



Working Together at Mat Time: Politics of Participation

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ABSTRACT

Learning as part of a group on the mat is a common experience in children's early education and socialisation. Indeed, many classrooms would have a mat, to which the children are called in addition to chairs and tables (Poveda, 2001). Nonetheless, very little research exists about activity using the mat in junior classrooms either locally or internationally, particularly in relation to children's perspectives. This paper reports recent findings from a doctoral study that investigated children's experiences of working together on the mat in three year-two classrooms. Data were gathered through video-observations of teacher-facilitated activity on the mat and semi-structured interviews with children and teachers. The findings suggested that participation on the mat was affected by children's relationships with each other. Specifically, social dynamics within the children's peer group appeared to enable or block active participation for particular individuals. Teachers utilised inclusive strategies to ameliorate the affect of the peer group and to enhance participation for children who struggled to secure an active role.

Keywords

Mat time; children's friendships; participation; classroom interactions

INTRODUCTION

There are a wide range of labels and approaches concerning pedagogy that utilises the mat. For instance a survey of several studies show that researchers refer to '*mat time*' (Klopper, 2008), '*circle time*' (Simpson & Oh, 2013), and '*large group time*' (Hong, 1995). As a practice, such events encompass a wide range of purposes and pedagogical designs. Historically, Friedrich Fröbel first promoted the idea of shared activity in order to promote collectivity and unity within the group (Fröbel, trans Jarvis, 1885). Today, a similar focus on group cohesion is evinced in studies on circle time in North America and the United Kingdom (for example, Collins, 2013; Leach & Lewis, 2012). However, the mat is also contemporarily used for 'show and tell' (Poveda, 2001), games (Mary, 2014), whole-group discussion, instruction, and teaching curriculum knowledge (Eirich, 2006; Milman, 2009; Vargo, 2008).

There are two predominant foci within the literature: (1) positively influencing children's desired behaviour on the mat and (2) teachers' use of constructivist pedagogies. The first focus consists predominantly of experimental studies that explore strategies to engender children's on-task and

compliant behaviours (for instance Ling & Barnett, 2013; Vargo, 2008; Zaghlawan & Ostrosky, 2011). The second focus includes studies that are more qualitative, and that document instances where the teacher relaxes his or her control to enhance the students' influence (for example Danielewicz, Rogers, & Noblit, 1996; Emilson, 2007; Poveda, 2001). This body of studies suggest that when teachers use children-centred pedagogies on the mat, the children will incorporate considerably more peer interests than when the framing is teacher-directed (Poveda, 2001). Furthermore, discussions follow a naturalistic pattern, whereby children interrupt each other and make bids for the floor (Wallat & Green, 1979). Finally, certain children take up a leadership role on the mat (Danielewicz, et al., 1996).

Few studies have sought children's views about learning on the mat, but where they have, children have identified various peer aspects as being significant. For example, Lown (2002) issued a questionnaire to eighteen school students in the United Kingdom. The students nominated 'getting to know others' as critical. Similarly, Cefai, Ferrario, Caviono, Carter, and Grech (2013) administered questionnaires to 74 children in Maltese schools and found that children identified knowledge on how to make friends and knowledge of peers as important skill-sets. By contrast, Leach and Lewis (2012) found that particular children sometimes felt disempowered by their peers during activity on the mat. This was specifically so when children felt they had done something wrong, meaning that others might talk about them. This was a small-scale study that conducted focus group interviews with eight children in the United Kingdom. Moreover, specific children reported that they merely observed, as opposed to actively participating. At the conclusion of each of these studies, the authors called for further examination of children's relationships with each other and the consequences for interacting together on the mat.

Children's participation in various interactions on the mat are difficult to describe because individuals can participate in many ways. Boylan (2010) suggests that participation can only be seen in relation to an individual's classroom ecology and should acknowledge dimensions such as whether an individual's participation is supported or resisted. Sandberg and Eriksson (2008) suggest a threefold conceptualisation of participation, that recognises an individual's (1) ability to exercise some degree of influence over the group or activity, (2) possession of fellowship, belonging and support, and (3) capacity for actively taking part. As such, this view of participation encapsulates the idea that relationships and inclusion are important to its enablement.

