Chapter 9
Children's Peer Cultures and Playfulness at Mat Time

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9.1 Introduction

Teaching a large group of children on the mat (mat time) is a commonplace practice in many classrooms in Aotearoa-New Zealand, where the current study is situated. Mat time is when teachers opt to work with the children on a carpeted area of the classroom rather than, say, have them sit at their desks. In Aoteroa-New Zealand, many teachers believe that mat time is an effective practice for bringing children together as a group and fostering cohesion, getting information across to children quickly, and giving children opportunity for speaking to a large audience (Mortlock 2016). It is predominant in junior classrooms, which includes children aged 5–8 years. In fact, many children aged seven years and younger are required to attend mat time for 15–22% of their classroom time (Mortlock 2016).

It is likely that interactions at mat time comprise a dynamic system whereby teachers' and children's behaviours form a specific milieu that, at times, interrupts the learning, which the teacher anticipates. For example, many researchers have reported concerns about children's challenging behaviour as well as the degree of teacher-control that might be exerted over the children at mat time (for example see Collins 2013; Leach and Lewis 2012; Zaghlawan and Ostrosky 2011). The way in which mat time is set up by the teacher is investigated as well as how children respond to this kind of teaching and learning environment.

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Extant studies suggest that generally, some children seem inattentive and disruptive on the mat; for example, calling out of turn or withdrawing focus. Some children might even leave the mat altogether or annoy friends (Ling and Barnett 2013; Wood et al. 2009; Zaghlawan and Ostrosky 2011). Although children's behaviour at mat time is often described by researchers and teachers as disruptive or inattentive, there has been little research to explore why this might be. An obvious answer is that children might be bored; however very few children cite an active dislike of mat time (Mortlock 2016). This present chapter investigates this paradox through a peer culture perspective and symbolic interactionism, which will be described further in the chapter.

We asked, 'how do children exercise their peer and play cultures when faced with teacher-imposed rules and pedagogical structures?' In order to address this question, analyses of interviews with children and their teachers in three classrooms were undertaken Video-footage was also taken of twenty-nine mat times and written narratives were formed from key vignettes developed from the footage. We argue that the children's peer group cultures, play cultures, and individual children's understandings of these cultures have a strong part to play in disruptive and inattentive behaviours. If we are to enhance mat time pedagogies to better meet children's needs then an understanding of their peer cultures and play, and the impetus of those needs behind any disruptive or inattentive behaviour at mat time is integral. In the context of our study, we interpret disruptive behaviours to be those that are distracting, or that interfere with others' focus on the tasks facilitated by the teacher. Inattentive behaviour might not be disruptive to others; however, it describes a focus that is elsewhere other than on the teacher's set task.

9.2 Theoretical Approach: Symbolic Interactionism and Peer Culture

We identified two bodies of thought in order to help us make sense of the interviews and video footage. The first was symbolic interactionism. Interactions must be understood in relation to the specific context within which they take place; this includes the people, objects, and situations that circumscribe those interactions. One key concept in this body of thought is that interactions are comprised of symbolic actions that serve to create social order and communicate how much power and agency is afforded to groups and individuals. Implicit is the idea that there are both overt and hidden rules, norms, and structures that influence the ways that people relate to each other and wider society. Ongoing interactions with others offer individual opportunities to construct meaning from those interactions, which may then be used to understand subsequent interactions, self, and societal or group structure (Carter and Fuller 2016; Musolf 2003; Snow 2001).

We took the idea of children's peer cultures as our second orienting concept. Children develop a peer culture that is related to but different from the culture espoused by the adults, particularly with regard to the official norms, rules, and values that the adults uphold. Children construct their own values, norms, and common interests that are distinct from the adults' (Corsaro 1985, 1988, 2012). In fact

children develop their own unique rituals and modes of participation in group-life. Not only that, children sometimes imitate or use rules that adults make in order to meet their aims and needs; in other words, children might use adult's rules in ways that adults do not anticipate (Corsaro 1985; Galbraith 2011; Mary 2012). In this way, children develop their own community and social systems within the wider adult-dominated interactional context (Corsaro 2012; Eirich 2006; Galbraith 2011). Children's peer culture, independent from the adults,' is often driven by a desire for control over their own lives (Corsaro 1988; Woodrow 2006). There is rarely a single, unified peer culture within a classroom (Galbraith 2011). When a group comprises several peer cultures or sub-groups, there are likely to be some aspects that are shared amongst the peer cultures and others that create dissonance. A key ramification for teachers is how to decide which peer group's agenda takes precedence when its needs are divergent from another's.

