

The Value Friendship – Collecting data in UK

This chapter reports on the findings from UK's participation in the EU ETHIKA project¹: Ethics and values education in schools and kindergartens (2014-2017). Birmingham City University established a partnership with the ETHIKA project in 2016. The results provide an insight into the exploration of the value of friendship in young children and impulses on the use of tools in different age groups and countries. The research findings collected in UK will be helpful to optimize the learning tools developed in the project.

The early years are a critical time in which children begin to exercise vital social skills and initiate new friendships (Guralnick, Neville, Hammond & Conor, 2007). From as early as toddlerhood, children begin to develop preferences for playmates, which enable them to form and strengthen healthy relations (Corsaro, 1985; Ross & Lollis, 1989). By preschool, children have often established stable, reciprocated and meaningful friendships (Gershman & Hayes, 1983). Friendship can be defined as a mutual involvement or an emotional attachment between two people, characterised by satisfaction, affection and openness (Rawlins, 1992).

According to Dunn, Brown and Maguire (1995) the process of moral development is similarly crucial to a child's advancement. Moral development can be defined as a process in which individuals form a progressive sense of what is right and wrong (Dorough, 2011). However, rather than explicitly refer to friendship, the theory instead describes how social interaction illustrates the development of moral understanding in children (Piaget, 1932). Piaget posits from age two to seven, children are egocentric in nature however, in the eyes of the child, parents and caregivers are prestigious beings in which their wishes and rules act as law. As young children grow older, their comprehension of morality, i.e. right or wrong is accompanied by a gradual understanding of injustice and a slow realisation that adults can sometimes be unfair. Due to this, the once heteronomous obedience shown by children may begin to depreciate, to accommodate the emergence of autonomy; a form of morality based on reciprocity. During this change, children begin to find justice and solidarity in other children through social interaction and peer co-operation.

Of greater importance however, is identifying the features within friendship, which are most strongly correlated to its quality. Studies show that empathetic and prosocial behaviours, characteristic of high quality friendships, are more likely to be exhibited in children when they are observed by adult models (Yarrow, Scott, & Waxler, 1973; Berndt, 2002).

However, many studies have challenged this view and argued that children are able to distinguish between right or wrong behaviours, independently and in the absence of adult models. According to Gilligan, Wiggins, Kagan and Lamb (1987) a child's moral sense is established during the early years of life. From as young as infancy, children are able to demonstrate concern for others, which can be shown in the way a child comforts another child in times of distress (Radke-Yarrow, Zahn-Waxler & Chapman, 1983).

The moral and ethical principles instilled in children are predominantly influenced by parent-child interactions (Smetana, 1999). However, as a child begins education, the attitudes and views upheld by a school and its teachers become equally influential and further

¹ The ETHIKA project is an ethics intervention which seeks to foster critical thinking skills, using ethics education as a way to enhance personal development.

emphasise the pivotal role of adult models. School systems seek to shape the children of today into the moral citizens of tomorrow (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006).

Research exploring transnational, age-appropriate intervention strategies to benefit much younger children, is relatively sparse. The present study seeks to explore the value of friendship among preschool children using an ethics intervention strategy designed by ETHIKA. It is predicted that this intervention will enhance the conceptualisation of friendship values among children.

Research Design

A qualitative approach was adopted (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008) and research was carried out using a focus group involving nine children, aged four to five in preschool. Focus groups for children not only serve as an innovative approach to understanding children's experiences from a developmental perspective, but are also effective in removing data gathering limitations placed by literacy and reading levels, which can disrupt self-report methods (Kennedy, Kools & Krueger, 2001).

Participants

Participants were recruited using a purposive sampling method. The inclusion criteria for participation were children aged four to five years old. Consent forms and information sheets were administered to one class; ten children gained parental consent following a three-week waiting period. Nine children were listed as the final participants; four boys and five girls.

Materials

The materials consisted of an activity designed by ETHIKA on the value of friendship, titled "The Good and Bad in Friendship". The aim of the activity was to motivate children to think about the important aspects of friendships. Animated images of friends arguing, fighting, playing and sharing were used. Exposing children to animated pictures was considered less sensitive and more appropriate for this age group. Prior to the study, a focus group schedule was created to help facilitate group discussion. The questions were found within the ETHIKA Teaching Manual and additional questions and prompts² were added.

Data Collection

Participants were escorted to the library of Marston Green Infant School by a teacher and researcher. Participants were then seated on the floor in a circle and given individual stickers with their names. Participants were made aware of the study after child friendly consent forms were individually administered and read aloud to the group. Children were asked to circle the *YES* or *NO*, depending on whether they would like to take part. Next, they were presented with four animated images. These images showed friends fighting, arguing, helping each other, and sharing toys. In the centre of the circle was a pile of ten happy faces and ten sad faces. For each picture, children were asked to think about the image and to select one out of the two faces which best described the situation shown in the picture. It was asserted to participants that if they were not sure, they could select both faces, representing a neutral face. Children were then asked to show what they had chosen to the rest of the class. After this, the researcher would proceed to ask why children had chosen a sad face and why some had selected a happy face. These steps were repeated the same for every picture.

