

Features of primary school students' perceptions of themselves and their friends in friendly relations

Características de la percepción que tienen los alumnos de la escuela primaria de sí mismos y de sus amigos en las relaciones amistosas

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Summary

The article is devoted to the study of some aspects of friendship relations in primary school age. It presents original diagnostic methods for studying friendship relations in elementary school students: "Qualities of a friend" and "What kind of friend am I?". The object of the diagnostic techniques is the significant qualities of a friend, the features of the respondents' attitude to the identified qualities, and the awareness of their contribution to friendly relations. The procedure of administering the techniques is described and the parameters of evaluation of the results, the features of their processing, and recommendations to experts on the use of the given diagnostic tools are allocated. The procedure of testing the validity and reliability of the diagnostic techniques is described. The deployed testing methods include expert evaluation and retesting. The results of the study of friendly relations in primary school students are described. The specific characteristics of the dynamic of friendly relations in primary school students are identified. The respondents demonstrate the ability to allocate a significant number of qualities important for friendship. By the end of the age period, children reorient from the external qualities of a friend to the internal ones characterizing the foundation of the relationships, empathy, support, and moral qualities. There is a development of reflection of relations, understanding of one's own participation in friendship. The prospects for further study of the designated topic are defined.

Key Words: Friendship, primary school age, friendly relations

Resumen

El artículo está dedicado al estudio de algunos aspectos de las relaciones de amistad en la edad escolar primaria. Presenta métodos de diagnóstico originales para el estudio de las relaciones de amistad en estudiantes de primaria: "Cualidades de un amigo" y "¿Qué tipo de amigo soy?". El objeto de las técnicas de diagnóstico son las cualidades significativas de un amigo, las características de la actitud de los encuestados hacia las cualidades identificadas y la conciencia de su contribución a las relaciones amistosas. Se describe el procedimiento de administración de las técnicas y se asignan los parámetros de evaluación de los resultados, las características de su procesamiento y las recomendaciones a los expertos sobre el uso de las herramientas de diagnóstico dadas. Se describe el procedimiento para probar la validez y confiabilidad de las técnicas de diagnóstico. Los métodos de prueba implementados incluyen evaluación experta y reevaluación. Se describen los resultados del estudio de las relaciones amistosas en alumnos de primaria. Se identifican las características específicas de la dinámica de relaciones amistosas en los estudiantes de primaria. Los encuestados demuestran la capacidad de asignar un número significativo de cualidades importantes para la amistad. Al final del período de edad, los niños se reorientan de las cualidades externas de un amigo a las internas que caracterizan la base de las relaciones, la empatía, el apoyo y las cualidades morales. Hay un desarrollo de la reflexión de las relaciones, la comprensión de la propia participación en la amistad. Se definen las perspectivas de estudio adicional del tema designado.

Palabras clave: Amistad, edad escolar primaria, relaciones amistosas.

Introducción

Modern society with its rapidly developing digitalization is experiencing a clear deficit in direct live communication, there is a problem of declining quantity and quality of interpersonal contacts. The consequences of this situation are not yet obvious and will become more clear with time. The importance of the line of mutual relations and its considerable influence on development as a whole is indisputable. Primary school age is the period of development of prerequisites for mental development in adolescence where communication with a peer comes to the fore as an important effective condition of mental development.

The topic of interpersonal relations in primary school age is covered by a considerable range of research. A great contribution to the study of primary school students' communication and relationship with peers was made by L.I. Bozhovich (1995), G.A. Tsukerman (2015), N.A. Shkuricheva (2011), N.E. Shchurkova (2013), E.A. Sorokoumova, O.V. Suvorova, S.N. Sorokoumova, E.B. Puchkova, M.G. Kumosova (2019), N.V. Ivanova, E.V. Minaeva, O.V. Kolesova, E.V. Mamonova, A.B. Akpaeva (2020), Krappmann (1991), and others. The works of Ia.L. Kolominskii (2003; 2004), A.V. Mudrik (2006), R. Valtin (1991), L.A. Jensen-Campbell (2002), and R.B. Hays (1988) identify and describe the formal characteristics of friendly relations. I.S. Kon (2005) and J.G. Parker (1996) emphasize the importance of primary school age in the emergence of friendly relations. D.B. Elkonin (2011), I.S. Kon (2005), V.S. Mukhina (2000), A.L. Venger, G.A. Tsukerman (2015), A.A. Lobanov, E.V. Minaeva (2021), and I.I. Markova (2017) point out the increasing importance of friendly relations for younger schoolchildren. The analysis of scientific sources on the problem of friendly relations in primary school age over the past 10 years revealed only one major study – the dissertation research of E.E. Mokhova (2000; 2003a; 2003b).

