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How to cite:

Parry, John (2012). 'I can sign like you' - Social connections and friendships between peers in early years settings. In: European Conference on Educational Research, 18-21 Sep 2012, Cadiz.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

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**Conference Paper- presented on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2012, ECER /Cadiz**

**‘I can sign like you’ - Social connections and friendships between peers in early years settings.**

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**Key Words**

Early Years, disabled children, friendships, adult support

**Introduction**

From an early age, most children are seen to engage in complex social interactions with other children in their preschool settings and we recognize that through these connections essential skills of how to interact and relate to other people develop (Lillivist 2010). As such although these early friendships can be ‘highly colourful, elusive and unpredictable phenomena’ they are regarded as ‘full of promise and potentially robust’ (Deegan 1996 p.5).

However for some disabled children or children labeled with special educational needs a more reductionist view of their social relationships may be assumed. The concern can be to focus on impairments or perceived differences as the barrier to forming early friendships (Guralnick et al. 2007, Engle et al. 2011, Rowley et al. 2112) and to make the link between cognitive competencies and the quality of peer relationships (Dunn 1993). In taking this emphasis there is a danger of conceptualizing friendships as being influenced by one key factor of social identity rather than the complexity and tensions that underpin any relationships (Konstantoni 2012). It can reinforce the ‘acceptance of the distinction disabled/non-disabled and child/non-child’ (Davis and Watson 2002.p.160) and overlooks the alternative perspective of the social model of disability (Oliver 1996, Mason 2000). Looking at the issues around a child’s social connections within a setting from a social model starting point, shifts attention from their impairment onto the disabling attitudinal and organisational barriers in their environment (Swain et al 2003).

Attempting to understand the nature of social connections that are made between disabled children and their peers in early- years settings in terms of an individual child’s ‘deficits’ also downplays the young person’s agency. Their role as active decision takers and choice makers in exploring their developing friendships within their group may not be fully recognised. They may not be viewed as active interpreters of their social situations but as passive recipients of support (Davis and Watson 2002, Nind et al. 2010). However it is important to recognize that child agency does not exist in a vacuum and children’s social interactions are also influenced by the context in which their relationships develop. Because ‘every early years setting represents a *culture* which is created by children, practitioners, parents and others’ (Nutbrown and Clough p.1 2006), the dynamics of this culture will impact on children’s interactions with each other. In this environment children can be seen as ‘independent social actors’ within a ‘complex web of dependencies and interdependencies’ (Konstantoni 2012 p. 344).

This study aims to examine how social connections and friendships between disabled children and their peers develop in an early- years nursery through the interplay of such interdependencies within the setting. Drawing on small scale qualitative research study of two children's experiences in a nursery setting, the study reports on the contexts and dynamics of the social interactions that take place between children and looks at the adult's role in facilitating these early friendships.

## **Methodology**

The research location was a combined Children's Centre and Nursery School in south-east London. It described itself as an 'inner city' school but had substantial outdoor play areas which all the children from different classes could access freely at any time during a session. Following a series of meetings and scoping visits to the setting, the school approached the families of two children to seek permission for their child's participation in the study. The children were considered to have additional requirements and had been identified by the nursery as being at 'Early Action Plus' within the SEN Code of Practice. They had also been attending the nursery for at least two terms. These children were referred to as the 'lead' children in the research project rather than the 'target' or 'focus' children, in recognition of their position as partners in the project.

The main method of data collection in the study was observation carried out by the researcher. This method was chosen as it was recognized that 'observing young children with learning disabilities provides insights that cannot be gleaned in other ways' (Nind et al. 2010, p.668). A series of eight observations in the nursery (four sessions for each child) took place over the period of a week. Each session was two hours long resulting in a total of sixteen hours of observation data. The observations were recorded as first person narratives by the researcher commentating on the social interactions that the lead child engaged in. Making observations in the first person reflected the researcher's attempt to avoid 'seeing the children as passive objects of clinical interest' and an intention 'not to research the children as 'children with special needs' but as active agents in their own decision making and responses (Nind et al 2010, p.667). Commentary was recorded for any social exchange involving the lead child and at least one other child. If an adult was present or joined the interaction the recorded observation was still made. Set group activities in which the adult was directing or leading a group activity were not recorded.

