The 'space' of friendship: Young children's understandings and expressions of friendship in a reception class

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Biographical note

Marianna Papadopoulou specialises in the area of children's development and learning. Her PhD thesis adopted a holistic approach (Gestalt structure) in order to examine young children's learning dispositions and experiences.

As a qualified teacher Dr Papadopoulou started her career in early years settings. Upon completion of her PhD she moved to academia and has developed and taught a number of modules in child development, psychology of education, psychology of adolescence and learning theory.

Her research so far has looked at children's learning experiences in both formal and informal settings. She has studied children's evolutionary traits, dispositions and ways of 'intending' towards their world as these are manifested in behaviours and interactions, such as in play and friendships.

Abstract

The purpose of this study has been to explore young children's understandings and experiences of friendship as these were manifested in children's behaviours, in a reception class setting. Drawing on an evolutionary, ecological framework, friendship is seen as, not only the expression and further development of social understandings and cognitive advances; more than that, making and maintaining friends is seen as an evolutionary trait and a 'drive' to relate to similarly minded others. Through 'niche picking', children select the environments and opportunities that suit them in order to develop their dispositions and individual traits. The research employed a participatory design in order to capture the children's views and experiences. It took place in a reception class setting, where children's everyday experiences were observed and discussed with them. The study identified six themes of analysis and offered some suggestions about creating enabling educational environments that allow the 'space' for niche construction.

Introduction

Young children's friendships and social understanding

According to Howes (1996) friendships are close relationships that involve companionship, intimacy and affection. In the early years, companionship is manifested as proximity seeking, spending time together and as having fun together. Intimacy, the sharing, closeness and self-disclosure among friends, may be more difficult to witness in very young children's relationships. However, a number of theorists (see for example Dunn, 2006 and Howes, 1996) state that children experience intimacy in pretence play. Indeed, the play themes they engage with and share with play mates may reflect their concerns, interests and fears.

Reciprocity, or mutuality of affection, is, according to Dunn (2006) and Rubin, Coplan, Chen, Buskirt, and Wojslawowicz (2005) one of the defining characteristics of friendship, as it helps distinguish between friendship (mutually experienced and cherished by both members of the relationship) from other social relationships based on looser bonds, or even a child's desire to be friends with others that is not reciprocated.

Laursen and Hartup (1997) and Rubin et al (2005) identify closeness, mutuality of affection and parity as some of the defining characteristics of friendship. Best friends want to spend more time together, offering one another emotional support, intimacy and fun.

It seems that these definitions share common grounds: the first is that they all seem to consider reciprocity, mutuality, intimacy and equality between friends as the fundamental prerequisites of a friendship relationship. Some of these characteristics, however, may be difficult to identify in friendships between very young children. Young friends are still not using a conventional form of language to reflect on and articulate their thoughts and emotions. Rather, their knowledge and understandings of friendships sometimes need to be inferred from their behaviours, interactions and play.

At this point it is important to 'borrow' Laursen and Hartup's (1997) distinction between the 'deep' and 'surface' structures of friendship. The first refers to children's understandings of what friendship is, what it means and requires. In other words, this is a cognitive structure that involves children's friendship schemas regarding the social meaning of friendships. The second is the manifestation of such understandings. The 'surface' structure includes behavioural expressions, or else the social exchanges among friends.

The two structures, although not mirroring each other, bear a significant relationship and the purpose of this study is to examine this relationship. Looking at children's friendship experiences and exchanges in a reception class, the purpose of this work is to infer young friends' understandings of what friendship involves and how to 'do' it.

The second theme that emerges from these definitions is that they all refer to some sort of social understanding, or social skills that are seen as fundamental conditions for the development of friendships. Reciprocity, for example, is a social skill that involves an understanding of give-and-take (cognitive aspect) but also an affective element of 'needing' to or wanting to engage in such a relationship (emotional aspect). In other words, it seems that there is a significant relationship between friendship and other areas of development (cognitive and socio-emotional).

Indeed, it seems that 'doing' friendship goes hand-in-hand with the development of other skills. The two (making friends and skill development) bear a meaningful, bidirectional relationship; the acquisition and development of certain (see next section) cognitive and socio-emotional skills enable children to achieve a more complex and sophisticated understanding of others' needs, thoughts and emotions and these advances, in turn, help children build friendships. At the same time, having friends and spending time together, enables children to further develop cognitive and socio-emotional skills. This relationship between development and friendships is further explored in the following section.

