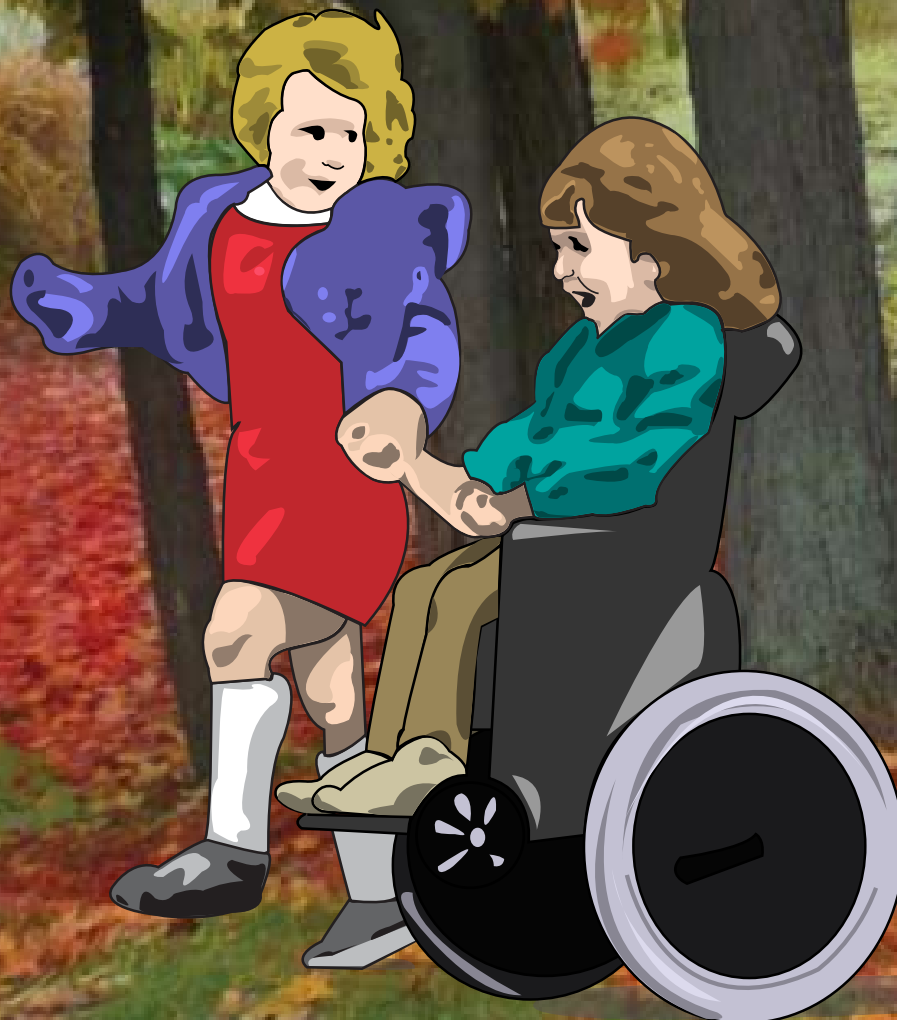
**SYLVIA DIETRICH, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF INTERDISCIPLINARY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AT WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY, BEGAN HER CAREER AS AN ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER. DURING THOSE YEARS, SHE HAD SEVERAL TYPICALLY DEVELOPING CHILDREN COME INTO HER CLASSROOM TO SERVE AS PEER TUTORS TO THE CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES. SHE BEGAN TO COMBINE HER SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSES WITH OTHER CLASSES OF CHILDREN THE SAME AGE AND BECAME INTERESTED IN THE ALLIANCES THAT BEGAN TO FORM BETWEEN TYPICALLY DEVELOPING YOUNG PEOPLE AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES.**

"I started to wonder if those connections developed in the early years, and, if so, were they typical of other friendships of kids that age, or did they look more like tutor/tutee or helper relationships," she explained.

