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Broomhead, KE (2018) Acceptance or rejection? The social experiences of children with special educational needs and disabilities within a mainstream primary school. Education 3-13, 47 (8). pp. 877-888. ISSN 0300-4279

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**Acceptance or rejection? The social experiences of children with Special Educational
Needs and Disabilities (SEND) within a mainstream primary school**

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Biographical note

Dr Karen Broomhead is a Senior Lecturer in Education and Early Childhood Studies at Liverpool John Moores University, predominantly teaching on the BA (Hons.) degree in Education Studies and Inclusion. Karen completed her PhD at Lancaster University in 2013, which was funded by a studentship awarded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Her PhD thesis focused on the home-school relationships between parents of children with Special Educational Needs (particularly those with Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties) and educational practitioners. Karen has recently published articles within the *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, *British Journal of Special Education*, *Support for Learning* and *Pastoral Care in Education*. Her research continues to centralise on issues surrounding home-school relationships, parental responsibility and Special Educational Needs. She also has professional and personal interest in the experiences of parents who have children with Autistic Spectrum Condition. Karen has much experience supporting children with Special Educational Needs within schools and the community, having worked previously as a Support Worker for children with Autistic Spectrum Conditions, Inclusion Support Worker, Summer School Officer and Teaching Assistant.

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Abstract

This article details a study which investigated the social acceptance and friendships of children with SEND, and their typically developing peers, at a mainstream primary school in the North West of England. Participants were 29 children aged five and six years old, separated into three groups; typically developing children, children who were being monitored for SEND, and children with formally identified SENDs. With the use of a peer nomination sociometric technique, findings revealed that children with SEND had less promising peer relations and friendships compared to children tracked for SEND and their typically developing peers, consequently questioning the mainstream 'ideal'.

Keywords: special educational needs; mainstream; social acceptance; peer relationships; inclusion

Word count: 6942

Introduction

Slade (2008, p. 63) stated that ‘the world of the classroom is a social one’, and with Erwin (1993) indicating that between the ages of two and five children begin to spend more time with their peers and less time with their parents, research has regularly suggested that relationships with peers heavily influence a child’s development (Gifford-Smith and Brownell, 2003; Hooper, 2002; Tur-Kaspa, Margalit and Most, 1999; Jackson et al, 1998). Others have progressed as far as suggesting that successful relationships with peers are not simply influential, but *vital* for a child’s social and emotional growth (Ollendick et al, 1992; Papageorgiou, Andreou and Soulis, 2008; Ochoa and Olivarez, 1995). For example, Johnson (1980, p. 125) proposed that;

experiences with peers are not superficial luxuries to be enjoyed by some students and not others. Student-student relationships are an absolute necessity for healthy cognitive and social development

Children who engage in successful social experiences appear to reap many benefits in relation to their attainment, wellbeing and self-esteem (Odom et al, 2006; Newcomb, Bukowski and Pattee, 1993), whilst those that do not engage successfully with peers may experience issues such as expectance of failure and more negative mood (Walker, Berthelsen and Irving, 2001; McFarlin and Blaskovitch, 1981). Two specific aspects of peer relationships which have begun to be explored are social acceptance and friendship.

Social acceptance

Social acceptance (‘a construct that represents the view of a groups towards an individual’ (Hoza, 1989, p. 19)) is perceived to be a key contributor when considering child wellbeing and development. If children are socially accepted, they are referred to as having strong,

positive links with their peer group (Bukowski et al, 2000), and are well-liked by many of their peers (Lindsey, 2002). A range of literature indicates that it is extremely beneficial for a child to be socially accepted by their peer group (Estell et al, 2008; Slade, 2008; Jackson and Bracken, 1998). For example, Newcomb, Bukowski and Pattee's (1993) meta-analysis concluded that children accepted by their peers displayed significantly higher sociability (such as more positive social actions and traits), as well as considerably less loneliness and negative behaviour. Further to this, it has been proposed that children who are not accepted by their peer group are at risk (Slade, 2008; George and Hartmann, 1996; Guralnick et al, 1996). For example, research has indicated that low-accepted children may experience problems academically (Odom et al, 2006; Roffey, Tarrant and Majors, 1994; Parker and Asher, 1987), as well as social and emotional difficulties (Walker, Berthelsen and Irving, 2001; Boivin and Begin, 1989), and problems with their mental health and relationships in adulthood (Johnson et al, 2000; Roffey, Tarrant and Majors, 1994).