9.2.1 New Zealand-Aotearoa Primary School Context

This chapter is based on data collected in three New Zealand-Aoteara primary classrooms in different schools as part of the first author's doctoral study (see Mortlock 2016). Our study sought children's and teachers' perspectives about the efficacy and social aspects of mat time, where the teacher brings the children to the carpeted area for discussion, instruction, or some other designated task. In New Zealand children typically start school on their fifth birthday and classes commonly comprise between twenty and thirty children and one teacher. A school day is six hours long with several breaks for children to play. Teaching is guided by *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework (NZCF)* which brings together constructivist theories of learning with prescribed levels of skill and understanding, which children are expected to achieve in a variety of subjects such as the arts and mathematics. Although academic levels and outcomes are a focus, the curriculum states that learning is embedded within socio-cultural contexts and that students' positive relationships with peers are integral to their learning and well-being (Ministry of Education 2007). Although mat time seems ideally positioned to be a forum whereby children can interact with each other, teachers often prioritise giving instruction (Mortlock 2016).

9.3 Methodology

9.3.1 Participants

Numerous schools responded to an invitation to participate in the present study, which was issued at the end of a nationally delivered survey about mat time pedagogies (Mortlock 2016). Three schools were chosen purposively based on the most points of difference to each other (group size, socioeconomic status of community, children's ethnicities). Research was undertaken in Year Two classrooms which

comprised children aged five to seven years. The first classroom was situated in an affluent area and had fewer than twenty children of European or Asian cultures. The classroom was well-resourced including electronic equipment (e.g. Vimeo whiteboards) which were utilised at mat time. Often children sat on the mat in an *en bloc,* free-seating arrangement while the teacher sat on a chair at the front. Sometimes children sat or stood in a circle, but this was less common than the *en bloc* configuration. The second classroom was the largest in the study with over thirty children descending from European, Pacific, Asian, and Middle Eastern cultures. A standard whiteboard, laptop computer, and data projector were available. Children predominantly sat on the mat in an *en bloc* configuration although sometimes the teacher asked them to sit in a circle. In either case she sat on a chair whereas the children sat on the carpet. The third classroom was midsized, accommodating twenty children from Māori and Pacifica descent. The school was situated in a low socioeconomic area. The teacher used a circle configuration for mat time and sat with the children on the carpet. The three teachers were very experienced, each with senior roles in their schools, and classroom careers spanning twenty years or more.

9.3.2 Data Gathering Strategies

The first data were obtained by placing a *GoPro* camera at a strategic location in order to film the class during mat time. Twenty-nine separate mat times were analysed, totaling 304.21 minutes of mat time footage. Each mat time was typically between four minutes and fifteen minutes in duration. The second set of data were gathered the following term though audio-recorded semi-structured interviews with the teachers (n = 3) across the three classes and many of the children (n = 49). Semi-structured interview allows a researcher to focus participants on the topic while allowing room for participants to extend on points of interest or personal importance. In other words, while they have predetermined foci, participants' are enabled to share their subjective and nuanced experiences related to those foci (Anderson 1999; Creswell 1994). An iterative approach for identifying key themes in the video recordings and interviews was adopted whereby the researcher must construct meaning from the data and identify prevalent themes (see Wiersma and Jurs 2009). A sorting and grouping technique was applied to identify data that had commonalities as well as identify data with outlying themes.

9.3.3 Ethical Considerations

The first author sought consent from children, their caregivers, each classroom teacher, and the school principals prior to data collection. Next, site visits were made to each classroom to optimise the children's feelings of safety and familiarity with the first author's presence. A second consent was sought from individual

children before being interviewed. The core principles guiding the ethical approach for the present study included the importance of minimising disruption to children's learning, protecting their emotional well-being as paramount, and protecting the anonymity of the participants. Pseudonyms were issued for each participant.