Photographs were also taken of key moments of interaction between children and used to provide feedback to the child about the activities they had entered into with their friends. Time was built into the observation sessions for sharing these photographs with the lead children, so involving them as participants, research partners and interpreters (Conroy and Harcourt 2009). These conversations or interviews with the lead children were facilitated by the researcher and a practitioner who knew the child. The sessions were also recorded for later transcription. At the end of the week the staff from each room were interviewed about their perception of the child's friendships and peer connections in the group.

The data from the observations, conversations with the children around the photographs and staff interviews were subjected to a thematic analysis derived from grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Recurring themes were identified, analysed and related to previous data and research. The research is presented as case studies of each child's experience of social interactions and friendships in their setting. All children have been given pseudonyms in the account. As a small scale case study the research makes no attempt to generalize findings to different contexts but raises significant questions for further investigation.

### **Findings- The social connections and friendships of the two lead children**

#### **Ray**

Ray was nearly 4 years old and had been with this room group for over a year. From the observations it appeared that there were two particular friends, Hayley and Ely, that he played with most often in both indoor and outdoor play. Key staff from the room were also very aware of this close relationship between the three children, noting that 'they seem to gravitate to each other almost instinctively...' (J,Teacher) and formed a 'tight group' (P, Teaching Assistant). The staff assumed that the development of this relationship was based on the children having 'the same sort of needs', most significantly relating to their perceived levels of communication and 'intellectual ability'. However they also noted that personality, age, temperament and play interests were key factors that had brought this group together. The lead teacher recalled that the group initially came together around a mutual enjoyment of building with the 'marble run'.

Ray's own comments on the photographs taken of him during the play sessions suggested the importance to him of the relationship with Hayley and Ely. He consistently chose to name these two friends as a first response to seeing the pictures rather than naming himself or other people in the photographs. Of all the children in his group these were the peers that he often sought for help :

*'I say 'where Ely' and 'help, help' as I cannot get my bike up the hill. I try to pull my bike up the hill calling for Ely.'* (Ray observation commentary)

Ray was also observed regularly in pursuit of their company and in some ways trying to attach himself to a pair as they played together:

*Ely has Hayley and is holding her hand and I am following them with the pram.*

Three things were noticeable in the sessions about this dynamic. Firstly, the significance of chase games as a focus for the interaction between all three children. In a setting where there was continual access to outdoor play, Ray, Hayley and Ely were frequently seen running and hiding from each other or pursuing each other on bicycles or scooters. Secondly when other children joined in play with the group it was noticeable that Ray kept his focus on interacting with Ely rather than any other peers. This was most apparent in a prolonged game that Ely developed where he collected balls in a container then tipped them out across the play area. As other children worked together to collect up the

balls and return them to Ely , Ray waited some distance away until they had finished before returning the balls that he had caught to his friend. Finally Ray showed that he was willing to try and initiate play and interaction particularly with Ely. This often involved: putting toys on Ely's head which would cause his friend to laugh and take notice of him; adding to the activity he was engaged in like placing another brick on his tower or picture on his lotto board; or pointing to pictures that Ely was looking at. Such 'intrusions' were usually well measured by Ray as they lead to further play with Ely and suggested Ray's intuitive awareness of the boundaries of this established relationship.