² If you wish to view our research materials and use them in your studies, please email us to Olga.Fotakopoulou@bcu.ac.uk.

After this activity, a semi structured approach was taken, using open ended questions focusing on the participants' own personal understandings and relevant interpretations of friendship. Examples include "What does being a good friend mean to you?" and "How can we be a good friend to others?" The focus group session was audio recorded. At the end of the session, participants were debriefed and given the opportunity to ask any further questions.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was carried out using the original framework defined by Braun and Clarke (2006). A line by line coding procedure took place using the software QSR NVivo 11 in which fifteen initial codes were generated. These codes were later reviewed to detect any reoccurring concepts found within the data, leading to the most prominent codes being grouped into three distinct themes, all of which were thought to accurately depict the story portrayed across the data.

Results

Participants took part in a focus group discussion on the value and various aspects of friendship. Through this narrative, three distinct themes were identified as central to the value of friendship: The Importance of Play, Sharing with Caring and The Role of 'Grown-ups'. Within each theme, multiple sub-themes also emerged.

The Importance of Play

Across the data, the importance of play emerged as a major theme. Findings suggest children considered play as integral to maintaining healthy friendships and were found to conceptualise being good friends as "playing with each other". Similarly, "playing at the park together" and "playing on the slide with each other" were commonly expressed as ways to strengthen friendships among children. Throughout the group discussion, engaging in play was also considered a good way to initiate and develop new friendships. When asked how you can make new friends, children suggested "asking them their name". These responses suggest that establishing friendships during the early years is typically uncomplicated and straightforward. While this direct approach to play and making friends may be easy for some children, for others it can prove challenging. While discussing how to make new friends, one child decided to share one of her own personal experiences:

"Today I asked 'L' if she wanted to play with me because 'Miss X' said you see L, go and ask her if she wants to play and be your friend and I asked her but she said no but ... I don't know why."

This statement highlights a child's genuine confusion after being rejected during play.

Another significant sub-theme to emerge from the importance of play is its ability to satisfy the emotional needs of others. When asked, what can you do to make your friend feel better if they are sad, children again appeared to find resolution in playing. One child simply suggested "you can play with them" while another said:

"You can just make them play with you, and if they say yes, they win."

This less egocentric response indicates that children in the early years are able to demonstrate empathetic qualities, by considering the feelings of their friends and allowing them to win games and celebrate victory during play. This notion led to the emergence of the sub-theme *Consideration for Others* and was also found to be in association with happiness, an additional and highly important variable of play and friendship. When asked how you feel when you have a good friendship with somebody one child responded with "happy".

Sharing and Caring

Results indicate that elements of sharing and caring are also significant to the value of friendship during the early years. When shown a picture of two friends arguing over a teddy bear, children were able to describe what was happening and recognise why this behaviour may be considered wrong. One child concluded “the boy had it first and the girl is nabbing it off him” while another child explored the consequence of this, by explaining

“One has the teddy bear and it will break ... if they snatch, it will break.”

Using specific discourse such as snatching, breaking and nabbing to describe the incident shown, suggests that children remain aware of the negative connotations surrounding arguing and selfish behaviour, throughout friendship. In addition to this, the importance of sharing was recognised as an important aspect of being a good friend. One child described a good friendship as “sharing the toys what you got” while another child demonstrated ability in understanding the moral implications of not sharing, by expressing:

“If a person has food and you want it, if you didn’t share they’ll get really hungry.”

This response suggests that to a more or lesser degree, some children are capable of viewing situations from a perspective other than their own and can exhibit empathetic understandings, which underpin various aspects of sharing and reciprocity.

Care also emerged as a major theme across the data with kindness being considered an important attribute of friendship. Children often characterised a good friend as someone who is kind and caring. When children were asked how you can make a sad friend feel better, one child responded with “by hugging them” while another child suggested “bringing them flowers”. This indicates that expressing affection through kind and thoughtful acts are greatly appreciated during the early years and are strongly correlated with maintaining strong, healthy and stable friendships.

When asked why it is important to help each other throughout friendships, children responded:

“Because if they fall over, you need to help them to tell the teacher, if they really hurt themselves ... they wanna hold hands.”

This suggests children understand the caring nature of friendships in both an emotional and physical sense. Despite variation in approach, showing your care is an important and highly valued part of friendship for children in the early years.

The Role of ‘Grown Ups’

During the discussion, children were able to demonstrate an understanding of problem behaviour such as fighting. When shown a picture of two friends involved in a physical altercation, children understood this as “being mean to each other”. One child highlighted the physical implications of violence by saying “you’ll hurt them and you’ll hurt yourself ... if you fight someone it’ll hurt”. However, it was the view that adults are important to the resolution of such conflict, which emerged as a major theme throughout the data.