Very little is known about children's participation on the mat in New Zealand. Anecdotal evidence within the researchers' own networks suggests that use of the mat may be a common occurrence in junior classrooms, therefore children are likely to participate in some way. Nevertheless, there are no direct references to pedagogy using the mat in Ministry of Education documents, although there are numerous photographs where a large number of children are seated on the mat while attending to a teacher or a peer (for examples, see Ministry of Education, 2003, 2009). As such, it appears to be a practice without a name in official documents in New Zealand. Furthermore, it is not known what knowledge children construct about interacting as a group on the mat, or whether the peer group influences individual children's ability to actively participate as opposed to onlook.

The following study sought to achieve two aims: (1) To identify a label and description for activity using the mat in New Zealand, (2) to establish whether active participation is important to children. In addition, the study asked, (1) How does the social world of children influence their participation on the mat? and (2) What strategies do teachers use to enhance children's participation on the mat?

METHODOLOGY

The study was guided by two theoretical orientations that each have relevance to Sandberg and Eriksson's (2008) conceptualisation of participation (as described in the previous section). The first was *social competence* and the second was *peer culture*. Social competence theories posit that there is an interplay between an individual's social problem-solving strategies and their social context (De Rosier, Cillessen, Coie, & Dodge, 1994). Green, Cillessen, Rechis, Patterson, and Hughes (2008), explain that social competence is commonly seen as, "the ability to balance one's own needs in social situations, while maintaining positive relationships with others" (p.93). This has relevance where children might have to compete for opportunities to participate while trying to maintain positive social relationships with peers, as seems the case with particular activity on the mat. For example, Kantor, Elgas, and Fernie (1989) described specific three- and four-year old children who mimicked the strategies that the teacher used in order to gain her attention. Mimicking the teacher appeared to be a highly competitively strategy, in that it was effective while simultaneously being socially acceptable to other children.

The second theoretical framing was William Corsaro's notion of children's peer culture. He suggested that children create rules that are specific to their peers and that are informed by shared activities, common interests, and modes of participation (1985). He later went on to define peer culture as, "a stable set of routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that children engage in with their playmates" (2012, p. 488). Children work together to protect their friendships using strategies such as enabling or blocking access to participation for others (1985, 2012). Peer culture studies suggest that what children value about participation might be fundamentally different to what the adults value (1985). For instance, whereas the teacher might organise games on the mat for everybody's fun and amusement, children may interpret the games as a forum for serious competition against peers (Svinth, 2013).

For the purposes of the present study, applying theory about social competence and peer culture to activity on the mat required a shared language. This was necessary in order to discuss the phenomenon with research participants. The very first strategy was to establish a committee of 'critical peers' to assist the researcher in developing a label and definition for use of the mat in New Zealand classrooms. These are detailed in the findings section. The committee included six primary school teachers known to the first author. Once a label and definition had been established by the critical peers, an invitation to participate in the study was issued via email to schools across New Zealand. Participating classrooms were selected purposively by seeking diverse representation of likely practices. The first classroom frequently utilised student-leadership approaches where a child assisted the teacher. The second classroom was distinctive in its use of a circle configuration for the children's

seating. The third frequently included a blended class approach that drew on children from two classes and where the participants on the mat changed depending on the subject.