Study objective

Studying the problem of friendly relations, we were faced with the underdevelopment of a significant number of issues: the diagnostics of friendly relations; the influence of friendly relations on the psychological development of primary school students, the construction of self-image; the correlation between empathy in the cognitive sphere and interpersonal relationships; methodological support of the formation of strong friendly relations and skills of friendly and buddy relations.

This study needs to define friendship and friendly relations. We rely on the definition provided by E.E. Mokhova. Friendship is a freely established mutual relationship characterized by emotional intensity, emotional and instrumental support, exclusivity, closeness, and personal attitude to the partner (Mokhov, Mokhova, 2000; Mokhova, 2003a; 2003b).

The study aimed to develop, verify, and test diagnostic techniques aimed at studying the specifics of friendly relationships in primary school age.

Diagnostic methods can be used for scientific purposes, in the work of practitioners, to help professionals in identifying areas of influence in the formation of friendly relations of primary school students, creating methodological support for their formation.

The aim of the study entails several objectives. In our study, we focused on identifying:

- the qualities of the subjects' friends and the students' own assessment of them;
- students' social ideas of friendship and friends, their understanding of the importance of friendship and its main components;
- the description of the diagnostic methods.

Methods

The study used diagnostic methods (test methods), methods for analyzing the obtained results (analysis, synthesis, summarization, systematization, data ranking, correlation analysis), and methods for testing the validity and reliability of the diagnostic techniques (expert evaluation).

Study design

The study was conducted based on schools in the city of Nizhny Novgorod, Russia. The study sample included primary school students aged 8 to 11 years old including 42 primary school students in 2nd grade, 46 primary school students in 3rd grade, and 44 students in 4th grade.

The validity and reliability of the developed diagnostic methods were tested in the course of the study.

Validity testing: Expert evaluation was used to assess the diagnostic techniques, test whether the instructions to the tasks and the tasks themselves are understandable for primary school students, as well as the extent to which the tasks correspond to the object under study. Experts' recommendations were taken into account when finalizing the diagnostic techniques. Six associate professors of the Department of Psychology and Pedagogy of Preschool and Elementary Education and one doctor and three associate professors of the Department of Pedagogy were recruited as experts. They had to answer the following questions:

- "Do you agree that the instructions of the diagnostic techniques will be clear to primary school students?" Ten experts gave an affirmative answer.

- "Do you agree that the instructions of the diagnostic techniques correspond to the stated objects under study?" 10 experts gave a positive answer.

100% of the experts agreed which can be considered proof of the substantive validity of the diagnostic techniques.

The reliability of the diagnostic techniques was tested through retesting on the same sample of study participants at 1.5-month intervals. The correlation coefficient of the results is 0.82, which is significant at $p < 0.001$. This allows the diagnostic techniques to be used for research purposes as an independent diagnostic tool.

Instruments and procedure

The methods "Qualities of a friend" and "What kind of friend am I?" were developed and used in the study as diagnostic instruments.

Diagnostics 1. "Qualities of a Friend".

Objective. To identify the most commonly occurring characteristics of a friend, to determine the attitude of respondents to the available qualities of friends.

Instruction. Draw your friend's facial expressions (eyes and mouth). Write the qualities your friends may have in the rectangles. Write positive qualities on the left and negative qualities on the right. Draw an arrow from the word written in the rectangle to your drawn friend if your friend is like what it says. Choose no more than three positive qualities and three negative qualities – only the most important ones that you like. Connect with the green arrow if you like this quality and with the red arrow if you don't like this quality of your friend.

