

Touch in relationships between children – Small stories from Finnish day care centers

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Although the significance of touch in human relationships has been recognized, touch between children has too rarely been studied. This presentation focuses specifically on touch in the relationships between children in the context of early childhood education.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (2010) philosophy of embodiment and his understanding about actions having a sense has inspired our research. Touch is at the same time a sense and an action, and therefore, a strong and an effective part of relationships. Touch and being touched are always intertwined (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). When touching one another, people touch deeper than just skin (Manning, 2007).

Our research material consists of video episodes produced in four different Finnish pre-schools (children aged 1–6). These episodes include touch between children. We understand these episodes as small stories of touch constructed in the fleeting moments of everyday lives (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). As people in general, we understand that children tell and re-tell stories to make sense of themselves, the world, and the culture (Spector-Mercel, 2010). We utilize holistic and thematic ways of reading the video episodes. In our research, we ask: What kinds of small stories of touch are told in the relationships between children?

The results illustrate touch as a personal and cultural issue. In addition, the child-adult relationships and adult relationships are intertwined with the relationships between children. For example, the rules, created by adults about proper touch, are present in touch between children. Furthermore, the results show how materiality, e.g. toys, chairs, etc. makes possible, encourages and limits certain kind of touch in the relationships between children.

As implications, we stress the importance of teachers and practitioners to become aware of the cultures of touch that exists in their pre-schools and that this culture needs to be seen as constantly changing.

Keywords: early childhood education, Touch, embodiment