These observations led her to consider a related topic in her doctoral studies: social experiences of children with and without disabilities in an inclusive preschool setting. This is still one of her primary research interests today. In her studies, Dr. Dietrich observed children playing together in a preschool setting. Their play habits were like those of all children; they played soccer, worked puzzles, wrestled, or engaged in "make believe" activities, such as pretending to be Superman, a pirate, or even a mommy.

"I discovered that, in these inclusive classrooms, kids engaged in friendships that were reflective of characteristics of other relationships during that age span," she said. "These relationships do exist and they look like relationships between typically developing children. They develop in the same way and go through the same stages of friendships. Some continue and some dissolve, just like all relationships."

*Dr. Dietrich said children with and without disabilities benefit from the number of professionals who deliver services in an integrated classroom, as well as highly trained teachers who are grounded in child development and instructional strategies and practices for kids with and without disabilities.*







But how did she know for sure they were actual reciprocal friendships? “Throughout my observations, children both with and without disabilities initiate contact, play, and inquire about friends if they are absent,” Dr. Dietrich said. “In interviews, children identified their peer as their friend and discussed qualities that made that person a friend. Parents also reported that their child talked about the peer at home, and the children spent time at one another’s homes in social situations.”

Dr. Dietrich said preschool children — with and without disabilities — reap abundant benefits from an integrated classroom. “Integrated classrooms are reflective of society, neighborhoods, and communities where individuals both with and without disabilities live, work, and play,” she said. “Children with disabilities have opportunities to interact with typically developing peers and practice social skills, enhanced language skills, and exposure to varied learning experiences. By the same token, kids without disabilities have the opportunity to develop understanding and compassion and learn about individuals with differences.”

Finally, Dr. Dietrich said children with and without disabilities benefit from the number of professionals who deliver services in an integrated classroom, as well as highly trained teachers who are grounded in child development and instructional strategies and practices for kids with and without disabilities.

Besides her preschool classroom research, Dr. Dietrich is also involved with the Center to Inform Personnel Preparation Policy and Practice in Early Intervention and Pre School Education. The purpose of this Center is to collect, synthesize, and analyze information related to:

- certification and licensure requirements for personnel working with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers who have special needs and their families;
- the quality of training programs that prepare these professionals; and
- the supply and demand of professionals representing all disciplines who provide both ECSE and EI services.

“Information gathered will be used to identify critical gaps in current knowledge and to design and conduct a program of research at the national, state, institutional, and direct provider level to address these gaps,” Dr. Dietrich explained. “This program of research and policy formulation will yield information vital to developing policies and practices at all levels of government, including institutions of higher learning. By researching issues related to teacher preparation, we design teacher preparation programs that prepare highly qualified individuals who, in turn, provide services to our very young children.”

Dr. Dietrich’s third research interest relates to what’s going on in the field — current practices in early childhood classrooms. “Currently, technology has been effectively integrated into the preschool classroom with computers, learning centers, presentation of stories, and one-on-one computer instruction,” she said. “The trend is to take that technology to the next level, making curriculum available to diverse learners. The classrooms are employing ‘active boards’ and software programs to facilitate transitions from one activity to the next.”

Dr. Dietrich is interested in the long-term implications of current classrooms — beyond the immediate community of WKU to the field at large. “I bring information on best teaching practices back to the classroom to my students,” she explained. “We serve our various constituents, such as Head Start, the Big Red School, and area preschools, and it serves and informs the field at large. When I look at our students, I see them striving to make a difference.”

Dr. Dietrich received both her B.S. in Special and Elementary Education and her M.A. in Special Education from Eastern Kentucky University. She received her Ph.D. in Special Education and Inclusive Early Childhood Education from the University of Tennessee.

How her work affects the average citizen is the guiding question that drives all of her research interests. “I want to make sure that what I do reaches beyond just me and makes kids’ futures better and brighter.” ■