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The Emergence of Friendships and Social Groups in Kindergarten

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Abstract

The school classroom is an inherently social setting where students interact with each other for seven hours, five days a week. The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how students select their friends and how social groups begin to form and emerge. The author collected data through student and teacher interviews, dictated drawings, a sociogram, and a parent survey. After analyzing the data by using the constant comparative method, the author found four major themes. The first was that each social clique came equipped with unique characteristics that the clique members embodied. Second, there were countless social learning opportunities embedded within every interaction. Third, the decision-making process was very dynamic and constantly changing. Fourth, young children value very similar things in friendships. This study may provide useful information to other educators who are trying to figure out the different social dynamics present in their classrooms.

The Emergence of Friendships and Social Groups in Kindergarten

Center time is packed full of students making decisions based on friendship loyalties. Students are sitting on the carpet waiting for Miss Carter to draw their stick to pick a center. As sticks are being called Tony turns around and watches which center Josh picks and follows him to the books. “Where should we go, girls?” Jade asks as she is turned around whispering to a group of girls. Jade’s stick is drawn, and she looks directly at Jules and says, “Meet me at the blocks”, and Jules nods to communicate she received the message. “She can go wherever she wants to go,” Miss Carter interjects after seeing the encounter. Jules still decides to follow.

Hailey, Jade, Sarah, Jules, and Caleb are all at the blocks center, and Caleb is the only one actually building with the blocks. “We are playing house, and I will be the mom,” Jade declares. “And I’ll be the little girl,” says Jules, and Jade responds, “No, you can be the sister.” Their dramatic play continues for a few minutes until Jade decides that Hailey needs a new hairstyle. Jade begins giving Hailey a bun which is identical to the bun that is currently in Jade’s hair. “Your hair looks so much better now!!” shouts Jade once she has finished the masterpiece. Girls are now going through their backpacks to look for more props to play with, all the while pulling out their matching chap sticks, hand sanitizers, bracelets, and JoJo bows. Jade decides it is time to begin playing again, and everyone follows suit, and Jules begins singing a song. “Jules, no, no follow my words! Start singing now Sarah,” instructs Jade. Sarah is building with Caleb and does not start singing. Caleb decides to join in and begins drumming with the Lincoln Logs. Jade becomes very excited and says, “Keep doing that, it’s so perfect!” Jules cautiously chimes in and asks, “Jade, can I be a leader too?” Jade responds by putting her hand on Jules’ shoulder and says, “No, just one leader, remember?”

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand how the kindergarteners in my class form friendships and social groups. I believed it was important to understand the inner social workings of a classroom because there is much to be uncovered in regards to how and why friendships form. School is an inherently social place and friendships will form, and those friendships influence and impact every aspect of the classroom climate. I believed this study was worth doing because students have freedom to decide who they are friends with, and I thought it would be worthwhile to understand their decision-making process. The social groups in our classroom, in particular, were dynamic and extremely prevalent because they factored into every student's daily decisions: where to stand in line, who to sit with at lunch, who to be partners with, who to play with at recess, which center to choose based on where my friends are, etc. The social aspect of kindergarten was intriguing, and I wanted to try and understand their world better by trying to get into the mind of a kindergartener.

The topic I worked with is the phenomenon of social groups emerging in kindergarten. I sought to understand the decision-making process of kindergarten students when selecting their friends and forming their social groups. In my classroom, there were very distinct and dominant social groups that began forming the first week of school. I was curious to know how this happened so quickly and what factors played into the decision making. My research questions included the following: In what ways do kindergarteners in a suburban class develop social groups? How do kindergarteners choose their friends?

Sub Question 1: What do kindergarteners in a suburban class value in friendships?

Sub Question 2: In what ways do the friendships fluctuate?

During this study, I was a graduate student completing a yearlong clinical teaching placement in a kindergarten classroom at Cherry Hill Early Childhood (all names have been replaced with

pseudonyms). Cherry Hill was an early childhood campus serving approximately 500 students in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten in a suburban district. Cherry Hill is largely made up of White students, encompassing 63% of the school's population. The school's Hispanic population is 25%, and the African American population is 3%. Approximately 27% of the students are categorized as economically disadvantaged, a mere 1% are English Language Learners, and 6% are classified under Special Education.

Related Literature

Developmental considerations need to be made when thinking about the emergence of friendships and social groups within the classroom, such as the capability to form and maintain friendships. Gallagher (2013) argued that children who are entering school in kindergarten are developmentally able to play with others and understand different perspectives from their own. In fact, "they are ready for developing the social skills required for more complex and intimate friendships" (Gallagher, 2013, p. 27). Due to developmental readiness, the next area of interest lies in the tendencies for stability or change within the friendships. The findings in a study conducted by Witvliet et al. (2010), reported young children were able to maintain a friendship over the course of a school year. Even though some friendships can remain the same, relationships are a complex entity and are often commonly referred to as dynamic (Witvliet, van Lier, Cuijpers, & Koot, 2010). Proulx and Poulin (2013) found in their study that when dissecting students' friendships, there will always be students who maintain, gain, lose, fluctuate, and never retain friends. These findings demonstrated the complex nature of the social realm of school.

