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Researching Young Children's Lived Experiences of Loneliness: Pedagogical Implications for Linguistically Diverse Students

This article addresses the pedagogical implications of linguistically diverse students' experiences of loneliness in elementary school. The study presented was derived from a larger investigation of young children's lived experiences of loneliness. A review of interviews with 10 linguistically diverse students in the original study revealed that these children experience the loneliness of being excluded, unwanted, and disliked, as well as empty of happiness, as a result of their inability to communicate appropriately with their peers. The students' loss of self-esteem and sense of self-worth and the development of learned helplessness syndrome are directly related to the persistence of their experiences of loneliness over a long period. Providing opportunities for meaningful social interactions in activities that do not require the English language as a sole means of expression of their knowledge and skills and teachers' effective use of nonverbal communication can be employed as strategies to foster a sense of belonging to the peer group and to promote hopefulness, which can lead to a reduction of feelings of loneliness in young linguistically diverse children.

L'auteure s'intéresse aux incidences pédagogiques du sentiment de solitude qu'éprouvent des élèves allophones pendant leurs années scolaires à l'élémentaire. L'article présente une étude tirée d'une plus grande recherche sur le sentiment de solitude qu'éprouvent les jeunes enfants. Une analyse d'entrevues passées avec 10 élèves allophones lors du projet de recherche original indique que ces enfants, incapables de communiquer adéquatement avec leurs paires, vivent la solitude et la tristesse qui proviennent de l'expérience d'être exclus, indésirés et pas appréciés. La perte d'estime de soi, la diminution de la sûreté de soi-même, ainsi que le développement du syndrome d'incapacité apprise qui s'ensuivent sont directement liés au fait que leur sentiment de solitude persiste. Le recours aux stratégies telles la création d'occasions propices aux interactions sociales significatives lors d'activités qui ne nécessitent pas l'usage de l'anglais comme seul moyen de faire connaître ses connaissances et ses habiletés ou l'emploi efficace de la communication non-verbale peut s'avérer utile pour favoriser un sentiment d'appartenance au groupe de paires et pour encourager un optimisme qui fait diminuer le sentiment de solitude chez les jeunes allophones.

When I came to this school I was really lonely because I didn't know how to speak English so I couldn't make any friends. I felt really sad. I felt that I have something less than anybody else. I felt different. Not only that I didn't speak English, but everything else was different from what I was used to. I was a complete stranger.

Mustafa's recollection of his experiences of loneliness during the first months in school after his family immigrated from Iran reveals a world where he was no longer able to communicate with others, or understand what they were saying or what games they were playing. Yet the emotional and social adversities that inability to communicate create in a rapidly growing number of

linguistically diverse students are often overlooked. There are teachers whose main concerns for these and other children remain with academics and whose frustrations are associated with the sense of helplessness and failure in "transmitting" the knowledge believed to be vital for students' success in life. But is the academic achievement really that important for linguistically diverse students when they are struggling painfully to make sense of their new lives? "The realities are that it's not just academics any more: it's the whole child and that means what *their* home is like, and *their* culture and *their* language" (Olsen & Mullen, 1990, p. 76). The "whole child," however, also includes the child in his or her school environment—an environment where they spend most of their waking hours. How does it feel to be different from most of the students in the class? Is it appropriate for teachers to expect linguistically diverse students to be involved and motivated learners while they feel like complete strangers in the school environment? How can teachers help these students become accepted members of the classroom community if they cannot rely on a common language to communicate? These are the main questions explored in this article.

Looking Back at the Original Study

As a non-native English speaker who has had first-hand experience of loneliness and isolation because of lack of conversational English skills, and whose child twice went through the challenges of adapting to new cultures and new languages in school, I became personally and professionally involved in my doctoral study of young children's feelings of loneliness and isolation at school. However, that study, which was carried out from a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective (van Manen, 1990), did not aim at exploring the experiences of loneliness in school for children from diverse backgrounds, nor did it explore the reasons for children's feelings of loneliness. Rather, it aimed at identifying the common themes or meanings that would lead to uncovering the essence of childhood loneliness.

My research interest in investigating minority language students' feelings of loneliness in particular was triggered recently by a vivid description of the isolation of an English-as-a-second-language child provided by one of my undergraduate students during her field placement. Leah's sensitive observation, which is discussed below, made me realize that in my doctoral research I had missed the opportunity to investigate the possibly unique aspects of linguistically diverse children's experiences of loneliness. It motivated me to look back at the experiential accounts I had previously collected from these children with the focus on the pedagogical significance of their feelings of loneliness.

This article, therefore, centers on the experiences of loneliness revealed through my interviews with 10 linguistically diverse students (6 boys and 4 girls) who were participants in the original study. Seven were in grade 4, and three were in grade 3 at the time of the interviews. The interviews revealed their experiences of loneliness when they first came to school in kindergarten or grades 1 or 2. All children were proficient in conversational English at the time of the interview.