In the interviews with staff there was less certainty about his interactions with other children:

*I haven't really noticed him, kind of outside of the two children that he has formed a relationship with, actually spending consistent time with other children or interact or wanting to interact with them on that same level. (Interview with J teacher)*

However throughout the observations it was apparent that although the frequency of him seeking social contact with other children was less evident, he was beginning to explore relationships with others. For example in one session the following interaction was noted:

*A boy comes into the area- he has a car I am still sat at the table. I look at him and bring my dolphin towards him towards the car on the floor- I am watching him push the car and I am pushing the dolphin around the floor as well-I put my dolphin back up onto the table and he pushes his car...*

Observations noted similar less overt approaches made by Ray towards other children than towards his established friends including copying actions, choosing to stand or sit next to peers, and deliberately moving toys towards them. Ray also spontaneously greeted other children by name during the observations, children who he also chose to identify when reviewing the photographs from the sessions.

In terms of his response to the approach of other children staff reflected that he had previously tended to push others away if they approached him but now he would allow them to play alongside. They also noted that at times he would still shout 'no' or 'stop' if he felt they were encroaching too closely onto his play. Observations verified that Ray would respond to peers asking to play with him or share his toy with 'No no', 'go away' or 'it's mine'. However this initial reaction could form the platform for a developing social exchange:

*The boy comes and looks at the clock who was interested before- I say 'no go away' and I take the clock away from him and he moves away- I put my hands out and say 'no-no' – he brings a toy table to show me- he puts it on the table- he puts his head inside a plastic box and looks at me as if it is a mask- I don't look at him I carry on-I look up at the box take it away and copy and the give it back to him- he goes away-I pick up the box and copy the game shouting into the box...*

*A girl comes – looks at my tower- goes to put a brick on my tower and I move it away- she holds out a brick and I take it. My tower falls down and splits in two- the girl takes one half and I take the other- I keep building up my tower- she laughs and goes to put a brick on top for me. She carries on putting bricks on top for me- I let her put it on top for me she says there- I let go then put a big brick on I say ‘Look big tower’- She picks up whole tower and laughs as it breaks in two- I say ‘mine’*

In both these examples it is evident that despite Ray’s initial rejection of the approaches of the two children they continued with positive ‘friendly’ actions, the boy bringing Ray a different toy and the girl holding out a brick for him to add to his tower. In response to this Ray re-interpreted the situation and, more immediately in the second example, engaged in further play and social exchange. Interestingly in his interactions with his regular play partners, Hayley and Ely, Ray would at times use a similar approach to initiate interaction. In one prolonged exchange with Hayley at the craft table he initially took things from the pile of material that she had gathered in front of her, causing her to shout out ‘mine-mine’. Following this Ray brought new items to the table and showed them to Hayley, before adding these objects to her collection. The exchange ended with Hayley copying Ray drawing on paper.

### **Isaac**

Isaac had been attending the nursery for a shorter time than Ray, having begun sessions in January 2012. He was also based in a different group in the nursery school and so was supported by another staff group. Isaac was three and a half years old and the nursery was the first group provision that he had attended. The staff’s perception of how he had settled into the group was positive although they saw him as more on the fringes of social interactions:

*He likes grown ups and he’ll be around a grown up but when he’s on his own he kind of flits so he will play on sort of on a whim with one of the other children. (JD-Teaching Assistant)*

*I think he fits in quite well in the sense that he is bubbly and he is always smiling, so he has lots of children who warm to him... I would probably say that he plays alongside children generally and he has begun to play more with children. (T- Teacher)*

In the interviews staff identified two children that Isaac played with more frequently, Saul and Lisa. The factors underpinning the development of these particular friendships were seen as being different. Staff felt that Isaac’s connection with Saul was based on their having similar ‘levels of understanding’ and also play interests. They felt that the two boys’ mutual relationship developed from their shared enjoyment of physical activity, ‘where it is more about doing things as opposed to standing and having a conversation’ (T- teacher).