There is a developmental readiness for students entering school to form relationships, but there is also a developmental need for friendships. Children who are involved in frequent

interactions with their peers are also progressing their cognitive development (Proulx & Poulin, 2013). In their study, Marcone, Caputo, and Della Monica (2015) watched how setting the building blocks for exhibiting and practicing prosocial behaviors paved the way to develop social competence. In order to be socially competent, a child can understand what a friend is, how to interact with others, and how to understand someone else's perspective.

Friendships tend to build further on pro-social behaviors which leads to increased social competence. A further finding from the Proulx and Poulin (2013) study illustrates the more mature prosocial behaviors were evident in children who maintained one friend, gained a new friend, or were involved in multiple friendships. Another study by MacEvoy, Papadakis, Fedigan, and Ash (2016) showed that students who were demonstrating prosocial behaviors were able to communicate expectations within the friendships, which resulted in more stable relationships. By communicating expectations, children are demonstrating that they understand certain rules of friendship and the potential values they may possess. Witvliet et al.'s (2010) study also produced results that indicate students who are a part of a clique or a reciprocal friendship experience more opportunities to practice their social skills and typically receive more support from their peers. The more peer supports a child has, the less likely they were to show externalizing behaviors such as aggression or depression (Witvliet, van Lier, Cuijpers, & Koot, 2010).

When researching about friendships and cliques, the absence of reciprocal friendships and the ramifications of this idea were also prevalent. Nangle, Erdley, Newman, Mason, and Carpenter's (2003) study found a direct correlation with the popularity of children and the amount of loneliness they were experiencing. Children who were unpopular among their peers showed signs of depression. When referring back to friendship expectations, children who were

not setting high expectations reported more feelings of loneliness and isolation (MacEvoy et al., 2016).

Harrist and Bradley (2003) took a different approach to tackling peer exclusion in their study. Typically, interventions involving peer exclusion work on changing the behavior of the peer in order to be better received. However, their intervention looked at changing the behavior of the social groups. The class-wide intervention revolved around a specific rule: “You can’t say you can’t play” (Paley, 1992, p. 4) to try and disallow any exclusion and encourage peer relations in the kindergarten classroom.

In the current research, I was able to find studies about social groups, but the studies seemed to lack the notion of figuring out why different children gravitate towards one another. I believe my study will add the element of attempting to identify the underlying values that are at the foundation of different social groups and friendships. I believe there needs to be more research on the values, formation, and foundation of varying social groups, and my study will attempt to fill this void.

What I Did

The following information describes an action research study conducted in the context of a kindergarten classroom. I studied the nature of different friendships and social groups within the class through a variety of methods. This study was conducted during a portion of my yearlong clinical teaching placement, so the students were already comfortable with me as I switched between my roles of being a teacher and a researcher.

Participant Selection

The participants of this study included a single classroom of kindergarten students, parents or guardians of the students, and one classroom teacher. I sent home a parent information

letter, and the students were asked to sign an assent form. Amongst the information that was sent home to the parent or guardians, there was also a consent form for the parent or guardian to sign if willing to participate in the study. Of the twenty students in the class, nineteen received parental permission and assented to the study and participated in the dictated drawing and sociogram.

I chose a representative sample of students to interview based on their responses to the dictated drawing and sociogram. I chose a male and female student who represented a social group leader, a male and female student who represented a social group follower, and a male and female student who represented a social group outlier. I chose a sample of students that represented the make-up of my class and the social groups within the class. This method of intentionally selecting interviewees is described by Patton (1990) as purposive sampling, which is a method of selecting participants who will best contribute to the achievement of the research objectives. I also conducted one interview with my cooperating teacher.

Data Collection

For this study, I collected four types of data: dictated drawing, sociogram, interviews, and a parent survey. All parents who consented to participate in the study were also given a survey to gather more information about their students' relationships with their peers. The parent survey contained four Likert Scale questions and seven open-ended questions (see Appendix A).

All students who received consent and gave assent to participate in the study were asked to participate in a dictated drawing. The dictated drawing aimed to gather more information about the students' friendships. During the dictated drawing, the students were instructed to draw a picture of them and their friends playing at school. After completion of their drawing, they

described their drawing by explaining which friends appear in the picture and what the friends are doing. The dictated drawing was administered one time in the first week of the study.

I was able to see the social groups that emerged by administering a sociogram (Hubbard & Power, 2003). The data obtained from the sociogram was able to display a visual of the patterns that came from our classroom (see Figure 1.). Based on the sociogram, I identified students as being either a leader, follower, or outlier. I administered the sociogram at the beginning of the data collection period. All students who returned consent forms and signed assent forms participated in the sociogram. While administering the sociogram, I asked each student, "Pick two friends from our class, who are the two friends you would most like to play with during recess." Each student was given this prompt in a one-on-one setting to ensure they could answer without any outside pressures. I recorded their answers in my researcher's journal, where I then transferred their responses into a sociogram web, which visually displayed the different friendships and social groups.

Based on the results from the sociogram and dictated drawings, I decided which students will be interviewed. I interviewed six different students in a one-on-one setting. From the sociogram, dictated drawing, and notes in my researchers' journal, I identified students as being either a leader, follower, or outlier. From those three subgroups, I interviewed a male and a female student (see Appendix B). I also interviewed the teacher to try and uncover her insight from her observations and noticing's about the formation of social groups, friendships, and social tones in the class (see Appendix B). The students were interviewed one time for a duration of approximately ten minutes, and my cooperating teacher was interviewed once for a duration of approximately thirty minutes. The interviews were semi-structured, meaning that open-ended

questions were asked, and the participant had freedom to discuss related issues that he or she found important (Hendricks, 2012).