Research Methodology

Research on children's self-perceptions of feeling lonely is a fairly recent area of inquiry (Asher, Hymel, & Williams, 1990). Cassidy and Asher (1992) suggest that feelings of loneliness in kindergarten and grade 1 cohere with perceptions of having few friends, being socially incompetent, and not having their basic needs for friendship satisfied. The children's responses to questions regarding what loneliness is ("being sad and alone"), where it comes from ("nobody to play with"), and what one might do to overcome the feelings of loneliness ("find a friend," p. 355), suggest that their conceptions of loneliness may be similar to those of adults.

Although these studies attempt to uncover the meaning of loneliness for young children, they employ a "loneliness and dissatisfaction questionnaire" (Cassidy & Asher, 1992, p. 352) delimiting the in-depth examination of the lived phenomenon. Attempts to produce quantifiable data may lead researchers to fit children's everyday reality into the dimensions of previously developed models. The understanding of children's experiences of loneliness should start from its description rather than its definition as a concept. Understanding everyday experiences such as loneliness is

> unlikely to occur through the analysis of aggregated data collected from people trying to fit their experiences into categories created by our data collection instruments. Paper-and-pencil measures of loneliness and related phenomena are crude reflections of a feeling or experience. (Stokes, 1989, p. 59)

The phenomenological method does not aim to isolate the phenomenon in order to study it, but rather to uncover its meaning as a "unity of a significant whole" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 60). Phenomenology as a human science research methodology is concerned with questions of meaning so as to understand the significance of experience. Human science requires the researcher to become engaged in a dialogue with the participants. Thus when with children, human science research could be viewed as a dialogue with children (Beekman, 1983). It is a particularly suitable paradigm for studying the phenomenon of children's loneliness and the influence of loneliness in children's lives. Human science expects the researcher to engage in a dialogue with the participants in the research and carefully analyze "the diverse possibilities inherent in the dialogue between adults and children" (Beekman, 1983, p. 37). The dialogue between the researcher and the participant is also a dialogue between the "ordinary expression of the life-world" and the scientific expressions of psychology conceived as a human science (Giorgi, Fisher, & Murray, 1975, p. 99).

Phenomenology emphasizes lived phenomena precisely as they are lived because it "affirms the primacy of the life world as a point of departure for research over scientific explanations of the same phenomena" (Giorgi et al., 1975, p. 99). Lived experience as the starting point and the end of phenomenological research (van Manen, 1990) can provide insights into how loneliness is experienced and how it is different from the experience of being bored, separated from loved ones, or by oneself.

Van Manen (1990) points out that lived experiences gather hermeneutic significance as we gather them reflectively and give them memory. Through interpretative acts and the process of phenomenological reduction, the re-

searcher assigns meanings to the phenomena of life. But to thematize these implicit meanings, the researcher first needs to collect many concrete examples of the experience of interest as it is lived by those who experienced it.

The themes of loneliness that emerged through in-depth conversations with 10 linguistically diverse children are interpreted here. In brief, the challenge of communicating appropriately with their peers seemed to be the predominant theme in their everyday life in school, creating a sense of loneliness and isolation.

Methods and Procedures

The conversations with the participants were conducted in a small, secluded office in the elementary school so that the interviews could be conducted without disturbance. It also provided the children with a a familiar and secure environment where they felt comfortable. However, as a researcher I was faced with the challenge of initiating a conversation with the children about their personal experiences of loneliness. Literature on loneliness suggests that "lonely people are reluctant to disclose their condition" and that "loneliness is more often discussed with family and friends than a helping professional" (Perlman & Joshi, 1989, p. 63). In addition, given the young age of the participants, I was concerned with their abilities to express orally and describe in detail their lived experiences of loneliness. These possible obstacles created the need to find an innovative approach to initiating a dialogue that could lead to disclosure of their feelings of loneliness. I needed to find a "door" to these children's life worlds.

The best way for a researcher to enter a person's life world is to participate in it (van Manen, 1990). The life world is a complex unit of experiences, and the meaning of the experience of research interest lies in its complexity. By the *life world* phenomenologists mean "the everyday world as it is lived by all of us prior to explanations and theoretical interpretations of any kind" (Giorgi et al., 1975, p. 99). Because the study aimed at understanding young children's experiences of loneliness, it was important for me to share an experience with a child that is central to his or her life world. It is well accepted that play is an essential means for children's development. In addition, it requires and creates a sense of togetherness. The research situation itself is a lived situation that implies an interpersonal context with a dialectic exchange between the researcher and the participant. Thus it seemed that to gain access to the experience of young children, I had to become involved in a play activity where I could talk to them while remaining attentively aware of how it was for the children. This involvement allowed me to realize fully the importance of the play situation for both the children and me in the process of establishing a close relationship that could allow us to be engaged in a conversation. Thus the door to enter the life world of these children was to generate a genuine play situation as a beginning of our conversations. To this end I decided to develop a board game.