Making and having friends, however, is not only limited to skill development. The experience of friendship is much wider. It involves the wholeness of human existence. It is an evolutionary trait, expressed as an internal 'drive', or else an instinct to relate to others and be part of a group (Laursen & Hartup, 2002; Rubin et al, 2005). Indeed, it appears that children experience an 'urge' to be with and relate to peers and to form close bonds with them and this starts becoming more evident at around the ages of three to four and sometimes even earlier (Dunn, 2006).

Thus, the basic premise of this work is that making and maintaining friends serves an evolutionary function and, as such, it is inborn and expressed in intentional acts (Papadopoulou & Birch, 2007; Papadopoulou, 2012). Depending on the children's age, developmental stage, and maturational factors, but also based on the social environment they experience, this drive may be experienced and expressed differently, both consciously and subconsciously. In other words, the manifestations of our human *instinct* to 'bond' with others may depend on a host of factors, both developmental and environmental.

Expanding on the evolutionary position, the argument proposed here is that making and maintaining friendships embraces the wholeness of the child's existence. Drawing on the notion of the 'developmental niche' (Flynn, Laland, R. Kendal, & J. Kendal, 2013), children are seen as active agents, who contribute to their own development. They are seen as actively seeking the kinds of environment that suit their internal, biological drives and fulfil their individual needs. In other words, children select the environments that help them develop their characteristics and predispositions, thus having a significant input in their developmental 'trajectories' and developing identity.

The last, but equally significant dimension to consider here is the role of the environment. Young children's drive to make friends and to 'make themselves' through niche picking (Scarr & McCartney, 1983) can be facilitated by enabling environments (Scarr, 1996) that offer children the 'space', both physical, temporal and psychological, to relate to others, to select the environments that are suitable for them. This will be explored in the last section of this study, which focused on educational implications.

To briefly recapture the argument here, young children's friendships is a significant, but also complex area of study. Friendship and development of cognitive and socio-emotional skills bear a meaningful and bidirectional relationship. The links between friendship and development will be explored next. Also, making and maintaining friends seems to be an inborn, biological need that serves evolutionary purposes. It aids adaptability to the environment, but also allows the child to be an active agent in his/her development and identity. The evolutionary and existential functions of friendship will be explored in the second section.

The methodology of this paper draws on the principles of participatory research, or else research with children. The study's aim has been to examine preschoolers' conceptions of friendship (the deep structures) by looking at the children's behavioural expressions (surface structures). Participatory research has been employed to enable the collection of data that emerged from the children's experiences and accounts, instead of imposing the researcher's prior understandings. This is despite the need to ground this investigation in evolutionary and ecological paradigms. The methodology and findings will be discussed in the third and fourth sections.

Considering the significant role of having friends on development and well being, the last section will consider the importance of supporting and facilitating children's friendship experiences in enabling environments. In particular, it will look at the school environment and ways of supporting children's transition to the reception class by creating the 'space' for friendships and self-development.

The developmental argument

The relationship between developmental factors and the formation of friendships is meaningful, bidirectional and dynamic. I will now consider both directions of influence;

a. *The impact of socio-emotional and cognitive skills on friendship*
   The first direction of influence refers to the impact of the developing social, cognitive and emotional skills upon friendship experiences. Piaget (1932) claimed that cognitive, social and affective behaviours have a common basis and are interdependent. Therefore developments in one area influence (and are then subsequently influenced by) developments in other areas.
   Piaget's work on cognition and its development has inspired the emergence of several theories that see the development of friendship as a staged process, in line with the development of socio-cognitive and emotional aspects (see for example Bigelow, 1977, 1982; Damon, 1977; Dunn, 2006; Furman & Bierman, 1983; Laursen & Hartup, 2002; Maguire & Dunn, 1997; Selman & Schultz, 1990). Although some are quite dated, their influence is still considered important.
   Based on the Piagetian model (1932), children's understanding follows certain patterns: from egocentricity to de-centering (and thus socio-centricity), from concrete to abstract, from being limited to physical, observable characteristics to an increasing ability to appreciate psychological, inner qualities. These cognitive advances impact on children's understanding and expression of affect, of others' minds, of cause and effect and of morality, to name a few skills that are significant for the formation and maintenance of friendships.
   Selman (1980) studied the developmental trend of reciprocity (one of the defining characteristics of friendship, as mentioned earlier) and identified four main stages that children go through: in infancy, children's perceptions are limited to self-interest. During the second stage, pre-schoolers are able to engage in matched exchanges of material resources, as their understanding now is less egocentric but still limited to concrete experiences. Moving from concrete to abstract, older children are able to identify psychological traits and appreciate inner states and therefore engage in matched exchanges of emotional and psychological resources. Finally, the last stage is marked by a needs based exchange, based on a more sophisticated appreciation of individuals' circumstances and needs, mutuality and common concern.

