
Book Review

Vincent, Carol, Neal, Sarah, and Iqbal, Humera (2019) *Friendship and Diversity: Class, Ethnicity and Social Relationships in the City*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 243 pages.

Sociological and educational inquiries have long been attempting to understand the role of schools in reproducing difference and inequality in society, as well as their potential to transform or negotiate dominating power structures on the micro-level. Schools are embedded in their larger contexts that make them often filled with controversies and dilemmas (e.g. Bunar, 2011); they are platforms conditioned by the structural and societal, but also contain the lived experience of children and adults who inhabit them. These tensions are clear for those exploring diversity and inequalities in schools (e.g. Abu El-Haj, 2006; Gynne et al., 2017; Watkins and Noble, 2019), instead of a number of educational and political agendas condition diversity, children, parents and school staff are key social actors to accept, negotiate or transform dominating views on difference and normality. As socio-political agendas, educational policies, and local communities constantly change over time, responses in schools remain relevant for the investigation of these mechanisms. Carol Vincent, Sarah Neal and Humera Iqbal continue to explore this fundamental question in *Friendship and Diversity: Class, Ethnicity and Social Relationships in the City*. Looking at three socially and ethnically mixed primary schools in urban London, the authors set out to explore children's and adults' friendship practices, and the nuanced ways they dynamically conform to or disrupt social ordering. Looking at the overarching themes of the book, this volume brings in some new perspectives for those interested in multicultural, inequalities in education and society, and individuals' agency and lived experience.

The first three chapters introduce the main theoretical and methodological concepts and perspectives of this research. From the fourth chapter onwards, readers become familiar with the findings of the study organised thematically along children's friendship practices, school staff and adults' interventions in managing children's social networks, friendship practices that reach beyond the school context, and parents' friendship practices. Chapter 1 and 2 describe the main theoretical perspectives applied in the study. Here we also find a literature review and the authors' take on friendship, conviviality and encounters in urban and multicultural cities, super-diversity, habitus, and school as a space of 'urban change and everyday social relationships' (68).

Chapter 3 informs readers about the methodological aspects of their research. The authors developed a classic in-depth qualitative study that is mainly built on interviews and observations. The interviews were conducted both individually and in pairs, which gave richness to the interview data. Although the authors do not identify their study as ethnography, they make hints that their observation (one intensive term in Year 4 classes) had an 'ethnographic inflection'

and was methodologically conceptualised as ‘focused ethnographic engagement’ (18). Rather than segmenting datasets, Vincent and colleagues’ approach is to treat data holistically, to triangulate the rich perspectives from children’s, parents’ and school practitioners’ experiences, which adequately allows for portraying school life as an integrated social world. Yet the reader may wonder what alternative methodological possibilities the datasets might offer. For example, the interviews in pairs might bring in a different light to how children positioned themselves or talked about their friendship experiences in a social situation when analysing conversational data. An interesting fact is that children’s drawings about their social networks were also collected, and then aggregated into one classroom scenario as part of the class descriptions (101–103). It might be relevant to incorporate children’s own visual representation in the analysis, and to contrast and compare children’s expressions about friendship through visual means, too.

We read about children’s friendship practices at school in Chapter 4. Vincent, Neal and Iqbal show that children recognised and reflected on difference, and they also mixed frequently across ethnicity. However, this mixing was much less prominent across gender, disability, class and religion. Therefore, we also get an insight into how certain school routines and activities (e.g. playground games, sport activities, etc.) reinforce cultural and social divisions. The authors highlight children’s agency in forming their friendship circles, and the importance of context in how fluidly they related to difference. Ethnicity and class played different roles in different situations in their everyday school life. It is an interesting finding that all children reported a certain level of unease and insecurity about their friendships, and that they all expressed a ‘desire for inclusion’ and ‘uncertainty around the security of that inclusion’ (91). This important insight alerts parents and school staff to take into consideration, and indeed a warning to take into account all children’s experiences with friendships seriously, including the legitimacy of their fears and insecurities, and possibly provide support in balancing these dilemmas.

