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Does 'to share' or 'not to share' matter? : An exploration of young children's sharing behaviour

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Background

As a part of finding from the Learning for Life project: the development of a character perspective in Early Years, this paper presents young children's manifestations of sharing behaviours in their daily interactions with their peers.

Young children's sharing behaviours documented in some reports (Rheingold et al., 1976; Hay et al., 1991) suggest that children's early sharing may occur shortly before their first birthday. Rheingold et al. (1976) claimed that infants begin the process of sharing by offering food and other objects to their companions, e.g. mothers, fathers, siblings, peers and other adults. The sharing behaviours of these infants, which the authors called 'partner play' also, involved showing objects to other persons at a distance, and engaging in coordinated use of them.

Some studies have focused on the frequency of sharing behaviours (Rheingold et al., 1976; Hay et al., 1991, Rao and Steward, 1999), and the people with whom young children share, e.g. friends or acquaintances (Birch and Billman, 1986). Others have explored children's understanding of sharing (Austin, et al., 1987), the relationships between sharing and variables e.g. young children's capacity in moral reasoning (Eisenberg, 1988), and empathy (Einsberg et al., 1987), the reasons that young children share, e.g. need for approval or reciprocity (Staub and Sherk, 1970), and the resources for learning to share, e.g. parenting styles (Radke-Yarrow, et al., 1983) and preschool education (using incentive social reinforcement, Doland an Adelberg, 1967). However, there is a paucity of studies exploring the content (how children actually do) of young children's sharing behaviours. The main reason for this can be the use of methodology in studies of sharing behaviour was different. The majority of studies were experimental designs. Even though the data were collected in the school or home environment, a hypothetical scenario or a preset testing design was in place. In this study, employing naturalistic observations in the early childhood education settings provided a possibility not only to explore the possible contribution of environment to children's behaviours (in familiar contexts), but also while they were engaged in both adult-led and child-led activities.

Research Questions

The main question: what is young children's manifestation of sharing behaviour in the preschool and school settings?

Methods

This study followed a sample of focus children's character development over the course of two years as they progressed through pre-school settings and into their first year at primary school. Thus, the informants in the study included Early Years professionals, nursery managers, reception class teachers and primary school heads as well as children in their care and their families. While the consent was received, some home visits were also performed.

There were 55 children (7 children in cohort one, 24 children in cohort two and 24 children in cohort three) aged between 3-year-5-month olds to 5-year-2-month olds for over the course of one and a half years. Six Early Childhood Education settings situated in urban London and rural Kent were chosen. Two major criteria guided the sampling of case study sites were: socio-demographic factors and provision judged by Ofsted as 'outstanding' in its last investigation. The settings reflect the variety in management arrangements, with two being maintained by the local (education) authority, one being

integral to an independent school, two owned and managed by private companies, and one being a voluntary sector, not-for-profit organisation run by a committee.

The first observation commenced in June 2008. After the cohort two children moved to a number of primary schools, there was one observation also made in the reception class. In total, 86 day visits were made between nurseries (84%) and primary school reception class (16%). On average, the focus child in the main cohort (24 children) each has obtained 17 hours un-structured observation records.

Frame

At the beginning of the analysis, the researchers looked at any data relating to the theme of sharing including young children's behaviours or their cognitive understanding. Particularly, the language that children used in their self-talk and their conversations when they interacted with peers/teachers/other adults was analysed. A common expression that children used to begin the process of sharing was 'Can I have it?'. While children imposed the request, various responses and reactions occurred. It is necessary to bear in mind that many interpersonal interactions are not neat or verbal and the interactions of children as young as three in this study were complicated. There were a number of sharing behaviours occurred in a non-verbal and subtle way.

Research findings

By analysing children's talk, behaviours, state of feelings and non-verbal clues, the results show that young children's sharing behaviour involve the consideration of their own needs and the ability in taking others' needs into accounts. It also demonstrates how young children operate between the ability of asking their friends to share an object with them, and the ability to offer an object to their friends. The exploration takes a step further and suggests that young children's sharing behaviours occur as a continuum phenomenon. A three-dimensional model including consideration of self/ others, like/dislike to share and type of sharing behaviours is applied. The findings imply young children behave, in this case the matter of sharing, in a sophisticated way. It is inadequate to simply look at whether a young child 'share' or 'not share'. This paper enhances the understanding and knowledge of young children's behaviour in terms of sharing.