Friendship and Mat Time: The Shadowy Underground of Popularity in Children’s Peer Culture

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Introduction

This address describes some of the findings of my doctoral research into children’s social worlds within the primary classroom and considers its relevance to early childhood settings. I have chosen a deliberately provocative title. This is because mat time is arguably an important event; one that has the potential to bring adults and children together in one space like none other. However, my findings suggest that children process aspects of it – especially those that relate to being chosen, or being popular – in ways that we might not always predict as adults.

My central argument is that, as teachers we must carefully reflect on the value of mat time and consciously practice it in ways that consider friendship structures. This is because children have their own culture, which sits within and alongside the culture of the educational setting. Moreover, friendship and social hierarchy are key aspects of this culture. Peer culture is not always evident to the adult eye. Nonetheless, it is pervasive and plays out even at ‘mat time’, irrespective of the fact that it is generally a teacher-facilitated event. This presentation will share some of the children’s insights into the hidden social aspects of mat time as well as my own observations.

At this point, I would like to sincerely thank the teachers and children who let me into their classrooms over the course of three terms to observe and ask questions. They were generous with their time and wisdom, often allowing me to sit on the mat to experience it authentically. I would also like to express deep gratitude to my three research supervisors, Vanessa Green, Mary Jane Shuker and Michael Johnston, who have been tireless in their enthusiasm and encouragement for me to learn new skills and probe the data in increasingly detailed and reflective ways.

Vanessa introduced me to two concepts from the 1980s that have been highly influential to my analyses of the data. The first is William Corsaro’s (1985) notion of friendship and peer culture. The second concept is John Coie and Kenneth Dodge’s (1983) theory of sociometrics, i.e. the degree of children’s popularity. These works are nearly thirty years old, and while many other writers have subsequently added to them, there is still much worth in examining the original theses. These will now be described.
Friendship and peer culture
Children and adults might have different ways of thinking about friendship. As an adult, when I think about my friendships I perceive them to be based on kindness and trustworthiness. Furthermore, I can go a long time without speaking to my closest friends, and yet the friendship remains strong. However, when we look at the seminal ethnographic work of William Corsaro (1985), it appears that children associate friends with people who they regularly do things with. By this reasoning, friends can seek each other out to play, but can be also very unkind to each other. Children’s friendships are socially complex. Therefore, to better manage them, children might opt for dyadic and triadic groups. Furthermore, they protect the boundaries of their friendship groups by using tactics to exclude others or to strengthen their own place. It follows that children’s friendships can be fragile, changeable and fluid (Corsaro, 1985).

The space where children’s peer culture connects to the culture of the educational setting is crucially important. The values of the context, as well as its routines, space and rules, each impact children’s play, and therefore their friendships. Both the culture of the educational setting and the peer culture communicate to its members about what roles they can take, how much power they each can have, and what artefacts are considered of value. One such example of power involves the extent to which individual children are able to appropriate the rules, routines and space that adults have designed. Children who are able to do this effectively have potential to further their own interests, including their friendships (Corsaro, 1985; 2000).

Popularity and sociometrics
At mat time, children generally have varying opportunities to participate, choose their friends for different things and offer different levels of support to specific peers. Despite the teacher’s efforts at equity, it is likely that different children will be afforded varying opportunities to be actively included versus on looking. This potentially relates to Coie and Dodge’s (1983) theory of sociometrics.

Coie & Dodge (1983) determined that certain children were more popular than their peers and accordingly could access more resources. They measured this by asking children to nominate whom they most liked and whom they least liked. Analysing these nominations enabled them to determine individual children’s social status as popular, controversial, average, neglected or rejected. This was known as a sociometric hierarchy. Children who occupied positions at the upper end of the hierarchy (i.e. popular and controversial children) tended to be frequently chosen and supported by their peers (Coie & Dodge, 1983; Green & Rechis, 2006).

It used to be thought that children who were neglected and rejected were so because they had poor social skills, whereas popular children had highly developed social skills. What we know now, is that this is only partially true. In her research, Vanessa Green (1998) found that social skills are contextually bound to a certain degree therefore it begs the question: ‘If we change the context, can we part way change a child’s social standing?’ The answer is potentially ‘yes’.
Methods

The participants in my research were children in three junior primary classrooms at different schools in the Greater Wellington Region. All three teachers were highly experienced. The children ranged in age from five years old to seven years old.

