Babs Anderson

Liverpool Hope University

Young children playing together: A choice of engagement

This article highlights the findings of an empirical research project, using an ethnographic approach, taking place over one academic year. It investigates the different forms of engagement that children may present, when acting in free play situations in a nursery in NW England, without direct adult intervention. This range of engagement includes passive, intermittent and two forms of cooperative play, termed divergent and convergent. In the latter, children developed collaborations, using inter-subjectivity, through a series of phases. In this form of engagement, young children are able to develop and sustain play episodes, particularly where they are familiar and friendly with their play partner. Young children playing in peer dyads are the most common grouping for convergent play to occur, although the exclusivity of this grouping may appear to contradict practitioners' pro-social agendas.

Keywords: Collaboration, Early Childhood, Inter-subjectivity, peer engagement,

shared play,

This research project examines how children engage with their peers, and which strategies they utilise. It explores how play episodes develop in a sustained manner in one Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) setting in the UK between peers in free play situations.

The experience of young children entering group care in ECEC settings requires that they learn to accommodate the subjectivity of a wide range of significant others. Subjectivity has its basis in the recognition that humans have individual consciousness and intentionality and that they express this through their own agency, or their actions on the world around them, both physical and social (Trevarthen and Aitken 2001). Inter-subjectivity entails the understanding that other individuals also have their own subjectivity, which is qualitatively different from one's own. This is evident from early infancy, where the newborn develops a relationship with the mother or other caregiver, responding to her expressions, gestures and vocalisations in meaningful interactions. This relationship is not solely one-way but rather is reciprocal and multi-intentional, responding to the needs of both partners in the communication. Intentional communication, where the child shares an experience with another with an expectation of this resulting in a response, the more familiar the 'other', the potentially more predictable the response is
(Stern 1985).

Trevarthen and Aitken (2001) highlight the requirements of communication for infants in showing inter-subjectivity. Firstly they must show an understanding of their own individual consciousness and their intentions, i.e. subjectivity, and secondly they must be able to adapt this awareness to take account of others

intentions in addition to their own, to recognise their self-identity and also the identity of others, i.e. inter-subjectivity. Mead (1934) indicates that in order to develop a full sense of the self, children need to understand how others perceive them, their actions and behaviours. Thus subjectivity and inter-subjectivity are interdependent.

Children must also recognise how to respond to others using an identified differential, both peers as potential playmates and adult practitioners as caregivers and educators. Inter-subjectivity occurs where, in this instance, young children show evidence of the recognition of a mind state in peers. They are able to understand this to be different from their own and actively work with this in mind to develop a shared play intention. Thus inter-subjectivity supports the development of negotiated play situations, where young children play with their peers in free-play situations, without adult intervention.

Edminston (2008) considers the conceptualisation of play as an attitude to an activity. In ratifying purposeful play, practitioners need to recognise its potential for children, accepting that social play depends on the development of a shared intention and the means of doing this. This may prove difficult for practitioners to facilitate (Ball 2008) given the perceived requirement for purposeful play as a vehicle for supporting cognitive learning gains.

Ryan (2005) suggests that this is also set against the dominant discourse of the groups to which the children affiliate themselves, such as that of gender and that this may cause unequal access to opportunities, for individuals and groups of children. Expectations of specific behaviours and adherence to these agreed norms may act as constraints to play activities. This may be implicit if

not explicit, so the choice of playmates is one example of how children's lives do not exist in a neutral domain but are bounded and regulated by the socio-cultural paradigm of their community.

One demand on early years practitioners is their ability to appreciate the interactions between peers and the potential learning gains of these. This includes understanding the children's relationships. The expectation that learning will occur through play episodes with peers is a common assumption, promoted by a play-based curriculum, such as the EYFS (DfE 2014). This does not fully recognise the means by which groups constitute their own norms and may well sit uneasily with the notion of pro-social behaviours to be encouraged in young children. One example of this is where children are to be encouraged to share and take turns (DfE 2014) with little recognition of the context, within which this required behavioural norm exists (Corsaro 2011). In this children are expected to share the resources of the early years settings with all the other children equally, yet this may not match the expectations of their community outside the setting.