Chapter 5 then turns to exploring teachers’ and parents’ roles in managing children’s friendships. Regarding school staff, their perception of children’s friendship corresponded well with children’s accounts, yet their active position in supporting social interactions seemed to be limited. This was often explained by other obligations of teaching and school life, and partly by the assumption that children develop ‘light and flexible relationships’ (123–124). They also perceived some children as more capable of forming social relations, and others as having problems, with the latter receiving more attention and intervention. This is an important insight for education professionals and researchers, and an encouragement to critically monitor how being ‘socially capable’ can form a type of dominant normality that impacts the ways school staff may think about their students. Furthermore, it also raises awareness for the need to implement more inclusive and sustained approaches to supporting all children’s social relations rather than simply managing ‘problematic’ cases. Regarding parents, they all welcomed diversity in the schools, yet not many preferred their children to have friends from a diversity of peers, and they strongly exhibited a tendency towards homophily (123). This finding is somewhat in contrast with children’s practices,

who seemed to be more at ease with heterogeneity and difference, at least in terms of ethnicity. Parents had a strong role in organising children's out-of-school life. Thus, children's friendships reaching beyond school were often conditioned by parents' views, dilemmas and opportunities to manage children's friendships.

The authors embark on exploring the school as an avenue of starting friendships, and how it facilitates social interactions to continue in out-of-school environments in Chapter 6. They show how the schools operated as a social resource (153), and bridged boundaries between institutional and non-institutional contexts. Vincent, Neal and Iqbal here expand on how social encounters in school are different from other places in the urban city since children and adults interact on the basis of habitual school practices, moreover they engage with the common education commodity, and this condition allows for encounters to transform into sustained social networks outside school. Almost all parents formed social networks beyond the school, yet with varying degree and intensity. Their encounters took place in other places of the neighbourhood, such as cafés, parks, and in their homes. While local parks seemed to be socially and ethnically more mixed sites (Neal et al., 2015), groups of people walking on the streets together to school, and adult friends visiting cafés were highly divided socially. Home-based friendship practices seemed to be divided even more, as they were usually seen as a site of difference and were managed with ambivalence and complexity or were simply avoided (168). While some parents did not prefer their children to visit other parents' homes, on the requests of children some made active efforts in negotiating their anxieties, and let children go or invite others to their own homes. Showing these complexities, the authors argue that schools can be socially productive sites, yet they do reproduce social inequalities too (156).

In Chapter 7 we continue learning more about parents' friendship practices. The authors describe a continuum in understanding how adults can refuse difference, accept homophily and be reflexive about it, and enable relationships across difference. Almost all participants acknowledged, appreciated and identified with diversity as a common feature of their neighbourhood. Nevertheless, when it came to their own attitudes and actions, there was a range of responses on the continuum. While only a minority refused diversity, most parents accepted homophily. This acceptance, however, seemed to be a result of either avoiding reflection on homophily and difference, or critically reflecting and yet taking actions that drive friendships to comfortable homophily. A small group of parents were described as enablers, those actively seeking opportunities to cross social and ethnic boundaries. However, this was often an emotionally laborious task for the enablers. Reproduced divisions in parent friendships were also related to 'the different degrees of privilege and social resources that different networks bring' (198–199) to school life. Parent-Teacher Associations were clear examples that had White-British parents in their governing bodies. This again may carry some implications for schools. There seems to be a need for opening up the school space and think about not only the inclusion and exclusion of children in school life, but equally, of parents. If schools operate with a whole-school vision that involves children, school staff and parents in education, this may potentially also enable adults to feel more comfortable with difference, and cross social divides.

Organising events collaboratively and providing equal opportunities for all parents to participate in school activities and decision-making about schooling would be crucial steps in reaching this vision.