The staff traced Isaac’s relationship with Lisa back to the time when he started nursery during which a group of girls took a particular interest in him. Although the group had

been keen to play with Isaac, the staff reflected that this had not been a positive experience for him. This was because they observed that he was often dominated in these situations and treated as a 'baby' in extensive role play games, a position that he began to upset him. Consequently the staff had intervened to reshape these relationships and now felt that for Isaac the issue had been resolved. During the observations for the research project there were occasions where some girls still referred to him as 'baby' or 'coochie - baby' but generally he seemed to be negotiating these interactions much more on his own terms:

*I am watching the ball again – one of the girls takes me- she lets go of my hand and tries to get the ball out of the tree- I pull the tree branch-then we both hold hands- Another girl holds my hand and says 'no he is my coochie baby'- a boy pats me on the head and moves away- another boy comes and starts to tickle me- I fall over the mat- a girl strokes my head- I get up-a girl says 'lets go this way' and goes into the tunnel- I move away and I go to the classroom. (Isaac observation commentary)*

However staff noted that Isaac and Lisa had retained their relationship although it was less intense. They felt that both children continued to be attracted by each other's energetic approach to play but also the friendship endured because it was familiar and predictable. This was evident in the observations. For Lisa, Isaac would usually respond to her ideas or suggestions and for Isaac, Lisa would take the lead when he was unsure about engaging with other children around him.

In the observations Lisa and Saul were the two children that Isaac engaged with for the longest sequences of activity. They were also the peers he named in photographs and which he chose to look at a second time when we shared the visual record at the end of the session. Isaac's play with Lisa frequently involved physical games around the climbing frame on which he would seek her physical help to negotiate the apparatus by holding out his hands and reaching up to her. During the observations it was noticeable that besides the adults, Lisa was the only other person he sought such assistance from when exploring the apparatus. Isaac was also assertive enough to reject physical contact with Lisa at other times and was seen refusing to hold her hand or breaking out of her hugs. He did however seem to be the follower, particularly when the two of them moved between activities which were often Lisa's choices. In this relationship Isaac was both persistent in trying to engage his friend and also resistant to her distractions if he was keen to pursue one of his preferred pursuits. This subtlety of the negotiations between the two children was evident in the following passages of observation:

*I am down on the carpet with some books- I take a book-we are looking at all the books together, me and my friend. Someone comes and bangs a tambourine but we carry on-my friend chases after someone – another boy comes to join us- I am on my own now- my friend is jumping around on the carpet area and trying to pull a net down. I am just looking at the books-the boy who just joined us is naming the pictures for me and I am talking as well. I am still looking at books – my friend is pulling on the curtains....*

Staff felt that Isaac's play with Saul developed from their acquaintance within the same small story group that gathered at the end of every session. As with his play with Lisa, the interaction between the two boys involved chase games and physical contact. In several of the exchanges between Isaac and Saul vocal interplay was noted, with Isaac in particular copying short phrases or sounds that Saul used. On one occasion during the observations the two children showed that they could work on a shared goal together as part of their relationship. Having engaged in their own pretend play as lions they both approached a member of staff and lead her to another room across the nursery playground where animal costumes were kept. In recalling the event when interviewed the member of staff commented:

*It was beautiful, really beautiful. And that kind of situation can help him to make friends, to develop his creativity, to develop his language, to develop all the things that we want him to develop.*

Besides the more prolonged connections he made with Lisa and Saul, the observations showed that Isaac also gravitated towards activities where groups of other children were playing. In every session observed he made at least two visits to the snack area where children would congregate for refreshments usually with an adult facilitator. The lead teacher in the room suggested that this indicated Isaac's interest at being part of a group, that besides it being a safe option amidst the free flowing activities in the nursery he made this choice with social motives. This view was verified when observing him at the snack table where he would attempt interactions by: pushing his bowl towards other children; copying their actions (banging bowls or waving them in the air); and calling out object names ('got cup', 'got bowl'). When joining other activities he also demonstrated similar purpose in trying to connect with other children. Even if there was plenty of equipment available for individual play he would choose to share with someone else for example:

