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Identifying Classroom Friendships: Teachers' Confidence and Agreement With Children

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Abstract

We conducted an exploratory study to investigate teachers' confidence and agreement with children when teachers and children identified close classroom friendships. Participants comprised six kindergarten teachers and 110 children, including 26 children with disabilities. Data were gathered from a friendship nomination questionnaire completed by teachers and a friendship nomination task completed by children. On average, teachers accurately identified one peer that a target child also named as a "best friend." Teachers also identified children selected as "very best friends" for 59% of their students when using a less conservative definition of very best friendship. Teachers reported being confident in identifying friendships, on average, for 39% of their class. However, greater confidence did not equate with more accurate reports. Although teachers were slightly more confident in their friendship reports for children with disabilities, they were also less accurate. Implications for supporting friendship development and future research are discussed.

Keywords

kindergarten, early childhood, disabilities, friendships, peer relationships

Over a century of research on peer relationships has revealed that friendships have a special role in young children's development of social competence and are distinctive from the contributions of adults or near-age relatives (Ladd, 2005). Close relationships with peers provide many opportunities for children to develop positive social behaviors, learn conflict-resolution skills, manage strong emotions, and contribute to their perceptions of self, such as self-concept and self-esteem (Ladd, 2005). Conversely, experiences of peer exclusion or bullying can lead to feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety. This may be one reason why the attainment of friendships and social interaction skills have been definitively named as critical outcomes of inclusive early childhood programs. For example, the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) and the National Association for the Education for Young Children (NAEYC) wrote a joint position statement on inclusion in 2009. Likewise, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the U.S. Department of Education (ED) in 2015 jointly developed a policy statement on early childhood inclusion in 2015. These statements emphasize that early childhood is a critical period for young children to learn skills necessary to beginning and maintaining friendships.

The Division for Early Childhood and National Association for the Education for Young Children (2009) joint position statement on inclusion states that the development of friendships is an outcome of high-quality, inclusive classrooms. In their policy statement, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education (2015) identify friendships with peers as an outcome that should be nurtured within inclusive early childhood environments for every child no matter how mild or severe their disabilities. Likewise, one of the three child outcomes that State Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education programs report to the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) refers to children's social-emotional skills and their ability to develop social relationships with both peers and adults (see www.ectacenter.org).

The mastery of social-emotional skills is considered a functional outcome for children with disabilities (Odom, McConnell, & McEvoy, 1992). These skills help children participate and succeed in their everyday communities, including home and school environments, ensuring their equal participation and access. As such, a goal of preschool

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special education is to support young children to function at a similar level as their same-aged peers. However, children with disabilities tend to experience delays in their social skill development, which may result in their forming fewer friendships than most typically developing peers (Buysse, Goldman, West, & Hollingsworth, 2008; Meyer & Ostrosky, 2014). Some preschoolers with disabilities transition to school-age programs without having acquired key social skills, which may present further challenges to forming close friendships with kindergarten classmates (Meyer & Ostrosky, 2016).

Nationally representative data estimate that about 40% of preschoolers with disabilities exited Part B–Section 619 (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 2004) preschool programs in 2015 without reaching age expectations for developing social relationships with adults or peers (Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center, 2016). These findings are troubling as recent reports suggest that the curriculum in many kindergarten classrooms has become increasingly academic focused (Bassok & Rorem, 2014). Although families of young children with disabilities may prioritize attention to their children's friendships and associated social and play skills that are necessary for successful relations with peers (Hollingsworth & Buysse, 2009), current kindergarten environments may place constraints on a teacher's ability to plan frequent and intentional opportunities to facilitate friendship skills for children with disabilities who enter kindergarten without these critical skills.

Role of the Teacher

Teachers play an important role in fostering friendship development in early education classrooms. Teachers' decisions influence the social ecology of classrooms (Farmer, Lines, & Hamm, 2011). For example, teachers make daily choices about instructional grouping. When selecting who will be partnered or included in a small group lesson, teachers may consider several child-specific characteristics such as who will be a good role model or who will be patient with a more reserved peer partner. When teachers use peer-mediated interventions or intentional peer arrangements as an instructional strategy to support students with disabilities, they also may take into consideration which classmates are already developing friendships, whom focal children (e.g., children with disabilities who are building their peer-related social competence) seem to prefer as friends, which children appear motivated to get to know each other better, which children have similar interests, or which children might need additional opportunities to get to know their classmates (Brown, Odom, McConnell, & Rathel, 2008; Carter et al., 2015). Teachers' actions can directly influence whether friendships will develop between children due to opportunities for positive social interactions, or a lack thereof. The teacher's role as a friendship facilitator can mean the difference between a young child with disabilities feeling like a guest or a member of the classroom community.

