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Variations in interaction: examining how social engagement is contingent upon context

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This article reports the findings of a study that explored how a mainstream school and a special school provided social interaction opportunities for two primary-aged children with PMLD (Emma and Harry). Both children attended a special school four days a week and a mainstream school one day a week, with a special school teaching assistant (SSTA) providing support in the mainstream. The findings suggest that the SSTA interacted differently with Emma/Harry depending on which school she was in, and heavily shaped early interactions between Emma/Harry and mainstream children. The findings also suggest that mainstream children quickly developed confidence, evidenced by the emergence of novel (playful and physical) styles of interaction.

Despite on-going international calls for 'inclusive education' by United Nations agencies children with PMLD are typically educated in special schools. This is not only the case in the UK but also appears to be a global trend, as Lyons and Arthur-Kelly (2014) note: 'From an international perspective most students with [PMLD], if they have access to any school education, are educated in "special" schools or classes by "special" educators' (p. 446).

Given that mainstream opportunities for children with PMLD are relatively rare, it is perhaps not surprising that there has been very little empirical research published on the topic. Existing research tends to focus on two areas: (i) parents and teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of children with PMLD, and (ii) descriptions of practice (i.e. what happens in the mainstream). Researchers who have examined the former have suggested that the more severe a child's learning difficulties the less enthusiastic teachers and parents are towards inclusive education (e.g. Coutsocostas and Alborz, 2010; de Boer and Munde, 2015). However, it is important to note that these studies have taken place outside the UK with countries that have different education systems (e.g. in Greece and the Netherlands).

Whilst some researchers have expressed reservations about inclusion, studies that describe the participation of children with PMLD in the mainstream have reached positive conclusions. For example, researchers in Australia compared levels of alertness between children with PMLD in a mainstream class and children with PMLD in a special school class. The researchers reported that the children in the mainstream school spent longer awake, active and alert compared to children in the special school (Foreman et al., 2004). The present author (Simmons and Watson, 2014, 2015) conducted research in England which examined the engagement of a child with PMLD who attended both a special school and a

mainstream school, and found that the child appeared happier (e.g. less self-harming) and more socially active in the mainstream school compared to the special school. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the small but growing empirical literature that describes how children with PMLD are supported across mainstream and specialist settings.

Research focus and methodology

This article presents the emerging findings of a three-year project funded by the British Academy that examined how different types of school provide different social interaction opportunities. The paper focuses on two students – Emma and Harry. Both students attended the same class for pupils with PMLD in a special school four days a week, and an age-equivalent class in their local mainstream school one day a week. At the time of data collection Emma was five years of age and attended a Reception class, whilst Harry was eight and attended a Year 4 class. A special school teaching assistant (SSTA) transported and supported Emma and Harry during their mainstream placements.

The methodology resembled an ethnographic approach. Ethnography involves direct experience and exploration of a particular social setting, through participation and observation (Atkinson et al., 2001). The project reported in this article combined participant observation with the writing of observational fieldnotes. The researcher's interpretation of the meaning of Emma and Harry actions was further developed through formal interviews with parents and teaching staff, as well as on-going informal dialogue with school staff who could be consulted during observation. Each child was observed one day a week in a mainstream school and one day a week in a special school for a ten-week period (twenty observations per child). The findings are reported below.

Findings

The bulk of the data described Emma/Harry's interactions with special school staff and/or mainstream peers. Analysis of this data suggests that the nature of the interaction was contingent upon the location of the interaction and the communication partner.

- **Special school staff in the special school**

  The theme '*social invariance through environmental change*' refers to the ways in which special school staff were consistent and predictable in their interactions with Harry and Emma despite variation in location within the special school (e.g. classroom, school hall or multisensory room). For example, on a daily basis Harry and Emma were encouraged to express a preference for an object, person or event. Children were asked to smile or look at an object such as a toy to express 'like', or turn away from an object to express 'dislike'. If the children did not respond to choices offered by staff then a range of prompts would be issued including verbal prompts (the question would be reiterated, reworded, and/or spoken in a more dramatic tone), gestural and visual prompts (pointing at an object or showing a symbolic representation of the object), followed by a physical prompt (e.g. rubbing a vibrating snake on one arm and rolling a spikey ball on another arm whilst observing the child's reactions). These interactions were typically dyadic in nature (staff worked with children one-to-one), symbolically normative (the interactions were deemed to be developmentally appropriate), and functional or pedagogically-framed (the interactions were timetabled and aimed to foster children's emerging symbolic communication). Staff were jovial (cheerful and friendly) and respectful (e.g. recognising when Emma/Harry were not interested in engaging and returning when they were more alert).

