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Making connections and making friends: social interactions between two children labelled with special educational needs and their peers in a nursery setting.

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Early Years: An International Research Journal

Making connections and making friends: social interactions between two children labelled with special educational needs and their peers in a nursery setting.

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Making connections and making friends: social interactions between two children labelled with special educational needs and their peers in a nursery setting.

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This paper reports on a pilot study of the social interactions between two children labelled with special educational needs and their peers in an early years setting. Data from play observations and staff interviews is used to examine the dynamics of friendship groups that the two children have developed and the way that they attempt to make new connections with other children. Comparisons between the two children's interactions with their recurrent playmates and less familiar peers are drawn and the significance of their agency in making decisions about developing relationships is highlighted. A theme that also emerges is that staff facilitating rather than directing interactions between the two children and their peers has the most positive impact. Areas for further investigation are suggested including the range of relationships that children identified with special educational needs establish with their peers and the nature of adult support that most effectively supports friendships between all children.

Key Words: special educational needs, friendships, social interaction, adult support.

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Introduction

From an early age most children are seen to engage in complex social interactions with peers in their preschool settings, developing through these connections an understanding of how to interact and relate to other people (Lillivist 2010). The nursery or playgroup not only presents opportunities for young children to build their social competencies, it also provides a context for the emergence of friendships between peers (Dunn 1993). For some children these friendships can remain stable and resilient (Lindsey 2002) whilst for others such relationships can become a ‘highly colourful, elusive and unpredictable phenomena’ (Deegan 1996, 5). For those children finding friendships more elusive, the prospect of ‘having no friends’ may have a negative impact on their well being and their capacity to respond positively to social situations (Engle, McElwain and Lasky 2011).

This paper reports on the peer relationships of two children labelled with special educational needs (SEN) within the social dynamic of their inclusive nursery setting. A key expectation of inclusive provision is to welcome all children and to nurture relationships amongst all those who attend (Guralnick 1999; Guralnick et al. 2007). Significantly parents of disabled children and those labelled with SEN often view the development of specific friendships between their children and non-disabled, non-labelled peers as a priority (Hollingsworth and Buysse 2009). However despite the importance attached to friendships for this group of children, much research in this area has tended to focus on the incidence of such relationships rather than the nature of their development (Webster and Carter 2007). Guralnick and his colleagues, in a series of socio-metric research studies, found that young children they categorised with ‘mild

developmental delay' or 'communication disorders' were both less successful at engaging other children and less likely to form reciprocal friendships in their pre-schools than their peers (Guralnick et al. 1996; Guralnick et al. 2007). Other studies have identified rejection as a play partner as being common (Diamond, Le Furgy and Blass 1993; Skinner, Buysse and Bailey 2004; Odom et al. 2006) and have drawn a connection between children's unorthodox or unpredictable behaviour and reduced social interaction with peers (Nabours 1997; Odom et al. 2006).

Research, drawing from a socio-cultural perspective, has sought to gain an understanding of emerging relationships by considering factors beyond the impact of the child's perceived developmental difficulties or deficits (de Groot Kim 2010). Meyer (2001) identified four interconnected variables that shape the social relationships between children in inclusive settings: the child's repertoire; the social environment; the nature of adult support; and peer skills and expectations. Dyson (2005), Laws and Kelly (2005) and Diamond and Hong (2010) also highlighted that general attitudes to disability as well as developing awareness of equity and fairness had a significant influence on children's intentions to make friends with disabled peers in their pre-school settings. Similarly Dietrich (2005) found that parental attitude to friendships between disabled children and their peers was a key factor in establishing early relationships together with the joint play opportunities provided by an inclusive environment.

The intention of this qualitative study was to take the social model of disability as a principle frame of reference, shifting attention from the children's impairment or

special educational needs onto the broader culture within a setting and its impact on children's experiences (Oliver 1996; Swain, French, and Cameron 2003). Corsaro (2005) emphasised that children themselves, through their interpretations of the adult world, contribute to the production of their surrounding culture. Consequently all children, including those labelled with SEN, need to be recognised as active decision takers, choice makers and interpreters (Nind, Flewitt and Payler 2010), who operate within their setting as 'independent social actors' in a 'complex web of dependencies and interdependencies' (Konstantoni 2012, 344). In terms of developing friendships within such interwoven social cultures, research with older children in inclusive secondary schools has highlighted the significance of the disabled child's own individual decisions and actions in influencing their relationships with classmates (Bentley 2008; Naraian 2008, 2011; Rossetti 2011, 2012). Drawing on observations of much younger children in a nursery setting, this research aimed to examine how social connections and friendships between two children labelled with SEN and their peers developed. The influence that these two children's own choices and preferences had on their emerging relationships and their response to adult's supporting their interplay with other children were of particular interest in this pilot study.