Along similar lines, Bigelow (1977) studied children's Friendship Expectations (FE), or else the characteristics that children wanted their friends to have. FE were seen as also including a judgemental quality, drawing on the moral values that children held at different ages. Bigelow identified three distinct stages: during the first, children's FEs were influenced by the physical attributes such common activities and proximity. Their moral judgements were based on rewards and punishments; during the second stage children referred to norms and values of friendships and these were defined and sanctioned by 'authorities' external to the child. This stage reflected an appreciation of social demands and expectations but also entailed feelings of disapproval and guilt when norms were violated. In the last stage, older children demonstrated empathy, understanding and self disclosure. Their understanding of moral principles was based on internal standards, rather than imposed externally. Here also, one can see the developmental trend from the early understandings that are limited to the concrete experience to the gradual appreciation of values and standards that are more abstract and psychological.

This developmental trend, from concrete to abstract, however, has been challenged by Furman and Bierman (1983). The hypothesis of this study was that younger children's understandings of friendship would be limited to observable attributes, such as propinquity and physical characteristics. More abstract attributes, such as the expression of affection and support, were expected to emerge later, as these require a more complex appreciation of prosocial and affectively based motives. Contrary to their expectations, the pre-schoolers in their study did show affection and prosocial behaviour.

Bigelow's (1982) study has also challenged the developmental argument. Examining children's understandings of friendship, the aim of this quantitative study was to identify a staged pattern that would be invariant and interdependent with the child's cognitive stage. His prediction was that the children's understandings would fall into three stages, moving from egocentric to socio-centric and then to an abstract, more empathic understanding. His findings, however, did not confirm a consistent relationship between cognitive stage and children's understandings of friendship.

This, according to Bingelow (1982), was attributed to the methodological limitations of his study. It could be either due to the narrow scope of his quantitative tool or due to relying on children's verbal accounts, which did not necessarily reflect the complexity of their understanding.

In summary, the contribution of stage theories is that they depict development in a holistic way, outlining the interdependence between different areas and the ways understandings in one area influence (and are subsequently influenced by) developments in other areas. However, perhaps looking at linear, sequential progressions in understandings may, in itself, be limiting, as it fails to capture the significance of the environment but also the child's intentional structures and agency. The two are inherently dynamic and uncertain.

b. *The impact of friendship on development*

The second direction of influence, namely the developmental benefits of friendship, is well documented; having friends has been correlated with cognitive, social and emotional advancements (Bukowsky & Sippola, 2005). Friendships allow children to experience pleasant, stimulating experiences, to feel supported and protected, to feel acceptance and thus positive self-esteem, to have a sense of belongingness and sharing. 'Friendship offers the stuff required to satisfy human needs' (Bukowsky & Sippola, 2005, p. 92).

According to Hartup and Stevens (1997), having friends enables children to further develop their social skills. First, making friends requires the possession of some social skills. Maintaining friendships also requires the ability to be other oriented, able to manage conflicts, to negotiate, to manage emotions, to name just a few of the complex interpersonal and intrapersonal skills involved. Ultimately, having friends enables children to develop their social skills and, enhanced social skills increase the chances of making and maintaining friends.

Rubin et al (2005) consider peer relationships as enhancing the chances of adaptive development whereas Mead (1934) views friendship as a vehicle for the development of identity and for adjustment. In Mead's writings, friendship enables the child to see the self from another's view. By experiencing acceptance and validation from an equal other, the sense of self becomes more positive (linked to self esteem) but also a more refined understanding of the self, its strengths and weaknesses develops.

Children's experience of friendships has also been associated with their school performance. Studies identify a positive correlation between having positive relationships with friends and being an academic achiever at school (Ladd, 1990); although how the two relate is less clear.

To summarise, it seems that there is general consensus about the benefits of having friends on other areas of development. The argument proposed in this study is in line with this position, although it does not necessarily accept the developmental necessity view. The latter reflects the detrimental position that children can only develop a number of important skills if they have friends (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1996). Instead, a more moderate position is adopted here and this views friendship as offering important experiences and opportunities for positive development and well being, but not as the only way that these skills can develop.

The developmental benefits of friendship are, thus, obvious and perhaps unquestionable. Further and in line with the aims of this piece, friendship enables children to adapt to their environments and to select and to an extent create the environments that are suitable for their individual development. This will be discussed next.