Friendship

A second important aspect of peer relations is friendship. This concept relates to mutual association and liking between two people (Howes, 1990, cited in Hall and McGregor, 2000, p. 115), that develops over time and is a voluntary not compulsory relationship (Bukowski, Newcomb and Hartup, 1998; Erwin, 1998). Lindsey (2002) states that although the concept of friendship is linked to social acceptance, it is important to understand that they make up two distinct aspects of peer relationships. This is because social acceptance provides information regarding how each child is viewed by *all* of their peers, whereas friendship is linked to the mutual relationships between just *two* children. For example, less accepted children may still have friends, whereas those who are accepted may not necessarily have successful friendships (Gifford-Smith and Brownell, 2003). Having friends aids a child's

social and emotional development, by enabling them to have positive perceptions of self as well as influencing their attitudes and behaviour (Heslop, 2005; Lindsey, 2002; Tur-Kaspa, Margalit and Most, 1999). Additionally, Gifford-Smith and Brownell (2003) reported that children who have friends are less likely to experience loneliness and depression compared to those who do not. However, children do not need several friends to experience these positive consequences; having just *one* friend is beneficial for a child's successful development (Frostad and Pijl, 2007; Vaughn, Elbaum and Schumm, 1996; Juvonen and Bear, 1992).

Children with SEND

Due to the potentially detrimental effects of being low-accepted by peers or having no friends, there is an evident need to explore whether there are particular 'groups' of children who are more at risk of engaging in poor relationships with their peers. One such group of interest is children with SEND.

The inclusion 'ideal' (fundamentally, that children with SEND should be educated in the same setting as their mainstream peers; Waddington and Reed, 2017; Kurth and Mastergeorge, 2010), has been a key area of debate for several decades (Shaw, 2017; Pijl, 2007; Bunch and Valeo, 2000). This is not least due to the Warnock Report (DES, 1978) and 1981 Education Act paving the way for the education of children with SEND alongside their mainstream peers. There is a supposed bias towards the inclusion of children with SEND within mainstream schools, regardless of widespread acknowledgement that the UK requires both mainstream and special schools (Waddington and Reed, 2017; Broomhead, 2013), and despite attempts to reverse this bias in recent UK policy (DfE, 2011). In other words, the inclusion 'ideal' and education of children with SEND in mainstream schools is frequently promoted (Shaw, 2017; Waddington and Reed, 2017; Avramidis and Wilde, 2009). This has

groundings in the perception that mainstream provision has key benefits for those with SEND in terms of their academic achievement, development and wellbeing (Shaw, 2017; Bajwa-Patel and Devecchi, 2014; Kurth and Mastergeorge, 2010; Knight et al, 2009; Buckley et al, 2006, Connor, 2000), and yet there are concerns that the ideal of inclusion ‘is not founded on a strong evidence base’ (Waddington and Reed, 2017, p. 133) and should consequently be questioned (Norwich, 2005; Powell and Tutt, 2002).

However, there is key concern with regards to the *social* implications for children with SEND if they are to be educated in mainstream schools (Avramidis and Wilde, 2009). Frederickson et al (2007) identified that the majority of previous research in the area of mainstream versus special school provision has predominantly focused on how the inclusion of children with SEND within mainstream schools effects their academic attainment, rather than exploring the social impact it may have. Nevertheless, parental and practitioner perceptions appear to imply that mainstreaming those with SEND will *improve* their peer relationships (Waddington and Reed, 2017; Bunch and Valeo, 2004; Frederickson and Furnham, 2004; Vaughn et al, 1998), with many parents citing the possibility of increased social opportunities as a main reason for choosing to educate their children with SEND at mainstream schools (Koster et al, 2007; Pijl, 2007).