Methodology

The research used a case study approach in a combined children's centre and nursery school in an inner-city, urban environment in England. The nursery served a diverse local community with 30% of the children speaking English as an additional language. In addition 15% of the children attending were identified with SEN. The

setting had substantial outdoor play areas that all the children from different rooms could access freely at any time during a session.

Ethical clearance for the project was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the researcher's university. This followed scrutiny of the protocols for seeking ongoing consent from parents (on behalf of their children) and staff to participate in the study. Four families agreed for their children to take part and from this group two were chosen on the basis of their attendance pattern, one attending five mornings and the other five afternoon sessions. These children were referred to as the 'lead' children in the research rather than the 'target' or 'focus' children, in recognition of their position as participants rather than subjects of the research. Both lead children were boys and had been attending the nursery for at least two terms. Ray was a four year-old living in the locality with his parents, two younger brothers and older sister. His family was of mixed race heritage with English being the main language spoken at home. Ray received support from a range of professionals including the community paediatrician and educational psychologist. As a young person with a hearing impairment associated with a clinical syndrome, he communicated with a mixture of gesture and short spoken phrases. When he had started at the nursery he had used Makaton sign language to assist his communication. Isaac was three and a half years old with the nursery being his first experience of group provision. He had previously received educational support at home through the Portage Service¹ and he was also involved with the community paediatric team. His family was of Black African heritage and he was an only child. He expressed

himself in two or three word phrases and understood the communication from others best when it was provided in short spoken units with gestures.

The two children had been identified by the nursery as being at 'Early Action Plus' within the SEN Code of Practice² (DfES 2001) and both received support from the speech therapy service whilst at nursery in small group sessions away from their main room base. Ray was also supported by a language programme which involved individual sessions with a staff member and the use of specific visual resources. Ray was due to move to the reception class in a local inclusive primary school the following term but Isaac had over another year in the nursery.

The research methodology drew from the 'In the Picture' approach developed by Paige-Smith and Rix (2011) in their study of home-based early intervention programmes for pre-school children with SEN. Acknowledging the influence of the 'Mosaic Approach' (Clark 2004) and the 'listening to children' paradigm, 'In the Picture' aimed to forefront the child's story 'and include a narrative that would assist in the understanding of the child's experienced world' (Matthews and Rix 2013, 242). Its potential to involve very young children with SEN as research participants also made it an appropriate reference point for this project. The key components used were: recording observations of children's peer interactions as a first person narrative; using photographs to make a visual record of the observed interactions; and sharing the visual record with the child and other people involved at the end of the observation session.

Direct observation of the lead children was chosen as the main method of data collection because it ‘...provides insights that cannot be gleaned in other ways’ (Nind, Flewitt, and Payler 2010, 668). A series of eight observations periods in the nursery took place over a week consisting of four sessions lasting two hours with each child. Within the nursery routine these sessions were designated times when the children engaged in free play either inside or outside. The observation strategy was to describe any interaction involving the lead child and at least one peer. The observations were recorded on a small hand-held Dictaphone with the researcher describing the social exchange as it happened. Consequently if the lead child was involved in solitary play the researcher would be watching but not recording any description of the child’s activity unless another peer joined in. If an adult was present or joined the interaction the recorded observation was still made as long as lead child was in the company of at least one other peer.

Because of the nature of the observations it was recognised that the researcher was potentially entering the private areas of children’s activity and encroaching on spaces preserved for their individual and collective withdrawal (Skanfors, Lofdhall and Haggland 2009; Corson and Colwell 2012). This raised ethical issues around permission to observe, the power dynamic between the researcher and the researched (Hill 2005; Robinson and Kellett 2005) and the responsibility for children’s well being (Birbeck and Drummond 2005; Langston et al. 2005). It was therefore important that transparent protocols were agreed with the staff and the lead children’s parents clarifying the researcher’s commitment to: intervene if any child was in danger; refer disagreements between children to familiar staff; alert staff to any child in distress; and withdraw if any child was

becoming unsettled by the observation. It was possible that such commitments could limit the scope of the field-work but inaction by the researcher in such circumstances would have been seen by the children as unusual and subsequently undermined the authenticity of any further observations (Birbeck and Drummond 2005).