Furthermore, students' social encounters and interactions were recorded in my researcher's journal. I kept a note pad with me throughout the data collection period so I was able to record any key phrases from a social interaction between the students. I was able to expand on the situations that were outlined in my notes immediately after school, and the expanded notes resided in my researcher journal.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data by using the constant comparative method, with initial coding followed by creating hierarchies of categories and supporting codes (Hubbard & Power, 2003). During the first week of data collection, I analyzed the dictated drawings and my observation notes and created approximately 20 level I codes based off of analyzing the first 20% of my data. I analyzed the Likert Scale questions on the parent survey quantitatively (see Appendix C). Level I codes are more specific themes throughout the data, while level II codes are broader and more encompassing. Based on these initial level I codes, I continued searching for themes throughout the remainder of the data. From these level I codes, I then identified broad themes throughout the data that would be classified as a level II code (Tracy, 2013). A codebook containing all of my level I and level II codes, definition, and examples can be found in the appendix (see Appendix D). In order to better understand the meanings and connections between and within major themes, I created memos based on the level II codes (Tracy, 2013).

What I Found

Throughout data collection there were some really interesting and unexpected trends that emerged as I observed and witnessed the social groups. My noticings were confirmed when I

began analyzing all of the data. I found every theme that surfaced to be extremely enticing and prominent to the study. I should preface by recognizing the notion that I am biased when it comes to this topic and the people of interest, my students. I consolidated a majority of my data into four level II codes that could not be ignored when considering my research questions. My four level II codes included the following: clique characteristics, social learning, decision-making process, and values in friendship. Below I organize my findings by providing a brief description of each of my major themes and then exemplify them through student vignettes.

Clique Characteristics

When beginning my research project, I had been observing social groups emerging from the beginning weeks of the school year and so I was very curious to learn more about the cliques. Through data analysis, I was surprised to uncover the different characteristics that each clique exhibited. It almost felt like hidden rules within each clique. Each clique was unique and distinguishable from the others, and I found this to be very intriguing as a researcher and as an onlooker. In my research question, I wanted to try and better understand how these social groups formed and then how they function and maneuver once they are formed. In order to do this, my research led me to identify each clique and figure out how that one clique operated and the defining elements within. I believe the social groups formed by different students embodying and adapting different characteristics of the social cliques.

Social Learning

Social learning became one of my level II codes because amidst any interaction or encounter there were overflowing social learning opportunities. In order to effectively function in a social group and maintain friendships, students need to be practicing prosocial behaviors. The social learning opportunities were seamlessly integrated into all parts of the school day, and

it was easy to look past until the data is written out right in front of you. The students' abilities to learn through social situations and integrate some of the prosocial behaviors was reflected in their friendships.

Decision-Making Process

Decision-making is an inevitable part of any day, and kindergarteners are no exception. There are multiple factors at play when a student makes a decision, and I wanted to understand how students make decisions regarding their friends. My data revealed that this is a complex theme, and the decision-making process is ever changing depending on the day, time, and activity. Decision-making plays into all three of my research questions regarding how friendships and social groups form due to the values students have towards relationships. Students' decisions, especially socially, inform a lot of the clique identity and friendship roles. It was interesting to see the relationship between the decision-making and their clique status. Relatively, the students who were not involved in a clique had more of a "go with the flow" attitude, and the students who were involved in a clique either had pre-planned decisions or took on the leader or follower role. Insight into the decision-making process of my students helped inform a lot of my data and findings.

Values in Friendship

While my research was centered around the idea of social groups in a kindergarten classroom, the makeup of social groups lies in friendships. Therefore, in order to understand the social groups, I first needed to understand basic friendships. It was important for me to figure out what values, traits, or qualities would draw two people together and solidify a friendship.

Vignettes

One of my goals during this study was to identify our social leaders, followers, and isolates. After these students were identified, I interviewed our male and female leader, male and female followers, and male and female isolates to try and gain more insight into their stories. During this next section, I will provide glimpse into greater details on each of these six students and how the findings played into their thought processes and social standing in the classroom.

