Full length article

# Supporting children's friendship stability in a culturally diverse school with a dialogic approach: A case study

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ABSTRACT

Children's competence to establish and maintain meaningful peer relationships is essential in Early Childhood Education. This capacity, known as friendship stability, has recently attracted researchers' attention due to its implications for high-quality friendships. This is crucial in the early years because stable friendship ties are associated with positive academic results and pro-social behavior. However, research shows that friends made in Early Childhood Education are rarely maintained during elementary school, and culturally diverse contexts present a more challenging scenario for making these friends last. This case study explores this phenomenon in a culturally diverse school or, by analyzing classroom observations ($n = 20$, 5 years old) and carrying out two discussion groups ($n = 30$, 7–9 years-old). Results reveal that fostering dialogic learning in the classroom and a culture of non-violence facilitate children's friendship stability in a culturally diverse context.

## 1. Introduction

Decades of research have demonstrated that friendship is a crucial human ability that has important implications for learning and development processes (Berndt & Murphy, 2002; Hartup, 1996; Rubin et al., 1998; Schneider, 2000; Vitaro et al., 2009). Through friendship, children acquire important social skills that will be essential in other relationships later in life, such as sharing, conflict resolution, or even loyalty (Epstein, 1986; Youniss, 1980). Such important abilities are rooted in the early years (Dunn, 2008). Indeed, research has pointed out the important value of building friendships during early childhood both at the economic and social levels (Domitrovich et al., 2017).

In this regard, positive attitudes about school, academic achievement, and the development of positive self-esteem are among the most common impacts when talking about healthy peer relationships and friendships (Denham, 2006). When Osher and colleagues explore the features at the macro and micro contexts that shape children's developing brains and their overall development, they found that having friends decrease loneliness, increases self-esteem (Fletcher et al., 2005; Osher et al., 2020), promotes school satisfaction and engagement, averts victimization, and buffers the mental health consequences of bullying (Adams et al., 2011). This is consistent with the main findings of the Harvard Study on Adult Development (Vaillant, 2008), which conclude that one of the most important factors for a happy and healthy life is high-quality relationships. In other words, friendship plays a key role in human development and

learning processes (Hartup, 1998).

With regard to children, scientific literature views their friendships as those peer relationships characterized by mutual positive regard that extend beyond a specific location, context, or point in time (Asher et al., 1996; Rose et al., 2022). Having friends, however, is not the same as being well-liked by classmates: not all children who are well-accepted have a specific, dyadic friendship, and not all children who are rejected lack friends (Asher et al., 1996). Delving into friendship's definition, it has been argued that this important human capacity has three main features: quality, interaction frequency, and stability (Barry & Wentzel, 2006). When Bukowski and colleagues explored the quality of friendship with children and early adolescents, they found that the major dimensions that define quality in friendships (companionship, conflict, help/aid, security and closeness) highly depend on the stability component (Bukowski et al., 1994).

Friendship stability is defined as the maintenance of a relationship over time (Poulin & Chan, 2010). Although it arises as a key element that affects friendship quality, it has been not the main element that has captured researchers' attention in the last years (Demir & Urberg, 2004). Also, although scientific literature highlights that friendship's foundations take root in the early years (Dunn, 2008), research about friendship and particularly its stability since the early years continues to be scarce (Carter, 2021), probably because it has been assumed that friendship ties formed in early childhood are unstable and transitory (Wang et al., 2019). Although studies about friendship focused on elementary education, secondary education or adulthood shed light on this unique human capacity, understanding how children's friendship operates and persists from the early years might contribute to nurturing features that facilitate it from the very beginning (Berndt & Murphy, 2002).

Research has established that differences in personal characteristics such as gender, age, or race could influence friendship stability (Poulin & Chan, 2010). For instance, an ethnographic study including 122 young children under 3 concluded that ethnic origin, gender, socioeconomic level, and family circumstances influence how young children choose friends (Bertran, 2015). Aside from individual variables, extant literature also points to the role of the school environment's organizational and structural characteristics (such as the school's architectural features, the organization of students, and instructional methods) in children's opportunities for interactions with friends (Epstein, 1986). While the school's physical layout appears as a "fixed" element, the organization of students and instructional methods emerge as potential areas of intervention in supporting friendships in Early Childhood Education (ECE hereinafter). In this regard, a study by Carter and Nutbrown (2016) on how schools can support children's friendships found that playgrounds and classroom play time provide the best opportunity for building friendships in ECE. Other features such as classroom activity areas and an educator's ability to support friendships have also been shown to affect friendship formation in young children (Irvin et al., 2021).

Due to the considerable amount of time that young children spend in schools, these educational contexts arise as a promising arena for children to build their first friendships (Kutnick & Kington, 2005). Thus, it is crucial to unveil what school features might support the formation and longevity of children's friendships. This is imperative because it has been shown that friendships are more influential when they are both high-quality and stable (Berndt & Hoyle, 1985). However, most of the research about friendship in ECE has mainly focused on playgrounds and how structured activities might hinder children's friendships to flourish (Carter & Nutbrown, 2016; Irvin et al., 2021), thereby prompting the need to explore other school factors and educational actions that can contribute to friendship formation and stability in the early years.

