

# Exploring Children's Peer Relationships through Verbal and Non-verbal Communication: A Qualitative Action Research Focused on Waldorf Pedagogy

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This study analyzes the relationships that children around seven and eight years old establish in a classroom. It shows that peer relationships have a positive dimension with features such as the development of children's creativity to communicate and modify norms. These features were found through an analysis of children's verbal and non-verbal communication and an interdisciplinary view of children's learning process from Rudolf Steiner, founder of Waldorf Pedagogy, and Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, specialists in children's cognitive and social dimensions. This research is an invitation to recognize children's capacity to construct their own rules in peer relationships.

*Key words:* Peer relationships, verbal and non-verbal communication, child's cognitive and social development

Este estudio analiza las relaciones que niños (que comparten edad, lugar y condición escolar) establecen en clase y muestra que dichas relaciones tienen una dimensión positiva con características tales como el desarrollo de la creatividad para comunicarse y modificar normas. Estos aspectos fueron encontrados a través de un análisis sobre la comunicación verbal y no verbal, y una visión interdisciplinaria desde la perspectiva de Rudolf Steiner, fundador de la Pedagogía Waldorf; Jean Piaget, y Lev Vygotsky, especialistas en la dimensión cognitiva y social del niño. Esta investigación es una invitación a reconocer la capacidad del niño para construir sus propias reglas.

*Palabras clave:* Relaciones entre individuos que comparten edad, lugar y condición escolar, comunicación verbal y no verbal, desarrollo cognitivo y social del niño

## Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to analyze children's peer relationships through their verbal and non-verbal communication. The research question, "What does children's verbal and non-verbal communication tell us about their peer

relationships?”), aimed to understand how a group of third-graders of a Colombian elementary school interacted among themselves, and how their peer relationships were determined by their own language and communicative conventions. Another main reason to carry out this study was the result of a diagnosis and intervention in which two difficulties were identified. The first one was their lack of interest in English writing activities and the second was their interest in being heard and in participating cooperatively.

During the process of analysis, two main categories provided alternatives for interpreting the research question of this study. The categories, children’s peer relationship as a reciprocal relationship and children’s relationship as a modifier of interactional and communicative patterns, revealed how the child was not only a receptor but also an active modifier of social relationships and communicative conventions. In this study, the view of the child went beyond his/her abilities to copy social patterns. This is an invitation to see the world of children from an interdisciplinary view in order to propose pedagogical alternatives in which different opportunities of socialization and autonomy will aid their growing up healthily.

### *Participants’ Profile and Setting*

The population of this research project was comprised of third graders between seven and eight years old in a public school in Bogotá. My teaching intervention was carried out twice a week for four months. I applied ten lesson plans focused on Waldorf Pedagogy. I played the role of observer, designer, teacher, and researcher. My students played the role of collaborators through their comments, ideas and opinions.

### *The Problem & Research Questions*

This action research was based on a diagnosis and my interest as a teacher-researcher. The first research interest was to explore how children’s peer relationships were developed and characterized in a classroom setting. I did not determine a problematic situation related to their behavior; instead, I noticed that they implicitly demanded activities in which they were heard and in which they could participate more actively. I also wanted to research how they established and developed their peer relationships, and how I could help them improve this relationship from my teaching intervention.

The second aspect that caught my attention was children's responses when they did some English writing activities. They verbally expressed their lack of interest in these kinds of activities; for example, when my students said, "Las letras del inglés me mare:::an" ("English words make me cra:::zy"; Carlos, in field notes number 6) and "Cuando yo escribo me su:::dan las manos y suelto el esfero" ("When I write, my hands begin to swe:::at and then my pen falls down." / Santiago, in a conference). After talking to them, we analyzed these specific responses as an excuse to avoid writing English sentences. Their responses emerged not only from what they said but also from how they expressed that message with faces of dislike.

### *Theoretical Considerations*

#### **Child's cognitive and social development from different perspectives**

The main construct identified as children's peer relationships is described mainly through the child's cognitive and social development exposed by Rudolf Steiner, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. Their perspectives about a child's cognitive and social development and my own understanding were related in order to provide insight about the specific purpose of this research.

Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian scientist and pedagogue, articulated stages of psychological development with a social and pedagogical view divided into septenniums throughout human life. The first three of these stages, which correspond very much with Piaget's stages of childhood, were first presented in Steiner's 1911 essay, "The Education of the Child". His stages or septenniums were interesting not only for his description but also for his pedagogical suggestions to meet the main necessities of each stage. According to him, the second septennium starts when children are six or seven years old. The main characteristic of this stage is imagination, since children are looking at the world with eyes of explorers, not only with the mere vision of duplicators of actions.