Indeed, several researchers have noted that children with SEND *do* potentially engage in successful peer relationships (Koster et al, 2007; Hall et al, 2000), although this is to a limited extent. Regarding social acceptance, some literature has proposed that children with SEND are often ‘averagely accepted’, in other words, neither high- nor low-accepted by their peers (Koster et al, 2007; Ochoa and Olivarez, 1995; Sater and French, 1989). Furthermore, with regards to friendships, children with SEND can experience successful, mutual relationships

with friends, enabling them to develop socially if they are low-accepted by their peers (Bunch and Valeo, 2004; Fox, Farrell and Davis, 2004; Vaughn and Hogan, 1994). Juvonen and Bear (1992), who examined the friendships of 46 children with SEND and 199 children without SEND aged between eight and nine, found that two thirds of children with SEND had at least one friend, and more than half also developed friendships with peers who did not have SEND.

This latter result contradicts with other research which suggests that homophily occurs in the friendships of children with SEND. Homophily refers to children choosing certain others as friends based on them having similar characteristics (such as gender, attainment and interests) as themselves (Male, 2007; Robins and Rutter, 1990). In this context, it has often been suggested that children with SEND frequently form friendships with other children with SEND, and those who do not have SEND also tend to become friends with each other (Frostdad and Pijl, 2007; Bunch and Valeo, 2004; Fox, Farrell and Davis, 2004; Cuckle and Wilson, 2002; Thompson, Whitney and Smith, 1994), whilst other research has found no such link (Avramidis and Wilde, 2009). Due to inconsistency within previous research, the issues of homophily and friendships of children with SEND remain unclear.

On the contrary, other literature has identified that children with SEND experience less social acceptance, and fewer friendships, compared to their typically developing peers (Estell et al, 2008; Frederickson et al, 2007; Frostdad and Pijl, 2007; Hooper, 2002; Guralnick et al, 1996; Ochoa et al, 1995). A study by Frederickson et al (2007) is particularly beneficial as it was carried out in the UK. A large sample of 397 eight to eleven year old children were included in this study, and 89 participants were on their school's SEND register. Results found that children who were on their school's SEND register were less accepted than their typically

developing classmates. The large sample strengthens this study; however all participants were over seven years old. This appears to be a trend with research investigating the social acceptance of children with SEND (Vaughn et al 1998; Thompson, Whitney and Smith, 1994; Stone and La Greca, 1990), with consequent scope to investigate the social acceptance of children with SEND who have more recently entered compulsory education where early friendships are forming.

With regards to friendship, some research has suggested that children with SEND have fewer friends compared to their typically developing peers (Avramidis and Wilde, 2009; Heslop, 2005; Hirst and Baldwin, 1994; Thompson, Whitney and Smith, 1994; Martlew and Hodson, 1991). One of these studies (Thompson, Whitney and Smith, 1994) was conducted in England, and investigated the friendships of 186 children aged eight to sixteen at three primary and five secondary schools. Half of the participants either had or were in the process of retrieving a statement of SEND, whilst the remaining 93 children were typically developing. Findings concluded that children with SEND had fewer friends compared to their typically developing peers. However, it should be remembered that only those who had, or were in the process of acquiring a statement were included in the SEND group. This suggests that there is scope for subsequent research to include children who may potentially have a SEND but have not yet been formally identified.

Based on the above reviewed literature, it is evident that further research regarding the peer relationships of children with SEND, and consequently the social impact of mainstream provision for these children within the UK, is essential. The study reported in this article examined the social acceptance and friendships of children with SEND in one mainstream

primary school class, alongside exploring the social experiences of peers being tracked for SEND and their typically developing peers.