Because of the power differences between adults and children there was potential for children to say things, which they thought were pleasing to the researcher more so than presenting their viewpoint. To mitigate this, when spending time in the classrooms the first author used Corsaro's (1985) strategy of presenting as a non-adult; this meant that she avoided, as best as possible, taking on the kinds of authority typically afforded to adults in schools. For instance, where possible, she followed the same rules expected of the children. Another example was to affirm children's peer interests and humour. In addition she avoided some of the symbols in interactions that were generally associated with authority (such as the teacher's chair, or issuing the kinds of instructions that would typically be attributed to a teaching role). In the interviews, it was essential that children felt that they could be authentic in their responses and make corrections if their meaning had been misunderstood or misinterpreted.

9.4 Setting the Scene: Mat Time

The context within which research is undertaken is important in both peer culture theories and symbolic interaction (Dennis and Martin 2005) because any context holds implicit and explicit patterns that influence how individuals within that context relate to each other and behave; therefore it is useful to set the scene for our study. Each of the three teachers gave specific examples of how mat time fosters a positive class culture as well as being a time for focused work. They each wanted to incorporate the children's interests into mat time pedagogical content and make it an enjoyable time for children. The video recordings showed that while this was true, they also frequently issued controlling statements either directly or indirectly. For instance, it was common to hear, "I will choose someone who is sitting nicely," which was an indirect bid to control children's behaviour.

Eggen and Kauchak (2006) suggest that a teacher's authority is integral to the creation of orderly and safe environments for children; however, at which point does authority become dominance and control? Children report that one of the most disliked aspects of mat time is other children's disruptive behaviours (Mortlock 2016); therefore teacher-authority potentially gives mat time a structure and assists many children to stay on task. Furthermore, when that authority is sensitively attuned to the children's needs, a positive mat time climate might be fostered (Cefai et al. 2014). Notwithstanding, when authority lacks sensitivity and tends towards control, specific children might resist that control through behaving in disruptive ways (Rubenstein Reich 1994).

In order to support children's on-task focus, teachers must consider ways to minimise control and instead optimize those factors which are associated with

maximising children's engagement, such as ensuring that mat time content and activities have relevance to children's lives and interests, and that they are given some choice and autonomy (Joussement et al. 2004; Wigfield and Cambria 2010). Specific strategies for attaining the ideal balance of teacher-authority and child-autonomy are dependent on each cultural and social context; therefore, identifying how teachers might achieve this balance in this chapter is problematic. Notwithstanding, understanding children's peer culture will go some way to enabling us to identify some key factors to consider. The following sections will explore our findings about children's peer culture and their interactions at mat time in relation to teacher authority and control.

9.5 Friendships and Playmates at Mat Time

We found that friendship is a prevalent concern for children at mat time. We observed children vying for seating positions close to friends, which requires a range of strategies, including physically blocking another peer from sitting next to a desired child, and issuing bribes, threats such as "I won't be your friend anymore," or affiliative strategies such as reminding another that "we're best friends, ay?" Affiliation, threats, bribes, and blocking others are essential strategies that children use to protect their friendships and describe the difficulties that some children have in sharing preferred friends with others (Corsaro 1985, 2012). We found that one difficulty for teachers is to decide when it is appropriate to support children in protecting their friendships at mat time and when it is not. Given our symbolic interactionist stance, the repeated strategies used by children are seen as core components of power and inclusion that describe group life, as well as describing who has agency (Dennis and Martin 2005). Specifically, we wonder who is successfully able to choose who to sit with and who is thwarted? A key consideration for teachers should be when those friendship-protecting strategies exclude other children, as described below.

At times, the teachers broke the class into small groups or pairs; while the teachers' aim was to facilitate small or pair discussion, the children's culture was such that friendship concerns were the predominant focus. The project data showed that the practice of breaking children into working pairs is particularly problematic for children in triadic friendship groups. They can be heard negotiating who will be in the pair, and who will need to be left out. This sometimes requires organising their friends into a hierarchy. Equally problematic, is when teachers ask children to organise themselves into small working groups at mat time. We found that it often it is the same child who is consistently left over without a partner or group; often because they do not have a close friend to sit with. We found that some of the children referred to peers in this position as being "the left over," which we believe symbolically insinuates a kind of dismissiveness to that child's potential contributions to group life. Oftentimes, the children who were 'left over' did not publically complain; however, one such child disclosed in his interview that he experienced mat time as a series of rejections that he needed to brace himself for. This has high

relevance considering that even from its conception in the nineteenth century, symbolic interactionists have accepted the notion that our experiences of approval from others informs an individual's sense of self (Harter 1999).