Based on an analysis of age, Steiner (1925, as cited in Sagarin, 2005) refers to a transformation "about age seven, more accurately associated with the loss of baby teeth, a process that often takes more than a year and can begin at age five or be prolonged well past age seven" (p. 32). I placed emphasis on age because even if it is not a strict parameter, it is relevant to the analysis of peer relationships and communication. I consider that the second septennium is the beginning of children's

understanding of the way social relationships work. They begin to understand the cause-effect process in their own relationships.

The analysis of cognitive and social development in seven and eight year-old children is enriched by both Steiner's and Piaget's perspectives. Piaget (1955, as cited in Sagarin, 2005, p. 32) emphasizes not the timing of the child's development, but the order of succession. From his point of view, time and previous experience, his/her maturation, and social influence can accelerate or retard the beginning of a stage. It means that chronology, for Steiner and Piaget, is variable; it is not a strict rule for human development. They expose a tentative but analytical description of the child's development.

Steiner's and Piaget's stages are pretty similar. Even though both theories are complementary; there is one notorious distinction between the authors: the pedagogical purposes. The point of Steiner's descriptions was not to normalize a child's place in a class but to provide insights for better teaching (Sagarin, 2005, p. 33). That is the main reason I emphasized Steiner's perspective. He included not only physiological and cognitive aspects in his works (as Piaget did) but also a real application of his ideas about teaching and learning processes. Steiner suggests that the cognitive dimension should be directly related to the affective one. For him, the affective dimension opens the door of the cognitive one. It means that if we want to help our learners internalize certain concepts, we can do it through their interests. In this research, my students' interests were topics related to ecology, and activities in which they could speak, move and participate among themselves. This analysis was crucial for the pedagogical design of this study.

Expanding on the literature review to understand the interdisciplinary purpose of this study, there is another complementary perspective described by Vygotsky. The major theme of Vygotsky's theory is that social interaction plays an essential role in the development of cognition and language. Vygotsky (1978) states, "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological)" (p. 57). The direction of this process is different from Piaget's, but they are complementary. Vygotsky paid attention to the social dimension in which environment's role is a modifier of the cognitive process.

Vygotsky viewed cognitive development as a result or process of a double-way road, in which the child learns through shared experiences with someone else, such as parents, teachers or peers. The social dimension in Vygotsky's theories is interesting

as this study analyzes peer relationships among contemporary learners. I think that peer relationships allow individuals to explore other channels of communication in order to remember things more easily and decode communicative conventions, and, why not, create other interactional patterns in their peer relationships.

### *Relationships among Same-Age Children*

A peer is a person who is the same age and shares some characteristics with one. From my own experience, the term peer relationship covers mainly three shared characteristics: age, setting, and role. My students were starting the second septennium of life (seven and eight years old), they were in the same classroom, and they were third graders.

In this study the child's communicative role is analyzed simultaneously with their peer relationships because they both are complementary and let the children's creativity influence their environment. As in my case, many researchers and teachers have become progressively more aware of the active role of the child in social activities. Children are beginning to be seen as active participants in adopting and modifying conventions and interactions and, more importantly, in constructing their own rules in peer relationships. This view about children's participation can help teachers, parents, and researchers understand and design pedagogical strategies to stimulate learners' learning process and peer relationships.

According to Sullivan (as cited in Chen, French & Schneider, 2006), being accepted by peers and establishing close relationships or "chumships" with peers are intrinsic needs of children during the period of childhood and preadolescence. Although Sullivan emphasizes peer relationships mainly in terms of their functions in the development of a sense of well-being or self-validation, the needs for peer affiliation and "belongingness" may motivate children to modify their behavior to conform to peer norms. The role of the interaction among same-age individuals is essential to enriching the process mentioned by Vygotsky (1978), in which the inner process of understanding and socialization is related to the influence of the environment.

### *Innovation & Pedagogical Intervention*

After a diagnosis in which my learners showed a lack of interest in English writing activities and an interest in topics of nature, I paid attention to two main areas:

activities based on rhythmic, kinesic and interpretive activities; and, the natural world (including a reflection on ecology).

