

DRAWING AND WRITING ABOUT FRIENDSHIP AS A WAY TO SUPPORT SOCIAL INCLUSION IN PRIMARY GRADES

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Abstract

When talking about inclusive education in our country, the focus is primarily on learners with lower abilities, but a person's social development is also of decisive importance for academic development, social inclusion and a successful transition to adulthood. Therefore, in addition to learning and teaching, the school must take care of the students' well-being and create a friendly, safe and bullying-free school environment where all students have an equal opportunity to participate in school life and have and express their opinion. Our school participated in the European Commission's project "Social inclusion through student participation" (SIPP). Within the project, in cooperation with partners from Italy, Denmark, Sweden and Switzerland, a friendship survey was conducted in the first grade of school in each country, where students had to draw a picture of friendship at school and write briefly what they think about it. This report presents the results of the survey conducted with the students of the partner school in our country. The sample included 26 girls and 22 boys. The article analyzes children's use of pictures and words and its connection with social inclusion in the school environment. The "draw and write" method was used, because young children can express their emotions most effectively in this way. The pictures drawn about friendship were divided into six thematic areas, which were defined in cooperation with international project partners: situations (16), emotions (10), symbols (10), classrooms (5), houses and homes (4) and mathematical visualization (3). The easiest way for children to handle the concept of friendship was through situational approach, as well as describing emotions and symbolism.

Keywords: *Social inclusion, student participation, inclusive education in the 1st grade, friendliness, drawing analysis.*

1. Introduction

All students should feel accepted and valued, regardless of their intellectual, social, physical, cultural, or other features (Hastings & Oakford, 2010), because research has shown that a key factor for academic development, social inclusion and for successful transition to adulthood is a person's social development (Vlachou et al., 2016). The goal of social inclusion in school is for guaranteeing the welfare of the students, namely that everyone would feel safe and well, despite their special needs or idiosyncrasies (Ikumelu, Oyibe, & Oketa, 2015).

Before the age of ten, children have an easier time expressing their feelings through drawing rather than verbal communication (Grosse, Streubel, Gunzenhauser & Saalbach, 2021). At the same time, student's comments help us understand the subject matter of the relevant art. Many previous studies have focused on children's drawings, looking at them from behavioral and emotional viewpoints and analysing use of color and featured objects, along with their size, placement, and level of detail (Degura & Nutbrown, 2017; Mandrapa, 2015).

2. Social inclusion

The results from the research of Schwab, Zurbriggen and Venetz (2020) point out that inclusion should not only focus on academic success but that one should also look at the student's social-emotional development. In a school environment it is important to support student's welfare, make their voice heard and to strengthen self-regulation. One must observe student's social inclusion in the classroom because inclusion in a non-formal activity may not translate into inclusion in a classroom in a formal activity. Norwegian pedagogy scientists Nordahl, Jahnsen, Støen, & Tinnesand (2016) confirm the fact that students do well in school when they experience good relations with both teachers and their peers, and when they feel valued.

2.1. Friendship

Friendly relationships are not only important for individual development, they are also necessary for successful community life (Bradburn, 1960).

The focus of friendship changes as age changes and intimacy and loyalty become important. Marcone, Caputo, and della Monica (2015) found that preschoolers clearly have difficulty defining the term friend. At school age, this difficulty disappears, although the reasoning remains self-centered: A friend is someone who helps us achieve our goals and do what we want.

2.2. Drawing as creating a visual text

Drawings are the reflectors and highlighters of the child's inner world (Bastrup-Madsen, 2001).

Before the age of ten, emotions play an important role in vocabulary acquisition, so it is often easier for primary school students to draw abstract and emotion-related feelings than verbal speech. Their thoughts and feelings are conveyed by colors, shapes, the presence, or absence of objects in the picture and the location of the object on the paper (Grosse, Streubel, Gunzenhauser, & Saalbach, 2021).

Children's drawings can be studied schematically from different angles such as action (dynamic aspect), symbolic representation, functional dependence and thought (Athey, 1990). The pictures often show a cause-and-effect relationship (Deguara & Nutbrown, 2017). The pictures are places where something actually happens, and the creation of schematic scenes is based on the child's own experiences. Thus, pictures are an objective source for understanding the child's experiences with still abstract words. Since the child likes to use many symbolic elements, the best way to interpret the pictures would be to let the child come up with the meanings of the symbols themselves (Coates & Coates, 2006).

Degura and Nutbrown (2017) point out that the colors convey the emotions that the situation caused, also the colors describe the children's nature, for example, purple and black suggest a dominant child who constantly needs something.