I wanted to enter the children’s peer groups therefore used Corsaro’s (1985) method of positioning myself as a non-adult. This involved avoiding any personal adult authority as best as possible. It was also important to build relationships with the children before collecting data. Three things happened that caused me to feel that the strategies for penetrating the peer group were partway effective. The first event occurred one day when I was late arriving to the mat after morning tea. I slipped in quietly and sat next to a child who whispered, “It’s okay. She [the teacher] didn’t see you”. The assumption appeared to be that there would be consequences for my lateness just like there would be for other class members. The other two events happened concurrently: children began to share insights into the teacher’s rules and use derogatory terms for their peers within my hearing. For example, one child told me that the teacher gets annoyed if you “don’t pick up your own mess,” while another told me that a peer was “an egg”. I found responding to such comments challenging from an ethical perspective so imitated the pro-social strategies that other children used. For example, I noticed that one popular child challenged an unkind statement about another child with an example of something positive that he had done recently.

The second phase of the data collection involved filming mat time. A small ‘Go Pro’ camera was placed on the whiteboard in each class. Not all children had permission by their parents to be filmed or desired to participate. Strategies to manage this were developed in conjunction with the classroom teacher and involved either offering children the opportunity to attend mat time in the next-door classroom, or creating a ‘dead space’ where children would not be within the camera frame.

During the final phase, fifty children were interviewed using small model humanoid figures as a provocation (see fig 1). As well as having parental and teacher consent, children’s assent was sought before each interview. Interviews lasted for approximately ten minutes and children were asked to set up a mat time and explain what happened. The interviews were recorded using a small Dictaphone. I told children that they could turn it off at any point. I also gave my assurances that children would not be identifiable to their teachers in any way. For this reason, I decided to report the findings as a whole, rather than treat each class as a case. In addition to these strategies, a field diary was kept. Finally, children were assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.
Findings

Friends help each other
There was a strong trend for children to sit next to their friends at mat time, although only some of the children said that it was important. There seemed to be several reasons for this. In the first instance, friends sometimes helped each other to get a preferred position on the mat. When the children sat in a “block”, the front positions were highly sought after, which also explained why children were often squashed in the first few rows. Reasons that children gave for this being the ‘best’ place included being able to see and hear better, or being better able to ask questions and gain the teacher’s attention. The consequences of being able to sit at the front of the group clearly relate to learning. It’s important to note that this trend was not visible when children sat in a circle. We will return to this point later in this presentation.

In addition to helping friends get preferred seating positions, some of the children helped their friends come up with good ideas to share. There was a perception that sharing astute ideas had currency within the group. In other words, they felt that they could get known as someone who was ‘clever’ if they answered a question well or shared a good idea. This was evidenced in comments such as six-year-old Kaitiaki’s, who stated the following about his friend, “He tells me what, what, to put up my hand and he tells me what ideas I should say [sic].”

A related theme was that someone with a lot of friends potentially had more power to influence curriculum and classroom decisions. In my own teaching practices, I can remember using mat time as a forum for democracy. For example, we held a mat time to choose a name for our centre goldfish. The routine that we followed was to ask children to nominate ideas and then vote on one. The idea with the most votes
would then be adopted. Looking back, I now believe that I failed to understand that the children often supported their friend’s idea. Alternatively, the group supported the ideas of the more popular children, even if there were better ideas. In this regard, Putallaz & Sheppard (1992) found that children would pick up the ideas of popular children with great enthusiasm. It stands to reason in this scenario that the more friends a child has, the more help and therefore potential influence he or she has within the setting.