The Feeling Game

Developing a game is a rather difficult task, and I would not have undertaken it if I had not had previous professional experience in developing toys and games in my country of origin, Bulgaria. Moreover, this game had to have a

particular content and rules for it to enable me to gain access to children's experiences of loneliness. Communication board games have been broadly used in analytic child psychotherapy, especially with children who find it difficult to respond to traditional approaches that require self-disclosure to the therapist. It is widely agreed that even the most reticent and negative child will usually play a game with the therapist, as such play is not viewed as being self-disclosing by the child and is usually seen as more pleasant than being confronted directly by the therapist (Frey, 1986).

However, the game that I developed called *How Do They Feel?* was not designed to serve a therapeutic purpose; it was designed to orient children toward oral expression of their feelings, to facilitate conversation. Language is the major means of communication, and phenomenology tries to make more rigorous this universal means by providing adequate contexts for all descriptions (Giorgi et al., 1975). The name of the game was intended to provide a cue to the child regarding its thematic content. The game included one game board, four markers (different colors), and 40 cards that bore concise descriptions of situations in a variety of school contexts. The game was appropriate for children from kindergarten to grade 4. Single printed words were used as prompts to aid children to identify and name the feeling of the person involved in a given situation (in the process of the game-playing activity) and to assist the interview process (after the game-playing activity). The words chosen were *proud, bored, sad, happy, angry,* and *lonely.* The choice of the words *bored, sad, angry,* and *lonely* was based on my thematic analysis of the results reported by the studies of children's self-perception of loneliness (Asher et al., 1990; Cassidy & Asher, 1992), as well as the descriptions of the feelings most commonly expressed by lonely people (Fromm-Reichmann, 1959; Margalit, 1994; Sullivan, 1953; Weiss, 1987). In addition, research on children's understanding of everyday emotions suggests that preschool children can produce many labels, including *happy, sad,* and *angry* after the age of 3 (Michailson & Lewis, 1985). The words *happy* and *proud* were chosen not only because they were age-appropriate, but also because I did not want the game to focus solely on unpleasant feelings. By including these words I intended to "lighten up" the process of game playing and give the children an opportunity to talk about pleasant experiences as well.

All the chosen words—*bored, sad, angry,* and *lonely,* as well as *happy* and *proud*—could be interchanged to describe the feeling a person had in a given situation. This also allowed children flexibility in their choice depending on the cultural meaning attached to an emotional experience. Cross-cultural comparisons indicate that emotions downplayed or left unidentified in some cultures are central to how other cultures make sense of experiences (Kuebli, 1994). Emotions such as pride, shame, and sadness have a different meaning in Chinese, Japanese, and American cultures (Levy, 1984; Lewis, 1992; Stipek, Weiner, & Li, 1989).

The following are examples of situations, described on the playing cards for which the use of the words *bored, sad, angry,* and *lonely* could be equally appropriate:

"Why don't you play with your space models?" asked mother. "But mom, I played with them this morning. There is nothing to do now!" said Andy.
How was Andy feeling?

Kim's best friend just moved to another city. "I wish he were here now. I really miss him," said Kim to himself and sighed.
How was Kim feeling?

Brenda sat staring at the ground. She didn't even notice she was hungry. "Why didn't Amy invite me to her party?—she invited everyone else," Brenda wondered.
How was Brenda feeling?

"Look guys, I've got a new ball," said Harry. "Do you want to try it?" "No, we are playing something else, don't you see? We are playing 'Let's get lost.'"
How was Harry feeling?

While answering the question on the card children had the opportunity to choose the word on the board that they felt was the most pertinent to the person's feelings in that particular situation. For example, the child could choose the words *bored* or *sad* if he or she had felt that way in an experience similar to that described on card number 1. Another child, who felt lonely in a similar situation, could choose the word *lonely* to describe how Andy felt. The children's responses to the situation described on card number 3, for example, included the words *sad, lonely,* and *angry* to name Brenda's feelings.

At the beginning of the game I explained to the children that there was no right or wrong choice of a word, and that the only restriction was to use one of the words on the board. Also, when it was my turn to play I asked the children to help me with my choice of words, which allowed for a short discussion about why one word might be more appropriate than another for a particular situation. Thus the choices made by the child allowed me to reflect on the meaning each individual child attached to the described situation. I was also able to use the information gathered indirectly in our follow-up conversation.

The four-step game-playing procedure consisted of:

Step 1. Reading the words on the board by the child or me, depending on the child's level of reading skills.

Step 2. Asking the child to say something that he or she knew about each word on the board.

Step 3. Taking turns in attributing one of the words on the board to the situations described on the cards as read by the child or me (depending on the child's level of reading skills). Then moving a marker to the spot on the board, which had the same word and the same color on it. The player whose marker reached the End position first won the game.

Step 4. The winner had to choose one of the words on the board and tell about one time he or she felt that way.

For the purpose of the study the order of the cards was prearranged so the child could be the winner. If the child did not choose the word *lonely* to tell about one such experience of his or her own (which was the case except for one child), I invited the child to tell me about when she or he felt lonely at school. The transition from talking about other people's feelings to one's own was so

smooth that the children responded openly and willingly to further questions. Thus the game-playing gradually became a conversation.