The evolutionary and existential position

According to the evolutionary argument, our behaviours are influenced by our biology (Konner, 2010; Rubin et al., 2005). This is not to say that the environment is not important. On the contrary, as Konner (2010) claims, brain plasticity presupposes the existence of environmental (cultural) demands that our brain tries to adapt to in order to meet and thus ensure survival and evolution.

Along similar lines, Rubin et al. (2005) examine the biological basis of friendship. As they state, there is a significant relationship between our biology and our ability to initiate, form and maintain relationships with others and this serves an important evolutionary function. According to Laursen and Hartup (2002), our innate need to bond enables us to achieve group membership and thus have better chances of meeting environmental challenges. Being part of a group, thus, has significant survival and reproductive benefits.

The theme that emerges from these accounts is that the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships (friendships in our instance) is biologically -driven, or else, we have an 'instinct' to make friends. This instinct may be expressed as a predisposition to be interested

in and a drive to approach others; also as a strong motive to develop the social skills that can help us bond with others, such as reciprocity (ibid).

Indeed, children seem to have a strong interest in making friends; they care about their friends, they are highly motivated to adopt social behaviours that help maintain their friendships and a tendency to try to resolve conflicts. As Dunn (2006) put it, friendship may be the first relationship that children care about; they are motivated to understand their friends' minds, needs and wishes. Seen under an evolutionary light, such pro-social (and pro-friendship) behaviours are the manifestations of the instinct to be part of a group.

To extend the evolutionary argument, the thesis adopted in this piece is that organisms, in our case young children, are active agents in their own development. Through the processes of niche picking and niche construction, children select the environments that are suitable for them and thus enable themselves to develop their traits and dispositions.

The conventional evolutionary argument sees evolution as the process of adapting to the demands of a given environment (Flynn et al., 2013). Through brain plasticity, young children's brains are mouldable and modifiable, in line with environmental demands. This position assumes a one-way direction of influence, from the environment to the child. The niche picking position, however, argues that the organism (young children) is much more active in 'making' itself. This process, however, involves mutuality.

The organism has the capacity to modify its environment and to select the environments that are suitable for the expression and further development of its individual traits (Flynn et al., 2013; Scarr & McCartney, 1983). In this way, the organism is in a position to co-direct its own evolution. Evolution is, thus, the result of an interaction between environments with certain demands (that exercise selection processes) and organisms that select and may even alter their environments. This is described as 'niche construction', which is

'…the modification of both living and non living components in environments through the metabolic, physiological and behavioural activities of organisms, as well as through their choices' (Flynn et al., 2013, p. 296)

The role of the organism needs to be emphasised here; driven by its predispositions (possibly genetically influenced), it engages in 'niche picking', in selecting the conditions that are suitable for it, that match its characteristics. In this way organisms are active in informing their environments, which in turn exercise further influence upon them.

The notion of niche picking is particularly relevant in a discussion of children's friendships. Indeed, children's friendship encounters and experiences can be seen as manifestations of niche picking. Children select their friends and, through their selections, they may be constructing their own niche – they choose the individuals and social exchanges that match their needs.

Perhaps following their dispositions, children choose to affiliate themselves with certain peers that have similar, or even complementary, traits. In this way they create the conditions that will enable them to interact in certain ways, to experience certain situations, to enact certain scenarios of mutual enjoyment with similar minded others. Therefore, children do not just choose friends, they also choose the experiences and social encounters they will have with these friends and in this way they engage in niche construction.

Children are thus seen as active agents that help shape their development. Their engagement with their environment can otherwise be seen as an expression of their intentionalities (Papadopoulou, 2012; Papadopoulou & Birch, 2008). Some intentions are clearer than others. When engaging in niche picking through friendship, it may be argued that the intention that is clear for them (intentional act) is to make friends with a specific individual, to share a particular experience with this individual. Behind this intention, however, there may lie an unconscious drive to develop themselves, to form the environmental conditions that will enable them to develop their basic traits. This, unconscious drive is otherwise called operative intentionality (ibid).

Indeed, a number of studies in the area of friendship (see for example Dunn, 2006; Hartup & Stevens, 1997; Rubin et al., 2005) argue that from an early age children seem to be attracted to other children who are similar in a number of characteristics and behaviours. Indeed, there are greater behavioural similarities between friends than non-friends in a number of traits: stress and internalised difficulties, prosocial and antisocial behaviour, shyness, popularity and academic success. In Dunn's (2006) study, four year olds were found to be similar to their friends in their understanding of others' minds, in general intelligence and verbal ability.