Investigating Agreement Between Teacher and Child Reports of Friendship

Overall, there has been little research on the agreement between teacher and student reports of friendships (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). We identified three studies that examined the agreement between teachers' and children's report of friendships. Despite different assessment methods applied, researchers across these studies had similar results.

In 1957, McCandless and Marshall conducted a seminal study investigating the relationship between 48 preschoolers' identification of friendships with teachers' judgments. Participants ranged in ages from 40 months to 67 months. Half of the participants were boys, and the other half were identified as girls. The researchers did not report children with disabilities being included in this sample. Researchers used a picture sociometric technique with children to determine the presence of friendships. For this sociometric assessment, children were shown pictures of classmates and asked, "Who do you like to play with?" in three different activities (i.e., outdoor play, inside play, and listening to stories). Children were encouraged to nominate three peers per activity, but additional nominations were recorded. Researchers calculated a weighted sociometric score for each child based on the sum of a child's playmate nominations. Adults weighing in on the presence of children's friendships included teachers, assistant teachers, and graduate students who were serving as classroom observers. All adults were asked to identify each child's four best friends and rank order the best friends in degree of closeness to the child. The teachers' scores were then combined, and an overall teacher nomination score was calculated. This study revealed that young children could accurately report on their friendships using a sociometric picture task, but their reports varied greatly in terms of agreement with teachers. Findings showed a range of agreement for teachers and children (7% to 56%) with great variability among teachers in their ability to identify children's friendships.

In 1988, Howes investigated an array of social competence variables, including children's friendships, using behavioral observation, sociometric measures, and teacher nominations. She used a sociometric friendship nomination and rating protocol with children to identify their closest friendships. For the nomination protocol, children were asked to identify, using classmates' photos, their three best friends and three children who were not friends. For the rating protocol, children sorted photos of their classmates into three groups based on how much they wanted to be that

peer's friend (i.e., a lot, a medium amount, a small amount). Teachers were asked to nominate three best friends for each child. Each possible friendship dyad (more than 4,000 dyads in total) was examined and classified as (a) non-friend; (b) unilateral friend, meaning that only one child in the dyad was nominated; or (c) reciprocal friend, meaning that both children nominated the other, and the nomination was mutual. Comparing the results of child and teacher nominations, and taking into account all possible dyad classifications, Howes found moderate agreement (78%) between teachers' and preschoolers' reports of friendships, with the agreement between teachers and children stronger among 3-year-olds than among older preschoolers.

In 2006, Gest noted a significant gap in the literature related to teacher–child reports of friendships for students in elementary grades. Therefore, he examined child and teacher agreement on friendships and social group status focusing on 832 same-sex dyads in first-, third-, and fifth-grade classrooms. To gather information about friendships, children were asked, "Some kids have a lot of best friends, some kids have one best friend, and some kids don't have a best friend. What about you? What are their names?" Based on children's grade, they either verbally named their friends or they wrote their friends' names. Identifying mutuality in nominations was a priority for Gest; therefore, all friendship nominations were examined to identify reciprocal nominations across students. Teachers shared their thoughts on students' classroom friendships on a form where they identified each student's one best friend; they also rated how well the friends got along on a 5-point scale. Next, teachers listed in rank order up to five classmates whom they considered to be close friends of the student. Additional space was provided for teachers to list up to four other children who might be considered friends with a child, and to rate each dyad's compatibility.

Examining friendship nominations, Gest classified each same-sex dyad as either "affiliated" (i.e., students considered each other as friends) or "non-affiliated" (i.e., mutual nominations were not present between children) based on the results from both child and teacher nominations. Comparing the agreement between affiliation and nonaffiliation status provided by children and teachers, Gest found modest agreement between teacher and student reports of friendships (72.5% agreement), with most of the agreement being on children's nonaffiliation nominations (58.9%). These results confirmed previous research involving teachers and preschoolers. However, in this study, stronger agreement was found between teachers and children in later grades than in earlier grades.