The Themes of Loneliness

All conversations were transcribed as closely as possible to how they were recorded so as to preserve the flavor of the young children's speech. Then I read each of the descriptions that was gathered several times with the intention of finding meanings that could open a deeper and more reflective understanding of the phenomenon of childhood loneliness. Themes were identified by isolating statements with evocative descriptions. As van Manen (1990) points out, theme is "the experience of focus, of meaning, of point" (p. 87). Theme, therefore, is the form of capturing the phenomenon one tries to understand, and it does not exist in the text as such; it exists "only in relation to the attitude and set of the researcher" (Giorgi, 1985, p. 15).

Thus the themes that were disclosed through my interpretation of the participants' descriptions of their lived experiences of loneliness do not pretend to account for the fullness of children's lived experiences of loneliness. They only allude to the phenomenon of childhood loneliness, indicating that there are always other perspectives, other ways of living the phenomenon. The procedures of exploration, interpretation, verification, and renewed exploration continued in a cyclic fashion. As van Manen (1990) points out, "grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of 'seeing' meaning" (p. 79). As the understanding of the phenomenon deepened new themes were identified and others were discarded. The following are the most common themes that emerged through the conversations with the linguistically diverse children.

Being Excluded

The feeling of being excluded was the most common theme that emerged from the descriptions of the experiences of loneliness provided by the participants. The following description comes from a 10-year-old boy, Mustafa, who came to the school from Iran a year earlier. It brings a child's perspective to our understanding of the social isolation and loneliness caused by the lack of the main communicative tool—the language.

> When I came to this school I was really lonely because I didn't know how to speak English so I couldn't make any friends. I felt really sad. I felt that I have something less than anybody else. I felt different. I didn't even know what people were talking about in the class, and those kinds of things made me even lonelier. I was a complete stranger. Time was passing slowly for me at school and I wished it could go faster. I didn't like coming to school because I didn't feel good about it.

This recollection communicates the feeling of being excluded not only from the games the other children were enjoying at recess, but also from life at school. Mustafa's familiar world seemed to be replaced with an incomprehensible and unwelcoming one where he felt like "a stranger" who has "something less than anybody else." A stranger is a person who does not belong in a place or a group, a newcomer to a community who has no personal acquaintances. A stranger, therefore, is unlikely to feel excluded from an event because he or she has never been part of it. Feeling excluded from something, on the other hand,

implies that our right to be included in it is denied. Yet Mustafa's description conveys both his feelings of being a stranger and his feelings of being excluded. Mustafa's previous experiences of being part of school life and his joy of being with his schoolmates created expectations for similar experiences that were not satisfied in the new environment. Participating in team games or enjoying them as a spectator was no longer possible for Mustafa.

> Not only that I didn't speak English, but everything else was different from what I was used to. Even the games that they played at recess were different. I never played football or hockey before. I played soccer at home and I love to play it, but I couldn't understand what those new games were about. I didn't understand the rules of the games. I felt lonely at recess. I just sat on the hill and watched the others, but I couldn't even enjoy watching the game they were playing because I didn't know what they were trying to do. I felt like there was a hole in my chest.

The complex relationship between feeling a stranger, yet excluded, was experienced bodily as a "hole" in his chest and as a personal deficiency—he felt he had "something less then everybody else."

Feeling excluded is not a theme specific to the loneliness linguistically diverse children experience, however. There are situations where children are not involved in adults' lives and where they become spectators. For example, an only child at a supper gathering may experience being excluded and lonely. Although some children feel loneliness only briefly through relatively transient moods, others experience loneliness in a persistent and life-disrupting way (McWhirter, 1990). Mustafa's feeling was so painful that it was experienced as a hole in his chest. But what was so painful in this experience of loneliness? Perhaps the description provided by Au, a 9-year-old boy from China, could help in understanding Mustafa's feelings as well. This is how Au described his experience of feeling excluded from a game:

> They were playing hockey outside and I was there too, but I wasn't really playing because nobody ever passed to me. I was sitting there with a hockey stick in my hands. It didn't really matter if I was there or not ... I mean for them. I think that nobody wanted to do anything with me because I was different. And I think that nobody liked me. They thought I couldn't do anything; that's why they never passed me the puck. They just bugged me because I could not speak properly. I tried to ignore them. I wanted to go home.

Au's lack of knowledge and skills both in English and the game resulted in the loss of the sense that he really mattered to the other children in school. Hockey is a team game and each player counts in the joint efforts of the team to win the game. But for Au it was different. He was there, with a hockey stick in his hands, ready to contribute to the game, but no one seemed to notice him. He was invisible, useless in the team. It appears this was the most painful part of the experience. "The need to matter in the eyes of the other has psychological significance as an aspect of forming a sense of self in relation to the world" (Josselson, 1992, pp. 99-100). Thus children who consistently feel excluded, who feel that they have no connection to others—which is a reality for linguistically diverse children during the period of learning the basic verbal communication skills—suffer a special challenge in the process of the formation of the self. The loss of self-esteem and the development of a sense of self-worthlessness are natural consequences of this process.