The aforementioned studies seem to confirm this point about the similarity between friends, but they have not tried to explain this further. According to Dunn, (2006, p. 50)

> We don't know much about how children sort themselves out into friendship pairs. It seems it is not a matter of carefully weighted decisions, but through processes that some researchers have called 'shopping expeditions', social choices about 'what feels right', that frequently get made within looser networks of friends

'What feels right' may be a manifestation of children's intentional structures. Through operative intentionality (the 'hidden', unconscious drive) children express, share, 'act on' and thus further develop their individual traits.

It seems that 'doing' friendship offers significant scope for niche construction, which is inherently experimental and opportunistic. This, however, does not necessarily mean that all friendships are positive and successful, or that all children develop pro-social, pro-friendship traits that enable them to always affiliate with similar minded others. Indeed, friendships often involve conflict, power imbalances and tensions and they can cause negative emotions. Some children do not seem to have friends and do not initiate contact with others. But this does not weaken the niche construction argument proposed here. As discussed earlier, this paper does not support the developmental necessity view and does not claim that ALL children use friendship for niche construction. There are several ways that children act and impact upon their environments, of which making friends is one example.

In addition to this, the role of the environment and the options available appear to be highly significant in this argument; enabling environments can support young children's niche picking by offering them choices, opportunities and the space to construct their niche. This position has serious educational implications, a point I will return to in the last section.

Methodology

Research design

Why participatory research

The last two decades have seen the emergence of a new legal, political and ideological discourse regarding the role of children in both the public and private arenas (Nichols, 2007). Article 12 of the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) proposed a new, more participatory role for children in influencing decisions that impact upon their lives.

Article 12 of the UNCRC (1989) introduces participatory rights for children and this led to the development of a new type of research approach, called participatory research. This is research with children, rather than research on, or about them (Mayall, 2000). It views children as important participants and informants and seeks to elicit their views and perspectives about the topic of research (Einarsdóttir, 2007).

Children's perspectives are likely to be different from their parents' since they live in a different world; a different setting at a different time. 'Children inhabit a universe that is "phenomenologically distinct" from that of their parents' (Farrell, Tayler, Tennent, & Gahan, 2002, p.28). If children's experiences of their world are different to adults' (Naughton, Hughes, & Smith, 2007) then to gain insights into childhood we must consult children themselves; this is the aim of participatory research.

Participatory research is a flexible design, with an open ended structure, in order to leave room for the unexpected and to enable the children to lead the agenda. Consulting the children, however, can also pose its own challenges. Generational and power differences (Dockett & Perry, 2005) can impact upon the naturalness of data and children's willingness to contribute their insights (Linklater, 2006). Using appropriate, child friendly methodological tools is also paramount as this enables the children's voices to be heard. Playing or conversing with them in an informal manner have often been used in participatory studies (Gillen & Hall, 2001; Linklater, 2006).

Along these lines, the purpose of this study has been to access the children's worlds, to facilitate the expression of their perceptions of what friendship means to them and how it is 'done'.

Setting and Participants

The study was carried out in a reception class (compulsory, preschool provision for 4-6 year olds) of a Greek, state, primary school.

The participants were all the children of the class, 12 girls and 6 boys. They were all between the ages of 4 and 5 when the study commenced, at the beginning of the school year.

Ethics

Access was gained by the Local Education Authorities, by the Head Teacher of the school and by the teachers of the class. Informed consent was gained from all the gatekeepers, guardians

and participants in the study. They were assured that anonymity and confidentiality would be preserved and that children would be protected from physical or emotional harm, though the possibility of such risks was very low, due to the nature of the project.

The children were told that I would spend time with them at school in order to understand how they play with friends. This information would then be used to write 'a story' about them and were asked if they wanted to be part of the story-writing process. All children consented to participate, some expressing their enthusiasm to be the story characters.

The children were keen to share their experiences with me. Nevertheless, there were times when I was perceived as the 'adult in authority' in their environment. The note- taking task frequently attracted their attention, especially at the beginning, when different children would approach me and ask what I am writing, looking at my notes. Sometimes they would inform me about the naughty behaviour of their peers, asking me to record it; whereas, at other times, children who were behaving badly kept me under observation, possibly to find out whether I had noticed and was keeping records of what they had done. Perhaps this is evidence of the children's attempts to test and establish some sense of normativity.

Despite my repeated explanations of my presence there (which was not to record 'bad' behaviour), my adult status coinciding with my child-like interests in their games and friendships may have caused some confusion and ambivalence. This may indicate support for the claim that power imbalances between adults and children cannot be eliminated (Dockett & Perry, 2005); at best they can be minimised. This enquiry could then be, to some degree, a work of adult imagination.