The research participants were fifty children and three teachers. All three teachers were highly experienced. The children ranged in age from five- to seven-years. Prior to data collection, the first author spent time in each classroom building relationships with the children and teacher. Data collection involved filming episodes on the mat by placing a 'Go Pro' camera on the whiteboard over two terms. The researcher was present at the time of filming. At the completion of filming, a range of ten to twenty-five children were interviewed from each classroom using small model humanoid figures as a provocation, shown in Figure 1. As well as having parental and teacher consent, childrens' assent was sought before each interview. Interviews lasted for approximately ten minutes and children were asked to set up a mat time using the figures and explain what happened. In addition, they were asked about their participation at mat time. The interviews were recorded using a small dictaphone, which the children were able to turn off at any point. In addition, the classroom teachers were interviewed. Anonymity of participants was assured. The interviews were transcribed and then qualitative observations were developed from the video footage. An interpretative approach to analysis occurred through the development of descriptive key themes about participation, which were later used as codes to label and categorise relevant excerpts of the data (as described by Anderson, 1998; Punch, 2005). The teachers were not given opportunity to view the video data. This was a limitation of the study, in that the teachers most likely may have noticed relevant interactions that were missed by the researcher. Furthermore, the teachers may have been able to contribute additional contextual detail that could have further informed the researcher's analyses.



Fig. 1. Humanoid figures used in children's interviews

RESEARCH FINDINGS

A shared language

Given that pedagogy using the mat does not appear to have an official name in New Zealand, it was important to identify a suitable label and definition in order to be able to communicate with teachers and children about it. Six teachers, who were consulted by the first author agreed that *mat time* was a suitable label. This is the term used for the remainder of this article. The agreed description was, *an event where the majority of the class is present together on the mat for the purposes of sharing, discussion, instruction, games, or other similar activity.*

The importance of active participation to children

Children were asked whether they thought it was important that they actively participated at mat time. Many children stated that their personal participation was important (72%, n=35), whereas 20% (n=10) indicated that it was not. Finally, 8% (n=4) were unsure. Common reasons given by the children for their participation being important included: it was beneficial to learning, it helped the child feel involved, it pleased the teacher, and it may have positively enhanced the individual's reputation within the class. The children who indicated that participation was not important gave reasons such as: general dislike of participation, general shyness, and fear of being judged negatively by the class.

Seating position

The predominant theme arising from the children's interviews was the importance of seating position on the mat. Nearly every child indicated a preference for a front seat when mat time was configured *en bloc*, i.e. free-seating was used. In contrast, there was no single preferred position for children who were seated in a circle. Nonetheless, many children had their preferred place in the circle, but the preferences varied widely. Reasons that children gave for their preferred position, irrespective of whether the class was seated *en bloc* or in a circle, included feeling that they were more noticeable to the teacher, being able to see or hear better, and being able to focus better. Not only was the importance of seating position evident in the children's interviews, but it was also visible throughout the observations. Indeed, the front rows were often squashed and children could be seen employing strategies to gain their preferred position. Examples included hovering around the relevant place just before mat time, or racing other children to secure the desired place. In addition, children frequently could be seen saving their friend a seat at the front.

Friendship

A second aspect of seating position indicated that sitting next to a friend was important to some children's participation. As well as an expression of belonging and fellowship, it was apparent that certain children helped their friends to come up with good ideas to share. There was a perception that sharing astute ideas had currency within the group. In other words, they felt that they could get to be known as someone who was 'clever' if they answered a question well or shared a good idea. This was evinced in statements such as,

“He tells me what, what, to put up my hand and he tells me what ideas I should say [sic].” Another reason given by certain children was that it was easier to find their friend to play with if a break occurred directly after the mat time.

Popularity

Within some friendship circles there was strong competition to sit next to the most popular group member. For example, one girl found that sitting on the mat was socially fraught. Her friends could be heard positioning to sit next to her sometimes twenty minutes before mat time started. Some strategies the friends used included offering her play dates or birthday party invites in exchange for her choosing them to sit next to. Direct threats such as *“I won’t be your friend”* were also made. Moreover, other children became annoyed if she did not choose them. In her interview she raised this issue as one that impacted her enjoyment of mat time, saying,

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

A contrasting situation was evident where particular children struggled to find anybody to sit next to. This was particularly noticeable one day when one such boy approached the mat time after the class was seated. Just as he went to sit in a gap, the teacher turned her back to gather her materials. The two children either side of the gap silently moved together and blocked his access. He moved to the next gap, but the same thing happened. These were acts of rejection that the entire class was witness to, and did not challenge. He appeared to have a negative reputation among some of the class members with one child stating, *“He’s only got half a brain”*.