The observations were recorded as first person narratives by the researcher describing the social interactions that the lead child engaged in. The following example is a transcript of a first person narrative description for one lead children recorded by the researcher as he observed an interaction:

I pull up on the plank - other children are coming across the plank that is between two climbing frame ladders. I watch the other children walk across then I walk down to where they are going across. I find a lower plank that I can get on and pull myself up onto it. A boy behind me waits and I crawl across the plank to the next climbing frame.

(Recorded observation of Ray)

It is important to stress that by using the first person narrative it was not assumed that the data would reflect 'the child's truth' more closely (Paige-Smith and Rix 2011, 30). All observations inevitably contain an element of personal interpretation but by using the first person narrative the aim was to help the observer be more precise about what the lead children did during interactions with their peers and the choices that they made. Detailed observation is recognised as being central to listening to young children, particularly those with learning difficulties or communication impairments (Clark 2005, Nind, Flewitt, and Payler 2010; Dickens 2011) and so using the first person narrative to provide

focus represented an attempt by the researcher to be a more effective and attentive listener.

In conjunction with the narrative descriptions of observations, photographs were taken by the researcher to capture social exchanges involving the lead children. Time was then taken at the end of each observation session to share these photographs with the lead children in a quiet area of their nursery room using a small digital picture screen. These 'sharing' sessions were facilitated by a practitioner who knew the child well whilst the researcher acted as an observer noting the child's reaction to the photographs and audio-recording their vocal responses. Using photographs as a focus is well established as an approach to enable children to participate in research by giving their own views on the phenomenon being investigated (Smith, Duncan and Marshall 2005; Stephenson 2009). The sessions here were important for this reason and also because they gave the lead children the opportunity to make connections between the researcher's presence in their environment and the purpose of the observations. From the researcher's perspective the activity was a further reminder that when investigating any aspect of children's experiences 'the most important starting point is that all children and young people- whatever their communication and/or cognitive impairment- have something to communicate' (Morris 2003, 346).

At the end of the week three staff members from Ray's group and four from Isaac's were interviewed about their perception of the lead children's friendships and peer connections in nursery. This sample represented all the staff that regularly supported

the children including the teacher in charge and the member of staff who had facilitated the photograph sharing sessions. The interviews were semi-structured with each interview covering the same themes but with the option to deviate from a set question order. The photographs taken of the children's interactions were not used as a focus for discussion in these adult interviews unlike in the original 'In the Picture' approach (Paige-Smith and Rix 2011). In the context of this small short term study it was felt that the staff's general views on the lead child's social connections provided clearer data triangulation in conjunction with the observational and photographic material.

The data from the observations, photograph sharing sessions and staff interviews were subjected to a thematic analysis derived from grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Initially 'open' descriptive codes were used to break down and organise the data according to the content which defined the interaction for example: play solely with recurrent partners; interaction with recurrent partners with other children joining in; interaction by lead child with others; and attempted interaction by another child. Further analysis of these broad categories identified connected common subthemes across the range of the lead children's encounters with peers. These included: being persistent; seeking help and engagement; initiating and controlling exchanges; sharing and not sharing; and the adult initiating, facilitating and intervening. The findings are presented as a collective case study and reported under subsections drawn from the data analysis themes, summarising the key characteristics of the lead children's social connections. As a small scale pilot study the research makes no attempt to generalize findings to different

contexts although it may ‘provide a lens someone else can use to look at friendships between children with and without disabilities’ (Dietrich 2005, 213).

Findings - The social connections of the two lead children

Recurrent playmates

From the observations and the photographs taken during the sessions it appeared that there were certain peers that Ray and Isaac played with more frequently. Ray recurrently engaged with Hayley and Ely, individually; as a partner or, often, within a threesome and the staff confirmed that the three children would ‘gravitate to each other almost instinctively...’ (staff interview). It was also noticeable that when other children joined in play with this group of three Ray kept his focus on interacting with Ely or Hayley rather than any other peers. His own comments on the photographs taken of his interactions suggested the significance of these relationships as he consistently named these two peers first when viewing the pictures. In the interviews staff identified that Isaac played with two children more regularly, Saul and Lisa and it was apparent from the observations that he engaged with these two peers for the longest sequences of play. Like Ray, Isaac also named these two children most frequently when the photographs were shared with him at the end of the session.