Methods of data collection

I spent four months in the reception class, observing, participating in and recording children's activities, interactions and school routines. Attempting to relate to young children in a school setting - a 'minefield of power relations' (Linklater, 2006) - required a choice of methodology that would redress some of the imbalances. According to Dockett & Perry (2005) this can be achieved by engaging in research conversations with them.

The research design was thus intentionally flexible and loosely pre-structured, in order to preserve the naturalness of the setting and enable children's choices of activities, interactions and themes to emerge.

Understandings and expressions of children's friendships would emerge and be expressed at different times, during different sorts of activities. My aim was to capture these when they emerged, as they emerged, 'naturally' and spontaneously. Instead of directing children's activities towards pre-specified areas, or asking them direct questions, I chose to just 'be' there, as a component part of their environment, and to 'follow the flow', ready to step in or out of certain discussions, or activities, depending on children's intentions and will.

The topics of discussion and play themes that were recorded were decided, negotiated and carried out by the children themselves, without any external influence. My interests lay mainly in the ways they related to each other, interacted, negotiated and co-operated, as part of a social group, rather than the play themes themselves.

The methods employed were both participant and non-participant observation; together with informal conversations. I would sit in the background and keep notes of their behaviour and interactions, play and narratives. My purpose was to remain as uninvolved as possible and let children's meanings emerge; whilst also acknowledging that one can never become invisible. My presence, even as a background figure, must have always been felt.

Only if invited did I participate in their games and interactions, but ensured that I did not lead the activity or discussion. Instead, I was only responding to their initiatives, leaving them room to make decisions and express their volitions

The types of activities that I observed and/or participated in included role play scenarios and games, arts and grafts, initiated and directed by children themselves. Such instances were a valuable source of information regarding the ways children organised the setting, devised themes and play rules, negotiated, adopted different roles in interaction with each other and expressed their liking/disliking of certain peers by including or excluding them.

Results

Different categories of meaning are discernible in children's interactions and expressions of friendship. Due to constraints of space, it is necessary to select and include only a small number of themes, based on the frequency and persistence with which they appeared in children's discussions and interactions.

The different patterns of behaviours and interactions which emerged during the stage of analysis are structured into six broad, and often overlapping, categories of meaning:

Togetherness and Sharing

Being one's friend, according to children's claims, involved having physical proximity with the other person, sharing tasks, ideas, or talking about each other's experiences. Even though the choice of friends changed sometimes, following a 'fall-out', self-designated friends, at any one time, expressed the need to sit together, draw together, play together, share toys, pencils, books, or any other material possessions. They sometimes made statements about their togetherness and sharing, as the following extract indicates.

> N (showing me a drawing she was holding): Look, this is the drawing M. has given to me. It is hers, she did it.
>
> M (showing me the drawing she was holding): Yes, and this is N.'s drawing. It's my gift.
>
> Me (noticing that the drawings depict the same theme): Are they the same? Why have you swapped drawings?
>
> N: Yes, we've made the same drawings and we've swapped them, 'cause we are friends!' Look, we've swapped shoes, also.
>
> M: Yes, and names. We've changed names. My name is N. and N.'s new name is M. I am her and she is me 'cause we are … best friends!'

The space of 'friendship' – territory and exclusivity

Similarly, togetherness was sometimes expressed by creating a 'territory', a physical space where friendship 'lived'. This space was often clearly marked and distinguished from the rest of the room, or playground. Sometimes it was surrounded by physical obstacles, such as chairs, that created a clear separation between the 'inside space' that the friendship 'inhabited' and the 'outside world'. At other times a pair or group would find a space that was relatively isolated, in terms of being physically distant from the rest of the class.

This friendship territory, marking a clear distinction between the 'insiders', the peer group, and the 'outsiders', all the other individuals in the class, was the space that friendship inhabited. Within the territory children would engage in different sorts of activities, play, chatting, and expressions of affection towards each other.

Marking their space appeared to act as a dividing line between the 'friends', the insiders, with friendship privileges; and the rest, the outsiders. It seemed to offer a sense of privacy and exclusivity and was fiercely defended against intruders. Processes of engagement, selection and rejection were therefore involved.