Methodology

At present, sociometry is perceived to be the most effective way of investigating a child's social experience in the classroom, and has been used extensively with children in primary schools (Frederickson et al, 2007; Pijl, 2007; Kemp and Carter, 2002; Bukowski et al, 2000; Jackson and Bracken, 1998). There are two distinct ways of collecting data via sociometry; by peer ratings or peer nominations. If a peer ratings method is chosen, participants are asked to rate each of their class peers based on how much they like to play with them on a likert scale (Terry and Coie, 1991). For example, often participants choose one of the following answers; "do not like to play with", "sometimes" [like to play with], "do like to play with", or, finally, "do not know" [whether I like to play with] (Coie and Kupersmidt, 1983).

Although this method may be beneficial as it can provide information regarding how participants feel about each of their peers (Gifford-Smith et al, 2003) and thus participants are not able to momentarily forget about any peers (Erwin, 1995), this method was not chosen for the current study due to its limitations. Firstly, peer ratings may be difficult to comprehend for children with SEND, as the procedure is relatively complex and answers have to be chosen from a scale (Frederickson and Furnham, 1998). Also, information regarding the actual relationships between participants cannot be identified (Farmer and Cairns, 1991, cited in Yugar and Shapiro 2001, p. 569), and it has been suggested that participants may display a position preference, for example rate a child on the right side of the scale (Yugar and Shapiro, 2001).

Thus, the peer nomination method was selected for the study reported in this article. Peer nomination refers to asking participants to provide positive nominations, in other words, to identify several peers as those who they *most like* to play with (Bukowski et al, 2000; Frederickson and Furnham, 1998). Some previous research has also asked participants to nominate peers who they do *not* like to play with, known as negative nominations (Slade, 2008; Pijl, 2007; Flicek and Landau, 1985). However, the study reported in this article did not use negative nominations due to the potential ethical implications of doing so (Kosir and Pecjak, 2005). For example, it has been suggested that children may discuss their nominations, despite being instructed not to, and thus discuss who they have negatively nominated (Yugar and Shapiro, 2001), which may then lead to those who are low-accepted experiencing further social difficulties (Iverson, Barton and Iverson, 1997; Ollendick et al, 1992).

Although by using peer nominations participants may just nominate the peers they see immediately, or those who they have enjoyed playing with simply on the day of the study (Koster et al, 2007; Frederickson and Furnham, 1998), the possibility of this occurring was minimised by providing participants with time to observe all of their peers before they were asked to provide nominations. It is also advantageous to use peer nomination because data can be sought quickly and efficiently (Hayvren and Hymel, 1984), for example, data for the study reported in this article was generated during one school day. However, a major advantage of using the peer nominations method is that reciprocal friendships can be obtained. Two participants are regarded as friends if they choose each other as preferred playmates (Slade, 2008; Hall and McGregor, 2000; Vaughn, Elbaum and Schumm, 1996), which is not possible when using the peer ratings method.

It must be acknowledged that collecting data at just one point in time could have had an impact on data reliability. This was necessary for the study reported in this article due to time constraints within the classroom, and is in line with previous research in this field where data was collected at just one point in time in order to provide a snapshot of classroom relationships. Nevertheless, although relationships evidently do change frequently within the primary classroom, and therefore we cannot fully assess and understand the quality of these friendships based on the single question that children were asked during this study, friendships also develop *over time* (Bukowski et al, 1998; Erwin, 1998). The participants within the study reported in this article were Year 1 children, who had spent five days a week together for just under two years and consequently had begun to develop consistent relationships and mutual friendships with their peers. It can therefore be argued that an insight can be gained, and tentative suggestions can be made, about their emerging friendships and the benefits of them.