Gaps in the Literature

Collectively, this body of work suggests that teacher–child agreement on the identification of friendships across the early childhood years is modest. However, the research on this topic is limited and dated, and notable gaps need to be addressed. First, the methods used to identify children's friendships in the three reviewed studies greatly varied. That is, researchers took different approaches to identify the presence of children's friendships and defined friendship in different ways. As noted by Berndt and McCandless (2009), a variety of methods have been used when researching children's friendships, and scholars have critically examined approaches used to identify children's friendships to distinguish this construct from other constructs such as popularity and acceptance (c.f., Asher, Parker, & Walker, 1996; Bukowski & Hoza, 1989). Given our contemporary understanding of friendship, the methods used in the studies by McCandless and Marshall (1957) and Howes (1988) could be considered approaches currently used to identify children's popularity or acceptance rather than friendships. These comparisons of teacher–child agreement on the presence of *friendships* are questionable.

Second, although research has been conducted on this subject for preschool and early elementary students, no studies focused on kindergarten, which is when many children begin their formal schooling and a significant developmental period for peer-related social competence for young children with disabilities. To illustrate the significance, researchers using the Pre-Elementary Education Longitudinal Study (PEELS) nationally representative data set found that children with disabilities with fewer or far fewer friends than their peers were significantly more likely to experience somewhat hard or very hard transitions into kindergarten (Carlson et al., 2009). Furthermore, researchers using the same data set found that limited social skills and difficulties with peer interactions in early school years predicted later peer victimization of children with disabilities (Son et al., 2014). Understanding the extent to which teachers are aware of and accurately observe children's friendships could inform both kindergarten teachers' use of intentional strategies to facilitate friendship skills, and early childhood special education teachers' use of instructional and transition practices. In addition, when comparing research by Howes (1988) and Gest (2006), inconsistencies are evidently related to age. That is, Howes found stronger agreement with younger children, while Gest found teacher–child reports of friendship strongest in older elementary grades. These findings make it difficult to ascertain the strength of agreement for kindergarten teachers and their students.

Third, of all the studies addressing teacher–child agreement of friendship identification, no one has examined teachers' feelings of confidence in identifying children's friendships. Reports from knowledgeable adults (e.g., teachers) are a primary method for gathering child-specific friendship information in the early childhood years (Buysse et al., 2008). By investigating both agreement and confidence, we

can begin to understand how teachers view their ability to identify their students' friendships. Confidence ratings also are one way to investigate how aware people are of their choices (Norman & Price, 2015). Examining confidence in friendship nominations may serve as an indicator of how attentive teachers are to peer relationships in their classrooms. This topic is timely as there is reason to believe that federal policies over the last 20 years have played a major role in "pushing down" academic expectations once reserved for older children into the curriculum and experiences of kindergartners (Bassok & Rorem, 2014; Graue, 2009; Stipek, 2006). As a result, teachers may not have the same opportunities to observe and intervene on children's social relationships and skills. Subsequently, this could affect teachers' confidence in identifying and facilitating positive relationships between young children.

Finally, none of the studies we found included children with disabilities. Current trends show that almost all students with disabilities (95%; ages 6 through 21) are included for at least part of the school day in general education classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). More than half of this group (62.6%) spends 80% or more of their day in general education classrooms. The movement toward greater inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms increases opportunities for children with disabilities to form close relationships with classmates and for teachers to help support the development of friendships. As noted earlier, teachers' role in friendship formation is incredibly important. Given the implications of teachers' role in supporting friendship formation in their classrooms, combined with mounting evidence for the salience of friendships in the development, learning, and wellness of children with disabilities, investigating nomination accuracy and teachers' awareness of children's friendships during kindergarten is critically important.

While the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings has markedly increased over time, the rates of inclusion for children with disabilities (ages 3–5 years) in early childhood settings has not changed (Barton, Steed, & Smith, 2016). Inclusive early childhood environments play a significant role in the formation of children's friendships and social acceptance (Buysse, Goldman, & Skinner, 2002; Odom, Zercher, Li, Marquart, Sandall, & Brown, 2006). If kindergarten teachers do not consciously address the social, play, and friendship skills in their curriculum or classroom environment that are necessary for children with disabilities to meet age-expected social relationship developmental milestones, it may be necessary to advocate for more high-quality, inclusive early childhood settings where children have multiple opportunities to learn these skills (Strain, 2014). Therefore, this study was designed to examine kindergarten teachers' confidence and agreement with children in their inclusive classrooms when identifying children's close friendships.