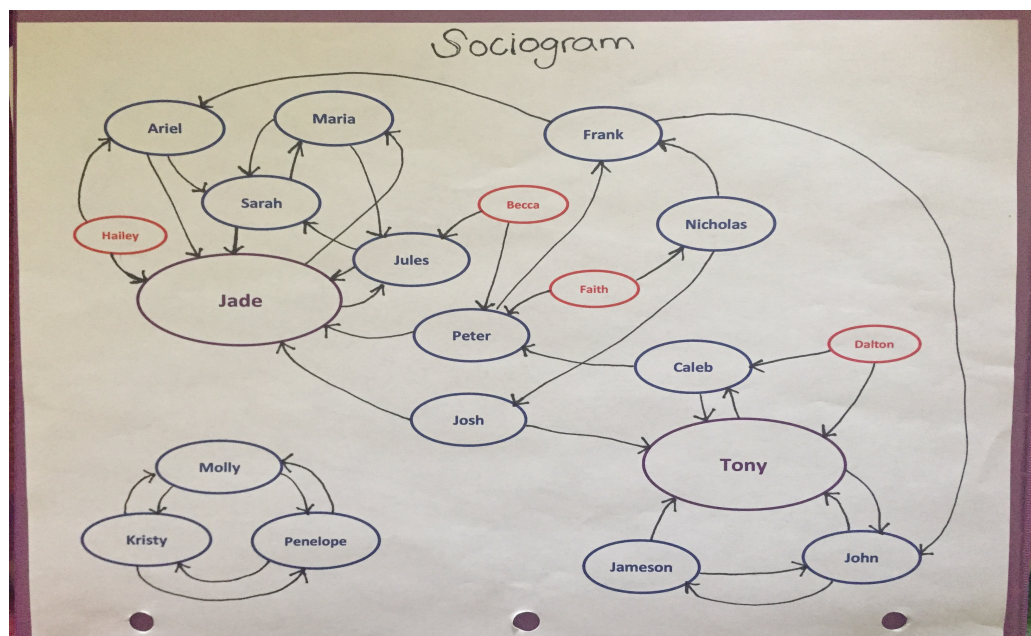


Figure 1. Photograph of the sociogram web

Jade. Jade was easily identified as the social leader of our girl's clique through flat out observations and data analysis. All signs pointed to Jade as queen bee, or at least six arrows according to the sociogram. On the dictated drawings, seven students drew her in their pictures. The day I pulled all students out one-on-one to ask "which two friends would you most want to play with on the playground?", Jade was absent. Sometimes, people's presence plays an impact on decision-making, but this time even in her absence her friends still remained loyal. Miss Carter was asked to identify who she believed the social leaders were, and she said, "I think obviously Jade because Jade has, like we said, the materialistic things, and that's what, the clique

is strongly leaning towards the materialistic things, and Jade has it all and more.” The girls clique that Jade was leading had been characterized by students, teachers, and parents as “sassy” and “fashion conscious”, and Jade embodied both of those qualities. She represented the clique’s characteristics, and the girls followed her lead.

When interviewing Jade, I found out that some of the values she looked for in a friend were, someone who could be helpful, someone she could easily play with, someone who was nice, and someone she could easily get along with. Throughout the interview she kept mentioning Hailey, and through observations she and Hailey argued quite often and were constantly needing a remediation session. However, whenever I asked her what she valued the most about their friendship she said, “We don’t get in fights a lot. Us three are the only three that don’t get in fights a lot.” Interestingly enough, Jade was involved in lots of drama, Miss Carter stated, “With Jade we have to get onto her multiple times in one day about being ugly to different people.” Hailey was on her mind a lot during our interview, but Jade neglected to include Hailey in her dictated drawing or choose her on the sociogram. I might have caught them in a good moment, or Jade believed this is the answer I wanted to hear.

In terms of social learning and decision-making, Jade was not able to articulate how she made decisions or solved problems between her and her friends. When asked about conflict and how to solve it she responded with, “I don’t know” and a laugh to go along with it. She did a lot of pre-planning on who she was going to sit with and play with throughout the day, but there was also some uniformity in the people she chose. When asked if she normally plays with the same people she said, “yes.” Not once did she mention a boy or someone who was not in her clique’s web on the sociogram. She was typically the peer in charge of deciding the different roles in

play; she was the ring leader. She controlled what her friends said and when they said it, and they followed along with, typically, no complaints.

When surveyed, her parents seemed to articulate some of the same things I had been observing in the classroom. When asked who they believed their child's friends were they named off five girls that were constant members of the clique. When describing what happened at school, "she talks about what they did at recess and who is BFF's." The values Jade looked for in a friendship, according to her parents, was someone who is "fun, nice, trustworthy, and kind." Her parents also strongly agreed that there were strong friendships being developed with a certain group of girls, Jade loved school because it meant seeing her friends, and she felt a strong sense of belonging in our classroom community.

Tony. It also was no surprise when the data revealed that Tony was our male social leader. Five different boys choose Tony as one of two friends they would most like to play with during school. Illustrated through the dictated drawing, five students chose to draw Tony. The boys in our class were a little more fluid in their friendships than the girls, but there was still a clique-like structure, therefore defining characteristics. Miss Carter easily identified Tony as the boy social leader, "I think they might see Tony as a leader because he definitely has our approval, and we give him a lot of praise." Tony was receiving praise and approval because he was doing the right thing and his peers took notice. The overarching characteristics emerging from the boy's social group was their kindness and acceptance of any and every one. They were loyal to one another, but they were not attached at the hip.

When interviewing Tony, it was revealed that he valued being able to play and get along with someone in a friendship. He explained a lot of things that he was interested in, that he would want his friends to be excited to play as well. Tony exhibited many prosocial behaviors

when it came to problem-solving, communication, handling emotions, and noticing and accepting differences. He was able to solve a lot of different friendship scenarios with ease. When asked about how to solve an argument, he said, “If me and my friend are fighting about a game, we should play a little bit of their game first and then a little bit of my game.” In terms of decision-making, he portrayed a go with flow attitude because he did not really mind who he was hanging out with as long as it was something he wanted to do. He based his decisions more on his interests and desires rather than what others were expecting or choosing.

From reading the survey that his parents completed, they seemed to notice the gender divide that orchestrated our classroom dynamics. His mother wrote, “I think he has more friends that are boys. He does have friends that are girls too, but he doesn’t talk about them as much.” Tony must have discussed some of the characteristics of our girl clique because his mom also wrote, “The main thing he says about the girls is that they are ‘sassy’”. In terms of values in friendship his mother articulated the importance of someone who is kind, has similar interests, and someone he can feel safe around. His parents also strongly agreed that there were strong friendships being developed with a certain group of boys, and he loved school because it means seeing his friends, and he felt a strong sense of belonging in our classroom community.