In pictures, the rule is that the most important figures are brought out larger. Impulsive children are tall, neckless, and have asymmetrical body parts. Concern is signaled by clouds, rain, people with no or closed eyes, and images of flying birds. When the child is angry, he draws people with big long arms and teeth, and when he is insecure, he draws crooked armless monsters with tiny heads (Mandrapa, 2015).

The researchers believe that the first glance at the drawing and the general impression left by it are the most important. Attention should be paid to whether the picture is ready, what colors have been used, how things are located and how big they are (Uzunboylu & Evram, 2017) and repeated motifs (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011).

3. Objectives

The team of the School of Educational Sciences of Tallinn University participated in an international project, and this study was carried out in school(s) in Estonia, Italy, Denmark, Sweden and Switzerland within the framework of one of the activities of the European Commission's project "Social inclusion through student participation". This article deals with data from an Estonian school, but the subject areas defined jointly with the project partners have been used in the analysis of the drawings.

The aim of this study is to find out how first grade students draw friendliness and with which expressions they characterize it. The following research questions were posed: How do first grade students express friendliness by drawing? What words and sentences do primary school students use to characterize friendliness? How does drawing and expressing friendship change as the student grows older?

We assume that understanding the concept of friendship is related to the child's age and becomes more detailed, deeper and multi-layered as the age increases.

4. Methods

A small private school from Estonia participated in the study, whose development plan aims to support the potential development of each individual according to the environment. 12 students from the first grade (8 girls and 4 boys), 12 from the second grade (5 girls, 7 boys), 12 from the third grade (5 girls, 7 boys) and 12 from the fourth grade (8 girls and 4 boys) participated in the study. The whole sample (N = 48) consisted of 1.-4. 26 girls and 22 boys study in the class.

Since children's drawings can be treated as visual texts transmitted as pictures (Albers, 2007), we chose the term drawing as one of the data collection methods because of its abstractness, in order to simplify the description of friendliness for students. The children were not asked to talk about their picture, although there were some who wrote explanatory sentences for their drawings. The activity was conducted once with each class by a researcher whom the students had not met before. As an introductory

activity, a theme matching game was organized where they thought of adjectives for a teddy bear and then the children could say whether they thought it was friendly or not.

To collect data, students were given an A4 paper and asked to draw a picture of friendship on one side of the page and write 3-10 sentences about friendship on the other side of the page. No further instructions were given, the first class was helped to write sentences if necessary. The children had 45 minutes to complete the task. There were colored pencils on the tables, which the children could use as they wished.

Compositional interpretation was used as a data analysis method in the analysis of children's drawings, during which one tries to understand the meaning of the picture and looks at the content, color range, spatial arrangement and expressiveness (Rose, 2001). Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the words and sentences written by the students, which allows the researcher to analyze the respondents' experiences and understand their assessments and interpretations of different situations (Laherand, 2008; Öunapuu, 2014).

5. Results and discussion

The pictures drawn about friendship were divided into six topics: situations (16), emotions (10), symbols (10), classrooms (5), houses and homes (4) and mathematical visualization (3). Thus, it can be argued that the easiest way for children to handle the concept of friendship was through situational approach, as well as describing emotions and symbolism.

Most of the **situation drawings** (N = 16) depict some kind of situation, and all pictures were dominated by friendly and positive solutions. When drawing situations, it is like small stories that the child conveys (Bastrup-Madsen, 2001). Four children have located their activity by the sea, although the zig-zag line used for the sea can be considered as an imitation of writing (Worthington, 2009).

Emotions were depicted ten times in the pictures. One emotion image consists of two neatly drawn children holding their pets side by side. The children's faces are satisfied. A study by Missaghi-Lakshman and Whissell (1991) shows that it is easiest for children to depict happy and sad emotions, while other emotions are more difficult to express in a drawing. In many cases, happiness is conveyed only by the line of the mouth, including the position of the mouth is not important in terms of emotion (Cannoni, Pinto & Bombi, 2021). The teacher rarely appears in the pictures.

In the images of the symbols, four had rainbows, which (Fogarty, 2018) refer to bright children with positive thoughts and experiences. One picture shows a head with big eyes and a big mouth, from which it can be concluded that the child is a good communicator and once again feels positively watched by an adult. In addition, there is a sun in the picture, which, as already described, indicates a bright world picture.

Classrooms were shown in five pictures, but three of them do not have students and are drawn as empty rooms. In one picture, the classroom has a barred doorway and the way out of the door is green, which may indicate that the child feels safe and comfortable only outside the classroom, while in the classroom he is rather shy (Albers, 2007).