The 'rules' of friendship - fairness and reciprocity

Interactions with peers involved exchanging views, negotiating; but also disagreeing, with arguments and fall-outs. In such contexts children often drew upon friendship 'rules' in order to reason and persuade others. These were influenced, to an extent, by the school rules, including references to democratic principles, such as taking turns, allowing everybody to participate and respecting others' activities and volitions. Children would often echo the teacher's reasoning in arguments with peers, as the following citations demonstrate:

'It is my turn now. We should all take turns'

'This is my seat. I got it first'

There were frequent references to the notion of 'fairness', which seemed to mean 'reciprocity' and a willingness to 'give and take'. Arguments regarding lack of fairness would sometimes result in threats that the friendship could be terminated; or in the actual ending of it. The following exchange took place between two girls, during a role-playing scenario:

M: (playing the role of the 'naughty' child who runs away all the time, being chased after by her 'mum') Now I am running away again. You have to come and find me.

I: (sounding frustrated) No! I am tired. I cannot run after you all the time. I have done what you wanted. Now it's your turn to do what I want.

M (running away again): Come and get me…

I: This is not fair. If you run away again you are not my friend!

Though often short-lived, such disagreements drew upon a system of 'rules' which, no matter how loosely defined, served the purpose of establishing what appropriate 'friendship' behaviours should be.

Assuming different roles – 'leaders' and 'followers'

'Doing' friendship also involves assuming roles in interaction with others. Peer dynamics played a significant part in how children related to each other. There were explicit hierarchies, some children assuming a 'leadership' position and others becoming their 'followers'. Leaders made decisions about the ways the group would carry out an activity, perhaps assigning roles to others, introducing ideas, organising the setting and resources, but also resolving tensions and deciding who is going to play and who should be excluded. Followers adapted to ideas and carried out their task.

Dynamics were, to an extent, related to children's self-presentation, with some common patterns of behaviours demonstrated by children in different contexts. However, there were also other factors that influenced the distribution of roles. The child most readily accepted as the leader was the one who seemed to know most about the task in hand. Being very good at it and showing others how to perform provided an indisputable criterion for leadership. Knowledge and skill were necessary to legitimise authority in a group. Basic social structural dynamics were exhibited here.

On the other hand, group dynamics did not always have a happy ending. Frequently there were clashes between different views and about the roles that each member wanted to play, which resulted in termination of the game, or exclusion of the protesters.

Privileges of friendship

'Friendship' was a label often used to generate certain patterns of behaviour. 'Friends' helped each other, often showing their peers how to perform tasks. Help might be in the form of step-by-step instructions, modelling the desirable performance; giving ideas; asking and receiving feedback; or offering one's work as an example for imitation.

There were often claims upon one's friendship that were used to elicit certain privileges, as the following conversation between two peers shows:

(Discussion between two boys. One of them is holding a torch that he brought from home. He switches it on and shows the rays of light.)

   V: Look. If you press this button (he presses it) light appears. My dad bought it for me.

   T: Let me have a look.

   P: No, I want to have a look. Can I hold it?

   V: No, it's mine. Don't touch it.

   T: Please, let me play with it for a little bit. Please, I am your friend. Friends play together.

'Being friends' with somebody implies having certain privileges, receiving support, encouragement and being taken care of. It involves expressions of affection, taking care of each other and confiding 'secrets' that only friends may share.

In short, being part of a friendship, for the young participants, means having a special relationship and receiving exclusive treatment that others cannot have.

Complementarity and meshing

Self-assigned friendships were not always stable, or without tensions. However, some of the pairs of friends seemed to be closer, more stable and consistent. These children seemed to enjoy the same activities, take pleasure in sharing the same objects and participating in the same type of play. In some cases they assumed similar roles, doing the same drawing for example (see first theme), or role playing 'mothers' that took care of their 'babies' (dolls). In other instances, friendship pairs took on complementary roles.

One of the friendship pairs studied involved a young boy (one of the youngest children in the year group, quiet and shy) and a girl (one of the eldest, and most academically competent, confident and popular children). The two were always playing together and theirs seemed to be a close, stable relationship. Their play and interactions were amicable and emotionally warm. They called each other 'best friend' and actively searched for each other once they arrived at school every day.

The roles they assumed in this friendship, however, were not the same but rather complementary. The girl always assumed an authoritative role, such as this of a 'teacher', a 'mother', or a helper, showing the boy how to draw, how to write his name, how to mix different colours, to name a few instances. The boy, on the other hand, reciprocated such encounters by being the 'baby', the 'pupil', the 'servant', or by observing the girl when writing and then trying to imitate her and asking for her help and guidance.

Their encounters seemed to involve 'meshing' and gave a sense of harmony, as both children appeared to enjoy their shared activities and each appreciated the other's contribution to their interaction. Both children often played with other peers (often of the same gender as them), but the relationship they had with others was not as close as the one they shared with each other.