*I go back to the rice table one of the girls pushes me away but I show her the rice in my spoon and pour it into her cup. I keep shovelling away – standing with the girls I watch them fill- I keep showing her the spoon and she holds up the cup for me to put the rice in.*

Isaac also seemed to take some risks in order to make in-roads into group activities which could involve spoiling games or initiating chase games. On one occasion he joined in with a group of boys who were kicking and chasing a large inflatable ball around outside. During the game he often picked up the ball or sat on it, calling out 'mine', before kicking it after the rest of the group had reasoned with him. One of the members of staff also noted that he could be particularly confident when approaching children who were new to the nursery. This was evident during the observations when he chose to spend time playing with a girl who was visiting the group with her parent.

*I give the foam shape to the new girl- I say 'you put this' I say 'here you that'- I give her a shape – she says 'x'- she puts a man in the boat toy and then I put a man in the boat. I take the X – I say 'x this' - I hold it up and show it to her and say 'X X'- I give it to the new girl and say 'X'-she shows it to me...*



Here Isaac was taking the lead in making with an unfamiliar peer as confidently as with his more regular companions Lisa and Saul.

### **Role of the staff**

A second intended focus for the research was the meaning that the two lead children made of the adult support provided as they pursued social connections and their friendships. A general overview of the observation data highlighted that the children's social interaction with their peers was not solely dependent on staff support. For both Ray and Isaac there were examples in every session when they were negotiating their own interactions without an adult presence. In other situations it was evident that the adults took on a range of functions in supporting the two children to make social connections with others.

Firstly the staff often acted as initiators: suggesting Ray shared particular items with other children at the snack table or taking Isaac to play next to another child. Secondly the adults would often seem to interpret what Ray or Isaac wanted from a situation. For example when Ray stood watching a group of children who were having running races the teaching assistant who was acting as the starter asked him if he wanted to join in. Finally they could also be seen to support as facilitators, suggesting or demonstrating possibilities rather than directing. This could involve modelling actions that the children could try with others:

*I touch the(toy) turtle . Another boy is watching us. Teacher says is it a hat and puts it on the other boy. She puts it on me- I smile and put it on the other boy....I pick up the caterpillar and put it on my head and show the boy with the butterfly. He is waving it around and I start waving my toy around as well. (Ray observation commentary)*

The way that staff perceived their role in supporting the development of friendships correlated with themes that emerged from the observations in the sessions. Several staff mentioned the importance of 'standing back' and letting the children develop the contacts themselves. However a recurrent proviso was that they would intervene 'if there's a problem or if you know nothing happening, you know if there's no words or no interaction at all' (Teaching assistant in Isaac's room). Staff in the interviews commonly interpreted such problems as relating to issues with turn taking or sharing. This seemed to overlook the key function that non-sharing or spoiling activities had as initiators of more positive social interaction in both Ray and Isaac's repertoire. The staff were not asked in the interviews to reflect on the effectiveness of their different interventions but it was apparent from the observations that the outcomes of their input was not certain. Sometimes initiating social exchanges between Ray or Isaac and other children would lead to further extended interactions and sometimes it did not. For example on one occasion the lead teacher prompted Isaac and a girl to hold hands outside after which the two children moved off to engage in activities in the garden together. Another time the same adult took Isaac to a table to play with two other girls emptying and filling

containers with rice but the children continued to play independently before Isaac moved away. Although there were many factors influencing the developments of these social situations that adults attempted to nurture, it was evident from these interplays that the child's view of the dynamic that they were introduced to was a key component in how the interaction progressed.