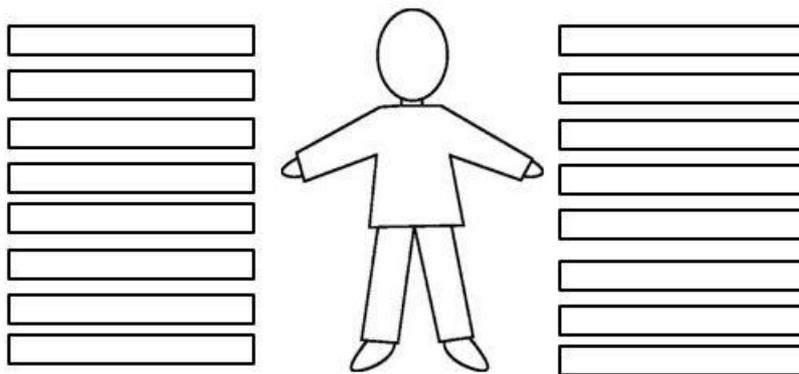


Figure 1. Stimulus material for the “Qualities of a friend” method

Result evaluation criteria – qualitative (the indicated qualities of the friend) and quantitative (the frequency of occurrence of the indicated positive and negative qualities of a friend in the sample of respondents) characteristics; groups of qualities (internal, related to joint activities, external).

The “What kind of friend am I?” method

Objective. To investigate how much the respondents are aware of their role in friendship, what they are willing to offer their friend.

The respondents were asked to write a short message “What kind of friend am I?”

Instruction. Write a short essay where you tell why you are a good friend, what qualities important for friendship you possess.

Result evaluation criteria – characteristics of the qualities indicated by the respondents.

Statistical analysis

The most important qualities of a friend for the respondents were identified based on the results of the “Qualities of a friend” diagnostics. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Frequency of occurrence of the identified typical qualities in a friend (%)

Groups of qualities	Quality of a friend	Representation of qualities, in %		
		2nd grade	3rd grade	4th grade
lack of reflection on the qualities of a friend	I do not think about what my friend is like, I am just friends with them	19	-	-
internal, reflecting the basis of the relationship	reliable, honest (can trust them with a secret)	23	75	80
	will always listen to me, give advice	26	88	71
	will help in a difficult situation, intercede	-	75	77
associated with joint activity	is doing well at school	57	70	59
	interesting to spend time with	26	91	87
	always shares food, will let you copy their work	9	59	61
external	careful	26	73	63
	kind	62	88	91

	brave	47	75	75
	fun	67	86	98
	smart	52	71	93
	has a lot of toys, interesting things	9	75	64
	sporty, strong	23	78	58
	rich	19	26	21
	well-dressed	23	79	61
	always in a good mood	42	65	56
	beautiful	38	-	-
	polite, well-mannered	33	75	74
negative qualities	ill-mannered (calls names, fights, hurts others)	5	9	12
	angry, grumpy, disgruntled	5	10	10
	greedy	-	5	27
	sad, boring	5	12	14
	cunning, deceitful	19	15	18
	dirty	10	7	7
	shouty, noisy	14	17	24

E.E. Mokhova (2003a; 2003b) distinguished the following groups of friendly qualities: 1) internal, reflecting the bases of relations (empathic experiences, expectations of support, importance of relations); 2) associated with joint activity; 3) external (character traits, external attributes, availability of external resources). Thus, the following groups of positive qualities were identified: 1) internal, reflecting the basis of relations (always listens, gives advice, reliable, honest (can trust them with a secret), will help in a difficult situation, intercede); 2) associated with joint activity (interesting to spend time with, is doing well at school, will let you copy their work); 3) external (well-dressed, rich, sporty, strong, has a lot of toys, interesting things, careful, kind, fun, brave, smart, always shares food, always in a good mood, polite, well-mannered).

Among the negative qualities the respondents identified: dirty, cunning, deceitful, sad, boring, greedy, angry, grumpy, disgruntled, ill-mannered (fights, hurts others), shouty, noisy.