9.6 Playing Around on the Mat

Data from the present project showed that although specific children behave in publically playful or humorous ways on the mat, other children's playfulness is furtive and includes only one or two additional children who sit nearby. In this section we look at the latter. We found that children were most likely to intentionally distract their friends through covert play as opposed to children they were less relationally close to. A typical playful behaviour between friends is described in the following example lifted from our observational data.

The teacher's rule is that no toys are allowed on the mat. While the teacher is talking about the day's intended work, Ella takes a small toy fish from her pocket. She holds it close to the carpet and touches Alex with her elbow. Alex looks at Ella and Ella directs her gaze to the fish in a conspiratorial manner. Alex looks at the fish for a moment and smiles. Ella smiles back and slips the toy fish back into her pocket.

This kind of furtive playfulness might serve to enhance specific children's sense of togetherness as a sub-group of the wider class, thus reproducing and consolidating a peer group identity (Galbraith 2011). This is particularly evident with children seeking to affiliate with specific friends, especially where there is a common agenda and agreed shared action (Corsaro 1985; De Haan and Singer 2001). In the above example Ella furtively shared her illicit toy with Alex, thus making Alex complicit in keeping her secret.

Some children use clandestine humour to play around. Toying with the danger of being 'caught out' is a common theme apparent in children's play cultures (Corsaro 2012) and some children appear to use humour at mat time to explore teacher-authority whilst avoiding being caught. Such practices potentially create and reproduce affiliative bonds and the humour that is utilised seems quite specific to individual peer cliques as evidenced in the following vignette we observed.

Quentin pretends to vomit into his hands and then wiped the imaginary vomit onto his friend Sefa, and later pokes Sefa in the middle of his forehead with a pencil, while smiling. Nearby, Jacob whispers to Tane to squeeze his fingers as hard as he can and then role-plays an injured hand, which causes mirth in a variety of children seated around them.

The symbols in these interactions are interesting because they deal with themes of illness or disgust, and pain. Libera et al. (2019) argued that making humour from pain (real or imagined) allows us to make sense of the uncomfortable aspects of the human experience. In this case, it could be that the children are symbolically amplifying their discomfort or boredom of mat time and representing it playfully as actual pain or illness. While potentially distracting to others in the context of mat time, we

must consider that Libera et al. (2019) describe such humour as a creative and "magical gift" (p. 235) because it alleviates our suffering of pain and discomfort.

9.6.1 Problems in Playing Around

Playful teasing at mat time was common amongst the participant children and seemed more likely to occur between friends rather than associates. In Quiñones' (2016) study about interactions between a father and his infant, loving teasing entailed symbolic thought in order to express affection and connectedness and we found that there seems to be a similar impulse in some forms of playful teasing between friends. Notwithstanding, there are considerable difficulties when teasing is one-sided. This often seems to be the case when one child wishes to focus on mat time and the other wishes to engage in playful behaviours. This is evidenced by a child in our study, Hunter , who described such an issue in the following comment: "You know my friend, this guy, he's sometimes behind me and then he starts fiddling with my back and stuff and starts tickling me or something, then I have to move, then he just moves with me."

Several theories are possible about why children might deliberately irritate their friends. Teasing in this context can be described as a symbolic ritual (see McLaren 1999); in this case, the ritual is a provocation, comprising a degree of antagonism that is used to cause tension (Keltner et al. 2001). It is possible that a child who teases might be reacting against the group nature of mat time by asserting intimacy with regard to his or her friend and asserting affiliation, thus enacting and reproducing a certain social structure within the peer group (as described by Pellegrini 1995). Teasing might also occur as an attempt to change the other's behaviour (Keltner et al. 2001). Both of these explanations are plausible given that the provocateurs of teasing in our study more often than not seem bored and expressed desire for their friend to attend to them rather than focus on the mat time content.