 Being chosen
The children were close observers to choosing behaviours and several of them found peer-choosing activities problematic, i.e. when a child was called on to choose a friend for a particular activity. Problems were most evident for two particular groups. The first was children who were in a triadic friendship group because it automatically required the exclusion of one member. The most telling illustration of this was one girl with two close friends. When she was given the task to choose a helper at mat time, she chose one of her two close friends. The other protested and was told, “But you’re only my second best friend”. A second group of children who were impacted by peer-choosing activities were children who did not have a close friend. They were often ‘left over’ and they either did not get to have a turn at the activity or the teacher had to find them someone to pair up with. In many instances, the children in both groups went on to work productively. However, there were also times when some of the affected children were visibly disengaged and distracted. This is unsurprising when we think about Corsaro’s (1985) assertion that doing things together is a key proponent in friendship.

In early childhood we might see such choosing behaviour occur during mat time games such as ‘Five Little Elephants’, whereby each elephant chooses a friend. At such times, children may have to prioritise their friendships. My own experience as an early childhood teacher has taught me that there are real emotional effects for some children who are not chosen by their friend. There are also likely to be effects for children who are consistently not chosen by their peer group at all. I am unconvinced that a compensatory turn awarded by the teacher makes up for it.

 Being the chooser
We might think that highly chosen children are fortunate, however they seemed to frequently be put in positions of having to choose between other peers. This sometimes caused them stress. Within some friendship circles there was strong competition to be chosen by the most popular group member. For example, for one girl, finding a place to sit on the mat proved to be a socially fraught time. Her friends could be heard positioning to sit next to her sometimes twenty minutes before mat time started. Some strategies included offering her play dates or birthday party invites in exchange for her choosing them to sit next to. Direct threats such as “I won’t be your friend” were also made. At mat time, she frequently seemed physically squashed by some of the other children in their bid to sit as close to her as possible. More over, other children became annoyed if she did not choose them.
In her interview she raised this issue as one that impacted her enjoyment of mat time, saying,

“Well, sometimes, people want to sit next to me like Annie and Penny. When other people come and sit next to me and they feel a bit like, angry, or something like that ‘cause they want to sit next to me [sic].”

**Being not-chosen**
There were three children who were not only chosen infrequently, but they sometimes even struggled to find a place to sit. This was noticeable one day when one such boy approached the mat time after the class was seated. Just as he went to sit in a gap, the teacher turned her back to gather her materials. The two children either side of the gap silently moved together and blocked his access. He moved to the next gap, but the same thing happened. These were acts of rejection that the entire class was witness to, and did not challenge. He appeared to have a negative reputation among some of the class members with one child stating, “He’s only got half a brain.” In addition, another child was rejected as punishment for a previous conflict with a peer. The peer stated in her interview, “I can’t sit next to this girl. She called me stupid one day.”

Despite their difficulties, children on the outer expressed favourable opinions about mat time. One child felt that it helped him get to know other children. My impression was that some of his most sustained discussions with peers occurred at mat time. He said, “I do know some people but I don’t know everyone.” This statement potentially reflects the challenges he felt in being accepted by the peer group and developing genuine relationships. Another child told me, “Because I get to sit with everyone, everyone is around me.” For her, mat time appeared to afford a sense of being with others. It is important to note that in both instances, the teacher deliberately used mat time as a forum to consciously bring the child alongside others. Examples of how this was done will be given next.

**Inclusion strategies**
There were several strategies that teachers used to promote inclusion and mediate choosing behaviours. These related to a careful facilitation style where the teacher held the control but attempted to come close to the child’s world-view. Emilson (2007) described this style as ‘Strong framing’. One example of this could be seen when the teacher asked the children to sit in a circle. In the first instance, this removed competition to sit near the front. Mandel Morrow and Smith (1990) found that children who sit at the back of the mat find it more difficult to participate. This is certainly echoed in the findings of this present research. With a circle configuration, the teacher could make eye contact with everyone in the group more easily. This in itself enabled certain participation for some children. Furthermore, the teacher noticed that children had a higher tendency to talk to each other rather than just talk to the teacher. She said, “How can you have a discussion with someone if you are looking at their back?” When the teacher needed people to pair up she either used playful commands such as “Every second person turn to your left”, or she
allocated partners. Another example of inclusion was the use of discussion doughnuts. With this practice, the children were asked to form two equal circles, with one inside the other. Pairs were formed when children in the inner circle face the children in the outer circle (Brown & Thomson, 2000).