In the EYFS (DfE 2014), children have opportunities to learn through a play-based curriculum, including both adult-directed tasks and child-initiated free-play activity. The context for child-initiated play is more complex however, as this includes both individual play and joint or group actions with peers.

These range from the perspective of a solitary player; as an onlooker, observing the play of others, both children and the adults engaging in children's play; playing alongside another child albeit with little apparent interaction, playing together through associated activity and cooperative play with shared

negotiated intentions (Parten 1932; Hughes 2009; Broadhead 2004). This inventory of play behaviours is available to children during their freely chosen activity in the themed areas of continuous provision, such as sand and water areas, construction and small world. Such play behaviours may not be available during adult chosen focused activity (teaching) due to the nature of the organised activity. Whilst in the original research (Parten 1932), young children were deemed to progress through the stages, arriving at the more complex cooperative social behaviours at a later stage of development, this has now been brought into question (Hughes 2009) as young children are able to adapt their play behaviours depending on the context. An example of this may be seen in onlooker play, when a child observes a group's dynamics before determining firstly if they wish to join the group and secondly how to join this established group in such a manner as to be accepted by the group and able to join their play.

Links between play and learning

Whitebread et al. (2009) highlight the difficulty for practitioners in identifying the psychological processes involved, when analysing children's learning in play. They recognise that this issue may well serve as an obstacle to practitioner application. They suggest that early emotional and cognitive self-regulation is a key facet of children's development as learners, including problem-solving and creativity. Children reflect this in their application of communication as a tool in attempting to regulate the behaviour of others, whilst employing a concurrent understanding of how their behaviour is interpreted by others (Mead 1934).

The belief that children are active constructors of their own learning owes much to the seminal work of Piaget (Cunningham 2006) and this is sometimes seen to be working in parallel with the ideas of the social constructivists (Wood 1998). For Piaget, the prime driving force behind children’s learning is their active drive to make sense of the world (Piaget and Inhelder 1969). Through their own activity, they form mental representations of their experiences and use these as a basis for their future exploration (Bruner and Haste 1988; Robson 2010). Their actions are purposeful, intentional investigations into their environment in an attempt to learn more about the world, which they inhabit. The social constructivists (Vygotsky 1978; Bruner and Haste 1988; Adams 2006) are concerned with the social interactions within the environment and the learning gains to be made from a more knowledge person rather than physical exploration per se.

If, as Wood suggests, ‘Play provides a bridge between the possible … and the actual’ (2009, 33), then during freely chosen play, children can explore the potential for their own capabilities and those they play alongside. They can investigate their own mastery of the world around them, their sense of agency. They can implement their own ideas by putting them into practice and exploring the consequences of their actions. Practitioners can thus support children′s play by attending to the children′s thought and action rather than a predetermined adult-led goal.

Sutton Smith (2001) suggests that the intrinsic motivation for play, much as a biological urge, does not necessarily conflict with the drive of extrinsic motivators, such as cognitive development. The child does not differentiate

their play into these motivational categories, seeing it both as a joyful, fun activity and one that enables them to find out more about their world. The ambiguity is present in the mind of the adult, who seeks to categorise, not the child, who engages.

When observing self-chosen play, children may exhibit a state of flow (Csikszentmihayli 1992) so that they become fully engrossed in their creations. They do not recognise the passage of time through their immersion in their activity. Their absorption in their activity is such that they appear to bridge the divide between their psychic self and the actions they are performing. This may appear to those around the activity that the child is self-absorbed and this may have a negative connotation, so that self-absorbed becomes self-ish and therefore lacking in care for others. This may also be seen in peer play also, where children having developed a play scenario either as a pair of larger group, are reluctant to allow others to join in, guarding their creation from intrusion (Corsaro 2011). This protection of their interactive space includes a resistance to attempts by others to join in, to access the shared play.