This action research let me set the following pedagogical objectives: (1) To stimulate learners' participation through rhythmic, kinesic and interpretive activities which foster individual and cooperative participation in a classroom setting; and (2) To motivate learners to interpret, through English sentences, different contexts which lead to their developing creative processes of verbal and non-verbal communication.

## **Waldorf Pedagogy in a Foreign Language Classroom**

This action research was focused on Waldorf Pedagogy. Mitchell (2006) says that one notable and unique aspect of Waldorf education is the alignment of the curriculum with the phases of child development and cognitive awakening. Related to this is the social interaction among teachers, students, and peers through each of the phases.

Taking into account the research question and the Waldorfian perspective, I designed ten teaching interventions with activities that gave children the possibility of speaking among themselves, listening to others, painting, and following creating new rhythms and movements, both individually and cooperatively. Yet it was not an easy task since it demanded a lot of time invested in looking for information, designing materials and internalizing and creating new concepts and rhythms that I had explored years ago. Besides, I was the vehicle to foment reflection; it meant that I was the first person who should reflect on each topic. After a reflection on what topics could be appropriate and appealing to them, the syllabus was designed from an ecological perspective.

### ***Methodology***

Students' relationships were stimulated through three pedagogical and social stages: verbal and kinesic activities, a "*What is it?*" activity, and an *artistic activity*. First, the verbal and kinesic activities (warm up) sought to introduce the general topic. Through these activities, my learners had the opportunity to move (e.g. handclapping) by intoning a rhythm and creating another one.

After the warm-up, the next step was "What is it?", an activity to interpret, relate and "read" more than words. In this step, three different clues were written on the

whiteboard in English using more than two colorful markers and pictures. Each clue was pronounced by me and then by my students while they progressively tried to interpret each one of the sentences. Children guessed relationships between the drawings, cognates, and the questions; and between my voice and movements.

The third pedagogical step was focused on drawing activities. Analyzing the effects of the activity of drawing on children, Embrey-Stine and Schuberth (1999) argue, "there are many sound reasons which support the feeling that form drawing is good for children. The simplest and perhaps most straight-forward reason is that it develops the fine motor skills as a preparation, and later a support for writing" (p.1). Based on my experience, I think that form drawing helped my children develop more the fine motor including eye-hand coordination. Besides, as Embrey-Stine and Schuberth (1999) mention, "form drawing also works in the other direction: the movements of the hand also educate the brain. It also teaches thinking but in a non-intellectual way; it trains the intelligence to be flexible" (p. 2). The drawing is the result of the process of a team job between the brain and the hands.




Each one of the described pedagogical steps allowed my students to develop a critical sense about environmental damage and serious situations such as endangered species and pollution. This process of reflection stimulated their and my sensibility and awareness as members of a community.

This pedagogical design is an invitation to apply those strategies to foster the view of a better world where our next generations can enjoy what we are wasting or ignoring. It is time to act, reflect and propose some analysis and solutions inside and outside classrooms in order to achieve more comprehension of our environmental problems and our intervention in different contexts. Table 1 summarizes my instructional design in a lesson of fifty-five minutes.

Through my experience, I realized that my learners expressed their own opinions about ecology. They proposed simple actions (e.g. not throwing garbage on the ground, and more complex ones like cleaning up the ocean). Through sentences such as "I think that..." or "I believe that..." I noticed that they wanted to express their points of view. They could express their opinions individually while doing tasks in small groups. On the other hand, they showed a major interest in interpreting contexts rather than in translating sentences. At the beginning they preferred to translate sentences to interpret them, but progressively, I observed that they did not ask me to translate; instead, they participated, explaining why they had identified the hidden clue in the description of an animal or object. I also noticed that they could

recognize English sentences with their meanings and liked to pronounce the words after I pronounced them.

**Table 1.** Pedagogical Stages

Pedagogical Stages	Characteristics
<p>Rhythmic and kinesis activity (20 min)</p> 	<p>Written sentences using rhythmic pairs related to the general topic (e.g. Can you bake? Asked the snake).</p> <p>Written words on the board using big letters, different colors and beautiful handwriting.</p> <p>Pronunciation through conventions (e.g. C: clapping ; HoD: hands on the desk).</p> <p>Drawings and extra material.</p> <p>Pronunciation individually and cooperatively.</p>
<p>Interpretive activity</p> 	<p>Three English clues written on the blackboard using big letters, different colors and beautiful handwriting.</p> <p>Placing emphasis on interpretation and body language.</p> <p>Drawings and extra material.</p> <p>Sharing learners' interpretation individually and cooperatively.</p>
<p>Artistic activity</p> 	<p>Form drawing e.g. draw five roads between the rabbits' house and the river.</p> <p>Sharing learners' work by pairs.</p> <p>Reflection on the general topic.</p>



