

Friendship among toddlers in a Norwegian Kindergarten

The study of friendship among toddlers is hardly an unproblematic endeavor. Considering children as social actors creating social order through interacting with other children, we might get information about the everyday-life of the children through children's perspective (Ivarsson 2003). A main methodological challenge is whether it is possible for an adult to research and capture children's perspective in knowledge construction. Connected with this is also the ethical question if it is appropriate to impose oneself onto the children that make up these cultures and contexts.

A great deal of the recent research on small children is based upon the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and his theories of the phenomenology of the body. The reason to this may be that the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty can provide us with an explanation about what we can observe when looking at small children, even if it might be difficult to conceptualise since small children have not got as yet a well developed verbal language.

The Body-Subject

Through watching a group of toddlers playing together, it becomes obvious that the children are in constant activity with their bodies. They run, jump, climb, clap their hands, laugh, and cry as if they were in a sort of ongoing symphony. The body is not something the child is conscious of, however. It is only in the moment when something hurts somewhere on the body that the child expresses a consciousness of the body. And even then the child will experience the pain as a pain located in the whole body, not in a single part of it. The body is the subject; the child will never experience him- or herself as something outside the body, for the child *is* the body.

Merleau-Ponty (1994) compares the body with a piece of art. The body is a unit where all the pieces are related to each other. Consciousness is shaped through the body and all understanding of the existence goes through the body. Merleau-Ponty says that the human consciousness is not 'I think', but 'I can' (Merleau-Ponty 1994).

Merleau-Ponty is sceptical of all who consider the body as simply a tool and an object to be acknowledged. The recognition of our existence goes through the body, not through the head and cognition. He asserts that we understand both our surroundings and our own

situation through our bodies. The body and its surroundings are in a relation to each other; as such the body and the surroundings refer to each other (Merleau-Ponty 1994).

The body can be regarded as the subject's personal history of life. At the same time, it is obvious that this history of life every moment creates and re-creates itself in new ways. Merleau-Ponty talks about *the body subject* (Merleau-Ponty 1994). The human body is something you *are*, not something you *have*.

The human body 'inhabit the space' in a different way than things do. Merleau-Ponty points out that in the same way as an organist installs him- or herself 'in' the organ, and becomes a part of the instrument by playing at it, the human body inhabits and installs itself in the world of which it is an active part (Merleau-Ponty 1994). The body is not a simple connection of arbitrary parts, but forms a unit of senses, perceptions, thoughts, emotions, language, and movements. The human body constitutes such a unit from birth.

Merleau-Ponty emphasises the inner tie, the obscure bonds between me and the others, and that co-existence is an open, communicative situation. The relationship between the human body and the world is not mechanical, biological or intellectual, but existential. We are situated in the world, and in contact with objects and the life through the body. We perceive, act, feel and talk through the body. As an example, we can look at how a child's joy is expressed (Sandvik 2000). In common speech, we will say that 'the child jumps *for* joy'. Since Merleau-Ponty does not divide the emotions and the body, the jump is considered as the joy. A more accurate way of saying this would be 'the child jumps *in* joy'. The consciousness of the body does not pass through thought.

In principle, both children and adults experience the world through the body. The child's body is situated in the world in the same way as the body of the adult. Løkken (1996) asserts that the bodily experiences of the small children are just as valuable as the experiences of the adults. When observing small children looking for friendship relations, I must consider the children as body-subjects, being together and sharing experiences as body-subjects, even if they do not speak to each other.

Social interaction

The reality of everyday life is shared with others. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962; 1994) human beings are born tied to the world and the other human beings. This means that we are social by definition. A condition for understanding other people is the meeting or the interaction with them. We communicate with other humans through participation in the worlds of each other. Communication is not only the spoken words, but also the existence of

the other, gestures, tones and facial expressions build a totality which tells us about peoples thoughts and way of being. It is not a question of insight or to feel like the other, but an aspiration of understanding the other's existence in the world. Still we can never fully understand other people, because we can never leave our own body and install ourselves in the body of the other. There will always remain something in the other that we never can get access to.

Friendship-relations among toddlers

My study will focus on friendship-relations among two-year-old children, interacting with one another within the everyday context of a Norwegian kindergarten¹. I will attempt to gain the children's perspectives and use these to interpret the children's agency in their peer cultures. In my opinion it is not possible to observe 'friendship' as a phenomenon. What we can observe are the children's interactions and whether one or several children apparently show marked preferences towards others in the peer group. The actual phenomenon in question will be how and to what extent two-year-old children express preferences towards each other within the everyday context of kindergarten in Norway, and try to grasp the meaning in the children's concrete lived world.

One of the issues I seek to address is to challenge the viewpoint that small children do not benefit from social interaction with peers. Traditional theories of socialisation consider development as merely the individual child's internalisation of adult abilities and knowledge. Because of that, these theories attach importance to individual outcomes. Such individualistically based approaches ignore the complexity of social structure, culture, and communicative processes. Socialisation is not only a matter of adaptation and internalisation, but also a process of appropriation, reinvention, and reproduction (Corsaro 2003).