Young children's agency in play

For children to have a sense of agency, they need to have ownership of their actions and their intentions (Smidt 2011). Within their experiences in early years provision, the children themselves are aware that their own sense of agency may be limited. It is in the areas of continuous provision, where they are free to choose how they are going to use their time, the available resources and where the learning intentions of the activity may be the result of their own intentions and interests. Einarsdóttir (2005) compares this with children in

Icelandic pre-school, who recognise their choice of location and activity was only available during free-choice time and that their sense of agency in relation to curriculum design and organisation of the pre-school was limited. Rowlands (2010) examines the nature of agency, suggesting that it is through encountering difficulty that the nature of personal agency becomes clear. It is when the individual's intention is thwarted that the needs and desires of the self become explicit, experienced by the individual through embodied phenomenology. Playing in free-play situations together with a peer without adult intervention makes this more likely (Porath 2009), exposing children to the intentions and desires of others without a 'safety net of adult protection'.

Young children have a distinct understanding of where and how they can develop their sense of agency and this is more likely to occur within the areas of continuous provision in early childhood settings. As promoted within the remit of effective practice in the EYFS (DfE 2014) there are given potential outcomes of learning, published by the practitioners in their long-term plans, for adults to promote when they are in the areas of provision. However the phenomenal expression of these normative tasks (Elfer 2007), the actual time and effort available for the practitioners to commit to these planned outcomes is debatable, either through time constraints or the existential pedagogically determined prioritising of activities. However by removing the adult's intention for learning gains in children's free play, this 'frees up' the activity to become owned by the children and the development of their learning as their interests guide. Thus this may result in a positive outcome for the children's sense of ownership and agency of their activity.

Edmiston (2008, 177) suggests ‘The core long-term ethical pedagogical goal is to promote children’s agency.’ For pedagogy to be ethical, the role of the adult is a complex one, requiring practitioners able to support young children to question the myriad situations they find themselves in. This is true of adult-child interactions but of peer interactions also. It may also be that ethical pedagogy requires adults to understand how children can learn within a peer group, so that the children can understand not only how their own actions impact on others but also how the actions of others can be interpreted, understood, accommodated and questioned.

For young children, their daily experiences within the nursery are grounded within their own physicality, their use of their senses to make sense of their environment as embodied cognition. In order to achieve agency in acting on their environment intentionally and with direction, children need to be aware of themselves as authors of ideas as well as being able to recognise the intentions and ideas of others. The use of communication is essential to this, using both verbal and non-verbal means within the early years setting.

Children’s relationships with peers

Friendships and peers prove very important to children of all ages (Kernan 2011). They are motivated to be allied with others and Dunn (2004) proposes that in studying children’s friendships, we gain an insight into the child’s world, how they view their relationships within the social world of human interactions. The importance of this subject matter, that of young children’s inter-relationships, has been relatively under explored in the literature so that assumptions are made without the deeper description available offered by

ethnographic studies. Notable exceptions to this are the work of Dunn (1993; 2004), Cosaro (2011) and Avgitidou (1997) in exploring children's relationships and friendships and that of Broadhead (2004) investigating social co-operative play as a continuum within early years settings.

For a young child, their friendships may be the first experience they have had of attempting to understand the perspective of another person outside their immediate family. Friendship relationships are qualitatively different from that experienced with siblings, where commonly friendliness and aggression coexist. They are able to choose their friend and exercise their own power and authority over their engagements.