Following E.E. Mokhova (2003a; 2003b), we divided the identified reasons for the choice of friendly qualities by primary school students into three groups: internal, associated with joint activity, and external. The respondents are more focused on the external qualities. Age dynamics of the content of relations start with external qualities, proceeds to the qualities important in joint activity, and then to the group of internal qualities (it is not numerous but expands with age). The reason for this phenomenon, in our opinion, is reflection developing intensively at this age. The drawn conclusion allows us to propose an option for the evaluation of results on the positive qualities. This may be convenient for practicing specialists working with primary school students. The evaluation criteria can have a qualitative-quantitative expression. Qualitative criteria are the basis of the identified friendship qualities. Quantitative indicator: internal qualities – 3 points, reliance on joint activity – 2 points, external qualities – 1 point. The total index is calculated according to the formula $1a+2b+3c$ where a stands for the external index, b is the index with reliance on activity, and c is the internal index.

The three most common characteristics of friends reported by students in the tested classes were identified.

Second graders see their friends primarily as “fun” (67%), “kind” (62%), and “good at school” (57%).

Third graders note that their friends are “interesting to spend time with” (91%), and most student friends are noted by them as “kind” (88%), “fun” (86%).

Fourth graders see their friends primarily as “fun” (98%), “smart” (93%), and “kind” (91%).

Students in all grades gave most of their friends the maximum number of positive qualities. This is apparently due to the fact that people and children tend to attribute positive traits and properties to the object of their sympathy.

An interesting observation we made is that some qualities are recognized as significant by the majority of students while others are influenced by the subjective characteristics of the person including gender characteristics. For example, there were more boys among the respondents in the 4th grade, so “sporty” and “brave” were also among the important characteristics of a friend.

As for the negative qualities, they are much less frequently mentioned by students among the characteristics of their friends.

Among the few responses, we identified the most common qualities of the respondents’ friends that they do not like. They include “cunning”, “deceitful”, “sad, boring”, “greedy”, “shouty, noisy”. In grades 2, 3, and 4, the respondents noted the characteristic “cunning, deceitful” in their friends (by 19%, 15%, and 18% of students, respectively). It should be noted that the 4th grade is the leader in the number of answers with negative characteristics of friends. This result is possibly associated with age characteristics (a friend is analyzed in more detail compared to younger ages) or could be influenced by other features of the class and children themselves. The most frequently encountered negatively assessed characteristic among 4th-grade students is “greedy” (27%).

The level of reflection of a friend is indicative. In the second grade, 19% of respondents could not distinguish the qualities of their friend (I do not think about what my friend is like, I am just friends with them). Respondents in 3rd grade demonstrated the ability to isolate the qualities of a friend which indicates an intensely developing reflection in the sphere of relationships in the primary school age.

Using the obtained data on the qualities of a friend, we also considered the number of negative qualities per friend.

In second grade, more than half of the students did not note any negative qualities in their friends that they did not like. None of the surveyed students noted more than 3 negative qualities in their friend.

In third grade, half of the students in the class did not note any qualities in any of their friends that they did not like. The maximum number of negative qualities in a friend was 2.

In fourth grade, 27% of respondents noted no negative qualities in any of their friends. Three students noted 15% or more negative qualities in their friends and expressed a negative attitude towards those characteristics. The rest of the students noted no more than 1-2 negative qualities in their friends.

We can conclude that students generally have friends with whom they feel comfortable, thus they characterize their friends with a significant number of positive qualities.

The results obtained using the method “What kind of friend am I?” allow us to study the respondents’ reflection on their role in friendship.

Table 2 shows the frequency of occurrence of the identified typical qualities in percentages of the total number of respondents.

Table 2.

Frequency of occurrence of the identified typical friendship qualities of respondents (in %)

Identified qualities of respondents as friends	2nd grade	3rd grade	4th grade
protecting a friend (interceding)	5	21	8
being a good friend, knowing how to be a friend	14	4	8
helping a friend	9	4	0
being able to keep secrets	14	8	13
difficult to answer	76	35	18
being reliable and loyal	0	12	27
being an understanding friend	0	4	0
being polite	0	8	0
valuing a friend	0	4	0
not taking things without asking	0	4	0
being fun	0	0	8
being honest	0	0	8
being smart	0	0	4
being generous	0	0	8
being interesting	0	0	4
being brave	0	0	4
being kind	4	4	8

Analysis of the identified characteristics shows that they can be divided into the groups of general characteristics (being a good friend, knowing how to be a friend, being an understanding friend, valuing a friend), personal qualities (being brave, kind, generous, etc.), and specific actions (not taking things without asking, keeping secrets, interceding, protecting). The qualities of personality highlighted by the respondents prevail quantitatively.