Hailey. Hailey embodied a lot of different characteristics that defined her as a follower. However, the results of the sociogram actually identified her as an isolate. After analyzing the rest of the data, I determined she was a follower that I wanted to interview and uncover more insight into. No one chose her on the sociogram, and only two students drew her in their dictated drawings (both not members of the girl clique), yet she was always included in the play and activities surrounding the school day. She was sassy and fashion conscious, which were key characteristics of this girl clique. Miss Carter believed she may not have been chosen on the

sociogram because she was a little more sensitive than her other clique members. Miss Carter gave two pieces of insight into why Hailey might be seen as both a follower and an isolate, “Hailey and Jules are very sensitive. And so, I definitely think that Hailey and Jules are kind of not as strong in the group” and “That also shows that everyone knows that Hailey tattles. Hailey tattles about there being a rock on the ground.” These girls who were tough and sassy did not want someone on the inside who was getting their feelings hurt and tattling on their mischief. For Hailey, it really depended on the day and the instant if she was a part of the clique; however, she followed them no matter her status.

When interviewing her, I uncovered that she valued friends that are helpful and like to play with her. She used a lot of different decision-making processes throughout the day depending on the situation. She believed that her friends sometimes followed her lead in circumstances like lining up for lunch. She decided who to play with at recess based on “where me and my friend want to go”, and I followed this question up with asking which friend she normally followed, and she said, “well Jade.” When preparing to go and play at recess, she and her friends had to talk about who was going to play with whom because, “well sometimes, yeah, you have to do that, and sometimes we have to do that because it depends who wants to play with us and who we want to play with.” In terms of social learning, her interview revealed that she often times became sad when she was rejected by her friends, but she also emphasized that she was able to go and find somebody else to play with when this does happen. Similarly, to Jade, she gave off the impression of not being sure how to problem-solve because she and her friends “usually not have a fight.” Again, this answer contradicted observations where there was persistent mediation occurring.

Through reading her parent's response (see Figure 2), I gained a lot of insight into how Hailey must have felt amidst the social group, particularly relating to some image-conscious insecurities.

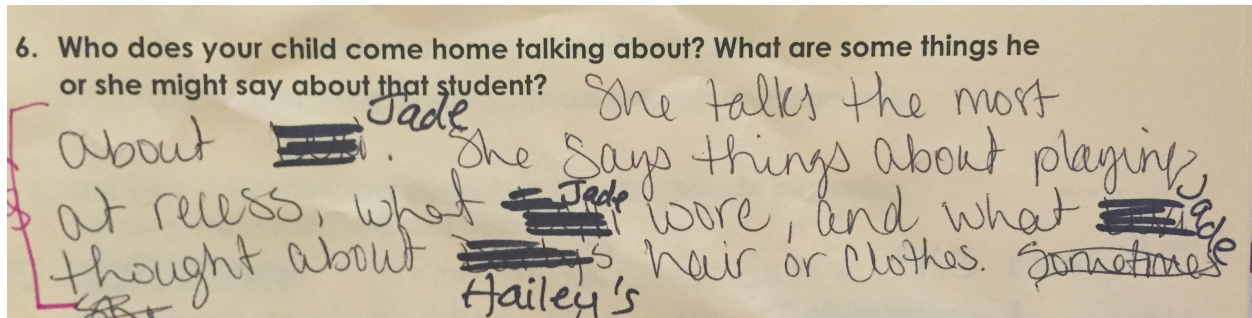


Figure 2. A response on Hailey's parent survey.

Hailey's mom relaying this information solidified the idea that this clique was extremely image and fashion conscious, and they were desperately seeking approval from others. Hailey went home and told her mom about the clique leaders outfits and that leader's opinion of others outfits. Reminder, these were five-year old's. Hailey's mother also emphasized that she believed Hailey valued kindness and loyalty in friendships. Despite all of the strife that happened daily in this social group, Hailey still seemed to find a strong sense of belonging in the classroom community and enjoyed coming to school to see her close friends.

Josh. Identifying Josh as a follower was a really interesting uncovering in the research. Based on the sociogram, he chose both leaders as his top two friend choices. He crossed over the gender divide, and stated he most liked to play with Tony and Jade. Through observations, he spent a lot of his time with Tony, but I rarely spotted him with Jade. I believe this emphasized the leaders' power of influence. Whether Josh played with both of them or not, those were the two people who came to his mind in our class of twenty students. Josh fully embodied the boy clique characteristics in the sense that he was incredibly kind and accepting. He was not tied to the boy clique in any sense of the matter because he could, and would, play with every student in

our classroom. In his dictated drawing, he included twelve students in the drawing, which was the most inclusive drawing collected.

Josh's prosocial behaviors were extremely evident. Arguably, his biggest strength came in his ability to understand and recognize differences, and then still choose to be friends with that student. He could sense when someone was in need of an extra friend. When describing Josh, Miss Carter said, "Josh understands it, he sees it, I definitely think he has a clear vision of the differences in our class, but he is so loving, and he is so helpful, and he goes out of his way, like 'I will sit by him at lunch, I'll save him a spot so he can sit by me because that is going to make him happy.'" During the interview with Josh, he reiterated his acceptance of any and every one when he said, "I play with...I think that I like everyone, I play with everyone." When describing his decision-making process, he did not seem to land on any because his responses revolved around the idea of "I am okay with everyone." He did not need to make decisions based on who to be social around because he was accepting of all. When delving into how he handles emotions, problem-solving and navigating roles in play he did not worry much or become upset because "I know that other friends will play with me still."