Van Oers and Hännikäinen (2001) introduce togetherness as a theoretical concept, concerning the formation and maintenance of specific groups as a human tendency, where a sense of belonging together induces a sense of rightness within the group thus choosing to interact together. Play can also produce a sense of togetherness, a reciprocal respect, where young children choose to spend time together, play together and build a friendship with one another. Dunn (2004) highlights the potential of friendship as promoting cognitive development in three interlinked ways. Firstly where a friendship exists, one that the children have chosen rather than their parents, children are wont to use a wide range of negotiation and conciliation strategies as they are emotionally attached to their friend and want to maintain their friendship. Secondly the common sharing of pretend play, where the children explicitly discuss the mental states of others, including imaginary characters. Thirdly the connection to moral development and selfhood is made clear as the child is made aware of how their own actions impact on another. Play represents a

means of gaining control over the child's environment and it is the negotiation of the social element within this environment that presents the greatest challenge for our young children. The dynamic, shifting nature of the other within a play situation requires a mental dexterity, an ability to continually re-evaluate their own responses in the light of the responses of their playmates (Broadhead, Howard and Wood 2010).

The interpersonal level of communication, that between two or more individuals, is deemed to be the initial psychological level at which learning occurs. Later this becomes internalised at an intra-personal level (Vygotsky 1978). The resources available for an individual's learning are therefore contained within their social interactions in the first instance, which are then incorporated into personal schema or concepts. Social constructivist theory takes the view of the learner as a competent, active, co-constructor of meaning and knowledge (Adams 2006) so that learning is seen as meaningful within the learner's view of the world.

This attunement to familiar others enables the child to take into account their internal states, their beliefs and their prevailing modes of behaviour (Bartsch, Wright and Estes 2010*).* It provides a means of identifying and using a range of persuasion tactics, based on the understanding of how these are likely to be received. This offers the child the heightened opportunity of gaining their intentions and desires by taking account of their audience (Colle, Becchio and Bara 2008).

In the EPPE project (Sylva et al. 2007), one of the hallmarks of quality provision is the promotion of experiences of 'Shared sustained thinking' where two or

more individuals collaborate in various ways. The common thread within such collaborations is the augmentation of intellectual thinking, such as extending a narrative or socio-dramatic story line, finding a solution to a problem or issue, the evaluation and appraisal of activity and actions as well as the clarification of a concept or theme. Whilst children in early years settings spend most of their time in small groups, the opportunities for 'shared sustained thinking' are most likely to occur when the children were interacting 1:1 with an adult or with a single peer partner. The richness of the process whereby the adult can foster and extend the child's thinking is a result of the greater curriculum knowledge possessed by the adult. Thus enabling them to gauge a range of potential ideas and explore a variety of options with the child. The potential for extending children's thinking through engagement with peer dyads is under examined. This is set within current educational research priorities, which actively focus on the role of the practitioner in aiming to determine and thus guide quality provision (see Sylva et al 2004, for example).

Nevertheless these peer dyad attunements allow a child, at the beginning of their foray into the uncertain world of interpersonal relationships, to tune into the ideas, thoughts and expressions of another to devise a co-constructed plan of progression.

Wells suggests that this

> '…is not that teachers try to extend children's knowledge, but that they try so hard to do so that they never really discover what it is about the child's experience that he or she finds sufficiently interesting to want to share in the first place (1986, 88).'

Peers do not have this need to educate, but instead can share their intentional directedness toward the world (Rowlands 2010) in an equitable manner. The relationships between young children as peers is worthy of further examination as to how these interactions are managed by the individual children.

The research project

The research questions underpinning the project were:

How do young children engage with peers in free-play situations in early years settings and what strategies do they employ?

How do young children develop and sustain play episodes with their peers?

The design of the research is that of qualitative constructivist ethnography (Howell 2013), where the aim is to document and analyse young children's lived experiences in a specific naturalistic location, an ECEC setting within the UK. It is a micro-systemic situational field, existing alongside yet separate from the home lives of the children.