The staff suggested several reasons for Ray and Isaac having these particular relationships. They felt that Isaac’s play with Saul stemmed from being in the same small story group as well as having similar ‘levels of understanding’ and a shared disposition for ‘doing things as opposed to standing and having a conversation’ (staff interview). Staff traced his connection with Lisa back to the time when he started nursery and she

was amongst a group of girls who had been keen to ‘baby’ him. Staff had intervened to resolve the situation and since this time Isaac and Lisa had maintained a more balanced relationship revolving around each other’s energetic approach to play. Several staff also assumed that the development of Ray’s relationship with Ely and Hayley was based on the children having ‘the same sort of needs’ in terms of their ‘levels of communication’ (staff interview). However they also felt that compatibility of personality, age, temperament and play interests had drawn this group together.

Seeking help and engagement

The lead children’s play within these recurrent peer groupings often involved seeking help and accepting assistance from their familiar playmates. When Isaac played with Lisa on the climbing frame he would consistently seek her support by holding out his hands or reaching up to her. It was noticeable that she was the only child from whom he sought such assistance at this activity. Similarly, of all the children in Ray’s group Ely was the child 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. (Recorded observation of Ray)

Ray and Isaac were also observed regularly in pursuit of their respective familiar companions and persistently trying to join in with them:

Ely has Hayley and is holding her hand and I am following them with the pram.
(Recorded observation of Ray)

Saul runs away and goes onto the crates- I follow him-go up onto the crates with him-I am climbing over the crates and say 'hi, hi'. (Recorded observation of Isaac)

Leading and controlling exchanges

Both Ray and Isaac's interactions with familiar peers also featured them taking the lead and controlling activities. For example in one prolonged exchange with Hayley at the craft table Ray dictated which items she could put in a pile that she was making by holding onto the main box of materials and giving objects to her individually. Similarly Isaac was observed with Lisa being both persistent in trying to engage his friend but also resistant to her distractions if he was keen to pursue another activity:

Lisa 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 - Lisa is pulling on the curtains.... (Recorded observation of Isaac).

It also seemed from the observations that both lead children had worked out particular strategies for successfully engaging with their regular playmates. For example Ray would often: put toys on Ely's head; add pieces to Ely's construction activity; or point to pictures that Ely was looking at. Isaac was noted on several occasions growling or copying a vocal sound that Saul was making in order to gain his attention. It was noticeable that neither Ray or Isaac were observed using similar ways of starting interactions with other children.

Interaction with other children

In the interviews staff suggested that both Ray and Isaac were becoming less dependent on being around their established playmates. Ray's teacher noted that 'he will

move away and do his own thing and so he is independent in that sense' and the staff from Isaac's room all reflected on his increasing attempts to play alongside other children.

Ray's approaches towards other children involved: copying actions; choosing to stand or sit next to peers; and deliberately moving toys towards them. The following interaction was typical of his attempts to make a connection:

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... (Recorded observation of Ray)

He also consistently greeted two particular children by name as they entered the room each morning, suggesting his emerging interest in these peers. Significantly he consistently named these children when reviewing the photographs from the sessions.

Observations suggested that Isaac also gravitated towards activities where groups of other children were playing. In every observed session he made at least two visits to the snack area where children would congregate and would attempt interactions by pushing his bowl towards others or copying their actions. The lead teacher in the room suggested that, although the area was a safe haven from more boisterous activities in the nursery, he went to this area to be part of a social group. When joining other activities Isaac appeared willing to take risks, attempting to make in-roads by taking away toys from others and initiating a chase. One of the members of staff noted that he was also particularly confident in approaching children who were new to the nursery. This was

evident during an observation session when he repeatedly brought toys to a girl who was visiting the group with her parent.

Other children initiating

Staff reflected that although Ray had previously tended to push other children away when they approached him, he was now more tolerant of them playing alongside. In the observations Ray often responded to peers that asked to play with him or share his toy with 'No no', 'go away' or 'mine'. However this initial reaction could form the platform for a developing social exchange:

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. (Recorded observation of Ray)

This example not only typifies Ray's initial rejection of less familiar peers but it highlights the role the 'other child' has on sustaining a social exchange. Observations from the research suggested that the most extended interactions with either Ray or Isaac required the initiating child to be persistent and prepared to follow their lead. For example other children engaged with Isaac more successfully at the interactive whiteboard if they copied his dances or the sounds that he made. He would then reciprocate by providing new actions and noises for them to copy.