Self-esteem has been identified as the single best predictor of loneliness (Murphy, 1986-1987; Woodward & Frank, 1988). Yet linguistically diverse students' loneliness and its relation to their low self-esteem and classroom anxiety has not been studied. The present study was able to capture the lived meaning of loneliness in linguistically diverse students' lives and the role it plays in their loss of self-esteem and desire to go to school where they did not feel good about themselves.

Being Unwanted and Disliked

Another common theme in the stories the participants shared was their feelings of being unwanted and disliked. These feelings further damaged their self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Feeling unwanted and disliked is a more active feeling than that of feeling excluded, as feeling excluded does not involve active resistance or aggression on the part of the people in a situation. In contrast, the feeling of being unwanted and disliked suggests that those who feel this way have made some effort to connect with the others, but have been rejected.

Research suggests that peer rejection, social withdrawal, and victimization by peers are factors that predict feelings of loneliness and depressed moods over time. Furthermore, lonely children are initially more rejected and victimized and become more rejected over time (Boivin, Hymel, & Burkowski, 1995). Also, rejected children are less successful in initiating interactions (Putallaz & Wasserman, 1990), and even when interacting they do not remain engaged with other children for long, but move from interaction to interaction more frequently than do other children (Ladd, 1983).

Children who do not fit in spend their days in relative isolation where they may be ignored, rejected, and/or further subjected to negative comments and threats from other children (Page, Scanlan, & Deringer, 1994). The desire to have friends with whom to share their most intimate thoughts and feelings is not specific to linguistically diverse children. The present study revealed that these children's attempts to fit into the peer group are misinterpreted and rejected, leaving these children with the pain of feeling unwanted and disliked. As a result, they begin questioning their own ability to learn how to fit in and thus to become members of the peer group. Sonja, a 9-year-old girl from Ukraine, describes her experience as follows:

> Nobody wanted to do anything with me because I was different from everyone else ... like I didn't wear the same clothes as them. So they thought, "She is something that we should just push aside. She is not part of our life. She is dumb." They called me "stupid," "junky curly hair" and stuff. I was really lonely because no one wanted to play with me. I asked Sarah and Ilona "Can I play with you?" and they said "No." And it wasn't only them. No one wanted to play with me.

Luka, an 8-year-old boy from former Yugoslavia describes similar experiences:

> I think that nobody liked me because I was different. Everyone was calling me names. No matter what I did I couldn't fit. I was lonely, very lonely. I just sat there and watch them. Sometimes I tried to talk to them but they didn't understand what I was saying. There was only one person who really tried to understand me but the others just bugged me because I couldn't speak like them. I felt

really bad. I acted nervous around people because I tried to fit in but I couldn't. I missed my friends from home a lot. I had many friends back home.

Perhaps loneliness is experienced most painfully not when we are alone, but when we are in the presence of others, as these accounts reveal. The children felt separated, disliked, unwanted, cut off from the shared world of the others. Their desire to belong to the communal world of their classmates on the one hand and the impossibility of reaching this desire on the other hand created a vacuum not only between them and their peers, but most of all inside themselves.

Empty of Happiness

"How did it feel to be lonely?" I asked Vladimir, who came to Canada from Russia. "Empty," he replied. I asked him to tell me more about his feeling. This is how explained it to me:

> I felt empty because I had no fun. Well, I kind of had fun playing games by myself. For example, I made a toy with two sticks and elastic. I asked the teacher to give me elastic. So I combined the two sticks and I made a toy that looked like a cross. The only thing that was interesting for me was to look at the sticks turning around when I threw them, or to drop the sticks into the snow and to try to pick them up without leaving my fingermarks on the snow. So that was all I did. I felt empty because there was no one else to play this game with me. I had no friends. I was empty of happiness.

This inner emptiness was so unbearable that many linguistically diverse children tried a variety of strategies in their attempts to become involved in other children's play. The strategies they used had various degrees of success. Au's experience of playing hockey is a powerful illustration of how children really feel, even though they may look integrated in the peer group to an outside observer. Au, like Vladimir, had "no fun" because he was "just sitting there with the hockey stick" in his hands. Playing "beside" and not "with" the other children is central to Vladimir's experience described below:

> I was in kindergarten when I came to this school. So at the beginning I just did what the others were doing. If they were playing with trucks, I just took a truck from the box and played with them. Well, not exactly with them but beside them. But I couldn't tell what I wanted to play with so I played with things that no one else wanted. It wasn't that much fun, you know …

As with feelings of being excluded, unwanted, and disliked, the experience of playing beside others is common to young children. Yet teachers of young children know that when children feel they are treated unfairly, they often seek comfort and fair resolution of a problem from adults. Linguistically diverse children, however, cannot do this. They cannot complain about their feeling of being mistreated. My own son Peter recalls his experiences when his inability to seek comfort in adult intervention in an unfair situation brought him to tears:

> I remember one day at recess those really big kids from grade 1 … well, they seemed to me very big at that time … who took the bike the teacher gave me and went off with it. And I couldn't tell on them since I didn't speak English at all. And I had nothing else to do and I had no friends at all. I felt sad and lonely. I began to cry. I wanted you to come and pick me up.