When answering the survey questions, his parents seemed to believe that he had more friends that were boys, even though the gender division was not reflected in his actions. Josh and his parents agreed that he valued "people that like to play things that he likes with similar interests", and Josh would add that he valued friends that were helpful, good citizens, and kind. Josh's parents also attested to the fact that they believed he had strong friendships with most members in the class, and felt a very strong sense of belonging in our classroom community.

Becca. Becca being identified as an isolate was initially one of the most shocking findings in the entire research. Similarly, with Josh, Becca could, and would, be friends with

anyone, and she was not in the giant sociogram web of the girl clique. Only one friend, Josh, drew her in their dictated drawing. After further analysis and processing, I realized the reason Becca was categorized as an isolate was because she was friends with so many people that she did not have one solid group that was loyal to her. Traditionally, when someone thinks of a social isolate it is for reasons that may be based on a lack of communication, cooperation, handling emotions, etc., but that was not at all the case with Becca. Through observations, she played with a different group of people in every situation. She was not a key player in any one group because her relationships were so fluid. Miss Carter pointed out that Becca would sometimes be playing by herself during recess: “I think sometimes Becca is but also maybe just by her own choice because she just has that sweet spirit to where if she went up to anyone, they would want to play with her.”

Throughout her interview, she vocalized many strong prosocial behaviors, and I believe that is because she was so fluid in her relationships that she had social skills that allowed her to adapt to whomever she was interacting with. When I asked her who her friends were in our class she responded with “all of them.” She valued a friend that could be helpful and play with her. Her decision-making process revolved around where she wanted to go and what she wanted to play with, she did not rely on the interests of others to influence her. I asked her what the best way to solve problems was, and she said in a matter of fact tone, “well just by talking about it.”

Becca’s parents believed she had a strong group of friendships that involved primarily girls, and that she valued a friend who “loves to play and pretend.” Again, consistent with our other students, her parents believed she had developed strong friendships, enjoyed coming to school to operate in those friendships, and felt a strong sense of belonging in our classroom community.

Dalton. Data analysis verified that Dalton was an isolate, and he resembled a more stereotypical isolate profile than Becca. His social skills were still developing and were not quite at the level of his peers, and so he had a harder time in relationships. He struggled with handling his emotions and had frequent anger flare ups, which caused the students in the class to be wary of playing with him. During an observation, Dalton was found punching and screaming at Caleb because they were playing tag, and Dalton tripped on the rocks because he was having to run too fast to catch Caleb; therefore, he believed Caleb caused him to fall. Caleb deserved to be hurt because he caused Dalton to be hurt. During part of our conversation after the fact I asked him, “Is it ever okay to hurt people?” and he passionately responded, “yes because he hurt me so it’s not fair!” He did not even realize or understand how else he could have handled that situation other than using aggression. I had the opportunity to teach him in that moment a more appropriate response.

Miss Carter gave her insight into Dalton’s isolation when she described why he may isolate himself, “He is completely fine being at the center by himself because he knows no one is going to bother him.” He did isolate himself, but no one else was attempting to include him, “But I don’t think people love to play centers with him because he gets angry.” During each observation, besides the one where he was in a fight with Caleb, he was playing alone. He was never upset about playing by himself because it meant less interaction and no needed communication; however, he now has less experience practicing social skills.

My interview with Dalton revealed that he valued a friend that liked to play the same kinds of games that he liked to play, mainly tag, and someone who was nice to him. His decision-making process was typically pre-planned because he liked to think about what he wanted to play before it was time. I asked him if he preferred playing by himself or with his

friends during centers and he replied, “I like to build by myself sometimes and not with my friends”, and I asked him why to which he said, “I just like to.” When navigating roles in play, he told me that he is always the person that gets to be in charge of the game or building with blocks. The problem-solving strategy he said he used the most is telling the teacher when something was wrong. I believe this was because he was not sure how to effectively solve a problem without incriminating himself as well as the person who bothered him. Dalton lacked a lot of the social skills that his peers possessed, but it seemed to be an ongoing cycle because he could not gain more social skills without interacting with others and forming friendships.

Implications for Teachers

The data I collected and analyzed led me to four impactful findings regarding the social atmosphere of a classroom and social groups amongst the students: cliques are generally organized by certain distinctive characteristics, opportunities for social learning are embedded within every single interaction, social decision-making processes are diverse and complex, and student values in friendship are fairly consistent. I believe that each of these findings provides its own set of implications for moving forward with social research in schools.

Based on my findings and my classroom of students, cliques formed very quickly. Children tend to gravitate towards others that are similar to them, and once that friendship is solidified it grows with others that are also similar, and this is the beginning of a social group. It is important to determine these characteristics quickly in order to figure out how the clique is operating. They may be lacking in some important qualities that are of value, and it is important to pinpoint those and teach the prosocial behaviors that the clique may need to function properly and kindly. It is okay to let these cliques form and allow students to prefer other students because

we do have the liberty to choose our friends, but we need to carefully watch how the clique treats others outside of the inner circle.