Controversy

Several children articulated a dislike for specific behaviours or situations that negatively impacted their participation. The most frequently raised was other children using controversial bids to participate, such as calling out of turn or using other dominating behaviours such as ‘bossing others’. Indeed, some children referred to specific peers who spoke ‘too much’. In reference to such bids, one teacher noted that it was, *“quite difficult because sometimes you suddenly realise that you’ve let them dominate”*. The same teacher noticed that such behaviours were predominant when questions with a definite correct answer were asked as opposed to those that required children to think critically. As such, particular children competed to show that they knew the answer. She suggested that such children might be motivated to be *“top dog”*.

Pedagogy and participation

The decisions that the teachers made had direct consequences for the children’s social world. For instance, each of the teachers called on the children to choose peers in different situations. Examples included choosing a peer for pair-discussion or choosing a peer to help with a specific task, such as handing out worksheets. When children were called on to choose a partner, problems were most evident for two particular groups. The first was children who were in

triadic friendship groups, which automatically required the exclusion of one member. The most telling illustration of this was the dilemma facing a girl with two close friends. When she was given the task of choosing a helper at mat time, she chose one. When the other protested, the girl informed her, "*But you're only my second best friend*". A second group of children who were impacted by peer-choosing activities were children who did not have a close friend. They were often 'left over' and they either did not get to have a turn at the activity or the teacher had to find them someone to pair up with. One of the teachers stated, "*I do notice one or two kids who never have a buddy, never get chosen, and will be the last ones when I say you need to find a partner*". In many instances, the children in both groups went on to work productively. However, there were also times when some of the affected children were visibly disengaged and distracted. The teachers each used mat time to promote the participation of children who were not chosen by peers and those who found it difficult to participate for other reasons. This was done through strategies such as:

- Allocating partners, thereby minimising the chances that certain children would be left out or left over.
- Making a game by setting criteria for finding a partner. For example, one teacher challenged each child to find a partner who was of a different gender and age to himself or herself.
- Using discussion 'doughnuts' whereby inner and outer circles of children were configured to develop random pairs (see Brown & Thomson, 2000).
- Choosing games that had an element of random selection. This meant that a wide range of children had opportunity to participate and succeed, not just the most highly skilled or competitive.
- Calling on less participatory children with topics that they are likely to respond confidently on and giving the child notice so that he or is prepared.
- Asking less participatory children to report back to the class after small group or pair discussion, meaning that the peers who the child initially worked with could scaffold his or her response.
- Seating children in a circle. This obviated competition to sit at the front and one teacher reported that it made it easier for her to maintain eye contact with every child, thereby better recognising when assistance for participation was required .
- Emphasising work ethic over children's favouritism for particular peers. For example, one teacher referred to her mat time as "*working circles*",

DISCUSSION

After finding a suitable label and description for mat time, the second objective of the present study was to establish whether participation at mat time was important to children. Children largely indicated that it was important, however certain children raised issues to do with their performance and being judged by peers. Given that the definition of 'participation' used here, encapsulated the importance of social support and fellowship, this is of concern. Specific children's anxiety about participation might relate to a perceived or

actual lack of peer support. One explanation is that the individuals in the peer group are close observers to the performance of others. Furthermore, such observations inform children's perceptions about their peers' inferiority or superiority within the group (Fein, 2012). In this way, individuals gain reputations such as being clever or not (Milman, 2009). It is unsurprising then, that friends sometimes assisted each other's performance by sharing answers or ideas to contribute. Similarly, it could explain why certain children appeared to compete vociferously when the teacher asked questions that required children to recall a correct answer.