The following three questions guided our research:

Research Question 1: To what extent is there agreement between kindergarten teacher and child reports of close friendships?
Research Question 2: How confident are kindergarten teachers in identifying children's close friendships?
Research Question 3: Does kindergarten teacher agreement and confidence differ based on whether they are identifying close friendships of children with disabilities or children without disabilities?

Hereafter, the terms *agreement* and *accuracy* are used interchangeably, for agreement between teacher and child reports signifies teachers' accuracy when identifying close friendships for children in their classroom.

Method

This study occurred during the second year of a larger, longitudinal investigation that examined the efficacy of a 6-week intervention designed to promote positive attitudes and acceptance of children with disabilities among their kindergarten classmates (Ostrosky, Favazza, van Luling, & Mouzourou, 2018). This 6-week classwide intervention had three major components: (a) school-based storybook readings with guided discussions using books that featured characters with disabilities, (b) mixed-ability cooperative learning groups, and (c) a lending library to share the storybooks between home and school to promote guided discussions on the topic of disability between children and their families. Data for the present study were gathered by administrating two assessments, both pre- and post-intervention, that were not included in the larger study's protocol.

As part of the present study, researchers concurrently examined the extent to which the intervention influenced the development of classroom friendships for students with disabilities (Meyer & Ostrosky, 2016). Improving teachers' ability to identify classroom friendships was not the target of this intervention. Rather, the researchers wanted to examine teachers' accuracy in reporting children's friendships at two time points to explore how having more opportunities to observe peer interactions over the course of 6 weeks (e.g., during cooperative learning groups) might influence their assessment results.

Participants

Teachers and students in six kindergarten classrooms participated in this study. Four classrooms were in a Midwest state, and the remaining two were located in a Northeast state. All

Table 1. Type of Disabilities Represented Across Classrooms.

Type of Disability	Classrooms (n = 6)
Intellectual or developmental disabilities	2
Learning disabilities	2
Communication impairment	6
Visual impairment	1
Hearing impairment	2
Physical disabilities	2
Health impairment	2
Autism spectrum disorders	1
Other (not specified)	1

Note. Number indicates the number of classrooms that included at least one child with that particular disability. This does not indicate the total number of children with disabilities.

teachers had at least 22 children in their inclusive kindergarten classrooms with at least four children with disabilities per room. For this study, disability was defined as having an identified disability as stated in the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, being referred to receive additional educational support (e.g., behavior support), or being in the middle of the assessment process for the provision of special education services.

All teachers were female and had at least 8 years teaching experience and at least 1 year of experience teaching children with disabilities. Teachers reported their level of education as (a) bachelor's degree (n = 2), (b) master's degree (n = 2), and (c) master's degree plus additional coursework (n = 2). All teachers had taken at least one special education course.

Across the six classrooms, there were 140 kindergartners. However, not all children had parental consent to participate in the assessments. In a few cases, data were missing, and some children had difficulty responding to the assessment questions. Due to these factors, data reported in this study represent responses from 110 kindergarten-aged children (M age in months = 71.2, SD = 3.8). Across this group of children, 58% were male (n = 64), and 42% were female (n = 46). Race/ethnicities represented included Caucasian (n = 58; 53%), African American (n = 25; 23%), Hispanic (n = 15; 14%), Asian (n = 11; 10%), and Other (n = 1). Included in this sample were 26 children with disabilities. Disabilities represented by class are presented in Table 1. This table indicates the number of classrooms, out of six, that included at least one child with a particular disability. The total does not represent the number of children included in the study.

At the start of this study, teachers completed the ABILITIES Index (Simeonsson & Bailey, 1991) for children with disabilities in their classrooms. This tool measures children's functioning in nine developmental areas: (a) audition, (b) behavior and social skills, (c) intellectual function, (d) limbs, (e) intentional communication, (f) tonicity, (g) integrity of physical health, (h) eyes, and (i) structural status. Using this tool, teachers rated children's functioning on a 6-point scale for each area. A rating of 1 indicated normal functioning for a child's age while 6 indicated profound difficulty or disability in an area. Of the 26 children with disabilities who participated in this study, 18 children had mild disabilities, five children had moderate disabilities, and three children had severe disabilities based on the descriptions provided by teachers on the ABILITIES Index.