Adult support

An overview of the observation data highlighted that both Ray and Isaac were often negotiating their own exchanges with their peers without adult support. In other situations it was evident that the adults took on a range of functions in helping the two children to make social connections with peers particularly those who were not their familiar playmates.

Initiating

The staff often initiated social interaction between the lead children and other peers, either directly or indirectly. The direct approach involved: asking Ray or Isaac to pass particular items to other children; taking either lead child to play next to a peer; or requesting that they hold hands with another child when moving activity. Initiating social exchanges more indirectly involved the adult interpreting what either 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.

Facilitating

In addition to initiating interactions staff used a more facilitative approach, demonstrating possibilities without attempting to elicit a response from either Ray or Isaac. This could involve modelling actions that the children could choose to 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 (Ray observation commentary)

It was also evident that sometimes the adult's role in facilitating social exchanges was more passive, involving their presence without any further comment or intervention. One prolonged exchange between Ray and a boy saw both children giving each other toy animals and copying actions with these whilst the adult sat with them and watched. When either Ray or the boy left the table the member of staff stayed and at this point played with whichever child remained until their partner returned.

In the interviews several staff reiterated the importance of 'standing back', observing and letting the children develop the contacts themselves although with the recurrent proviso that they would intervene 'if there's a problem...' (staff interview). Such problems as turn taking, 'not sharing' or 'spoiling' games were regarded as triggers for their intervention rather than potential starting points for social interactions between either Ray or Isaac and their peers.

Discussion

A key theme to emerge from this short study was that during the observed sessions both lead children played more regularly with certain peers but were these recurrent interactions indicative of early friendships? Dietrich notes that 'a distinguishing factor between friendship and another type of relationship, such as a playmate, is to repeatedly seek one another to spend time engaged in a variety of activities' (Dietrich 2005, 208). Ray and Isaac often prioritised seeking out Hayley, Ely, Saul or Lisa and additionally the play within these regular peer groupings involved the reciprocity, consistent positivity, physical affection and appropriate interpretation of behaviour that

further signifies friendships between pre-school children (Odom et al. 2006; Sebanc et al. 2007; Hollingsworth and Buysse 2009). Ray and Isaac's interactions with their regular playmates were also distinguished by the uniqueness that often characterise friendships between disabled young people and their classmates (Rossetti 2011). Ray's tendency to place toys on Ely's head or Isaac seeking Saul's attention by copying vocal sounds were distinctive features of their social exchanges that were not evident in their play with other children. Similarly the reciprocal provision of help between the lead children and their familiar peers in this study reflected 'a local understanding' that is often found in friendship groups (Rossetti 2011, 31), an understanding which is qualitatively different from other helping relationships in which the motives may be for one child to dominate another (Dyson 2005; Hollingsworth and Buysse 2009).

The staff clearly regarded the lead children's connections with their regular playmates as friendships and pointed to the fact that they had been relatively long standing connections, existing for over a year in Ray's case and for two nursery terms for Isaac. Some longitudinal research has suggested that the sustainability of such relationships reduces significantly over time (Guralnick et al. 2006) and if they do continue, greater intimacy and sophistication struggle to develop (Guralnick et al. 2007; Webster and Carter 2013). A further suggestion is that for children identified with SEN, enduring friendships depend on the children in the relationship being at a comparable developmental level (Skinner, Buysse and Bailey 2004; Hollingsworth and Buysse 2009). It was the case that Ray, Hayley and Ely were all children who were identified with SEN but Isaac's close friends were children without this label. As the staff suggested in their

interviews it seems that the foundations of Ray and Isaac's friendship groups were based more on a range of interconnected dimensions such as similar interests and shared enjoyment, rather than being underpinned by any single factor (Dunn 1993, Dietrich 2005). Consequently the sustainability and quality of these friendships is likely to be affected by a complexity of circumstances of which the children's special educational needs is only one component.