According to Frønes (1994) and Løkken (1996; 2000) peer relations offer something foundational to the children that neither older children nor adults can offer them in the same way. Løkken (2000) focuses the toddler's special way of 'doing' childhood. She points out that the small children interact in many complex ways, exhibiting a sophisticated development of relations, friendship and solidarity through a kindergarten-year. At the same time she argues that the adults in the toddler-group often divert children from social play towards more individual activities or towards more attention to the adults. This argument is supported by Howes, Hamilton and Matheson(1994), who claim that the caregivers who had

¹ I use the notion 'kindergarten' synonymous with 'preschool' and 'day-care'. I prefer the notion 'kindergarten' as it corresponds directly with the Norwegian notion 'barnehage'.

positive, secure relations with small children did not necessarily encourage them into or support positive relations among peers.

Howes et al. argue that it seems as some caregivers prefer to strengthen the relations between the small children and the adults instead of arranging for child-child-relations. My experience is that these tendencies still are found in some Norwegian kindergartens. The clear implication of such arguments is the viewpoint that small children do not necessarily benefit from social relations with peers because they are not able to implement and sustain such relations.

In my opinion, friendship is a phenomenon with value on its own. In addition to that, such relations play an important role in the development of social competence (Corsaro 1987; Lamer 1990; Frønes 1994; Lamer 1997; Ytterhus 2000; Network 2001). Yet, despite the considerable importance for contentment, well-being, and for the development of social competence, there is very little research on friendship-relations among toddlers. Studies of friendship have mostly been based upon interviews of children about their ideas and experiences of friendship. That is probably the reason why the youngest children have been rarely investigated (Whaley and Rubenstein 1994). There are however, a number of pertinent research papers in the area.

The child's perspective in research

My study is based upon the ontological assumption that there exists a child's perspective. Halldén (2003) makes a distinction between the notions 'child-perspective' and 'the child's perspective'. She claims that it is necessary to discuss the meaning of these concepts within the research with children. Child-perspective (in one word) focuses a perspective that aims at taking care of children's conditions and has an effect on the children's benefit. The child's perspective (two words) is a concern to capture a perspective that belongs to the child. In my study, I want to focus on the child's perspective, with the application of phenomenological and ethnographic approaches based on a phenomenology of the lived world. One important question is whether it is possible at all to understand and express the child's perspective. Is it possible to study different phenomena based on children's perspective, their intentions and their experiences of meaning? For what purpose am I doing this? Is it for the benefit of the children, for the science, for me as a researcher or for the teachers? Johansson (2003) claims that the possibility of understanding the child's perspective is closely related to our own perspectives, either as researchers or as teachers. In

my study, my aim is to tell something about children's lives, based on the assumption constituted by the theory of the lived world (according to Merleau-Ponty 1962).

Researchers and teachers may be so blindfolded or preoccupied by their own assumptions about how things should be, that they do not take notice of the surrounding world and its aspects (Qvarsell 2003). Their perspective is directed towards an intended ideal. Adults often capture an ideological viewpoint, interpreting the phenomenon according to how things should be, while children often are engaged in the activity. This will be a challenge for me in my study as well; in particular because I have been a teacher for many years, being used to educate the children and tell them what is 'right' and what is 'wrong'. Therefore I must be careful and always question what I am doing and why I interpret the phenomenon in question the way I do. Both the phenomenological and the ethnographic approach do emphasise such sincerity towards the phenomena in question.

The fundamental view of children in developmental psychology today resembles the ideas and understandings within modern pedagogy. The child's lived world and the child's experiences are in focus. This harmonises with the so-called shift of paradigm within psychology and pedagogy, where the child's perspective is in focus (Sommer 2003). Instead of considering the child as a 'tabula rasa', the child is now considered as a social person able to communicate from the very beginning (Stern 1985; Trevarthen 1993; Sommer 2003).

Ethical questions

Wanting to gain the child's perspective and understand the child's lived world, it is necessary to be close to, and together with the children. This is not always positive, in an ethic point of view. The child might feel the researcher's observations as an invasion of privacy. There is a significant difference between *observing* and *being observed*. This is a question about power relations. The observer has the upper hand over the one being observed. Ethnographers like Corsaro (1987; 1997) have noted that in ethnographic research with children, the researcher is often not regarded as a 'normal' kind of adult by the children. With that the children may not see the researcher as occupying an adult position of power. Using video, this becomes even more explicit. This method has become more and more common in research with children. My experience is that some children do not appreciate being filmed, others are evidently disturbed in their activities, and still others enjoy being a "movie-star". Conflicts between children are an example where the presence of the researcher might offend the children. Another example is when the researcher witness some prohibited activity.

We need to know more about how preference is expressed among children. With a deeper knowledge about how children express preferences towards other children, teachers in kindergartens can help the children to crack the code of interaction. More knowledge about peer relations and friendship among toddlers could clarify this issue.

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