Indeed, the most harmonious friendships in the setting seemed to involve children who had similar, or rather complementary, interests and traits.

Discussion

Significance of findings: social competences and the 'drive' to make friends

The pre-schoolers in this study actively and feverishly engaged in making and maintaining friendships. They took initiatives, approached other peers, participated in and shared activities together. Their behaviours and interactions were manifestations of their understanding of what it means to be a friend; they often referred to sharing, reciprocity and the rules of friendship, they showed affection and the ability to understand others' emotions and take care of their friends.

Indeed, the children often demonstrated a sophisticated social understanding that moves beyond physical and observable traits and shows the ability to decentre and appreciate others' thoughts and wishes. They also expressed affection, another trait that is expected to develop later on in the developmental trajectory, according to developmental theories (see for example Bigelow, 1977, 1982; Piaget, 1932).

One of the reasons for this apparent discrepancy could be that developmental stages may just show general patterns, but are quite limited in appreciating the important role of the environment. It may be possible that engaging in interesting, meaningful and purposeful experiences enables the children to understand and act in ways more advanced than decontextualized, generic theories can capture. The important role of the environment in presenting opportunities and supporting children's development is a point I will return to shortly.

Making friends and spending time with them seemed to be of high priority for the children in this study. All the participants actively sought the company of and interacted with peers for of the most part of their day at school. This does not mean that all encounters were positive and amicable. There was often conflict and even temporary termination of friendships. Nevertheless, having friends and being part of a friendship group, appeared to be highly significant for the children.

This urge to be with friends may be a manifestation of children's evolutionary drive to form close bonds and belong to peer groups. It may also suggest that children use friendship to explore their world and themselves. The young friends explored play themes together, exchanged views and shared activities with one another. Through these, the children were constituting meanings together and were influencing each other's understandings and advancement of skills. They chose their play themes and topics of discussion, they orchestrated these shared activities together and acted out their roles. In this sense, it could be claimed that they commonly engaged in niche construction (Flynn et al., 2013).

Their choice of friends was anything but random. Although not always stable (some children would often change friendship groups), it still reflected the friends' common interests in a particular activity, or object, or even theme of a story. In other words, what emerges from these findings is that selecting one's best friend(s) was based on certain criteria; spending time with this friend would enable the child to pursue his/her interests and share them with a similar minded other.

This relates to the literature on the similarity between close friends, presented earlier (See Dunn, 2006; Rubin et al., 2005). It also relates to the notion of niche construction. Indeed, it

could be argued that choosing similarly minded peers, children with similar interests and complementary abilities and tendencies, enables children to engage in the activities that are important to them and thus further develop their dispositions. Making friendships with similar minded others, thus, becomes one of the means by which children select the environments that match their characteristics, the process of niche picking, and create the conditions that will enable them to practice and further develop those.

Educational implications: enabling environments

The significance that children attach to making and maintaining friendships is a frequent theme in the literature; and is the single most significant factor that children associate with positive school experiences (Dockett & Perry, 1999; Peters, 2003; Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). Relating to peers and developing positive relationships, having opportunity for the privacy, time and space to 'play' with 'friends', are of high priority to children; and correlate to their overall experience of school life. Dunn (2006) and Ladd and Kochenderfer (1996) claimed that having friends in the first year of school can be a predictor for children's later adjustment and academic success.

Considering the significance children attribute to friendships, but also the multiple socio-cognitive, emotional, existential and adaptive benefits of forming close bonds with peers, supporting children's friendship experiences in the school environment becomes a priority. We may need to consider ways of creating 'enabling' environments, environments that give friendship the space and time it deserves.

Talking about children's transition to school, in particular, and the significance of having the emotional support of friends in managing this, perhaps reception classes should capitalise on this type of support. Enabling environments would involve giving children the physical and emotional space and time they need in order to meet friends and build relationships. Rather than focusing mainly on adult-led, adult-directed and adult-controlled activities, children should be given the opportunities to exercise agency and choice, to meet peers, spend time with them and select the types of activities and resources they want to share with their friends. That would be to promote their activities as social agents rather than simply economic agents in a skill orientated education system.

As argued earlier, children are active agents in their development. They engage with their world and, through niche picking, they select the environments that are suitable for them, depending on their traits and dispositions.   In Scarr's (1996, p. 204) words, 'to a considerable extent, people make their own environments'. Making friends offers children an excellent opportunity to select and modify their experiences, provided that they find themselves in enabling environments that offer opportunities for the exercise of agency and choice. Friendship should thus be given the space it deserves.

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