9.6.2 Social Support of Playmates and Peers

A child's participation in group-activity is partly dependent on his or her sense of belonging and social support, and ability to influence the group through his or her unique contributions (Sandberg and Eriksson 2008). Evidence from the current study showed that this is equally true at mat time; children's abilities to contribute meaningfully are dependent on social support of playmates and peers; therefore, it is important to consider the impact on children who experience less social support from their peers. Because of the potential disadvantages for those who experience little social peer support, teachers must take on active roles to mitigate the power differences between children.

Both peer culture studies (see Galbraith 2011) and symbolic interactionist studies (see Musolf 2003) describe complex systems of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' (in this case, those children who are accepted by the group and those who are not). This is expressed subtly in mat time interactions when insiders are given social support and outsiders are not. A symbolic view of those interactions also raises questions about participation and power, making the extent of children's social support and insider-status an issue of equity and rights (Mortlock 2016). In fact, some studies would describe those children with high social support as socially dominant (see Green and Rechis 2006; Fein 2012). In short, allowing specific children disproportionate social prominence at mat time potentially fosters a context where they may be enabled to dominate others. In our interviews with children, some of the children described their prominent peers as being more important than others and implied that they had a sense of centrality to group life that was very powerful, as described by Green and Rechis (2006). The following section describes other ways that children might explore power in their interactions with their peers.

9.6.3 Playing the Teacher and Policing the Rules

As we found, often times, the very beginning of mat time inspires policing or authoritarian kinds of behaviours in some of the children. Often these social behaviours are ones that can be typically observed in teachers; therefore it is likely that specific children who draw on those behaviours are in some way mimicking the teacher. Such behaviour was found in Jordan et al. (1995) study of children's awareness and use of rules. They state that invoking the teacher's rules enables an individual child, "to carry out the child's personal agendas, to control the behaviour of other children, and to prevent their own behaviour from being controlled" (p. 340). Indeed, symbolically such behaviours indicate an implicit culture of "who is allowed to do what to who?" in various interactions (Dennis and Martin 2005). This is a poignant question given that those children, interested in rules, did not apply their policing to everyone; they appeared to target specific peers (often not their friends). Rule policing appeared to be used at times to deliberately get someone in trouble with the teacher. It could be that such behaviours further entrench the notion of insiders, outsiders, dominance and power, that were described in the previous section.

In our study, sometimes the teachers would invite the children to take on a specific role that the children recognised as the teacher's domain. In one classroom, being chosen as someone who could use the teacher's shaker to inform people to be quiet was highly coveted. Alternatively, to be chosen as the person who held the pointer (for large books) in another class was very popular and several children exaggerated desired behaviours in order to maximise their chances of being chosen; for instance, sitting upright with pronounced straight backs or ensuring the teacher knew that they had completed all of their work to a high standard. Symbolic interactions are sometimes coupled with symbolic objects, which communicate ideas

about what kinds of status an individual has (Maloney 2000; Rietveld 2010). In the examples from our study, the objects such as the pointer and the shaker become important symbols to denote the child's status as the teacher's proxy. A symbolic interpretation would suggest that the some of the children's exaggerated behaviours (such as sitting 'nicely') in order to be chosen, shows that taking on the object and therefore the associated status, was highly desired.

Both peer culture and symbolic interactionist studies have an interest in artefacts and what they bring to interactions. Arguably when a teacher allows an individual child to use the pointer or shaker, that teacher is sanctioning the child's positional power in that moment; the shaker or pointer become artefacts to communicate the child's deputation to have authority over peers in that moment. Notwithstanding, when a child takes that authority on from his or her own volition, the other child or children must then either comply or resist the bid for authority and control (Cobb-Moore 2012). In either case, a child's feelings of agency are likely pivotal. Our data suggests that whereas specific children's engagement with the rules and desire to police them is an element arising out of their peer culture, it seems their success in enforcing those rules is potentially dependent on their status and support within in the peer group; however the exception seemed to be when the teacher had given a child a symbolic object to denote deputisation or proxy status.

This section looked at how children might use rules to meet their own aims within peer interactions. The following section examines how certain children might use teacher-facilitated games to similar ends.