The time period spend by the researcher within this field was one academic year, from September to July. The first three months of the research project were used as a settling in period, so that the researcher became familiar with and to the setting. Although still an outsider to the setting and one where the researcher's sole activity was data collection, there was some element of insider role. This was due to the researcher's immersion within the life of the setting prior to the data collection, the researcher's previous experience as an early years practitioner in ECEC settings and the common role of other adults as visitors to the setting, for example advisory teachers. Thus a more fluid and

transient perspective of insider/ outsider roles in this ethnographic project became necessary, rather than viewing this as diametrically opposing research stances (Thomson and Gunter 2011).

The participating setting was one Foundation stage Nursery in a Children's Centre in the Northwest of England. This was the result of purposive sampling, where the gatekeeper from the Local Authority (LA) provided access for the research. This was a representative example of a LA maintained nursery for 3-4 year olds, where wraparound care in addition to the provision offered by the LA enabled all local parents, including working parents, to use the service either as a sessional or full day provision of ECEC.

Ethical consent was therefore gathered at several layers; the LA, the Children's Centre manager, the practitioners of both the LA nursery and the wraparound care element, the children's parents and the children themselves.

As the research progressed, one child made her feelings clear as to being unhappy that she was not a research participant, in that she was not being observed and her words recorded, as she had noted other children being involved. The parents had not given permission initially, so this was an interesting situation, where the child was keen to take part, yet the lack of parental consent denied the child participation rights. Fortunately this was resolved as it transpired, with the practitioners' negotiation, that the lack of parental consent had been an oversight on the parents' part, rather than a desire to reject their child's participation. Ethical consent was monitored from the children, by their actions, gestures, expressions and utterances to the observer and their peers, and if these were negative, the observation was terminated and the data removed from the study. The children understood that

the researcher was not a practitioner and therefore they could say no to any observation.

Eighteen children, aged between three and four years of age, participated in the research. The children attended the setting on one particular session during the week, that is one afternoon. This cohort remained consistent during the fieldwork period. The children were familiar with each other, as many had attended the wraparound care element of provision located in the same nursery from circa 6 months of age and those new to the setting were assimilated through a designated carefully designed process of 'settling in'. All children were from the locality, which was deemed to have low to mid- socio-economic context.

All fieldwork took part during this particular afternoon, rather than at random points throughout the week with different combinations of children attending. The primary research tool used was naturalistic observations, where children were observed playing in continuous provision and records made of their communications, both verbal and non-verbal and their behaviours. Field notes were also made by the researcher whilst in the setting (Tillema, Barak and Marcos 2008).

As Beach (2011, 574) suggests "Ethnography is analytically different from linear research… It is far more iterative." So while the temporal gap between visits to the children's centre nursery to collect research material may appear problematic, nevertheless it was useful as it provided a space for the observations and field notes to be reviewed in a recursive process of reflection.

As part of this reflection, the initial stage of data analysis aimed to bring a sense of order to the research material by "looking for patterns, categories, descriptive

units and themes” as suggested by Pole and Morrison (2003, 78). Thematic analysis was used whereby the raw material from the observations and the accompanying field notes were organised into common themes during data collection, annotated and given an initial index code in order to represent the emerging idea. The codes were cross-referenced in order to tease out any relationships between the codes. Through the process of qualitative description, in aiming to describe key events in children’s social relationships, the task was to describe and explain what was observed. No established structures, such as predetermined codes, were used as the intention was to explore afresh without preconceived ideas rather than seeking evidence of particular behaviours, noted by other researchers (Saldaña 2013).

The final coding categories established a framework of engagement, responding to the forms of engagement experienced by young children in the setting in relationship to their peers. These final codes were passive engagement, intermittent engagement, divergent play and convergent play. One of these forms of engagement, convergent play, was analysed in depth as this seeks to answer the research questions of how young children develop and sustain play episodes with their peers.

Results and discussion

Four main categories of engagement were identified in peer interactions.