The potential danger of such experiences being repeated over a long period is that children may begin to feel powerless and helpless to change their status in the peer group. Often these feelings result in children's involvement with peers who *choose them* and not whom they would choose if given another option. This is how Nadia recalls how she became friends with a girl in her class.

> Finally I made a friend ... well, she wasn't really a friend ... but, you know ... she played with me. She was ... she was ... weird. I never had a friend like her. She was weird, really weird. She was so different ... she was unlike everybody else. She had friends that were actually different ... like different color.... At the beginning when she started playing with me I didn't really want to play with her, but then I started liking her ... kind of ... But she was weird.

Peter's recollection of his first school relationship with a boy with Down's syndrome is somewhat similar to Nadia's:

> At the beginning I kind of liked him although he was ... strange. But he wanted to play with me and no one else wanted. I was so lonely. I didn't really choose him. He chose me. He liked to play games even though he didn't really understand them. He liked to play tag and hide-and-seek and stuff ... We just hid inside or outside of the school and that was it. We didn't talk ... we didn't have to. There were no rules.

These initial contacts played an important role in the process of Nadia and Peter becoming members of the school community. They were their first steps toward the development of friendships that played a crucial role in overcoming their feelings of loneliness and isolation. However, not all children who were interviewed went through such a transitional period. Many remained friendless for almost a year after they moved to their new environment; others had not made friends yet when I talked to them. Tom, a boy who came from China, for example, made his best friend a stuffed teddy bear from which he was inseparable. "I have seen you carrying almost always your teddy bear with you," I said to Tom during our conversation. "What is special about him, or is it her?"

> It is a boy. He is very special to me. He is like my imaginary friend. He is from home ... he is Chinese too, you know? I talk to him and he talks to me. Well, I pretend that he talks to me, but I talk to him for real. I talk to him about everything—the friends from home I miss, the divorce ... When I go to bed I talk to him. He sleeps with me.

Lack of friends contributes to low self-esteem and inability to develop social skills. The relationship of loneliness and sociometric status to school achievement has been reported in Asher et al.'s (1984) study of 506 English-speaking grade 3-6 students. The study presented here suggests that the lack of school friendships experienced by children who have limited (if any) proficiency in English strongly affects their self-esteem and self-worth and contributes to loneliness and inability to develop both social and academic skills. These children perceive themselves as "having something less than anybody else," and often feel "stupid, like I don't know anything at all." Maria, one of the girls interviewed, said, "There is no point in trying anymore. They think I'm stupid and that's it. I used to cry a lot but now ... And it's only because I like different things."

The Learned Helplessness Syndrome

Research into childhood loneliness (Page et al., 1994) indicates that a debilitating sense of helplessness often accompanies loneliness. Ponzetti (1990) points out that these feelings "fracture people's self-esteem and cause them to believe they cannot help themselves" (p. 338). Seligman (1975), whose study initially focused on migrant workers and on economically poor or ethnically different people who suffer from exclusion from full participation in the mainstream of society, described a syndrome known as learned helplessness. The study presented here indicates that because of their inability to participate fully in the classroom community and the consequent persistent feelings of loneliness, linguistically diverse students often exhibit behaviors identified as components of this syndrome such as giving up quickly, crying, refusing to try, and so forth. It is crucial for teachers, therefore, to be aware of their linguistically diverse students' feelings of loneliness and isolation and to monitor their behaviors carefully in order to prevent them from being caught in the syndrome. Alloy and Seligman (1979) suggest that learned helplessness appears to cause three types of deficits:

- *Motivational.* Students expect to fail and are reluctant even to attempt either initiating social contacts or learning academic skills.
- *Cognitive.* Students lack confidence in their abilities and do not participate in activities that provide them with opportunities to improve their abilities and skills.
- *Affective.* Students have low self-esteem and suffer from classroom anxiety and feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Among teenagers, learned helplessness and the possibility of concomitant depression can become incapacitating and should be taken seriously (Garber, Kriss, Koch, & Lindholm, 1988). The related construct of hopelessness, described as the maintenance of a series of negative or pessimistic expectancies regarding one's future and present self, has also been shown to be strongly associated with adolescent loneliness (Page, 1991; Page et al., 1994). With the growing number of linguistically and culturally diverse students of all ages, the potential loss of motivation resulting from a series of frustrating and painful experiences of loneliness in their everyday school lives cannot be ignored. This is a challenge for many teachers who are expected to teach linguistically diverse students. As a result, teachers may feel torn by their professional commitment to reach all students and their inability to communicate successfully with their linguistically diverse students.