The main themes of everyday multiculturalism, social inequalities and agency are brought together dynamically in *Friendship and Diversity*. The idea of diversity and multiculturalism has been long introduced to and proliferated in the research landscape of the social sciences. Perspectives, epistemological and ontological stances are numerous, and the multicultural even today remains a contested conceptual idea, a 'floating signifier' (Bhabha, 1996). While Vincent, Neal and Iqbal's main focus is not solely on the multicultural, they return to interrogate diversity in the urban space by applying Vertovec's (2007) concept of 'super-diversity'. Since its first appearance, this notion received immense popularity among scholars of migration, language, culture and diversity studies as a relevant concept frequently used to describe current conditions of diversity, but not without critique. For example, in the field of sociolinguistics, Pavlenko (2018) critically examined the concept's meaningfulness and contested its dominant position in academic knowledge building. By mobilising this construct, Vincent and colleagues' interpretation is similar to the original idea of super-diversity being a descriptor for signalling social complexity, contemporary plurality and intersectionalities of the multicultural, especially in those urban areas where gentrification appears. In the words of the authors, it is applied to 'describe localities' and 'dynamic processes of change, the fluidity of local populations' (37). While the analysis explicitly focuses on social class and ethnicity, research participants' accounts also attest to the interactions between migration experience, religion and language background in children's and adults' friendship practices in and out of school. Importantly, the authors also point out that diversity is not a 'flat' concept, but that structural inequalities impact the multicultural idea. As they put it, 'diversity is hierarchical, structured and graded, not flat, and our understanding of how conviviality works must take social inequality into account' (49). With these views, the authors combine approaches from, on the one hand, the 'everyday multiculturalism' stream that zooms into the dynamic production of cultural differences and the interaction of social relations and identities in the process (Arasaratnam, 2013: 817); and, on the other hand, structural critique that carefully maps children's and adults' opportunities and experiences with the friendship circles they are involved in, or are excluded from, on the basis of class and ethnicity. With a constant attention to triangulating the personal and the structural dimension of friendship, the notion of super-diversity in Vincent and colleagues' work remain meaningful, and they add a new perspective to discussing the multicultural in contemporary times.

Another key theme of the book is interrogating the possibilities of individuals and human collectivities in disrupting usually dominating socially and ethnically divided practices in school and society. Following Bourdieu's work on the habitus (1999), and expanding on Borrero's (2009) interpretation on the tendency towards homophily (sameness) in habitus, the authors map out the possibilities and constraints that friendships in socially and ethnically mixed urban schools may carry. They argue that although a tendency towards homophily still

exists, children and adults can take different positions, attitudes, reflections and actions towards the established norm. They specifically take friendship as a meso-level sociological construct when exploring both the multicultural idea, and more dominantly, the positions taken towards social norms. Friendship as a mediating concept between the micro and the macro-structural levels (and not as a psychological concept) is indeed a much-needed fresh perspective in the field of social inequalities and diversity. This angle is important in finding new focal points of inquiry for the literature on social inequalities and diversity in school. It is also valuable in moving beyond both naïve assumptions about the ultimate power of individual agency and intercultural relations, and pessimistic determinations about the inevitable role of dominating power structures in personal lives. Vincent, Neal and Iqbal carefully navigate through the chapters to show multiple facets of friendship practices, and the ambiguities and dilemmas children and adults have when relating to difference. They emphasise tensions and complexities in limiting as well as allowing for social transformation, rather than presenting clear-cut solutions. They present their main findings by portraying specific examples from children's and adults' everyday life, while also making it clear that the illustrative personal narratives may not stand for the whole group with which the participants identified.

Multiculturalism, structural inequalities and individual lived experience are weaved through the book in the particular site of schools. The authors take a stand that schools can spark social transformation when looking through the lenses of friendship. Schools are understood rather from a sociological point of view and are taken as a platform to explore social relations and their connections to the proximate social worlds. Vincent et al. argue that schools are specifically potential places of transformation, since unlike in other places of the urban city, here children and adults do not only repeatedly meet, but also engage in education which is a 'shared social good' (68). This way, schools are places of 'shared, situated and embedded social "commons", generative of invested and affective social interaction' (23). As the book demonstrates, the school space ignites social interactions that reach beyond the school environment to home and to the larger neighbourhood, yet the often classed nature of these relations is also evident.

Friendship and Diversity offers valuable insights for researchers in sociology, education and the multiculture, and it also has practical implications for schools and educational professionals (even though the educational output is less highlighted in the book). By combining several research fields that may not often communicate with each other and adding new perspectives to respond to some long-sought questions of school research, this book continues to stir meaningful conversations about diversity, schools, and power.

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