These were synthesised using the observed behaviours and communications of the children. Each of the categories was delineated by specific coded features with regard to level of engagement, the boundaries of the play activity, the closure of the play, behaviour and intentional aspects. They interpret the strategies used by individual children when choosing how to engage with their

peers. The category of intentional aspects was an interpretation of how the child expressed its sense of agency. The deep, rich descriptions of ethnography in the form of the children's actions (Geertz 1973) were analysed in the synthesis of table 1 below.

Table 1 Forms of peer engagement in free play in nursery

Features as exhibited by type of engagement	Passive engagement (PE)	Intermittent engagement (IE)	Divergent play (DP)	Convergent play (CP)
Engagement with peers	Passive, watching	Partial, intermittent, not sustained	With self-chosen direction	Collaborative play
Boundaries of free play activity	Observes boundaries set by others	Transient boundaries	Sets boundaries individually	Sets boundaries for pair or group
Closure of activity	Through others	No	Celebration of individual result	Celebration of joint result
Physical Behaviour	Physical proximity to activity, however distance maintained.	Movement from activity to activity, 'flitting' or 'butterfly' lack of settling to engage fully with	Physical proximity	Physical proximity, possible exclusivity

		the activity or children.		
Intentional Aspects	Positioning self to gain access to information. Processing at a remove. No interactions with players. Imitation. No ownership of direction of play.	Child moves from activity, peer to peer. Series of individual interactions, although these are not sustained. Ownership of own play activity. No shared ownership of play.	Each child initiates own ideas, and then proceeds to develop them. No connection with others' ideas. Ownership of own play activity. No shared ownership of direction of play.	Each child initiates own ideas, and then proceeds to develop them. Connections made with others' ideas and incorporated into own play. Synthesis of play theme between the partners. Joint ownership of direction of play.

In passive engagement, the child watches an activity without being an active player, either physically or communicatively. They may observe the boundaries

of the activity as they are set by the other children, but have no ownership of these. The end to the activity is brought about by the observed children, not the observer. The child positions themselves so as to gain access to both the physical actions and the language and gestures used but remains at a 'safe' distance, avoiding any social obligation on their behaviour. There is a reduced level of proxemics, so that the child is not identified as being part of the core group. There are no interactions with the children involved in the activity, so that all information is one way towards the child observing. This form of engagement was observed frequently.

In intermittent engagement, the child may engage with other children in an activity but this is not sustained. The duration of these episodes is short and the child will remove themselves from the activity without a sense of closure for the activity. There may be individual interactions, but these do not add cumulatively to a cooperative venture. There is a sense that the interactions are mundane or short-term, rather than cognitively challenging and sustained. This type of engagement may involve several sequential episodes, which present the same format, as though the child is unable to commit long-term effort to any single activity.

In divergent play (DP), the child follows their own interests, even though they are playing physically playing alongside another child at an activity. The children involved set their own boundaries for action and at times one may cross over into the other's space, which is regarded as a negative intrusion. Each child may exhibit an interest in the other's creations, but this is minimal in comparison to their pride, interest and involvement in their own. DP occurred frequently, where two or more children played in a social manner, albeit with

limited reciprocity (Broadhead 2004). Each of the partners show an awareness of their play partner with communication between them, however any connection between the play of each is limited to the sharing of resources, rather than the building of a joint narrative. This is similar to Parten's (1932) category of parallel play, where young children appear to be playing in a group albeit with parallel intentions and motivations in their activity.

In convergent play (CP), there is a clear collaboration between the children. Each contributes to the play and takes on board the ideas of their partner by incorporating some elements of these into their own actions. They achieve closure of this activity though a celebration of the joint achievements "Look, what we have made", commonly using the personal pronoun 'we' to indicate collective ownership. The boundaries for the activity are created and maintained by all equally and this may cause an apparent exclusivity, where newcomers to the activity are not welcome.