What this study of the social connections made by Ray and Isaac did highlight was their position as decision makers and their personal influence on how exchanges progressed both with familiar and less familiar peers. They were active agents in their own choice-making with a drive to 'differently and actively negotiate their positions, make meaning and express themselves in different contexts' (Nind, Flewitt, and Payler 2010, 668). It is possible that they opted for play with Hayley or Ely, Saul or Lisa more regularly because they were confident that they could exercise their agency with these peers more than in other social interactions (Konstantoni, 2012). Outside these established peer groupings the maintenance of control was much less certain and consequently the interaction was more transitory. However there were times when they were more proactive in seeking out other children and did take risks in attempting to make these connections. Such variation underlines the fluidity of emerging relationships where 'insiders and outsiders are terms that are context-specific and under constant negotiation' (Konstantoni 2012, 344) and in which all children are continually shaping their peer culture (Corsaro 2005). In this research a key finding was that Ray and Isaac were as active in these negotiations as any other child.

The significance of Ray and Isaac's more sporadic social interactions with less familiar peers is difficult to ascertain from this short study. Some aspects of their attempts to engage with others appeared to move beyond the indiscriminate exchanges that are seen to characterise peer activity between children 'with and without delays' (Guralnick et al. 2007). Isaac's decision to frequently return to the snack table and Ray's choice to greet some children besides his regular play partners could suggest a level of social intent. A significant body of research has focused on the motivation of disabled children's peers to engage with or befriend children who are labelled as being different (Meyer 2001; Dyson 2005; Laws and Kelly 2005; Diamond and Hong 2010). However the findings that emerge from this research are a reminder that the making of social connections between children is a dyadic process. Developing further understanding of such preliminary social exchanges from the perspective of both the labelled and non labelled child would be an appropriate focus for further investigation, particularly as these interactions can be important precursors to future friendships (Buysse, Davis Goldman and Skinner 2002).

The outcomes of the support that the adults provided to Ray and Isaac were unpredictable, irrespective of whether staff were initiating, facilitating or directing peer interactions for the lead children. Rossetti (2012) found similar variations in practitioner influence whilst Bentley (2008) highlighted that for children with a label of SEN or disability, sustained practitioner presence, in the guise of support, can be a barrier to spontaneous interaction. Dietrich (2005) also noted that social connections between

children with SEN and their peers could often develop without any specific intervention plan. In this study practitioners emphasised the importance of ‘standing back’ in their interviews and appeared sensitive to the need for both Ray and Isaac to experiment and explore peer relationships. Intervening to support negotiations over disputes or sharing represented a trigger for the staff to be much more directly involved. However both Ray and Isaac seemed to use spoiling or refusing to share as a strategy to gain access to activities and make connections whilst maintaining an element of control (Skanfors, Lofdhal and Haggland 2009). As Broadhead suggests there is a potential for precipitous adult intervention into disagreements to stifle children’s attempts to negotiate and connect with each other (Broadhead 2009). Evidently such tensions suggest that the adult’s role in supporting the development of early friendships is a complex and nuanced activity (Meyer 2001). However for Ray and Isaac the foundation of any effective adult support was to recognise them as active agents rather than passive receivers in their established and exploratory social interactions (Nind, Flewitt and Payler 2010).

Conclusion

From this study it was evident that the lead children made a wide range of social connections with their peers some of which represented early friendships. The sustainability of such friendships, the influences on their development, and the qualitative difference between them and other social connections, are all significant areas for future investigation. The pilot study also highlighted the significance of both lead children’s agency in respect of their influence on social exchanges and their response to any adult support. Their actions began to reveal how they saw friendships, serving as a reminder

that their choices and preferences needed to be understood before any presumptions were made about which children might be encouraged to play with them or how to support their socialising with others. All children have ‘a potential to contribute to societal change’ (Lofdhal 2006, 87) and this study emphasized that Ray and Isaac contributed as richly as their peers to the social community in their nursery.

Total Word Count (including references)

6842 words

¹ Portage is a pre-school educational service that provides children and their families with a regular home visit from a trained Portage visitor. A learning programme is developed and practiced by the home visitor and parents with the aim of addressing the child’s special educational needs.

² All early years settings in England were required to follow this Code, which set out a graduated process of assessment of special educational need. Children identified at the ‘Early Action Plus’ stage in the framework would be receiving external support in addition to their pre-school provision in order to meet their educational requirements

Notes on contributors

John Parry is a lecturer in Education at the Open University in the UK. His research focus is: the development of inclusion in schools and early year’s provision; early intervention; and social interaction in inclusive settings. He has a particular interest in the application of research into practice. He has co-written *Special Needs in the Early Years* (2013) published by Routledge and edited *Equality, Participation and Inclusion: Diverse Contexts* (2010) published by Routledge, Taylor & Francis.

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