## **Discussion**

Spending time on the periphery of Ray and Isaac's social world allowed some insight into the complexity of their social interactions in their nursery. Their relationships with other children involved 'a range of different dimensions, including connectedness, shared humour, balance of control, intimacy and shared positive emotions' (Dunn 1993, p.113). They were active agents in their own decision and choice making, who in the detailed observations revealed a drive to 'differently and actively negotiate their positions, make meaning and express themselves in different contexts (Nind et al 2010 p.668). This is not to conclude that their 'different negotiations' should be interpreted as meaning that their level of social engagement seemed linked to the communication difficulties with which they were identified. The observations suggest that like many other children in their nursery group they were able to adjust and temper their responses according to the company that they found themselves in at any time. Ray knew that with his established friends, Hayley and Ely, he could take things from them or put things on their head to interact. However in other situations, with less familiar children he seemed to know to behave differently and be more circumspect in how he negotiated further play. Similarly Isaac was confident enough in his relationship with Lisa to keep to his own chosen activity when he wanted to rather than follow her lead.

From the observations, staff interviews and photograph sharing sessions with the lead children it was apparent that both Ray and Isaac clearly established friendships. These relationships reflected the key characteristics of positivity and stability that distinguished them from other peer acquaintances (Seban et al. 2007). There were few observed recurrent disputes within the interactions with their friends and their play together was often characterised by mutual help and giving each other assistance. Research findings (Freeman and Kasari, 2002, Guralnick 2007) have consistently suggested that the social interactions between 'children with delays' and their friends do not appear to feature sustained passages of play within which there is intensive interaction. Certainly both Ray and Isaac's play with their regular friends did not involve significant imaginary or pretend play elements. To the adult observer there appeared to be few examples of engagement in symbolic representation of events 'by using one object to stand for another, animating figures or objects, or assuming symbolic roles during play' (Odom et al., 2006, p. 814). There seemed few instances of role play which is seen by some researchers to be central to any young child brokering and maintaining ongoing relationships with their peers (de Groot Kim 2010). However the play sequences between Ray and Isaac and any of their close friends were noticeably more extended in terms of prolonged sequences of activity during this case study than the fleeting social connections made with other children. The games also appeared to often feature elements of chasing, hiding, following, imitating and sampling different activities as a group or pair. Although these features were not uncommon in Ray and Isaac's interactions with others the

repetitive and sequential nature of the pursuits appeared to feature particularly prominently in their play with their friends. This suggests that further investigation into comparisons between the social play of disabled children with their close friends and their encounters with other children in their peer group could reveal more about the diversity of their social connections. Consideration could also be given to their differentiation between best friends, friends and acquaintances and the signifiers or predictors of such relationships (Sebanic et al. 2007)

The reasons for Ray's seeking out Hayley and Ely every session or for Isaac's purposeful engagement with Saul or Lisa seem to extend beyond notions of them having similar levels of communication. It was the case that Ray, Hayley and Ely were all children who were identified with special educational needs within the nursery but Isaac's close friends were children without this label. Significantly the staff recognised that characterising such relationships as 'birds of a feather sticking together' (J, Teacher interview) overlooked their foundation on compatible personalities and shared enjoyment. It is evident that the friendships also revolved around other important indicators for social acceptance amongst children which included: showing positive affect (smiles and laughing); showing physical affection; appropriately interpreting behaviour and actions (Odom et al. 2006). However the most essential component distinguishing these established relationships from the other social interactions appeared to be that with Hayley or Ely, Saul or Lisa, Ray and Isaac were more certain that they could exercise their agency (Konstantoni, 2012). This could be seen to explain some of the reactions of the lead children to encounters with other children, for example Isaac quickly rejected the resumption of being babied by some girls or when Ray refused to hold an unfamiliar child's hand. In these situations the maintenance of control was much less certain than within the safety of their close peer groups and consequently the continued interaction ceased.