Assessments

Assessments were administered prior to the onset of the classwide intervention and after the completion of the 6-week program. All assessments were completed within a 10-week period of time, 2 weeks pre- and 2 weeks post-intervention. Research staff from the larger study conducted all assessments, which occurred in the spring.

Teacher friendship nominations. Using a three-part paper and pencil questionnaire, teachers were provided with a list of all children in their classroom. First, for each student, teachers nominated a maximum of three classmates whom they believed a child would identify as their best friends. Teachers were able to choose from all children in their classroom regardless of ability status. Second, teachers identified the one student whom they thought a child would choose as their closest friend (i.e., their very best friend). Third, teachers identified whether they felt confident or not confident in naming each child's close classroom friends. Teachers had 1 week to complete the questionnaire on all children in their class for whom parental consent was obtained. Directions for the questionnaire emphasized that there were no right or wrong answers and that it was not necessary, or warranted, to solicit information from children that would influence how teachers completed the questionnaire. Data were not gathered on how long it took each teacher to complete the questionnaire.

Child friendship nominations. The process for gathering children's friendship nominations was adapted from guidelines described by Parker and Asher (1993). A brief overview of the assessment is described here. For additional details, please see Meyer and Ostrosky (2016).

Children completed this assessment individually with a researcher in a quiet school location (e.g., the library, hallway) while seated at a desk or table. To begin, the researcher placed wallet-sized photographs of classmates on the table or desk surface in front of a child. The order of photos was randomized for each classroom, and the display remained consistent for all children being assessed from that particular classroom. As photos were shown to a child, the researcher said the name of each classmate or allowed the

Table 2. Teacher–Child Friendship Nomination Agreement.

	Agreement BF[a]			VBF strict (%)			VBF loose (%)		
Teacher	Pre	Post	Average	Pre	Post	Average	Pre	Post	Average
1	0.73	1.13	0.93	20	47	33	60	73	67
2	1.20	1.75	1.48	35	40	38	75	75	75
3	1.28	1.17	1.22	44	22	33	78	56	67
4	1.05	1.38	1.21	33	29	31	62	38	50
5	0.71	1.41	1.06	12	29	21	35	82	59
6	0.79	0.79	0.79	26	11	18	42	37	39
Total	0.97	1.28	1.13	29	29	29	59	59	59

Note. BF = best friend; VBF = very best friend.
[a]Range of agreement could be 0 to 3.

child to say the name of the classmate in the photo, providing correction as needed.

When all photos were displayed, the researcher asked the child to turn over the photos of *all* their friends. There was no limitation on how many photos could be turned over. Once a child was finished, the researcher noted the nominations and turned the photos right side up. This nomination process continued with the researcher asking the child to identify his or her three *best friends.* Children were allowed to choose fewer than three best friends. If, after two prompts, a child did not identify any best friends, a debriefing protocol was used to allow a child the opportunity to talk about other friendships outside of the classroom and to end the assessment. For the last step in the assessment, the researcher returned photos face up and asked the child to identify his or her one *very best friend.* If the child did not identify one very best friend, the researcher thanked the child for talking about classroom friendships and the assessment ended. This process lasted approximately 5 min per child.

To calculate agreement between teachers and children on best friend and very best friend nominations, two scores were derived. First, for best friend nominations, teachers had up to three opportunities to agree with each child's friendship nominations. As a result, a scale was used to assign teachers with an agreement score that could range between 0 and 3. For example, a teacher's score of 0.79 would indicate that, on average, the teacher agreed somewhere between 0 and 1 time with the friendship nominations provided by individual children, while a score of 1.75 indicated that a teacher's average agreement was between 1 and 2 nominations for individual children.

Second, the scores for very best friendships were dichotomous. That is, teachers either correctly identified whom a child named as his or her very best friend or they did not. Due to the dichotomous nature of these data, the results could be interpreted as a percentage. When examining agreement scores between teacher and child nominations for very best friendships, using a strict definition for very best friendship resulted in considerably low agreement. Thus, data were analyzed using two definitions for the identification of very best friends (i.e., strict and loose). A strict agreement occurred when a teacher named a classmate as a child's very best friend and the child named the same classmate as a very best friend. A loose agreement occurred when a teacher named a classmate as a child's very best friend and the child named that same classmate as one of his or her three best friends.