The four types of engagement were observed in both genders and throughout the data collection, whereby these were common at the beginning of the data collection period and equally common at the end, 6 months later, where the children were very familiar with each other. They represent a repertoire of available behaviours for young children, who seek to make meaning of their environment, both physical and social. They do not represent a developmental continuum. One particular individual, who frequently collaborated in convergent play with her friend, also participated at other times on a passive engagement level. This participant made an active choice in how she engaged, the question is not whether she could collaborate but rather her choice in this was an

example of her agency, how she took control of her experiences. This contrasts sharply with Parten's interpretation of play as consisting within a developmental continuum.

The final category of the convergent play (CP) is the product of collaboration with peers. Throughout the observations, same gender pairs occurred as frequently as mixed gender pairs. The dominant discourse of gender as revealed by Ryan (2005) does not appear to have impacted yet on these young children. However acknowledged friendship pairings were more likely to collaborate at this stage than pairs of children without established friendship relations. As Dunn (2004) argues, children's friendships are vital to their development of positive relationships. Howes (2011) extends this idea into attachments, seeing children's friendships as being one form of attachment to another person and this may show itself in how one child may take pains to accommodate another's ideas.

In CP, children are willing to incorporate the ideas of their play partner into their own play so that sharing and building on ideas forms an effective vehicle for the co-construction of learning (Vygotsky 1978; Robson 2010). In a sustained episode, the children create a shared learning trajectory, incorporating ideas into an ongoing narrative. A sense of togetherness that Van Oers and Hännikäinen (2001) maintain develops from established relationships is clear. However this can form a barrier to others joining the play, as the original pair aim for exclusivity. These are not pro-social behaviours, yet they are evidence of the child's own sense of agency, their ability to create with a preferred partner, showing an attunement to the thinking, ideas and intentions of another.

The development of an episode of CP is not straightforward. Familiarity, friendships and individual interests influence the development of the convergence of a play episode between the protagonists. In the research findings, the most common configuration of peer groupings that appeared to be operating within this was found to be a peer dyad. One interpretation of this may be that for young children aged 3 and 4 years of age, it is too demanding a task to incorporate several sources of intentions into a coherent whole, which drives activity. Young children can succeed in collaborations, where the cognitive demand is manageable and does not require an overly sophisticated synthesis of views. The phases of an episode of CP are listed in the table below, including the types of strategies used by individual children, where ethnographic ‘thick’ description (Geertz 1973) have been categorised according to communicative utterances by the child.

Table 2 Phases of convergent play episodes

Phase	Key features, strategies used	Examples of the child’s communication
Noticing	Observing, watching Showing an interest Positioning self so as to gain access to viewing the play activity	*“What are you doing?”*

Contact	Addresses self to play	*“Can I join in?”*
	Gestures, nods	*“Do you want this one?”*
	Proffers resource	*“What can I do?”*
	Requests help	*“Can you help us…?”*
	Uses name of child	*“What do you need?”*
	Requests permission to join in	*“Here are some more.”*
	Asks how to join in	*“I’ve made the car for …”*
		“This will help you.”

Connection	Explicit instruction Offer of help Expression of intention Elaboration of idea Linking experience to maths concepts Linking experience to knowledge and understanding of the world Reference to emotional states Identification of ownership	*"I think someone needs to hold it."* *"Here you are, 1 more."* *"You are not doing the same, it's not a circle."* *"I'm going to.."* *"I'm pretending to eat it"* *"What have you made?"* *"That's yours, you need to get one of these."* *"Look, you do it like this."* *"Put your box on both of ours and then it will carry."* *"No, it's not 'choo choo', it's not got a funnel."* *"I know a good idea."* *"The cake is really hot, it's done."* *"I've just seen a big plant, it's going to be a big flower."* *"Are you so excited? "No." "Why are you jumping then?"* *"That's not mine"*