I also realized that my learners began to write English sentences with a positive attitude. I used to create some drawings below the key words written on the whiteboard. I think that my drawings and the relationships between them and the



English words motivated my learners to write and then draw. On the other hand, I wrote big letters and used different colors and beautiful images, so that the blackboard was appealing to them and they could see it very well. It is relevant to mention that the third activity was a tool to stimulate their writing skills. Through form drawings, they explored different ways to draw and write. We played with colors, sizes, shapes and drawings while writing.

In order to summarize the research and pedagogical intervention, the next figure shows the specific process:

**Table 2.** Researchable Situations and Specific Pedagogical Activities

Researchable situations	Pedagogical intervention
<p>Lack of interest in English writing activities</p> 	<p>Artistic activities (e.g. form drawing). Extra material in the activities (Use of different colors, drawings, font). Opportunities to go to the board and write or draw. Rhythmic activities to listen, read, clap, speak then write.</p>
<p>Need of activities to participate individually and cooperatively</p> 	<p>Activity of individual and in group pronunciation. Questions to answer individually about our role as members of a community. Tasks to share elements (drawings, pencils) in which they had to agree on different roles.</p>

## The Study Design

### *Type of Study: Qualitative Action Research*

This qualitative study aims at understanding situations through systematic research in which the participants' voices as well as my observations, interpretations,

reflections, and the connection with the lit review were taken into account. This study can be described as action research because my study looked for a type of transformation in a natural setting and real participants. As Kemmis (as cited in Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) mentions, “the action research becomes involved in creating change not in artificial settings where the effects can be studied and reported dispassionately, but in the real world of social practice” (p. 33). I did not look for applying some research or pedagogical strategies, or taking out data and reporting those results. I really wanted to generate transformations especially for my participants and for me as a teacher-researcher. I think that we (the children and I as a teacher-researcher) explored more than I ever expected. This was a process that I will never forget.

Along the research process, I took into account several aspects such as the difficulty evidenced by my own population in the diagnosis, my personal interest in the researchable situations, and the dialogue among students (students, head teacher, and teachers of other subjects such as social studies and biology and me). Besides, I considered the impact of the project on my participants and myself, the process of interpretation and the appropriate language to describe it, and my ethical standing as a teacher-researcher in the management of the data and conclusions.

Taking into account the cyclical process in action research, I completed two cycles (diagnosis, delimitations of the specific research situations, application of pedagogical and research purposes, data collection and analysis, conclusions, and reflection of the results). The first cycle was relevant to explore the context and design a variety of activities according to my children’s needs and interest. The second cycle was enriched thanks to the experience that I had gained along the process. In this step, the theory, the data collection and analysis of the preliminary patterns, categories and samples were shared with my colleagues, tutors, and children who enriched the analysis of this study.

### *Data Collection, Instruments and Procedures*

With the purpose of collecting data about the children’s verbal and non-verbal communication, the instruments and procedures used in this study were teacher field notes (observation), transcripts (audio recording and observation) and finally the transcripts taken from a conference. I collected those data in a systematic way, taking into account research protocol (consent forms signed by children’s relatives, a piloting process carried out with other population

similar to their characteristics of age and setting). Observations were made in each one of my lessons paying attention to verbal, kinesic and paralinguistic channels. After each one of my interventions, I wrote (teacher field notes) about different aspects which were expanded upon when I listened to the audio recordings. While I re-wrote my field notes, I underlined (using different colors to begin classifying them) specific situations that could be relevant to the second instrument of research (transcripts).

Progressively, I identified relevant transcripts to be explored in the third instrument. At the end of the project, a conference was conducted to analyze my participants' responses, expanding my personal perceptions and inferences through their own voice and behavior. To conduct the conference (after a piloting process with six second-graders chosen at random), I designed sixteen questions which were analyzed at home by my students (six of them who had attended my lessons had expressed an interest in my research project and had the consent form signed by their relatives). After a week, we talked without reading the questions; we talked in an informal way discussing what they wanted to expand on or comment on. Thanks to this last stage, which was recorded and transcribed, I realized that there were different aspects I had not taken into account. Furthermore, I could elaborate on some inferences made during the study.