According to recently published findings of brain research, all learning is mediated by emotion, and if the learning environment is too stressful the most active part of the child's brain is not concerned with learning cognitive tasks, but with emotions (Begley, 1996). The literature on language diversity and learning suggests that the successful acquisition of a second language is a process in which success is heavily influenced by highly charged affective factors (Deplit, 1995) and that there is an "affective filter" (Drashen, 1982) in language acquisition. The filter operates

> when affective conditions are not optimal, when the student is not motivated, does not identify with the speakers of the school language, or is overanxious about his performance ... [causing] a mental block ... [that] will prevent the

input from reaching those parts of the brain responsible for language acquisition. (Deplit, 1995, p. 50)

Lack of sufficient research on linguistically diverse students' feelings of loneliness and isolation at school and the feelings that color these children's everyday life and learning at school prevent us from establishing appropriate educational goals and selecting corresponding learning experiences that can help all students.

What Can Teachers Do?

This study of linguistically diverse students' experiences of loneliness revealed significant aspects of the motivational factors influencing these students' learning during the first stages of English-language acquisition. On the one hand, school plays an important role in becoming proficient in English, which is a primary concern of linguistically diverse students. It is a big step toward making the desired shift from observers to participants in the peer group life. On the other hand, lack of language proficiency interferes with social interactions between linguistically diverse students and their English-speaking peers, leading to feelings of loneliness, loss of self-esteem, and loss of desire to go to school. Thus a tension develops between the necessity of going to school to learn English and become accepted in the English speaking community of peers and the frustration associated with peer rejection.

In addition, during this period teachers and students may have different priorities. Although the priority for linguistically diverse students is learning the language in order to become members of the classroom community, some teachers' priority remains academic achievement for all. It is essential for teachers, therefore, to understand that linguistically diverse children are driven by an instrumental motivation—"the desire and motivation to learn a language in order to benefit socially" (Genesee, 1994, p. 383). These children seek to use language in their social contacts to regain the joy of friendship. This is captured in a recollection provided by Masha, an 8-year-old Ukrainian girl.

> After a few months I started speaking English. Well ... not really speaking, but at least I could understand what they were asking me and answer somehow. I felt like I was becoming one of them. Then I found a girl from another class who let me play with her ... I wasn't lonely anymore. She let me play with her friends, so we became friends too. It was so nice to have friends again.

The regained joy of being accepted and liked by a friend is perhaps the most powerful motivation for learning or further improving language skills. Friendship provides the most meaningful context for identification with native speakers and thus the most powerful means of its mastery. The question, therefore, becomes, How can teachers provide appropriate experiences to linguistically diverse students to ensure the development of a sense of belonging to the classroom community?

Opportunities for Meaningful Social Interactions

The more meaningful social interactions children are involved in, the more opportunities they will have to communicate with their peers both verbally and nonverbally. And the more successful these interactions are, the more motivated the children will be to reach higher levels of language proficiency

and the stronger their sense of belonging will become. During the first few months of having linguistically diverse students in the class, teachers and peers demonstrate an increased interest in their heritage and backgrounds. At this time these students can be encouraged to participate in activities that do not require the use of English to communicate their feelings and thoughts in order to become fully participating members of the classroom community.

Delpit (1995) points out that all teachers can do is provide students with the opportunity to practice in contexts that are nonthreatening, have a real purpose, and are intrinsically enjoyable. Art, music, and movement are powerful media that allow individual expression and create a sense of belonging to the group and thus are appropriate as a nonthreatening context for learning a second language. The learning experiences they provide allow for a silent period when learners are exposed to comprehensible input without being required to produce oral language (Littlewood, 1984). Creative expression through fine arts offers excellent opportunities for helping children who have difficulties expressing themselves orally to feel good about themselves (Warner, 1999). Leah, the undergraduate student mentioned earlier, provides a description of an art activity in which Dee, a grade 2 student from Thailand, was fully participating:

> The project, which involved using an intricate braiding technique, was with a small group of students. It was a challenging craft and I knew I would have to model and explain the procedure several times. However, I wasn't even done modeling and explaining the first time when I glanced over at Dee and saw that he was following my movements identically. The other students, as I had expected, needed to be shown several times, but Dee had already understood the procedure and was enthusiastically finishing his project. I asked Dee to show his work to the other students in the group. He held it out for them to admire and I asked him, "Dee, are you making a bracelet or a necklace?" Without hesitating, he said, "bracelet" and pointed to his wrist. "Dee can speak!" exclaimed one boy who could not hide his astonishment.

Language learners can use what language they have for purposeful communication and use other communication strategies to compensate for gaps in their knowledge of the second language. According to Littlewood (1984), "Learners can communicate even with an imperfect knowledge of the language system" (pp. 95-96). Littlewood also points out that teachers should emphasize the effectiveness of communication over accuracy in assessing student performance. Role-playing cartoon characters with which all children are familiar, or creating a puppet show can also provide an avenue for diverse speakers to express themselves without having to use complex English structures to be understood by their peers. Thus by increasing substantially the number of learning experiences that do not depend on the use of English, teachers can offer all students the chance to be equally successful.

