“She is Not a True Friend”: Drawing Social Borders Through the Discourse of Friendship in an Israeli Elementary School

Friendship is central to the everyday life experiences of girls in school. By defining and managing their friendships, girls also demarcate powerful social borders. My ethnographic research, based on a year-long participant observation in a fifth-grade elementary classroom in a low-income, multi-cultural neighborhood in the centre of Israel, explores the ways in which girls understand, create and negotiate friendship and its boundaries, in response – and sometimes in opposition – to their teachers’ discourses on the subject. In this presentation, I seek to foreground how the school staff’s discourses and practices of friendship enabled the girls to construct and manoeuvre social borders in the classroom. The minute ethnographic exploration of the construction and negotiation of friendship borders, which I propose here, can expand our understanding of socialization to belonging and of the cultural logics and meanings of friendship. Additionally, this examination can contribute to our knowledge of the lived experiences of girls in schools, and the ways in which they adapt school discourses for their own purposes.

The culturally specific meanings and bordering processes of friendship, employed by both the girls and the school staff, merit detailed description. The public school system in Israel places significant emphasis on fostering friendships between classmates and, ultimately, on molding them into a cohesive peer group. During class time and recess, the school staff stressed the importance of friendship between all classmates. They encouraged their students to share school supplies, snacks, and feelings, and initiated numerous conversations about friendship and its role in shaping reciprocal and supportive ties. Friendship became nothing less than a moral imperative in the school. Through the discourses of friendship, the staff strengthened the borders of the class as a significant social category, striving to create within it a sense of community, belonging and moral commitment.

However, friendship with all their classmates was not a goal the girls were necessary interested in pursuing and – in common with their teachers, who admitted this privately – did not find this objective feasible. Moreover, the assumption that all the classmates would be able to find common ground threatened the individuality of the students. In response, the girls used the discourse of friendship to demarcate other, more flexible and exclusive borders between them. They employed the school’s logics of friendship to negotiate the borders of friendship and belonging. For example, they transformed the demand to share school supplies and snacks into a site for tense negotiations of friendship and its limits and used the concept of a “true friend” as a basis for moral judgments. Furthermore, several girls designated each other as “best friends”, thus introducing a more exclusive and hierarchy-based meaning of friendship; this modified and challenged the friendship principles of support and reciprocity promoted by the school staff. Simultaneously, the girls acknowledged the inclusive demands of the school staff by labouring to perform the moral role of the “friendly student” in front of them.

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