## Findings

After a long process of analysis and data triangulation procedure, the emerging categories were *Children's relationship as a reciprocal relationship* and *Children's relationship as a modifier of interactional and communicative patterns*. Each of them was divided into subcategories which were illustrated by my role as a teacher-researcher and children's responses, and the literature review to explain certain concepts related to cognitive and social development. The categories aimed at answering the research question and fomenting reflection on children's peer relationships in a classroom setting.

The data analysis of this study consisted of two steps: First, the categorization of some preliminary issues in each one of the instruments when I finished this process, and second, the definition of preliminary patterns that answered the research question and that were the result of data triangulation. It was a long process of sharing the findings with other teachers, partners, and tutors. After some months of reading and analyzing, I defined two categories and their corresponding

subcategories. Through the literature review, I gave answers to my research question in order to conclude the second cycle of this action research.

From the data analysis, the main category was *Children's relationship as a reciprocal relationship*, which revealed three subcategories: (“Gra::cias”: Expression of gratitude, “*Como me ayudan, yo los ayudo*”: Expressing solidarity, and “¡Bra:::vo!”: Expressing congratulation) of a bilateral response. Having established this first category, I started to wonder in what way a student-student relationship could modify their own environment, including interactional patterns through linguistic, kinesic and paralinguistic expressions. From this perspective, the first category was related to human relationships (among peers), and the second category, *Children's relationships as a modifier of interactional patterns and communication*, was related to the children's participation and influence on communication and their context. In this second category, two subcategories (*Imitating as a modifier of communicative channels* and *Social distance among peers as a modifier of interaction*) emerged through the same analysis of verbal and non-verbal communication.

### ***First Category: Children's Relationship as a Reciprocal Relationship***

The main category *Children's relationship as a reciprocal relationship* reveals how the children adopted external patterns making them very notorious or relevant to their perceptions and actions. Their peer relationship was revealed as a two-way street, seen by my students as a type of equity. The balance was more evident in positive actions than in negative reactions. Negative relationships of peer pressure were not evident, perhaps because some strategies of democracy were applied (through dialogue) in that group by different teachers, especially by the social studies teacher.

Paying attention to the social relationship among children, Piaget (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) says “... the term social corresponds to two very distinct realities in the affective sense” (p. 116). The first reality is the relationship between the child and the adult which, according to this author, “is the source of educational and verbal transmissions of cultural elements in the cognitive sense, and of specific sentiments, in particular the moral sentiments in the affective sense” (p. 116). The second reality, center of this study, is “... the social relationship among the children themselves, and in part between children and adults, but as a continuous and constructive process of reciprocal socialization and no longer simply a unilateral transmission” (p. 116). For Piaget the process of socialization is progressive rather than regressive. Although behaviors related to autonomy are beginning to appear in this stage of life, “the child

of seven and over is more socialized than the self of early childhood which is in interdependence with others” (p. 117).

Youniss (1980, as cited in Dixson, 2005) proposes a Sullivan-Piaget theory of relationship development, stating that children experience two “strands” of relationship development: a unilateral relationship (parent-child) and a bilateral or reciprocal relationship (peer-peer). Youniss, based on his and others’ works, argues that before the age of nine, children engage in direct reciprocity. Positive behavior is responded to with positive behavior; negative behavior is responded to with negative behavior. When positive acts are reciprocated, children are friends; when negative acts are reciprocated, they are not. These relationships are defined in terms of interchanges and are not very stable. In this study, positive reciprocal behaviors were more evident than negative ones, perhaps as a consequence of the pedagogical intervention based on rhythmic and kinesic activities in which students could work individually, by pairs, and as a group. Also, thanks to the intervention of the head teacher and other teachers there was a focus on respect and solidarity.

### **First subcategory: “*Gra:::cias*”: *Expressing gratitude***

According to my students’ comments and my direct observation and reflection, “*Gra:::cias*”: *Expressing gratitude* was an action that required reciprocity because it expressed a type of compromise when someone received a favor from a peer. A variety of learnt words such as “*Gra:::cias*” (Thank you) and behaviors such as returning objects that were lent by another person are part of understanding the process culturally learnt and adapted to by a group.