Results

Agreement Between Teacher and Child Reports of Close Friendships

Agreement ratings between children and teachers across the six teachers at pre- and post-intervention, along with their average agreement ratings, are presented in Table 2. Over time, teachers' levels of agreement were variable. When rating children's best friends, a slight increase was seen in teacher–student agreement from pre- to post-intervention ($n = 4$ teachers). The averages for individual teachers ranged from 0.79 to 1.48. Overall, agreement for best friend nominations across teachers and times was 1.13, meaning that, on average, teachers and children agreed on one peer whom a child thought of as a best friend and whom the teacher also thought the child would name as a best friend.

Looking at teachers and children's agreement of very best friendships, half of the teachers increased or maintained their level of agreement from pre- to post-intervention when identifying children's very best friends using either definition (i.e., strict or loose). The average agreement for very best friend identification between teachers and children, using a strict definition, ranged from 18% to 38%. The range of agreement using a less conservative definition of very best friendship resulted in a range that averaged from 39% to 75%. Overall, agreement for very best friend nominations, across teachers and time, defined as

Table 3. Teachers' Levels of Confidence and Rank Order of Best Average Agreement Scores.

	Confidence (%)					
Teacher	Pre	Post	Average	BF	VBF strict	VBF loose
1	53	73	63	5	2[a]	2
2	20	0	10	1	1	1
3	56	56	56	2	2	2
4	43	62	52	3	4	5
5	0	0	0	4	5	4
6	58	47	53	6	6	6
Average	38	39	39	—	—	—

Note. BF = best friend; VBF = very best friend.
[a]When the average agreement score was tied, teachers were given the same rank.

strict or loose was 29% and 59%, respectively. This means that, on average, teachers could identify the peer whom a child identified as his or her very best friend for 29% of their class. Whereas for 59% of their class, teachers named the peer chosen by a child as a very best friend as one of the child's three best friends.

Teacher Confidence

Descriptive statistics for teachers' levels of confidence and their ranked order in terms of best agreement scores are presented in Table 3. Looking at average levels of confidence across pre- and post-intervention, four of the six teachers were confident in their scoring for at least 50% of their classroom population. One teacher reported no confidence at either time point, and the second teacher reported low confidence (i.e., 10% overall). Teachers were equally divided between those whose confidence increased ($n = 2$), decreased ($n = 2$), or remained consistent ($n = 2$) over time. Teachers' levels of confidence in their ratings across time averaged 39%, meaning that, on average, teachers were confident with their friendship nominations for 39% of their class.

Examining the rank order of teachers from the "best average agreement scores" to the "worst level of agreement" (1 through 6), the teacher with the highest agreement scores across all types of friendship nominations had one of the lowest average confidence rating (i.e., Teacher 2; 10% confidence). Alternatively, the teacher with the lowest agreement scores across all types of friendships had the third highest average confidence rating (i.e., Teacher 6; 53% confidence).

Teacher Agreement and Confidence Based on Disability Status

Descriptive statistics for teacher agreement and confidence based on whether they were identifying friends chosen by children with or without disabilities are presented in Table 4. Teachers felt slightly more confident when identifying friendships of children with disabilities (40%) as compared with children without disabilities (38%). When considering accuracy, teachers had lower levels of agreement for children with disabilities compared with children without disabilities for best friendships (1.04 vs. 1.15), very best friendship with strict definition (23% vs. 31%), and very best friendship with loose definition (50% vs. 62%).

Table 4. Agreement and Level of Confidence by Disability Status.

		Overall agreement		
Disability status	Overall confidence	BF	VBF strict	VBF loose
Yes	40%	1.04	23%	50%
No	38%	1.15	31%	62%

Note. BF = best friend; VBF = very best friend.