- **Special school staff in the mainstream school**

  When supporting Emma and Harry in the mainstream school, the special school staff typically embodied a different style of interaction dubbed '*narrated bodily appropriation*'. These interactions had a chronologically normative dimension meaning that special school staff encouraged Harry and Emma to behave like other mainstream children of the same age. During the interaction Harry and Emma's bodies were re-positioned or moved according to the contextual demands of the situation. The interactions were invariably accompanied by narration or a description of what was about to happen to Emma/Harry and why. The main interactive partner during these events was typically the SSTA, but there were also occasions when the mainstream teaching assistant would engage in a similar manner. For example, during numeracy the SSTA repositioned Harry so he sat upright rather than slouched, turned his head so he faced the teacher, opened his palm and placed a pencil in his hand, closed his fingers around the pencil and move his hand across a page to make marks. The physical event would be narrated, meaning that Harry would be given an explanation as to why he was being moved.

- **Special school staff and mainstream peers in the mainstream**

  One of the aims of the research was to compare and contrast how different groups (e.g. peers or school staff) interacted with Emma/Harry. However, what became apparent during analysis of the mainstream school data was that interactions often involved both peers *and* staff interacting with Emma/Harry. The special school teaching assistant initiated and sustained interactions between Emma/Harry and mainstream children. For example, the SSTA would unintentionally attract other children to Harry during care-based activities such as tube-feeding. At first children observed from afar. However, over time children would approach the SSTA and ask questions about Harry (e.g. 'What's that going into his tummy?'). The SSTA would answer questions, invite children to address Harry directly, and ask them to hold or shake his hand. The SSTA would sit Harry next to a group of children and ask them to say 'hello', show Harry their work, and suggest ways of interacting with Harry (e.g. help him draw through hand-on-hand support, read with dramatic intonation, and take turns when talking to him). The SSTA modelled how to interact, helped children interpret Harry's behaviour (e.g. 'He's tilting his head to listen to you'), praised children who initiated interaction, and took a step back if the children appeared confident when interacting with Harry. The SSTA made use of similar strategies to support interaction between Emma and her mainstream peers.

- **Mainstream peers**

  As the project progressed the mainstream children began to initiate interactions themselves without invitations by staff. Children chose to sit next to Emma and Harry (e.g. drinking milk beside Emma during snack time, or sitting beside Harry during art). Children also enjoyed performing for Emma and Harry (e.g. dancing, singing, acting, and making

Emma/Harry laugh). The children interacted with Emma/Harry by showing off objects (e.g. Lego cars and paintings), giving Emma/Harry objects to play with (e.g. balls and hula-hoops), and demonstrating how to use objects (e.g. spinning tops and whoopie cushions). They invited Emma and Harry to play games with them in the playground. Sometimes the interactions resembled those that took place between Emma/Harry and the SSTA (e.g. the children would assume the role of the SSTA and, unprompted, put an apron on Harry during painting, help him move a brush around the paper, and wash his hands afterwards). However, interactions between the mainstream children and Emma/Harry sometimes embodied a more informal style of interaction (dubbed '*interaction-for-interaction's-sake*') and involved playful engagement such as tickling or giving objects of affection (e.g. daisy chains, cards, and friendship bracelets). These interactions were often physical in nature and involved on-going or sustained, intimate exchanges such as reciprocated hand squeezing and 'tug-of-war' with interlocked fingers. These physical exchanges could also be subversive. For example, during carpet time children were required to sit down, face the front of the class, listen to the teacher and stay silent. However, whilst the children were verbally quiet, they held Emma's and Harry's hands, rubbed their legs, touched their wheelchairs, and leaned against them.

Conclusion

This paper presented the emerging findings of a project that explored how different school environments afford children with PMLD opportunities to interact. The findings illuminate how interaction can be context-specific (e.g. the SSTA's style of interaction was contingent on the context of interaction). Furthermore, the research shed a light on more plural forms of interaction – particularly in the mainstream. The SSTA and mainstream peers collectively shaped the social milieu for Emma/Harry, initially with the SSTA heavily influencing the interaction before the mainstream peers developed the confidence and skills to interact in their own unique (playful and physical) ways. Further research is needed to develop understandings of how different contexts shape social opportunities for children with PMLD, and the impact this can have on participation in school.

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