It is necessary to mention the role of affective and socio-cultural factors as generators of interactional patterns in this type of study. As Kiersch (1997) mentions, “the affective and socio-cultural factors involved in the process of language have been more clearly recognized” (p. 36). Expanding on this idea, Stern’s theory (as cited in Kiersch, 1997, p. 37) sees language development as a product of the convergence between the speech from the child’s environment and the child’s own inner need and ability to express itself. This convergence is an unfinished process of the interaction of our affective and socio-cultural dimension. Social dimension is closely related to the learning process. In Vygotsky’s words, “Some information is acquired in a solitary fashion that is through the direct manipulation and observation of objects and events, and the child’s subsequent reflection upon these acts. However, most of our knowledge is acquired in social interactions with significant others” (1978, as cited in Kinsler & Joyner, 1993, p. 37). So far I have

mentioned two factors for social dimension and communication: the influence of context and our inner need and ability to express ourselves.

Even though the child can learn from almost any individual, “those best able to impart concepts and beliefs are individuals with whom the child has significant relationships” (Bandura, 1977, as cited in Kinsler & Joyner, 1993, p. 37). From such interpersonal identification, the child begins to think, feel and behave using social patterns. The “other” who strongly influences the child is called identificand. According to Kinsler and Joyner (1993), “The identificand is the individual with whom the child identifies from among the field of candidates” (p. 37). When the identificand is selected (often unconsciously), the child begins to simulate his/her behavior. Freud (1938, as cited in Kinsler & Joyner, 1993, p. 37) argues that identification is the primary mechanism for the development of the child’s gender identity, notions of appropriate sex-typed behavior, moral standards, and sense of self.

### **Second subcategory: “*Como me ayudan, yo los ayudo*”: *Expressing solidarity***

The second subcategory of bilateral action was named “*Como me ayudan, yo los ayudo*”: *Expressing solidarity*. It refers to the ability of interacting with others in a supportive manner (verbal, paralinguistic, and kinesics). In the sentence, “*Como me ayudan, yo los ayudo*” (as they help me, I help them) is noteworthy for the importance of the reciprocity in the social sphere. This reciprocity is stimulated by the context; it could be said that the direction goes from “outside” to “inside”. According to Vygotsky (1962, as cited in Kinsler & Joyner, 1993, p. 38), most of the individual’s knowledge of concepts and processes exists twice; first, on the interpersonal level as dialogue between a learner and a more knowledgeable other, and then on the intrapersonal level as information which has been internalized.

### **Third subcategory: “*¡Bra:::vo!*”: *Expressing congratulation***

The last subcategory named “*¡Bra:::vo!*”: *Expressing congratulation* illustrates the most common linguistic, paralinguistic and kinesic responses that emerged from children as a symbol to recognize a partner’s participation. As in the first subcategory, body language (e.g. laugh / clap) plays an important role in the sense of reciprocity.

## ***Second Category: Children's Relationship as a Modifier of Interactional and Communicative Patterns***

The second category, *Children's relationship as a modifier of interactional and communicative patterns*, shows children's capacity and ability to transform their communicative norms and interactional patterns as members of a peer relationship. This category was the result of a deep analysis of children's behavior and its impact on the pedagogical and social sphere. Children are learning and understanding the role of communication in their context and, at the same time, they are creating ways of using that information and social rules depending on the situation, setting and people. Children's relationship gives them the opportunity to experience and/or create some strategies to generate responses. This way, they transform their communicative patterns and context by developing other interactional patterns. Children can also analyze others' behaviors by giving them meanings, and then approving or disapproving them. The subcategories of this second category were *Imitating as a modifier of communicative channels* and *Social distance among peers as a modifier of interaction*.

As Kinsler and Joyner (1993) argue, "In human development, language has two primary functions: Communication and the representation of knowledge" (p. 36). According to them the child learns early in life that speech and language can be used as mediums to express messages to others, as well as to the self. As they say, "He/She learns oral and behavioral cues for imparting messages, and simultaneously learns to interpret the messages of others. These acquired words and symbols also become the categories through which the child reasons with him/herself" (p. 36). Children are not boxes to be filled with knowledge or messages: they are contributing to their own knowledge and are participants of teaching and learning processes. Thanks to their interpretations, they explore how others' behaviors affect or benefit them. According to Piaget and Inhelder (1969), when children are encouraged to think for themselves and reflect on the moral issues in their lives, they rework commands through differentiation, reinterpretation, and elaboration in the course of lived experiences (p. 6). Children's relationships and appropriate school stimulation to reflect upon their relationships help them understand their context, and transform it through their communication, which involves verbal and non-verbal configurations.