Discussion

Based on data from this study, kindergarten teachers tend to have moderate levels of agreement when taking on the perspective of children as they identified their students' closest classroom friends. This finding, in addition to the variability in levels of agreement among teachers, is consistent with previous research (Gest, 2006; Howes, 1988; McCandless & Marshall, 1957). However, none of the prior research included children with disabilities. Findings from this study indicate that teacher and child agreement across nominations of best and very best friendships was less accurate for children with disabilities than for their classmates without disabilities. Based on the importance of social inclusion for young children with disabilities and the development of peer-related social competence, we do not believe the field of early childhood intervention should be complacent about these results (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016). Teachers play a significant role in supporting social interactions for children with disabilities within inclusive settings. Their careful involvement and intentional instruction can facilitate friendships and greater connectivity for children with disabilities within peer social networks (Buysse, Goldman, & Skinner, 2003; Guralnick, Connor, & Johnson, 2011), as the formation of long-lasting friendships for young children with disabilities continues to be a pressing issue (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016; Meyer & Ostrosky, 2014). For teachers to facilitate children's peer relationships and support the development of peer-related social competence, it is important that teachers can identify peers considered to be close friends.

As noted by Berndt and McCandless (2009), researchers investigating children's friendships have a number of choices to make when planning their studies, including the

question of whether friendship nominations need to be mutual. Even the answer to this question is not straightforward and depends on the purpose of a study. Therefore, it is important to understand the methodological decisions made in this study that led to us not requiring children's friendship nominations to be mutual.

The primary purpose of this study was to better understand teachers' ability to "put themselves in children's shoes" and gauge the accuracy of their perspective compared with children's perspectives, along with their confidence in knowing whom children would identify as their closest friends. For this purpose, the existence of reciprocity among children's nominations was irrelevant. We were more concerned with teachers' ability to take on a child's perspective. It can be argued that knowing a child's point of view could assist teachers in delivering effective interaction practices (McCollum, 2015). To date, assessing the presence of children's friendships is mostly limited to studies in which investigators were mainly concerned with identifying mutual friendships to ascertain the actuality of friendships for children with disabilities (Buysse et al., 2008; Odom, McConnell, & Brown, 2008). For this purpose, requiring mutual nominations makes sense methodologically and theoretically. Yet the present study was designed to better understand the extent to which teachers were aware of children's friendship preferences; this did not require mutual friendship nominations.

In addition, requiring that friendship nominations be mutual would have led to two significant limitations (Berndt & McCandless, 2009). First, we asked children to identify their three best friends. Because friendship nominations were not unlimited, if we had required friendships to be mutual, we might have underestimated the presence of children's friendships. For example, as noted by Berndt and McCandless (2009), if "four or more children name the same classmate as a best friend, the classmate is only able to name three of them in return. Therefore, at least one of these friendships will appear not to be reciprocal, even if the classmate considers all the other children to be best friends" (p. 70). In another example, a "girl may consider another girl as her second closest friend, the other girl might consider the first girl as her fourth closest friend. If children are asked to name their three best friends, this friendship will appear to be unilateral when it is only asymmetrical" (p. 71). Second, requiring mutual nominations would have further decreased our sample size. As it was, data from 30 children were not available for analysis. If we required mutuality, and a child named a peer as a friend who was among the 30 children whose data were not included, this would have resulted in one less friendship that could be examined for teacher–child agreement. Therefore, the term *friendship*, as used in this study, does not imply that a mutual friendship was present between two children.

Another point worthy of discussion is that teachers were not overly confident in their ability to identify whom students would choose as their closest friends regardless of disability status. This finding suggests there may be underlying reasons for teachers' limited awareness of peer relationships and, consequently, their own confidence. Given that teachers provided information on children's friendships and their level of confidence before and after a 6-week intervention designed to increase children's positive attitudes toward peers with disabilities, it was surprising to see very little positive change in the overall agreement between teacher and child ratings, and almost no change in teachers' levels of confidence from pre- to post-intervention. A core component of delivering high-quality instructional strategies, including implementation of the Division for Early Childhood Recommended Practices (Division for Early Childhood, 2014), is to use data to guide decisions (Schwartz & Woods, 2015). In addition, a core component of comprehensive early childhood curricula is to conduct ongoing assessments to understand children and inform teachers' curriculum planning to meet students' individual learning and development needs (Dodge, 2013). The first step in a data-driven decision-making assessment process is to engage in careful observations of children (Grisham-Brown & Pretti-Frontczak, 2013). Thus, it might be expected that when asked to share information on peer relationships through the Teacher Friendship Nomination Form, teachers' accuracy and awareness of children's friendships would increase over time given the research team's prompt to observe this particular outcome. However, data from the present study do not support this. With pressure to teach preacademic skills, teachers may not prioritize children's friendships, irrespective of the view that social-emotional development is an essential domain for school readiness and the fact that social-emotional development is measured in many statewide kindergarten entry assessments (Scott-Little, Brunner, Schultz, & Maxwell, 2013).