My data showed the robust amount of social learning opportunities that are overflowing in every moment of peer interaction. While focused on social learning, it was easy to determine the students who exuded prosocial behaviors. In my classroom, the students who were not entangled deep within a social group actually demonstrated and practiced more advanced social learning techniques. I believe this is because their relationships are more fluid, and so they are interacting with a more diverse group of friends, rather than always following familiarity. It is easy to become comfortable within your clique full of similar people, but the real social growth occurs when a student steps outside of his or her social web and tries to adapt and communicate with others. As teachers, we have to teach them prosocial skills, such as how to communicate effectively, problem solve, appropriately handle emotions, and navigate through differences.

While examining the social groups, I was enlightened to witness their decision-making processes throughout the day. Some students were pre-planning every step of the day, others were being a leader while others followed suit, others were being dedicated followers and omitting their own wishes, while the rest were just going with the flow with no worries in the world. Again, those that were loyal members of a social group were more likely to take on the leader and follower persona or pre-plan with other students to ensure everyone was on the same page. Decision-making influenced important social choices and repercussions throughout the day, and it was important to understand some of the factors that played into this complex process. We always try and understand our students' academic decision-making and thought processes as they are working, so why would it be any different for social decisions? I believe it should not be.

My students all valued very similar attributes when forming friendships, and I believe this could be generalized to more children than just my students. Children want someone who they can play games they enjoy with, while getting along and someone who is helpful and kind. For this reason, it is okay to allow social cliques to emerge because that may be where the similar interests value gets fed the most. However, once they start being unkind to one another an intervention may be necessary to explicitly teach some important ways to be kind. Role playing is generally an effective strategy to teach desired prosocial behaviors. I think implementing different strategies to strengthen the classroom community could have a really powerful effect on the social environment. Incorporating even more collaborative work and pairing students together who would not normally interact could help strengthen some bonds outside of the clique and increase prosocial behaviors.

While this study on social groups in kindergarten was very impactful and informative, I am still left with some further wonderings. I wonder if academic performance played an impact on the social groups. Were the students also gravitating towards others who had similar academic strengths and abilities? I believe academic performance sometimes increases confidence in students and may make them more desirable, especially if they are constantly receiving praise and affirmation from the teacher. Students are observant, and they notice more than we sometimes give them credit for. I also wonder how different social groups may look in a school, or classroom, that is infused with more diversity than the classroom where my research took place. We only have two students who are not White, and so most students came from similar backgrounds and looked very similar. Our students did not have a lot of experience interacting with people who were different than them, and they already gravitated towards one another based on common characteristics and features. I would love to see a study like this done in a

diverse classroom community; diverse in all different kinds of ways, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, family dynamics, etc.

Final Thoughts

I believe this study will be impactful and important for the educational community because the pure essence of being in a school is social and friendships are going to occur, which is why I believe it would be beneficial to understand how students choose their friends. Social groups will inevitably form, and I think there could be something lost if we never try and figure out why this is happening. School is an inherently social place, and I believe the social atmosphere influences the amount of learning taking place. Also, understanding the values children look for in a friend can help us teach these values to our students so they can thrive in the social world. After looking at current research, there were not many studies that discussed the different values children look for in friendships. I believe by having a better understanding of the values that children look for in friendships, we will uncover some of the similarities and distinctions between different social groups in the classroom. Our students are going to be social and so we should be trying to uncover more truth underneath the friendships.

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Appendix A**Parent/Guardian Friendship Survey**

(When completing this survey, please only include first names)

- 1. Did your child know any students in the class prior to beginning kindergarten? If so, who and how?**

- 2. Has your child invited any students from the class over for a play date or birthday party? If yes, who?**

- 3. Has your child been invited to any play dates or birthday parties from students in the class? If yes, who?**

- 4. Who do you think your child's friends are in the class?**

- 5. Does your child seem to have more friends that are boys, girls, or mixed?**

- 6. Who does your child come home talking about? What are some things he or she might say about that student?**

- 7. What are some characteristics or values you believe your child looks for in a friendship?**

8. My child has made many close friendships with the students in our classroom.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

9. From what my child tells me, he/she has a certain group of friends that always come up in conversations.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

10. My child seems to enjoy school because it means he or she gets to see and play with his or her friends.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

11. My child feels a sense of belonging in our classroom family.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Appendix B

One-on-One Student Interview Protocol

(Questions may vary and additional questions may be asked depending on the answers of the participants)

1. Tell me who your friends are. I have your drawing here, tell me a little bit more about your drawing.
2. What does it mean to be a good friend?
3. What do you like to do with your friends at school? At home?
4. How do you decide who to sit with at lunch?
5. How do you decide which center you want to play at during center time?
6. How do you decide who to play with when you are on the playground at recess?
7. How do you ask a friend to play with you?
8. What do you do when you ask a friend to play with you and your friend says no?
9. If you are playing with a lot of friends, how do you decide who is in charge?
10. How does a friend make you mad?
11. If you and your friend are arguing or have a disagreement, how do you solve the problem?
12. What do you do when someone comes up to you and wants to play with you?