Meaningfulness and responsibility in friendships increase gradually with age. In the 2nd grade, only 24% of respondents indicated what kind of friend they promised to be for their friend, the rest (76%) found it difficult to answer. This may be due to a low level of awareness of their role in friendship, a low level of responsibility for friendly relations.

In the 3rd grade, 65% of the respondents identified personal qualities important for friendship, 35% of the respondents found it difficult to answer.

In the 4th grade, 18% of respondents could not articulate personal qualities important for friendship, 72% coped with the task.

In general, students' assessment of their role in friendship is adequate to the notion of friendship in the public consciousness. Some respondents failed to assess themselves as friends. This is most definitely associated with the development of reflection as a new formation of primary school age that has yet to reach its maximum. The significant age dynamics of reflection of oneself in friendship draws attention: 24%, 65%, and 72% of respondents coped with the task accordingly by grades. This development serves as a basis for adolescence where the accent of reflection shifts from cognitive activity to the sphere of relations. The number of qualities important for friendship allocated in oneself is growing. There is a transition from the allocation of generalized qualities to the prioritization of personal qualities and actions.

Discussion

The dynamic of the development of friendly relations throughout primary school age is characterized by several features. Primary school students identify a significant number of qualities important for friendship. Our results support the conclusions of E.E. Mokhova (2003a; 2003b) on the increase in the orientation of internal qualities reflecting the foundations of relationships including empathy, support, and moral qualities by the end of primary school age. The designated qualities do not reach the maximum manifestation at this age. This feature continues to develop in adolescence which allows us to characterize primary school age as the period of the formation of conditions for the development of interpersonal competencies. The qualities focused on joint activity are important for primary school students. From our point of view, this aspect is linked to the formation of cooperation as an important strategy of interaction that undergoes considerable development in primary school age.

Along with positive qualities, primary school students identify negative qualities in a friend. However, negative qualities are present in an insignificant amount. We were unable to find studies that examine the negative qualities that may be present in a friend in detail. Their presence suggests the development of tolerance in the relationship but this proposition requires experimental testing.

Conclusion

The obtained results indicate that aside from the individual objective and subjective prerequisites of friendship (such as spatial proximity, the nature or matching of interests) there is a range of qualities that arouse sympathy and stimulate interest in almost all students. It can be assumed that these qualities are the vital basis for friendship at least at this age stage. These qualities include cheerfulness, kindness, being interesting in communication, honesty, and being trustworthy. The degree of importance of friendship grows in primary school age. While not all students at the beginning of this age period manage to allocate qualities of a friend, by the end of this age, it becomes attainable for all primary school students.

A dynamic in the development of reflection on one's contribution to friendship was revealed. The identified qualities demonstrated by the respondents in friendship were general characteristics, personal qualities, and specific actions with personal qualities being predominant. Responsibility in friendly relations increases significantly. By the 4th grade, most respondents can allocate qualities important for friendship in themselves. These qualities include the characteristics of personality and actions.

The analysis of scientific sources demonstrated that the problem of friendship diagnostics, including friendship diagnostics at primary school age, is poorly developed. Diagnostic methods aimed at studying aspects of friendship relations in primary school age were developed and described, and their validity and reliability were tested. In developing the diagnostic instruments, we relied on the methods proposed in the works of E.E. Mokhova (2003a; 2003b). It was important for us to develop an instrument that could be used not only for scientific but also practical purposes by teachers and psychologists working with children directly. The "What kind of friend am I?" method contains stimulus material, the criteria for the evaluation of results are developed, and a quantitative summary indicator of the significance of friendship relations is introduced. This makes the procedures of using the methods and processing their results more clear and concrete in practical application. The results obtained in the study (typical qualities of a friend for primary school age) create a basis for the development of a test questionnaire to study the specifics of friendship relations in the primary school age.

Of interest for further research are the questions of correlation between primary school students' cognitive capacities and their characteristics in friendly relations, the role of friendly relations in the formation and change of self-image in primary school age, the specifics of buddy

relations, and the genesis of friendly relations throughout primary school. These questions can serve as goals for further studies.

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