Sample

Participants were 29 children aged between five and six years old, within one class at a mainstream primary school. Eighteen were male and eleven were female. Participants were divided into three groups for this study. The first group were 18 children with no evidence of SEND and were therefore referred to as the ‘typically developing’ group. The second group of children, referred to as the ‘tracked’ group, were a further 6 boys who were being monitored by the school’s Special Educational Needs and Disability Coordinator (SENDCo), as they had been identified as potentially requiring additional support during their education. The ‘tracked’ group was felt to be important to include for the following reasons. Firstly, if the ‘tracked’ group was not included, they would have been recorded as ‘typically developing’, which the SENDCo (with fifteen years experience) did not perceive to reflect

these 6 pupils due to concerns with regards to their rate of learning and levels of communication skills. In addition to this, whilst a ‘tracked’ group would look different in differing educational settings, it was necessary to acknowledge this group of often ‘hidden’ children who had evident additional needs which were not formally recognised at the time of data collection due to the drawn out processes of obtaining diagnoses, intervention and support (Kendall, 2017; Norwich and Eaton, 2015).

The remaining participants were 5 children who were formally registered at the school as having SEND, educated alongside the above participants. One of these 5 children (participant 26) had an Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan due to his physical disability and learning difficulties, whilst another child (participant 28) was undergoing an EHC Needs Assessment with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) identified as his primary need. The remaining 3 children required significant additional support to aid their learning. This group are referred to as the ‘with SEND’ group.

Procedure

The researcher sat in a quiet corner of the classroom enabling each participant to share their nominations privately without being overheard, where all areas of the room, as well as their peers, were visible. Participants were individually requested to consider all of the children in their class by looking around the classroom, and to use the individual photos of each classmate located on the wall to help them further. They were then asked to name five children in their class who they most liked to play with. Participants were reassured that it was not a test and that they did not have to name anyone if they did not want to. The children were also instructed that their answers would not be shared with anyone, and that the researcher would like them to keep their answers private too. Once it was evident that the

participant had understood the above, they were asked to share the names of up to five children whom they most liked to play with. All agreed to do so, and the researcher recorded answers as the nominated child's previously assigned number. Finally, participants were thanked and asked to continue with the activity they had been completing beforehand.

Ethics

The ethical guidelines by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) were adhered to. Written consent was obtained from the headteacher, class teacher and the parents of all participants. However, participants themselves were also asked, not pressurised (as instructed by Kumar, 2005) to provide informed consent verbally, and were provided with time to think about taking part in the study.

To maintain confidentiality, the name of each child was written on a list and then randomly assigned a number that they would be recorded as in the study. When participants named a peer, this information was referred to and their answer was recorded as the number of the child.

Findings

Two sets of data were collected during the study reported in this article, in order to explore the social acceptance and friendships of participants. Firstly, in relation to social acceptance, details of the five nominations for preferred playmates provided by each participant were recorded. The second data set, relating to friendship, identified the amount and details of participants' mutual nominations, in other words, those peers who had reciprocally chosen each other as preferred playmates. This second set of data also helped to identify homophily,

referring to the amount of participants nominating peers in the same group as them as preferred playmates.

The social acceptance and friendship results of participants were presented as a sociogram, displayed in Figure 1, which is the customary way to display peer nomination results (Slade, 2008; Northway, 1967).

[FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE]

As can be observed from Figure 1, the majority of the ‘typically developing’ participants are placed in the more centrally located concentric circles of the sociogram, indicating that many received a high amount of nominations from peers. However, children in the ‘with SEND’ group are all located on the outer circles, identifying that they were all nominated as preferred playmates less than four times. Those participants in the ‘tracked’ group appear to be in between the ‘typically developing’ and ‘with SEND’ groups on the sociogram. On the other hand, there were anomalies, for example, two ‘typically developing’ children (participants 4 and 8) only received between one and two nominations, whilst one child (participant 19) from the ‘tracked’ group received between five and six nominations, an area of the sociogram which appeared to be dominated by ‘typically developing’ children.