The present study investigated how children's social worlds influenced their participation. Immediately evident was the degree of competition to obtain a front seat when an *en bloc* configuration was used. Several of the children indicated that they were noticeable to the teacher at the front. Whether this is indeed so is unknown. Nonetheless, the front positions on the mat were highly desired within the peer culture. Where competition for a particular asset or resource is evident in a peer group, children who successfully obtain it can reinforce their position within the peer group (Pellegrini, et al., 2007). By contrast, little competition was evident when the children sat in a circle. When children are seated *en bloc*, front seats may be more desirable because those at the back find it more difficult to participate (Mandel Morrow & Smith, 1990).

Further competition was evident where children competed to sit with a popular peer and avoided sitting next to an unpopular peer. This is perhaps unsurprising considering children seek to spend more time with preferred peers than to those who they like less (Bukowski, Buhrmeister, & Underwood, 2011). Nonetheless, friendlessness is indicative of low social support (Jenkins & Demaray, 2012). Given that fellowship and support are implicated in children's ability to participate (Sandberg & Eriksson, 2011), teachers should be concerned about those who are regularly left out or left over. A further concern is that learning and social opportunities are denied to such children.

There was evidence that certain children attempted to dominate the mat time. Several children indicated their displeasure at dominating behaviour. Children must be able to balance their own needs with those of the group (Green, et al., 2008). However, overtly dominating behaviour may be an instance where a balance does not occur. Jones and Kelly (2007) suggest that talkative group members gain greater attention from the group than their peers. In turn, they are able to have a disproportionate influence as their ideas, suggestions, and interests are given a greater share of the floor than peers. Given contemporary emphasis on including children's interests in education, a possible implication is that high-participatory children might be able to influence the content of the classroom curriculum, thereby cementing their own social capital and further reinforcing their reputation as a capable peer.

Teachers' pedagogy at mat time is an important issue that requires further investigation. Evidence in the present study suggests that pedagogical strategies could be appropriated by the children in order to create a popularity contest. For example, there were instances where the teachers asked children to find a partner for discussion; the teacher's intention was that children would co-construct knowledge together. However, it was clear that children's peer culture perceived it as an opportunity to prioritise friendships. This is relevant at any time, but especially at mat time because of its public nature. Children witness the actions of class members, potentially using them to validate

exclusion and strengthen it. Some of the pedagogical decisions of the teachers may disrupt aspects of the peer culture that are seen as undesirable, such as exclusion. Further research is required about whether teachers can potentially influence the social status of specific children through enabling further participation and inclusion at mat time. Nonetheless, the current research suggests that there may be some benefit to children's participation through utilising a circle configuration where possible, and minimising situations where children self-select partners. When the teachers did this, they were able to distribute participation across the group and bring children together who interacted infrequently.

In summary, children's participation was shaped, at least in part, by whether or not they had the social support of friends or other peers. Moreover, certain children, who took on highly active participatory roles, appeared to have potential to garner more influence within the group, or vice versa. These findings confirm Sandberg and Eriksson's (2008) conceptualisation of participation as including social support and influence. Furthermore, there was evidence that certain children used competitive and affiliatory strategies to secure their own participation, or that of their friends. Such strategies were consistent with notions about children's competitive social strategies and social competencies (see DeRosier, Cillessen, Coie & Dodge, 1994; Green, et al., 2008; Pellegrini, et al., 2007). Finally, elements of peer culture, such as children placing different value on mat time activity, was consistent with descriptions of peer behaviour in Corsaro's (1985, 2012) work. Specifically, children placed a higher value than the teachers on friendships, seating position in *en bloc*-configured mat times, and reputation.

CONCLUSIONS

Friendship and social status form an undercurrent to interactions in the classroom. The culture of the educational setting and the peer culture communicate to its members about their individual status and the support they might experience for active participation. In response to inequity, teachers (1) distributed participation across the peer group, and (2) brought children together who might not otherwise have chosen each other to work with.

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