Children can give different meanings to **houses and homes** (Fogarty, 2018), but in general they reflect the surrounding situation. Although the task was to draw friendliness in a school context, we got drawings of four houses, two of which were nice and tidy, surrounded by friendly activities. One of the houses drawn was sloppy and in some places the shape of the bars appeared. Houses are symbols of stability and structure and give us a description of the life we experience, bars suggest that the child experiences the depicted place as a prison (Fogarty, 2018).

Pictures expressing **mathematical thinking** were the least of the given sample (N = 3). These pictures represented scales for rating different behaviors and communicated through facial expressions and graded representation what is positive behavior and what is not. Such repeated use of faces as images testifies to students' need to emphasize certain aspects and their understanding (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011).

Adding **verbal explanations** to the concept of friendliness was quite difficult in the **first grade**. Children wrote down words related to friendship. The most common words were friend and good friend (N = 9). Activities that can be done with a friend or a friendly person were described: I can play with him (N = 7), I can play football (N = 2), I can visit him (N = 2). An activity that the friend does not do was also mentioned: the friend does not hit (N = 2), but the children can sing, ride a bike and talk about things with him. Friends should be kind and share things.

Second grad students began to write about things that two people have in common, such as the sentence: A friend is someone you want to do things with all the time and he enjoys being with you. The ability to generalize was born - friendliness is when people are like brothers, love the same things. It was also considered important that the friend was smart enough. When describing friendliness, the word

friendly (N = 4), playing together (N = 3) was mentioned. In contrast to the first class, belonging was highlighted: It is important for a friend to recognize you in front of others, saying hello was highlighted (N = 3) and being a support to a friend (N = 4).

The difference for the **third graders** was that when the children wrote about what a friend should do and what they do, the good things were in the form of an action, and the things the friend should not do were in the form of a command. Writing about friendliness, the emphasis had also shifted to the use of words, friendliness is expressed in politeness (N = 2), nice language (N = 4), not cursing (N = 3), in addition to saying hello and acting like a friend cannot be arrogant. Not gossiping and being honest were mentioned twice. Being friendly also meant not being ignored (N = 2). Sharing things, worksheets, and pens is still an important feature of friendliness (N = 8).

In the case of **fourth-grade** students, due to their greater linguistic ability, unlike the above-mentioned classes, they answered with proper full sentences that contained both analysis elements and students' emotions. One boy wrote: I think a friend is a person who shares things, helps and doesn't hit. For girls, the verbal part is more important: I like it when someone listens to me and answers my questions. Invites me to play and explains how to do it.

Again, not hitting (N = 6) and being helpful (N = 5) were mentioned the most. Yelling not being loved is mentioned twice in relation to friendliness in this age group as a new thing. And in the words of one girl: A friendly person will not hurt you physically or emotionally.

6. Conclusions

Most of the drawings depicted situations, and all of them had an overwhelming positive emotion or supportive behavior. An earlier theory also points out that when drawing situations, it is like small stories that the child conveys (Bastrup-Madsen, 2001). Images describing situations are dominated by images describing sharing, standing up for the other, consoling and playing together. Families are also involved in friendship.

There were ten times each of emotions and symbols in the drawings, emotions are conveyed mainly by facial expressions and body positions, and in the case of symbols, a rainbow and the sun are depicted several times, which indicate bright emotions. Most of the emotions were positive, but there were also some that indicated anger or insecurity. The teacher rarely appeared in the pictures. Earlier studies (Missaghi-Lakshman & Whissell, 1991; Cannoni et al., 2021) have also shown that it is easiest for children to imagine joy and sadness, so for example happiness is conveyed in many cases only with the line of the mouth.

In this study, the children themselves were not asked for verbal explanations about the drawings.

Based on children's written texts, it can be pointed out that for students, friendliness means an emotionally warm personality, with whom it is easy to communicate and relate, without negative emotions. The criterion of friendliness is also respect for others (respects people's feelings, ideas and beliefs) and public acknowledgment of one's friends in front of others. Friendliness also includes the ability to show patience and care and take enough time for people. Friendliness is considered more of a character trait than a skill, but it is also something that can be learned and improved.

Social involvement and friendliness are key words in the development of a complete person, despite the abstract nature of the concept, it turned out that, both verbally and in drawings, children understand friendship as sharing things, acting together, caring for each other, helping, respecting, standing up for the protection of others, as well as safety and reliability. While the word usage was slightly different by age level with different emphases and also by gender, the age characteristics did not differ when drawing.

Acknowledgments

The study was completed within the framework of the European Commission's project "Social inclusion through student participation", where a similar study was conducted in the schools of different countries participating in the project. We thank the schools and students who participated in the study!

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