The sociogram also displays the mutual nominations for participants, indicating friendships. Overall, it is evident that many children had friendships with their peers, however ‘typically developing’ participants appeared to have more mutual nominations than the remaining

groups, for example participant 3 had five mutual nominations (the maximum) and participant 7 had three. It is also evident from the sociogram that homophily occurred, particularly in the ‘typically developing’ and ‘with SEND’ groups, indicating that children were often friends with peers who belonged to the same ‘group’ as themselves.

It is also evident from the sociogram that there is a gender split, in that the majority of participants nominated peers of the same-sex as preferred playmates, with only two participants (7%) making opposite-sex ratings. However, those who nominated peers of the opposite-sex were mutually nominated and thus had friendships with children of the opposite sex, which is an important finding. In relation to social experience, females were nominated as preferred playmates 5.3 times on average, and had a mean number of 2.3 mutual nominations. Males were nominated a mean number of 4.8 times, and had an average of 1.9 reciprocal nominations.

A table was also produced (see Table 1), which details the mean social experience results for each group; ‘typically developing’, ‘tracked’ and ‘with SEND’. This table contains information on the average amount of nominations received by participants in each group. Bronfenbrenner (1945, cited in Slade, 2008, p. 64) suggested that receiving three nominations indicates average social acceptance, whilst achieving seven nominations indicates high social acceptance, therefore these categories are used in the table. Furthermore, the table also displays the mean total of mutual nominations obtained, which signifies friendship, and whether homophily occurred.

[TABLE 1 NEAR HERE]

In relation to social acceptance, the table indicates that, on average, ‘typically developing’ participants achieved considerably more nominations (6.4) compared to the ‘tracked’ and ‘with SEND’ groups, who achieved a mean of just 3.3 and 2.0 nominations respectively. Additionally, more than a third of the ‘typically developing’ group received seven or more nominations, whilst no members in the remaining two groups achieved seven or more votes. In relation to the friendships (mutual nominations) of participants, all members of the ‘typically developing’ group had at least one friend, and the vast majority of the ‘tracked’ and ‘with SEND’ also did. Furthermore, in relation to homophily, it is significant that no children in the ‘with SEND’ group had mutual friendships with peers other than those who also had SEND, whilst participants belonging to the ‘tracked’ group actually had more mutual friendships with peers who belonged to other groups as opposed to their own group.

The implications of these findings will now be discussed in relation to previous literature, whilst also considering recommendations for action.

Discussion

Children with SEND within this study were found to be *considerably* less accepted than their typically developing peers, and slightly less accepted than children being tracked for SEND. This is in line with previous research (Frederickson et al, 2007; Ochoa and Olivarez, 1995; Swanson and Malone, 1992). Achieving three votes is suggested to signify average social acceptance (Bronfenbrenner, 1945, cited in Slade, 2008, p. 64), and therefore participants with SEND within this study were not even averagely accepted by their peers. Despite this, it is promising that most of the children with SEND within this study had at least one

friendship, which literature (Frostad and Pijl, 2007; Vaughn, Elbaum and Schumm, 1996; Juvonen and Bear, 1992) has suggested is just as beneficial to a child's development as having several friends. Nevertheless, although the majority of children with SEND and children tracked for SEND had at least one friendship, they had fewer friends overall than their typically developing peers.

Of those who had at least one friend, children with SEND only had mutual friendships with other children with SEND. No children with SEND expressed a mutual friendship with peers in the 'tracked' or 'typically developing' groups. These results support the limited amount of previous research on homophily (Frostad and Pijl, 2007; Bunch and Valeo, 2004; Fox, Farrell and Davis, 2004; Thompson, Whitney and Smith, 1994), which has found that the majority of participants with SEND were friends with other children with SEND, whilst typically developing peers were friends with other typically developing children. Homophily therefore appears to occur in the friendships of children with SEND and those who are typically developing.