Teacher Interview Protocol

(Questions may vary and additional questions may be asked depending on the answers of the participants)

1. Tell me about your classroom dynamic this year.
2. How does your dynamic this year compare to previous years'?
3. Tell me about some of the social trends that have been apparent.
4. How have these trends fluctuated, changed, or remained constant from the beginning of the year until now?
5. What are some different strategies you have used to build classroom community this year?
6. Have you seen any instances of social exclusion? If so, do you think the student(s) want to be excluded or are they forced to be excluded?
7. Tell me more about the different social groups you have witnessed emerging throughout the year. What are some of the characteristics from the different groups?
8. Have you noticed a division between girls and boys or are their friendships pretty mixed? Tell me more about this.
9. Who are some of the students you would identify, just through observations, as social leaders? Tell me more about why you think this.
10. How do you think their friendship groups have formed and evolved?

Appendix C

Parent/Guardian Friendship Survey Results

8. My child has made many close friendships with the students in our classroom.

Strongly Agree - 3
Agree - 9
Disagree - 4
Strongly Disagree - 0

9. From what my child tells me, he/she has a certain group of friends that always come up in conversations.

Strongly Agree - 6
Agree - 7
Disagree - 3
Strongly Disagree - 0

10. My child seems to enjoy school because it means he/she gets to see and play with his or her friends.

Strongly Agree - 8
Agree - 7
Disagree - 1
Strongly Disagree - 0

11. My child feels a sense of belonging in our classroom family.

Strongly Agree - 10
Agree - 6
Disagree - 0
Strongly Disagree - 0

Appendix D**Codebook**

Code Name	Level	Definition	Example
Clique Characteristics	II	The defining characteristics that categorize different cliques in the classroom.	“You said the boys group is more kind and Tony represents that and you said the girls group is more sassy and Jade represents that.”
Girls Being Sassy	I	Female students within a particular clique that are exhibiting behaviors and attitudes viewed as bossy, mean, etc.	“The main things he says about the girls is that they are ‘sassy’.”
Boys Being Kind	I	Male students within a particular clique that are exhibiting behaviors of acceptance and kindness.	“I think on the topic of kind boys, Josh will be an ant’s best friend. I think Josh and Tony and Cory all three of them are very aware of the differences.”
Accepting	I	Students who are showing welcoming attitudes towards those either inside or outside their clique.	“They are very accepting and they are kind and they are helpful and they can play with each other and they can play with other people too.”
Fashion Conscious	I	Female students within a clique that are concerned with materialistic items and fitting in with the group.	“I think obviously Jade because Jade has, like we said, the materialistic things and that’s what the clique is strongly leaning towards, the materialistic things and Jade has it all and more.”

Gender Divide	I	The division between males and females within the classroom.	“But they still don’t necessarily all play with each other, but they are not in conflict which is good.”
Social Learning	II	The different pro-social behaviors that students are exhibiting in relation to their emotions and interactions.	“We normally sit to the side to let them play and build relationships with each other, we will love on them but then we will tell them to go play.”
Handling Emotions	I	The ways in which students deal with different emotions throughout the school day.	“I understand that you are upset and angry that you got hurt, but it is never okay to hurt someone else just because we feel angry. It’s okay that you are angry, I would be too...but we cannot hurt our friends like that.”
Problem-Solving	I	The ways in which students solve their problems or conflicts with their peers.	“If we are playing basketball, I would say ‘can you wait until the next round?’ and then they would say yes and they would watch us and then they would be done and then they could play with us”
Noticing Differences	I	The ways in which students notice and respond to differences prevalent in their peers.	“I mean Josh understands it, he sees it, I definitely think he has a clear vision of the differences in our class but he is so loving and he is so helpful and goes out of his way”

Navigating Roles in Play	I	The ways in which students interact with one another in play and the different roles each student takes on.	<p>“How do you decide who is in charge of the game?”</p> <p>‘We just play usually whoever picks the game gets to be the guy who is in charge. Like when I was playing that car game I was in charge.’”</p>
Decision Making Process	II	The ways in which students make decisions in relation to the social environment of the classroom.	<p>“How do you decide who you sit with at lunch?”</p> <p>‘I don’t know, I don’t decide, my friends decide.’”</p>
Pre-Planning	I	The ways in which students make decisions by making a plan beforehand.	<p>“How do you decide which center to play at during center time?”</p> <p>‘I decide before I come in and I make a decision before I come in the classroom.’”</p>
Go with The Flow	I	The ways in which students do not have a preconceived plan for making decisions.	<p>“How do you decide who to sit with at lunch?”</p> <p>‘Kind of I just get in line and whoever I sit by, I sit by.’</p> <p>‘And are you okay with sitting by anyone?’</p> <p>‘I am okay with anyone.’”</p>
Leaders and Followers	I	The ways in which students make decisions based on leading or following their friends.	<p>“I would just go to the blocks and I’d just go there and probably one of my friends would notice and they would go.”</p>

Values in Friendship	II	The different traits and characteristics students value in their friends.	“What are some characteristics or values you believe your child looks for in a friendship?” ‘Similar interests; ability to play well with others.’”
Social Exclusion	I	The instances in which students are isolated from their peers.	“I like to build by myself sometimes and not with my friends”
Approval from Others	I	The ways in which students need outside approval or affirmation from teachers or peers.	“Okay, I think that this group is very...they want approval a lot and they really like getting our approval.”
Prior Relationships	I	The influence that relationships that began outside of school effect relationships inside the classroom.	“We’ve had several girls that came in knowing each other, so that created an even bigger bond.”