The significance of agency does not mean that the two lead children were always the dominant partners in their favoured relationships. Within the friendship groups it was also evident that there was the potential to learn about other aspects of social experiences such as disappointment, insecurity and resentment (Staub 1998). There was a reminder of the interdependent nature of relationships, that 'children's peer relations are complex in nature' and that 'insiders and outsiders are terms that are context-specific and under constant negotiation' (Konstantoni 2012 p.344). Both Ray and Isaac were keen to explore and negotiate new networks of social connections, testing the interplay between their agency and other children's agendas. The research observations featured significant examples of outgoing behaviour where they seemed keen to test social connections with children outside their close friendship groups. Isaac made a clear decision to play with the new girl who was visiting the nursery and was persistent in trying to break into the ball game with a boisterous group of boys. In addition these approaches made by Ray and Isaac towards other children were spontaneous and often unsupported by adult prompting or encouragement. For these two children the suggestion that their communication impairments correlated with passivity in terms of seeking social interaction did not seem appropriate. Also it could be possible in this particular early years setting the 'barriers to doing and being in the spaces created for children's interactions' (Nind et al., 2010, p.668) were being challenged by the positive staff attitudes and practices. The open child centred

approach, emphasis on free play and physical activity, and variety of private and communal spaces all appeared to support the dynamic social interplay between all the children including Ray and Isaac. The impact of such factors on overcoming the barriers experienced by some children when trying to develop their social connections, would be a relevant area for continued investigation.

In inclusive settings the role of the adult in 'actively mediating student perceptions of each other is necessary for promoting more equitable relations' (Naraian 2011 p.113). In this case study a theme that emerged was that this mediation by staff worked most successfully when it was facilitative rather than directive. Asking either Ray or Isaac to play with someone or suggesting they shared did not always support further social interaction. Scaffolding the social exchanges with a presence and perhaps a verbal commentary on the interaction, often seemed more successful because it left the children with their own room to negotiate further. Broadhead (2009) highlighted the importance of educators carrying out extended, detailed observations and to reflect on the data they collect in order to understand the purposeful activity of children. The opportunity and benefit of such observations focused on children's social interactions was demonstrated by the research and should be considered as a priority for practitioners. The concentrated observations questioned the assumed validity of some well rehearsed adult interventions in the setting, for example stepping into support sharing or prompt turn taking. For Ray and Isaac spoiling games momentarily taking something away from a playmate was often a significant first step in interactions with less familiar peers and the subtlety of this function could be easily overlooked by the orthodox adult response to such events. Therefore the focus on watching the social connections being made by the children, often in private and secret places, allowed an insight into the complexities of relationships. Consequently taking this focus is of particular significance for supporting children for whom the richness of friendship building is often seen to be a difficult challenge.

### **Conclusion**

From the observations collected in the groups it was evident that social connections and interactions between the focus children and their peers took place consistently throughout the sessions. The nature of the interactions were often unpredictable and fleeting, sometimes specific to activities and sometimes more spontaneous. For both children there appeared to be key partners that they regularly engaged with or who would seek them out for play. The robust nature of these friendships, the predictors and indicators for their development, and the qualitative difference between them and other social connections that the lead children made, are all significant areas for future investigation.

Both children in the study seemed to be involved in range of relationships with their peers, which in the context of this small case study could have been attributed to their particular personalities and preferences. More stories would need to be told with children who are similarly often associated with passivity in terms of making social connections in order to develop further understanding. It has been recognized that 'children's needs for positive interdependent peer relations are not met when they are excluded, isolated and discriminated against' (Konstantoni 2012, p.344). In this particular setting there was a focus through practice on addressing the attitudinal and systemic barriers that lead to

such isolation. It could be that in other pre-schools, where the awareness of these barriers is not so developed, the foundations for nurturing the social relationships between all children may be less secure.

Finally, the nursery staff were highly skilled in terms of their observational skills and this was identified as a key part of their role. However they reflected that their observations were, by necessity, often focused on children's skills, learning intentions and dispositions. There seemed to be untapped potential to watch children in uninterrupted social exchanges and to reflect on what these meant. Taking such opportunities seems key to 'understanding the dynamics of interactions so that (children) with and without disabilities know how to interact with the people they want to. (Rosetti 2011 p.32)

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