

The Friendship Network Stability of Preschool Children during One Pedagogical Season

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Abstract : This longitudinal study aims to examine how five- and six-year-old children's peer relationships are formed and fostered during one preschool year in a southwestern Finnish preschool. All 16 kindergarteners participated in the study (at dyad level N=240; i.e., 16 x 15 relationships among the children). The children were divided into four daily groups, based on the table order during the daily routines, and four intervention groups, based on the teachers' pedagogical plan. During the intervention, one iPad was given to each group in order to stimulate interaction among peers and, thus, enable the children to form new peer relationships. In the data gathering, sociometric nomination techniques were used to investigate the nature (i.e., stability and mutuality) of the peer relationships. The data was collected five times during the year to see what kind of peer relationship changes occurred at the dyad level and the group level, i.e., in establishing and losing friendship ties among the children. Social network analyses were used to analyze the data. The results indicate that the children's preference for gender segregation was strong compared to age preference and intervention. In all, the number of reciprocal friendship ties and the mutual absence of friendship ties increased towards the end of the year, whereas the number of unilateral friendship ties decreased. This indicates that children's nominations narrow down; thus, the group structure becomes more crystalized. Instead of extending their friendship networks, children seek stable and mutual relationships with their peers in their middle childhood years. The intervention only had a slightly negative influence on children's peer relationships.

Keywords : intervention study, peer relationship, preschool education, social network analysis, sociometric ratings

Conference Title : ICECDSE 2017 : International Conference on Early Childhood Development and Science Education

Conference Location : Madrid, Spain

Conference Dates : March 26-27, 2017