Different studies about children's relationship placed emphasis on spoken language. In this respect, Piaget (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) says, "The fact is that

speech of subjects between four and six is not intended to provide information, ask questions, etc., but consists rather of monologues or “collective monologues” in the course of which everyone talks to himself without listening to the others (that is, egocentric language)” (p. 121). These “collective monologues” emerged at the beginning of the research, but progressively, thanks to the head teacher’s intervention and my emphasis on individual and cooperative activities, children began to talk and listen to the group. There were different strategies to stimulate communication (see pedagogical design) trying to decrease egocentric language. As a complementary strategy used by children, imitation played an important role to exemplify the other’s action or attitude in the social sphere. This action of imitating (to illustrate situations and behaviors) was notorious when a child tried to explain something to another or in conversations among children.

### **First subcategory: *Imitating as a modifier of communicative channels***

In the first subcategory, there was a relevant factor of creativity: “reading” and being “read” through verbal and non-verbal communication. The movements (input /output) and their impact on the child’s totality (mind, heart, and hands), and then a corresponding output, helped them develop the capacity for language and socialization and their own participation and interpretation of contexts.

According to Vygotsky (as cited in Hall, 1993), “the development of individual cognition is tied to one’s participation in such conventionalized social activity.” He argues that through such participation novice members learn to acquire not only the appropriate behaviors but perform new goals and negotiations among others. These new goals and negotiations are part of children’s participation to transform their realities. There is a huge variety of interactional mediums to enrich this participation. Hall (1993) adds, “It is a process in which we are continually engaged; it does not end at some point in the stages of the late infancy or early adolescence but continues through our lives.” One of these interactional mediums, according to my experience and systematic observation, was the process of imitation with interactional purposes to generate sympathy. Here, smiling and laughing played a strong communicative role (kinesics and paralinguistic) to generate rapport.

This subcategory appeared from the beginning to the end of this study. For many teachers, imitating is related to negative actions of behavior. However, in the case of my students, it was one of the most common actions to generate empathy. From the home and the community, according to Kinsler and Joyner (1993, p. 36), the child



acquires knowledge of interpersonal interaction patterns, or prescriptions for the appropriate attitudes, verbal responses, and gestures that are viewed as acceptable in particular social context. In the case of imitative actions, many adults consider this action as an inappropriate behavior by using sentences such as “This is neither the time nor the place for that behavior” or “Don’t do it here”, or, “A good child must not imitate other people. It is a lack of respect”. But, there is another point of view: the child’s view. They can analyze behaviors, and they can give them meanings. It requires a mental process of “reading”; which is not an easy task at this stage. I was not trying to determine whether the act of imitating was good or bad; I tried to analyze how it can develop mental processes related to understanding (implicitly or explicitly) communication among same-age people.

Having explored this analysis of behaviors made by children, I agree with Steiner (as cited in Kiersch, 1997) when he says, “The human being (as opposed to the animal) absorbs the linguistic expression of psychological states” (p. 33). We have the capacity to analyze others’ attitudes through their language. Adding Steiner’s words, “language encompasses not only spoken language, but also everything conveyed through gesture and facial expression” (as cited in Kiersch, 1997, p. 33). According to Poyatos (1994), an individual can reconstruct another’s physical appearance joining step by step his/her words, paralinguistic, and kinesics getting this individual’s “life” again in his/her mind; and without effort, he/she can reconstruct that physical presence by looking at and listening carefully with the eyes and ears of memory. This process of codifying and decoding is made not only by adults but also by children in their second stage of life (in an unconscious or spontaneous way). Based on my experience as a researcher in this study, I noticed how my participants were interested in showing or giving their own interpretations and meanings to behaviors, paying attention to verbal and non-verbal communication.

Throughout the process, laughing was the most common reaction to generate a positive stimulus before and after an imitation. In this specific action of imitating someone, the children looked for generating a response through their action of smiling or doing a funny imitation. The generated response was the same: smiling and/or laughing. It represented acceptance, making use of a kinesic and paralinguistic medium. From my own point of view and through analysis of non-verbal communication, this action has the equivalence of sentences such as “You are right”, “I agree with you”, or “You are really funny”.