Contract	Negotiations Statement of social rules Asks about other's intentions Change of intention in response to another fitting in Beginning of synthesis of ideas Symmetry of action	*"What do you say? You say sorry."* *"What do you think the game is going to be?"* *"What game do you think it's going to be?"* *"Let me do it."* *"Is that a good idea?"*
Continuation	Maintenance of play partnership Negative response to incomers Exclusivity	*"I can't do it when he's helping."* *"No, we're already playing"*
Celebration	Joint recognition of success Seeking public acknowledgement	*"Look what we made!"* *"Look, what we made together."* *"Look what we did."* *"Wow!"*

Noticing is characterised by a child showing an interest in either an activity or a resource that another child is using. The behaviour exhibited shows an inclination to engage with the other child's actions, so that a physical proximity is manifest in the position the child adopts. A frequent question from the child is a simple "what are you doing?" indicating the beginnings of shared interest.

Contact is an overt attempt to join in with the play activity, using a range of strategies, including friendly gestures, offering items to support the play theme " Do you want this one?" and asking to join in. One key communicative strategy example is the use of the child's first name, as if understanding that this will be of interest in motivating the other child to engage with the newcomer. Connection shows the developing inter-subjectivity between the protagonists at play, where strategies are used to create joint intentions in guiding the progress of the play activity. These strategies include offers of help, an elaboration of an idea so that the other child can understand what the child means "Look, you do it like this", linking ideas to knowledge concerning scientific or mathematical concepts by utilising prior learning. The child may make reference to affective as well as cognitive states in themselves and their play partners as well as identifying ownership, promoting a shared space as well as activity. During the contract stage, inter-subjectivity comes into play fully, where negotiation takes place with both children recognising the intentions and needs of the other child. There is symmetry of action, with reciprocal acts by the children. The ideas of both children are combined to create a synthesis of each individual's contribution as a joint endeavor, "Is that a good idea?" Continuation is the maintenance of the successful collaboration between the children and during this, newcomers may be excluded contradicting the practitioners' views of acceptable pro-social behaviour, "No, we're already playing…" . At the celebration stage, both children acknowledge they have been successful as a collaborative group. The children may desire external validation of their work, either from practitioners, their peers or other adults in the setting, such as parents/ carers, "Look what we did!'.

Conclusion

Young children have a need to understand their social environment. In order to do so, they must understand that others think differently from themselves and learn to accommodate this, whilst maintaining a sense of their own agency. In this research project, young children show their engagement with their peers in a number of different ways when in free play. They can utilise a range of strategies, such as passive engagement when they are able to observe the play of others without emotional investment in the activity. In this, they can observe the actions of others without feeling obliged to take part. They can learn what other children are thinking by attending to their activity. This is socially useful and should not be dismissed as lack of activity by practitioners aiming to promote predetermined learning outcomes, given the focus on play-based learning within the EYFS (DfE 2014).

Other strategies require more active involvement from the child.

Convergent engagement occurs when the children are familiar with each other, they have developed an understanding of inter-subjectivity and can use this to create and maintain a shared intention. This occurred mostly in peer dyads. However practitioners may unwittingly intervene in such episodes by the requirement that the pair of playing children accept another into their play. In doing so, the social and cognitive demands on young children can lead to the dissolution of what was hitherto a productive episode of sustained shared thinking.

In understanding and harnessing the ideas of others, young children extend, strengthen and enhance their own repertoires of learning sources. Children of three years of age are able to develop and extend a sense of subjectivity, an

interpretation of their self-identity. This is evident in their expressions of intentions and wishes, particularly in free play. In experiencing inter-subjectivity with peers, young children can build on this in their understanding of the wider social community in which they are participants. It is vital therefore that practitioners in ECEC settings are able to understand how individual children are developing their repertoire of engagement strategies and can support and extend these as active pedagogical tools. These are too important to be left to chance.

Limitations

Tillema, Orland Barak and Marcos (2008, 54) apply a theoretical framework to the analysis of ethnographic research material. These include "telling more than we know (overstretching)." This aspect was taken into account. This research is based on a case study of one nursery and as such reflects the internal life of this nursery and its community only.

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