Effective Use of Nonverbal Communication

Helping linguistically diverse students become fully participating members of the classroom community requires raising teachers' own awareness of the role and functions of nonverbal behavior in communication, especially with their linguistically diverse students. Teachers, particularly elementary schoolteachers, often more than anyone else in a child's life live in continuous interac-

tion with students for extended periods. "The semiotics or 'signs' between them (language-saturated, exuberant or silent) are unending—weaving and refining the understanding they have of one another" (McKie, 1994, p. 20). These signs indicate to children how much teachers care about them and what their expectations are. Teachers connect or derail meaning, create affinity or destroy it. In interactions between teachers and linguistically diverse students, these signs may be exclusively nonverbal. Yet they clearly communicate to the students the teacher's level of support, interest, trust, and concerns or their absence. Studies have shown that 82% of teacher messages are nonverbal (Grant & Hennings, 1971) and that the nonverbal component of communication is more influential than the verbal component (Keith, Tornatzky, & Pettigrew, 1974; Woolfolk & Brooks, 1985). Thus to communicate meaningfully with their linguistically diverse students, teachers do not need to be proficient in the languages they speak. They do need, however, to be alert to cross-cultural differences in terms of some nonverbal behaviors. For example, some Native American children are taught not to maintain steady eye contact with an adult because in some tribes an adult who looks straight into another person's eyes is seen as untrustworthy (Sprinthall, Sprinthall, & Oja, 1994). This does not mean that teachers cannot and should not look at Native American children, but that they should watch closely for signs of incongruity as indicators of effective communication in working with children from different cultures.

Research on teachers' nonverbal behavior (Woolfolk & Brooks, 1985) demonstrates that direct and frequent eye contact can improve attention, intensify participation, increase the amount of information students retain, and boost self-esteem. Thus not using such a powerful social reinforcement can impede children's acceptance into the classroom community. The following is a description of a classroom observed by my undergraduate student Leah during her field placement as a student teacher in Michigan:

> The first thing I noticed about Moan was the way he sat apart from the rest of the class. His desk was not placed in one of the banks of desks with the other 4th graders; it was at the back of the room, adjacent to a small table where a bilingual aide sat. The teacher did not try to communicate directly with Moan. She did not address him while talking; she did not establish eye contact with him either.
>
> While the other children worked cooperatively in small groups, Moan remained at the back of the room. At the sound of a classmate's laughter coming from one of the working groups, Moan turned his head toward the excitement and watched for a moment, his dark eyes intently examining the faces of the other students. Then he bent his back down to his work—a list of spelling words in English.

By neglecting to speak to Moan or even look at him directly, the teacher was modeling for the rest of the class that communicating with him was too difficult or unimportant to attempt. The classroom arrangements also created a spatial distance between Moan and his classmates, emphasizing that he was not "one of them." Miller (1986) suggests that, typically, people maintain more distance from those they dislike or fear; they also stand farther away from people who are from different racial backgrounds or have disabilities. In Moan's case the other students did not have to maintain such a distance—it

was already set up in the classroom. This distance was also experienced by the participants in this study, who described it as a feeling of being different, unwanted, and disliked.

This distance was reflected not only by the arrangement of the desks, but also by the teacher's lack of encouragement to Moan to participate in group classroom activities. Thus Moan not only felt a lack of control over the circumstances (although he was interested in what his classmates were doing, he had to complete his assignment while working with the aide), but also a sense of worthlessness—he had nothing to offer to his peers' joint efforts to solve problems presented to them.

Pedagogical thoughtfulness and tactful actions on the part of the teacher are required so that linguistically diverse students can be provided with more, not fewer, opportunities to practice problem-solving skills. Once learned, the problem-solving skills can be transferred to social situations as a means of achieving perceived or real control. This strategy can foster a sense of learned hopefulness in children (Zimmerman, 1990). Zimmerman suggests that acquired problem-solving skills "may increase one's repertoire of personal coping strategies and social support, and help inoculate individuals against the debilitating consequences of life distress" (pp. 73-74).

Summary

Loneliness is a common theme in the lives of young children. In my dissertation study (Kirova-Petrova, 1996) only seven of the 75 children interviewed stated that they have never been lonely. The descriptions of the 10 linguistically diverse children's experiences of loneliness used for this study revealed that they often experienced loneliness as being excluded, unwanted, and disliked, leading to the feeling of emptiness and unhappiness. Although these themes indicate similarities between experiences of loneliness of some mainstream children and children from non-mainstream culture, the lived experiences of linguistically diverse children clearly indicate that their loneliness stems predominantly from their inability to communicate appropriately with their peers. The experiential accounts also revealed that these students' loss of self-esteem and sense of self-worth and their development of learned helplessness are directly related to the persistence of their experiences over a long period.

To help their linguistically diverse students become equal and accepted members of the classroom community, teachers need to respect children's being; value their background, heritage, and interest; and deliberately seek opportunities to acknowledge, verbally and nonverbally, their linguistically diverse students' presence and achievements. By doing this they not only serve as role models for their other students, but also foster a classroom atmosphere of acceptance and mutual appreciation. Providing opportunities for meaningful social interactions in activities that do not require English as the sole means of expression of knowledge and skills, as well as teachers' effective use of nonverbal communication, are strategies that foster a sense of belonging to the classroom community and a sense of learned hopefulness, which leads to a reduction of feelings of loneliness among young linguistically diverse children.

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