### **Second subcategory: *Social distance among peers as a modifier of interaction***

The subcategory, *Social distance among peers as a modifier of interaction*, shows us the limits that children can establish to delimit their own space and negotiate and create new roles among themselves. Children can modify their interactional patterns through their verbal and non-verbal communication. In a study on cooperative work in children of different ages, Nielsen (as cited in Piaget & Inhelder, 1969) analyzed spontaneous activities in which children worked in pairs on desks that were too small, utilizing common mediums (e.g. only one pencil). She obtained two kinds of results (p. 120): first, she observed a regular development from collaborative work. On the other hand, she observed children's initial difficulty in finding modes of collaboration. In this research about peer relationship, I noticed that Nielsen's results were similar in my population's case. From these perspectives, I named the second subcategory "Social distance among peers as a modifier of interaction" because of an interactional pattern related to how they worked by pairs using common mediums emerged in children's peer relationships. They, making use of their creativity, transformed their environment and linguistic, paralinguistic, and kinesic communication.

I analyzed children's use of space in a natural setting: the classroom. I noticed that most of the children revealed an interest in dividing their spaces when they were sharing objects (for example, desks, and guidelines) and this action frequently generated conflicts among them. One of the most notorious problems was to determine who had the power to delimit the space. They used different materials to do it, and, in many cases, their own body (e.g. with their elbows generating a kind of force) was the delimitation mark.

## **Conclusions**

The conclusions provided two answers to the research question. The first answer sums up the two categories in two senses. The first one was a sense of children's justice reflected in reciprocal behavior among peers. And the second was the sense of empathy reflected in their ability to make others laugh or smile thereby transmitting messages through linguistic, paralinguistic and kinesic channels. In the second sense, children (beginning their second septennium of life) have the ability to analyze (e.g. in the process of imitation) other behaviors, interpret contexts, and maintain

conversations. Children have the ability to be spontaneous, creative and expressive; in that way, not only do they receive external interaction, but also they can be more receptive and become modifiers of their social sphere.

The second answer suggests that children's peer relationship or their qualities as individuals are not totally determined by genes or the environment. I agree with many authors such as Steiner, Piaget and Vygotsky that the majority of human traits are the result of interactions among the biological features and characteristics of the environment to which the child is exposed. We as teachers should propose a teaching practice that assumes the responsibility of cultivating interpersonal relationships and strategies to promote the child's overall development. We can contribute to our children's education if we create spaces where students can learn from one another, listen to others, work collaboratively and identify individual and group needs (for example, problem solving activities) in order to suggest and develop solutions for them through reflection and the reading of contexts and behaviors.

From my point of view, my participants enriched their relationships because they revealed a need to maintain them. This necessity is a good beginning to provide a variety of activities to socialize because, thanks to this process, they developed more abilities to modify their environment in a positive way. As Chen, French and Schneider (2006) say, "the needs for peer affiliation and belongingness may motivate children to modify their behavior to conform peer norms". This need motivates the negotiation and creation of communicative and interactional patterns.

The role of interaction in same-age individuals is essential to enrich the process mentioned by Vygotsky in which the inner process of understanding and socialization is related to the influence of the environment. However, according to previous research, if there is an exaggeration in the social dimension, there is a risk of decreasing the value of autonomy. That risk is revealed by Chen, French and Schneider (2006). Their works showed how peer interactions in many Asian and Latino group-oriented societies were characterized by more affiliative and cooperative activities and greater self-control because of activities related to interpersonal cooperation and group functioning. As a result, according to the above-mentioned study, the children in these societies displayed lower autonomy and competitiveness and higher mutual sensitivity and compliance in social interactions, an observation for which it is advisable to keep a balance between cooperative and individual activities. That balance requires a research process in which diagnosis is the

open door to multiple possibilities because it takes into account different characteristics, such as age, setting and roles.

Through an exploration of the peer, children can develop their verbal, kinesic and paralinguistic channels while learning to interact and develop a sense of cooperation and autonomy. From the beginning to the end, I emphasized the need to keep a balance between autonomy and cooperation and between being heard and being a listener. We can help children develop their abilities to make sounds, imitate, interpret other communicative channels, negotiate rules and analyze behaviors. We as teachers can be facilitators of this process.

When a group shares some characteristics such as age, setting and roles, they can see in their peer a mirror in which they can identify the power of communication and the negotiations they can establish mutually. Analyzing a peer group and its relationships is a good beginning to know how the learners' relationships are determined by external and inner factors. Besides, it is a road for exploring the creativity of our learners to interpret their own relationships or behaviors. They can express much more what we consider. They are all-time verbal, kinesic and paralinguistic human beings. Our role is to learn to interpret each channel complementarily in order to provide activities that allow for socialization.

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