“If they’re being naughty to each other and there’s a grown up then they can tell them, and also ... the grown up can say stop.”

This suggests that *grown-ups* are perceived as figures of authority, qualified to dissolve the problematic issues which often arise throughout friendship. However, the role of teachers and adults throughout friendships may be confounding for some children. One child said:

“But when we go outside after lunch and people tell the teachers ... they’ll just say why did you tell the teacher, why did he or she ask you to tell off them.”

This indicates that informing a teacher of an incident or situation can sometimes be perceived negatively by children.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the value of friendship among preschool children, using ethics education methods. It was predicted that the intervention designed by ETHIKA would encourage open discourse surrounding friendship values and aid in the enhancement of a child's understanding of the topic. Findings provide powerful evidence that children in the early years are able to characterise the features of good quality friendships and remain competent in identifying the key attributes of a good friend. Results indicate that engagement and interaction are understood by children as an important aspect of friendship and are typically exhibited throughout play.

Early theories suggest children at the preoperational stage are egocentric in nature and often exhibit difficulty in interpreting the opinions, thoughts and perspectives of others (Kohlberg 1971; Piaget, 1932). As a result, peer interaction serves an important function to eliminate egocentrism and increase prosocial norms of reciprocity and compromise.

Results suggest the multi-functional purpose of play is demonstrated through its ability to establish, strengthen, maintain friendships, and satisfy the emotional needs of children and others (Gross, 2002). Results show that from the age of four to five, a child's conceptualisation of friendship and play is relatively low in complexity. This is reflected in a child's simplistic and direct approach to initiating friendship and engaging in play.

Results also revealed that exhibiting acts of kindness and expressing affection, form the basis of sharing and caring principles among pre-schoolers. Findings indicate, sharing is conceptualised as important to strengthening social relations and is inextricably linked to a child's ability to understand perspective and co-operation. As suggested by Eisenberg-Berg, Cameron, Tryon and Dodez (1981) a child's demonstration of prosocial behaviours, including sharing, is typically directed towards others who frequently help and share with them most. However, this discriminative attitude to sharing did not emerge in the present study. This may be the result of children evaluating sharing, specifically in the context of friend relations. The motivation for such action, appears to derive from a child's ability to empathize with friends and understand how they, themselves would feel if roles were reversed (Hoffman, 1994).

Empathy and prosocial behaviours have been recognised as characteristic of high quality friendships. The present study reveals adopting and exhibiting caring behaviour is an important fact of friendship for preschool children. According to Noddings (2013) to be 'caring' is defined as an attribute or disposition frequently exercised by a moral agent. Results show that children comfort friends in various ways and often express affection by giving hugs and flowers. As suggested throughout previous literature, care remains pivotal to good moral practice and is strongly advocated in ethics education. While engaging with the ethics friendship activity, children appeared to understand care as a virtue, central to the value of friendship. Thus, the implementation of ethical and moral principles in education is shown to be beneficial for a child's conceptualisation of friendship.

In the same way positive behaviours are associated with good friendship, negative behaviours such as fighting and arguing are recognised as problematic to friend relations. Results show that children understand why conflict is considered a problem and are competent in establishing appropriate ways to resolve them. Findings indicate that *some* children depend and rely on the status of adults to intervene when problems arise between friends. This supports the notion originally established by Piaget (1932) which posits that children in the early years perceive adults as figures of authority. However, other children

understand conflict in friendship as an issue or disagreement which can be resolved among themselves. This remains consistent with the findings of Turiel and Killen (2010) which suggest even without the intervention of adults, children in the preschool years are responsive to protests from others and can resolve conflicts on their own.

The role of adults has also been explored throughout previous literature with much relevance to ethics and education. The length in which teachers are willing to publicly affirm important values has a significant influence on children's development, during the preschool years. This suggests that when open discussion surrounding friendship values is encouraged or promoted by teachers, children are better able to comprehend the principles which are being explored. This further emphasises the role of teachers throughout ethics education and suggests its implementation in preschool settings would be highly beneficial.

Limitations and reflections

An important limitation of the present study is the relatively small sample size. For this reason, the views expressed throughout represent those of nine children that cannot be applied to the wider community of children, as the normative understanding of friendship for all.

The ETHIKA EU Project is a transnational intervention strategy, thus applying its methods and resources to a broader and more culturally diverse sample size is put forward as a recommendation for future research. This may enable researchers to compare findings on a larger scale and recognise the effect ethics education has on children's and adults' conceptualisation of values in various parts of the world. Potentially, this could lead to significant changes in the field of ethics education, ranging from national policy development to prompting much needed dialogue concerning ethics across communities.

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