A final strategy was the use of ‘drawing names’. In other words, during games or where only a small group can be chosen for active participation, the effects of choosing were ameliorated by placing names in a container, and drawing them out randomly. It stands to reason that the drawn names are put to one side until everybody has had their turn. This had the potential to be effective even when releasing children from the mat. This matters when we think that children might read particular meaning into teachers’ habit of consistently letting certain children leave the mat first. For example, in one context a child was frequently chosen to leave the mat first because the teacher found his behaviour disruptive. Nonetheless, another child told me that it was because he was important. Not only did this practice possibly reward disruptive behaviour but, it had communicated to at least one other child that there were differences in “importance”. While this was not the teacher’s intention it did illustrate the importance of accessing the children’s peer culture and understanding how they make sense of the facilitation.

Relevance to early childhood education
There are three pivotal points for relevance for those of us who facilitate mat time in early childhood. The first is how we use discussion. When discussion happens as a whole group often only limited numbers of children can contribute. We need to ask ourselves whether it is the same children who contribute each time, and whether this is okay. A second question relates to how we might streamline discussion practices between early childhood and school. We have much to learn from our primary colleagues who are exploring other modes of discussion with considerable success. Pair-share and doughnuts are two such examples. Practices such as these offer two exciting possibilities: (1) distribution of participation across the group (Zaglawan & Ostrosky, 2011) and (2) bringing children together who might infrequently interact, and thereby potentially enhancing collaboration within the group (Lown, 2008).

A second point of relevance is the use of competition within the peer group and the intersection with our mat time facilitation. It is important that we identify what it is that inspires children to behave in competitive ways, and then determine if there are inequities. Seating position is one example of this. I believe that it is of critical importance that we review the benefits of sitting up the front of the mat and determine whether all children get to uptake such benefits.

The final point of relevance is how we utilise choosing behaviours. This is a political act that potentially creates a popularity contest or requires children to prioritise friendships. The power of being chosen is illustrated well by Moore (2001) who found that when rejected children were chosen by the teacher for important management roles, such as being the teacher’s helper, they experienced reduced
levels of bullying and rejection. The question of 'how to choose children' is an intensely philosophical issue, and one worth examining.

So what? Summing up
One of the common critiques of my work is that life is just competitive and we cannot be chosen all of the time. While this is true to some degree, my concern is with the children who are chosen infrequently or never. This directly relates to the degree of agency that individual children experience within their educational setting. Sarah Te One (2008) relates agency to children's personal ‘power’ and their ability to make choices. When we look at choosing behaviours at mat time, what we see is that there are differences in the personal power that children have. Some have a great deal of agency; they can make many choices and sometimes they can even make decisions about curriculum. Furthermore, the group essentially communicates to them that they are wanted. However, others have comparatively no power or agency. They may also frequently experience situations that communicate to them that they are not chosen. This drives this issue into the realm of wellbeing, equity and rights.

What do we believe about our personal responsibility as teachers to those children who have little agency? Donohue, Perry and Weinstein (2003) suggest that we have a high responsibility. Children seem attuned to our expectations of and attitudes to their individual peers. This in turn influences their responses to the peers. In other words, it is critically important that we reflect on whether we unwittingly enable certain children to be left out. This is relevant at any time, but especially at mat time because of its public nature. The children witness the decisions we make therefore it validates exclusion and potentially strengthens it. The good news is that we can potentially influence the situation for children who are on the outer; this can be done by examining our facilitation practices at mat time, and what they enable, by way of individual children’s power and popularity. I want to finish with some questions that have helped me reflect on the experiences of individual children at mat time.

Reflective questions

What does this group tell me about who I am?
Am I someone who is sought after and included? What role do I have here? Am I liked?

How are my contributions valued?
Am I enabled to move beyond participation to actually contributing in ways that are valued and visible? In other words, am I able to take on an active role, or is the expectation that I will merely be present?

What special connections do I have to other people here?
How do people here look after my interests and needs specifically? How is Te Whāriki enacted when we’re sitting on the whāriki, particularly Nga Hononga (relationships) and Whakamana (empowerment)? (Ministry of Education, 1996).
References