9.7 Teacher-Facilitated Playfulness: Mat Time Games

Teachers use games at mat time that they feel the children enjoy (Mortlock 2016). Their predominant purpose appears to be teaching and learning games that introduce an element of fun. The plethora of circle-time games is testament to the popularity of this kind of playfulness at mat times (Mary 2012). In the study that underpins this chapter, the games often had a focus on correct and rapid responses, such as being first to accurately identify the answers to multiplication problems.

Those interested in children's peer culture assert that specific children appropriate the teachers' rules and structures to achieve outcomes that teachers' do not intend (Corsaro 1985; Galbraith 2011; Mary 2012). This was confirmed in our study where, more often than not, specific groups of children introduced a competitive element into the games, which was not always commensurate with the teachers' intent of 'having fun'. This manifested in certain children shouting answers when it was not their turn, helping their friends, and deriding other individual peers. Other sophisticated strategies were employed by some of the children such as calling for rule-enforcement and declaring that an injustice had occurred in order to defeat an opponent; for instance, one child answered incorrectly to a question about reading time but immediately changed his answer to the correct response. A peer shouted out that children were not allowed to change their answer, despite having done so

himself on a previous occasion. Some of the games seemed to be ritualised in that there were repeated behaviours and actions over time that were directed consistently at specific children and that also appeared to have the purpose of delineating the peer group into winners and others.

McLaren (1999) asks in such interactions "whose interests does the ritual ultimately serve? …Who benefits the most? Who is marginalised as a result? (p. 85)" It is perhaps no surprise that the children who seemed most enthusiastic about the competitive games were the ones that frequently win them. In addition, many children across all three classrooms made reference to reputation and status arising from effective performance in competitive games. For some children this is a source of anxiety (Mortlock 2016). Children observe the performances of peers and judge their own performance and abilities against them. Status differences might be reinforced; therefore, in highly competitive situations it means that some children might opt out. Indeed, a child's self-concept might also be impacted (Bukowski et al. 2011).

In short, even when a teacher promotes fun above competitiveness, specific children's subgroups might drive the activity into something more competitive (Svinth 2013). Even so, the majority of the children expressed a preference for games that are less prone to aggressive competition and more focused on whole-class cooperative activity (Mortlock 2016). One example includes singing together. Notwithstanding, the teachers infrequently offer such cooperative activities compared with those, which are more prone to becoming competitive (Mortlock 2016).

9.7.1 Peer Culture as an Aspect of the Interactional Milieu at Mat Time

By looking at the mat time environment through the lens of symbolic interactionism and peer culture, this chapter has considered how children are able to exercise peer concerns such as friendship and competitiveness even in the adult-controlled context of mat time. In particular we explored the symbols associated with the interactions at mat time and added a peer culture focus. For instance, certain children use illicit artefacts such as toys to attract peers' attention, and bond through subterfuge. Symbols relevant to peer humour might be used for a similar purpose. A further relevant symbol is the idea of insiders and outsiders to social cliques and the compliance to behavioural norms that might signify belonging. An example given is where a small clique of children feigned disappointment when their teacher separated them. Symbols were also used to communicate power; for instance, the teacher's shaker or pointer were artefacts that denoted a child's position of authority in that moment. Furthermore, specific children symbolically appropriated the teachers' rules, using them to inform on peers.

When these symbols are looked at with peer culture in mind, it is evident that teachers' and children's expectations for interactions are at odds with each other at times. Whereas teachers might hold goals for children's learning, the children

themselves appear to be influenced by two other specific kinds of goals, which are often observed in action within their play cultures. The first type of goals is egoistic, which Corsaro (2012) describes as meeting an individual child's desire and often results in a 'winner' and a 'loser.' This was very much the case when specific children introduced aggressive competition into mat time games in a bid to better peers. Indeed, behaviours such as calling out of turn might seem as a direct challenge to a teacher but likely have their genesis in peer culture. For instance, when a child has a strategy of calling out answers rather than wait for a turn, it does not appear to be a bid to merely disrupt the teacher. It seems more related to a desire to better those children who she or he sees as opponents or to further entrench a positive academic reputation within the peer group. A second example of egoistic behaviour could be seen when children took initiative for policing rules because this arguably relates to power and status over peers. In either case, teachers should carefully consider whether or not such egoistic goals should be supported, especially if it contributes to an inequitable peer power structure.