Limitations

There are a few limitations to this study that warrant mention. First, this study included a small sample of teachers and children. As a result, the findings may not generalize to other kindergarten teachers. Second, there is debate on how friendships should be measured and which peers (i.e., classroom, neighborhood) children should be allowed to nominate as friends (c.f., Berndt & McCandless, 2009). It is reasonable to expect teachers to be most familiar with peer relationships within their classroom versus friendships that children may have with other children in their school, neighborhood, or community at large. In the present study, children were only allowed to identify classmates as friends, which may represent a conservative group of children one may consider friends. Third, teachers and children were not

provided with a definition for the term *friendship*. The characteristics that constitute adult friendships, while similar in many ways to young children's friendships, may have some unique differences (e.g., intimacy is more often a quality found in adult friendships). Teachers may have used an operational definition that was more consistent with adult friendships than young children's friendships when identifying whom they felt children would name as close friends. Despite these limitations, implications for practice and future research exist.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

The first implication for practice focuses on kindergarten teachers' lack of confidence in identifying the close friendships of their students. Research has shown that it is important to closely monitor the development of children's friendships, especially for young children with disabilities (Buysse et al., 2008). However, if teachers cannot identify friendships between children in their classroom, it may be difficult to facilitate the development or maintenance of such relationships. It also may be particularly difficult to effectively use evidence-based instruction and interaction practices, such as peer-mediated interventions, without knowledge of children's relationship interests or preferences. Future research should consider teachers' confidence when reporting on children's friendships and other developmental outcomes targeted during the early childhood years. Teacher awareness, confidence, and assessment of children's friendships could be promoted through professional development that focuses on social-emotional/peer relationship development and observational methods for identifying peer relationships.

Our findings suggest that teachers should intentionally set aside time throughout the day to observe children's interactions with peers both within and outside of the classroom (e.g., recess or lunch). Prosocial skills such as turn-taking, helping, and resolving conflicts are best learned within the context of friendships, and teachers could use the information they gather through observations to plan instruction that supports the development of peer-related social competence and friendships. Teachers might discuss friendships with children to understand their feelings about classmates, especially peers with whom they would like to become more familiar. Engaging in such conversations with children acknowledges the significant role that reciprocity plays in friendships. That is, friendships are two-way or bidirectional interactions where each child is voluntarily involved. In the process of understanding more about children's classroom relationships, it is important to respect children's voices, interests, preferences, and choices, and provide the space for children to be heard. Providing young children with disabilities the opportunity to share their perspectives about aspirational or real friendships, along with honoring their choices and giving them the chance to make decisions related to those relationships, is fundamental to fostering self-determination skills in early childhood (Erwin et al., 2009). Future research might examine how, when, and in what ways teachers approach the task of observing and gathering data on a wide-range of skills related to friendship formation and how these data are used to foster peer-related social competence during the early childhood years. Detailed knowledge such as this can help create evidence-based approaches that are feasible and socially valid among teachers of young children with and without disabilities.

Our findings also highlight the salience of intentional observations and accurate data collection when sharing information about children's development, strengths, and needs with family members. Parents of young children with disabilities note that friendships are an important outcome for their children (Guralnick, Connor, & Hammond, 1995). Kindergarten teachers report that parents often ask about children's friendships during parent–teacher conferences (Meyer, 2014). Although researchers recommend sharing information about friendships between home and school to support children's development and maintenance of close peer relationships, it is a practice that may rarely occur (Hollingsworth & Buysse, 2009). Future research might focus on the perspectives of teachers and family members related to sharing information between home and school regarding children's friendships. Such studies might include an investigation of teacher confidence in sharing this information with families and how their feelings of confidence influence whether they share friendship information with families.

Conclusion

High-quality friendships significantly contribute to children's development and promote their early school success (Child Mental Health Foundations and Agencies Network, 2000). Teachers' decisions, be they conscious or unconscious, visible or invisible, influence the classroom environment, and certain decisions may alter the social ecology enough to affect children's friendship formation. One crucial lesson learned from this study is that improvements are needed in observation and data collection methods to increase teacher confidence and accuracy in taking on children's perspectives regarding whom they consider to be their closest friends. These topics must be addressed if we want to facilitate the development and maintenance of friendships among young children including those with disabilities.

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