Implications of findings

Although the categorisation of concepts as complex as peer relationships and friendships into votes could be critiqued, as well as the study reported in this article only being based on one class, these findings provide a valuable glimpse into the emerging intricacies and diversity of pupils' social experiences within a mainstream environment.

This study contributes to discussion regarding the social impact of mainstream provision for children with SEND, a key area to investigate due to Frederickson et al (2007) identifying that much previous research has focused on the academic rather than social consequences of

inclusion in mainstream schools. As well as this, it supports previous literature in proposing that children with SEND, as well as children who are being tracked for SEND to a lesser extent, have lower social acceptance and more challenging social experiences than their typically developing peers (Estell et al, 2008; Hooper, 2002). However, it does indicate that children with SEND are able to engage in successful friendships with peers, although these friends frequently have SENDs too. Perceptions of how mainstream provision for children with SEND improve opportunities for peer relations should therefore be questioned. There should *not* be general consensus regarding inclusion leading to improved social experiences for children with SEND as discussed earlier (Shaw, 2017; Pijl, 2007; Frederickson and Furnham, 2004; Vaughn et al, 1998). Although the majority of children with SEND were found to have at least one mutual friend amongst their peers, these friends also had SEND. This study also suggests that few children with SEND achieved even average social acceptance, whilst many typically developing children were highly accepted. This indicates that the desired effects of inclusion in mainstream settings with regards to social and emotional development that parents hope for (Koster et al, 2007) may not necessarily occur; instead children with SEND may in fact be isolated from their mainstream peers.

However, this is not to suggest that children with SEND should not be educated within mainstream schools; quite the opposite. It can be tentatively suggested that, based on the findings reported in this article, children with SEND display evidence of forming emerging friendships with their peers. Nevertheless, it highlights that interventions to support the social skills of children with SEND in mainstream schools are essential.

In terms of recommendations for action, a whole-class (or indeed, whole-school) approach which focuses on encouraging children to form relationships with others even if they have

different interests and abilities to themselves would be helpful. This would provide those with SEND with the opportunity to engage with an increased number of peers, which in turn could positively impact on their social experiences. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that children should be free to play and engage in activities with pupils that they choose to. Strategies such as Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning, more commonly referred to as SEAL (Department for Education and Skills, 2005) have previously been identified as incredibly valuable for supporting social skills, friendships and peer relations of young children, and yet this programme has been given little priority by the current Conservative government in the UK.

Nevertheless, although this study has identified the complexities of the social experiences regarding children with SEND in mainstream schools, it has been unable to explore the reasons *why* this is the case. Ability grouping within primary school classrooms (where those with SEND are frequently grouped together), in addition to teaching assistants often working closely with those with additional needs whilst typically developing children work together, are just two factors which may impact on peer relationships involving children with SEND (Richmond and Smith, 2006; Davies, Hallam and Ireson, 2003). In addition to this, the nature of a child's SEND may influence their ability to forge and sustain relationships with their peers, particularly if their needs relate to speech, language and communication, as well as behavioural (Broomhead, 2013). Further exploration of the factors contributing to the social experiences of children with SEND within the mainstream educational environment would be beneficial.

Overall this study explored the social experiences, more specifically the social acceptance and mutual friendships, of children with SEND and compared these results with the social

experiences of peers being tracked for SEND and typically developing peers. Findings suggest that less than half of participants with SEND were ‘averagely’ accepted, compared to the *majority* of the tracked for SEND group and the *vast majority* of their typically developing peers. On the other hand, most of the children with SEND had at least one friend, suggesting that they can have meaningful relationships with their peers, however all of the friends of children with SEND also had SEND themselves. Despite this, children with SEND were reported to have much fewer mutual friendships than children in the ‘tracked’ and ‘typically developing’ groups. This indicates that children with SEND may have a less promising social experience compared to their typically developing peers, which has implications for how to effectively support the socio-emotional development of children with SEND within mainstream settings, and questions the inclusion ‘ideal’.

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