The second kind of goal that was evident was affiliative (Corsaro 2012) whereby children collectively appropriated the teachers' structure governing mat time interactions in order to play out relationship concerns. This was evident when the teachers described the importance of focus on the lesson whereas certain children were more concerned with sitting with their friends, and establishing a sense of we-ness amongst their sub-group (see Galbraith 2011). When children introduced subversive or furtive elements of playfulness, it was often done in conjunction with their friends. Where there was agreement about shared playfulness relational bonds might be strengthened or aspects of peer culture might be recreated (Lambert et al. 2013; Van Oers and Hännikäinen 2001). There were varying degrees of endorsement, given that some children reported that the distractions were annoying or that they did not want to be distracted but did not seem able to tell their friends. In either case, the initial impetus behind the behaviour appeared to be one of affiliation.

Even though the teachers prioritised learning, children had a strong focus on power and inclusion. Within each class, a clear social hierarchy was evident, with children experiencing a wide range of social support from friends and the wider group; in other words, some children had considerable support whereas others had little. Examples included children wanting to sit near and work with preferred peers, or either encouraging or denigrating the verbal contributions of classmates. Finally, a small group of children took on authoritative and rule-enforcing roles whereby they appeared to utilise power typically associated with teachers. Gest and Rodkin (2011) assert that teachers play a considerable role in the social ecologies of classrooms, particularly when it comes to individual children's influence and social power. Moreover, they suggest that not only do children's peer cultures challenge the rules, roles, and norms established by teachers, but that teachers, in turn, influence peer norms including those that regulate children's social behaviours. A clear example is when a teacher separated a group of girls who distracted each other, legitimising their desire to focus. However, more than this, teachers' attitudes to children's aggression, competitiveness, and social withdrawal directly impact the degree to which children's social subgroups are hierarchical. Overall, it behooves us

to consider that practices that default to aggressive competition might negatively impact a classroom's social ecology.

9.8 Implications for Teaching Practices

The differences in agenda between teachers and children suggest that teachers must critically reflect on their mat time practices in relation to the impact on peer relations. Many teaching decisions might favour specific children more so than their peers. For example, contrary to a small number of children who express enjoyment of competition, the majority of children express preference for more shared, collaborative activities (Mortlock 2016). Teachers express concerns about the overtly competitive behaviours of some of the children, including reprimanding them at times; however, given that the collaborative activities are less frequently offered than competitive activities, it seems that the teaching practices unwittingly give competitive friendship groups a disproportionate degree of agency compared with their less competitive peers (Mortlock 2016). When children demonstrate such competitive prowess, he or she might gain or maintain high status within a group (Fein 2012), which ultimately might negatively impact group cohesion (Howes 1990). It seems then, that deliberately and consistently facilitating activities that engender some form of cohesion or togetherness is important at mat time. One example might include those activities that require children to cooperate in order to achieve a shared goal, ensuring that every child has a role to play.

In addition to considering the trickle on effects of mat time pedagogies to children's behaviour and peer culture, mat time could be made more emotionally safe for certain children. One very pertinent issue is the public nature of mat time where some children experience more social support compared with specific peers. Teachers noted that the children seemed to denigrate specific peers' contributions. Coupled with this, some children will consistently find themselves without a partner or group when a teacher calls for shared work. Overall, teachers must utilise strategies that ensure that those with less social support are included and are able to make valued contributions. Furthermore, how power is expressed in the peer group needs to be considered. In this chapter we present examples where teachers gave management roles to children such as using the shaker to call for silence on the mat; arguably, this is one strategy that allows children with less support to take on a key role. Equally, however, teachers might consider and mitigate ways that children use power in other more subtle ways; for example when they exclude certain peers or use a teacher's rules as the basis for informing on classmates.

Finally, as shown in this chapter, children seek to covertly play around with rules. Although teachers might still require children to be on-task with their focus, it is useful to understand that such behaviours might have a critical role to play in children's peer-bonding and fostering "we-ness" by cooperating in subterfuge. Even so, teachers might also need to be cognisant that specific children might need support in managing such situations, either because they are one-sided (i.e. one peer wants

to play around but his or her friend wants to focus on the lesson) or because the peer group norms are such that children cannot assert their desire to focus.

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