

Sophia Avgetidou, *Social Relationships and Children's Friendship at Preschool Age. Theory, Research and Didactic Methodology at Nursery School*, Thessaloniki, Kyriakides brothers, Pedagogy and Education, No. 36, pp.238., 1997.

In this book the author describes and analyses the environment and the procedures through which young children develop social relationships and friendship. The impact of specific educational and cultural contexts on the development of the social relationships is investigated and concrete educational premises and teaching stages are proposed.

Avgetidou moves beyond the description of children's behaviour to the investigation and understanding of the dynamic interaction between the structure and the content of the educational experience and the gradually developed social relationships of the nursery school's young children.

The fact that the book is based on an eight-month ethnographic study of Greek young children's behaviour in two different classrooms of the nursery school makes its discussion meaningful and convincing. The most important finding of the study and the whole book is that the priorities and the values prevailing in the classroom and underlying the everyday interaction during the school work affect the extent and the quality of young children's social relationships. From that standpoint, the emphasis on socialization, autonomy and self-respect in the "open" classroom promoted the development of firm relationships and open interactions among the group's members without any limitations concerning the participation of new members. The cooperative atmosphere of the classroom with its emphasis on the values of justice, sharing, and democratic conflict resolution, affected the quality of the relationships among young children. The relationships were based on consensus, respect and mutual acceptance. On the contrary, in the "traditional" classroom, the emphasis on the development of academic skills and the comparative evaluation of children created a competitive atmosphere which promoted the sense of individuality and the formation of exclusive groups. The limited interaction among children due to the structure of the daily program and the lack of any attempt on the teacher's part to resolve the problems which appeared between children, affected the quality of the social relationships among young children. The children's relationships in the "traditional" classroom were based on the predominance of the strongest and the most powerful children, a fact that led to repeated tension and conflict.

The study's strength lies in the importance given to the perceptions of the young children and the descriptions they provide for the definition of the criteria for the classification of young children's relationships. In addition, the

observation of children's behaviour in their physical environment (their nursery) allowed the conclusions to be drawn from particular facts in a concrete context and not to be imposed as theoretical general laws, independent of the educational and cultural climate and practices.

In the second part, the author highlights the theoretical background and critically revises the literature about the social relationships and childhood friendship, concluding that there is no any agreed upon definition of friendship because the characteristics and the criteria of friendship depend on the theoretical and methodological model used by the researchers.

The book's third part describes the author's eight-month ethnographic case studies in two Greek nurseries. The study included observation and interviews with children, teachers and children's mothers. The final aim of the study and the book, according to the author (p. 14), was two-fold:

(1) to provide detailed information about the development of the social relationships and the friendship among the Greek young children and to stress their importance for their cognitive, social and emotional development;

(2) to propose concrete educational strategies and activities for observation, understanding, and teacher's intervention in the classroom.

The results of the study are presented in the form of a comparison, between the "open" and the "traditional" classroom and stress the importance of the educational experience for the development and the quality of young children's social relationships. The author defines the "open" classroom as one where children participate actively in the decision-making process, reach a consensus in case of disagreement and work cooperatively in non structured groups. Teacher's intervention concerns the process of problem solving. Interaction is encouraged during play and the values of justice, respect and acceptance are cultivated.

In the "traditional" classroom, the teacher preferred the structured and predefined activities. She emphasized the practice of memorization and skills in preparation for work in the primary school. For the most of the time, children were seated at their tables dealing with predefined activities. Positive reinforcement was provided for "successful" work, a fact that enhanced competition among children. Communication developed between children and teacher and not among children.

The study shows that the experience of friendship, fostering firm and positive relationships in an open learning setting, in contrast with friendship as negotiable relationship in the traditional learning setting, is closely connected with the educational experiences in the classroom.

The fourth part of the book carries important implications for curriculum development. The author believes that in order to promote teachers' reflective action and ensure their pedagogical autonomy, researchers must help them reach

their own conclusions concerning teaching practice and everyday interaction with children. For this purpose, she advocates action research in the classroom based on seven steps which lead to the definition of the appropriate activities for the social development of young children: a) recognition and understanding of social relationships, b) understanding of the factors affecting social relationships with emphasis on the educational factors, c) definition of objectives and expectations concerning children's social relationships, d) the teacher as model, e) selection of activities, f) cultivation of social skills according to the needs of children, g) control and evaluation of children's development.

This book raises critical new concerns about children's development and it will be appreciated by researchers, teachers and parents interested in young children's social relationships. The author's attempt to bring research to bear on classroom practice is a valuable experience to be shared with teachers in the nursery school.

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