Meanwhile, literature on friendship formation alludes to the difficulties encountered in culturally diverse settings, especially for "newcomers" from different ethnic backgrounds (Barron, 2011; Deegan, 1993; Wang et al., 2019). Due to increasing cultural diversity in schools, there is an urgent need to ensure that actions within the school context for supporting children's friendships are also effective in culturally diverse contexts. In this vein, a particular school model called Schools as Learning Communities (SLC hereinafter) has reported positive results in enhancing social cohesion and academic achievement in more than 9000 schools worldwide (Soler et al., 2019). SCL has been highlighted by the European Commission as an effective model to prevent and reduce school dropout in Europe, encouraging Member States to implement it in their own educational systems (European Commission, 2011). It is grounded on the implementation of Successful Educational Actions, a set of interventions rooted on the principles of dialogic learning (Flecha, 2015). When SEAs are implemented, the classroom becomes dialogic, since it prioritizes situations for peer discussions where students engage in productive interactions (Snell & Lefstein, 2018; Vrikki et al., 2019) among them and with a diversity of non-teacher adults (Valls & Kyriakides, 2013). SEAs are built on the value of classroom talk and its benefits in enhancing learning processes (Mercer & Howe, 2012). Building on that evidence, SEAs open spaces for students to share their ideas while respecting others' points of view and provides opportunities to explain, think aloud, and clarify their understanding which boost learning processes (Kaufmann, 2019). In addition, SLC has been found to nurture important human values for friendship such as love, justice, tolerance, and solidarity (Villardón-Gallego et al., 2018; García-Carrión et al., 2020; Zubiri-Esnaola et al., 2020; Khalfaoui-Larrañaga et al., 2021).

Due to the inclusive nature of the SLC, and the interactive foundation of the approach that guides these schools (García-Carrión & Díez-Palomar, 2015), examining children's friendship stability in early years within a SLC might be a promising arena. Thus, this case study addresses two research questions: How does a culturally diverse school organized as a Learning Community support children's friendship stability? What school elements act as drivers of friendship stability in a culturally diverse context? To answer these questions, a classroom with five-year-old students was observed during the 2018/2019 academic year. In 2022 two focus group discussions were conducted where children shared their perceptions and experiences on friendship since ECE.

## 2. Method

A case study design was conducted (Stake, 1995) between November 2018 and June 2022 to gain an in-depth understanding of a specific social activity within its context which, in this case, involves a group of young children within a particular school environment.

More specifically, this qualitative case study generated its findings based on an analysis of the features of children's verbal interactions in a specific classroom activity (through classroom observations conducted during 2018/2019 academic year) and children's responses from two focus group discussions. The research procedure and the analysis strategy were agreed upon by researchers and the school staff (teachers and headteacher), ensuring the priorities and needs of the school were met and respected. The features of the school, key information about the participants of the study, the research procedure, and the data analysis strategy are described below, followed by the ethical standards.

### 2.1. The school, principles, and participants: our case study

This study focuses on a particular school located in the Basque Country (northern Spain). The school is situated in a neighborhood with low socioeconomic status serving historically marginalized families (from ethnic minorities and migrant backgrounds). This particular school is composed of students from 2 to 16 years of age (308 students by June 2022), mostly Roma and migrants from Northern Africa, South America, and Western Asia. By June 2022, 98 % of the students had received free school meals from the Basque Government, which reflects the deprived situation most of the families of this school face in their households.

Despite the disadvantaged social and living conditions of the population in this area, the school has achieved high standards since 2010 by implementing evidence-based educational actions, which have led to a reduction of absenteeism and an improvement in attendance and academic performance. In 2013, the school received a national award for its project a *Learning Community*, particularly for its emphasis on providing high-quality interactions among students and highly diverse populations to improve learning and coexistence. The improvements reported by implementing this project go beyond the school itself, nurturing respectful social relationships at the community level (Khalfaoui et al., 2020).

The cornerstone of the school's approach is what scientific literature identifies as Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) (Flecha, 2015). The school frames its practices around two principles: the key role of dialogue and interactions in fostering children's learning and development and the involvement of families and community members in activities both inside the classroom and at the school organizational level such as in decision-making committees. One of the curricular activities that attract more families to volunteer in school is the *Interactive Groups* (IGs). IGs have proven to promote positive peer interactions among children while nurturing disadvantaged families' sense of belonging (Flecha & Soler, 2013). In brief, IG is based on grouping students heterogeneously and including adults from the community in the classroom, and it has been shown that IGs address educational inequalities and enhance learning processes in diverse contexts (Valls & Kyriakides, 2013). When organized in IGs, children share and discuss their ideas to solve a particular problem or activity that the teacher has proposed in advance, while an adult volunteer ensures that everyone's voice is heard and that students interact in an egalitarian atmosphere while in small groups.

To gather data for the study, peer interactions were observed during the 2018/2019 school year to detect whether those might be coherent with friendships among the participants. One of the researchers accompanied and volunteered in the IGs attended by 20 5-year-olds between November 2018 and May 2019, and children's verbal interactions were audio recorded after receiving their verbal assent. In 2022 - three years after the first round of data collection was conducted - some of the children from this group moved to different schools (6 out of 20) and some new pupils have joined, thereby changing the initial configuration of the group. Of the 14 children who remained in the school, 10 were attending 3rd grade while 4 remained in 2nd grade due to specific learning difficulties. The focus groups were then carried out with these two classes to retain the same participants from the 2018/19 group. A total of 18 3rd graders (10 from the original group and 8 "new" students, 8–9 years old) and 12 2nd graders (4 from the original group, 8 "new" students, 7–8 years old) participated in the focus groups. Building on existing data on positive peer interactions observed with these children (the initial 20), these two classrooms offered an excellent space to further explore children's friendship stability during their academic path. The researchers, the headteacher, and the teachers agreed on the appropriateness of inviting these children to participate in brief focus groups to explore this issue from children's experiences and voices. Table 1 summarizes the groups' ethnic composition to highlight the cultural diversity of the learning environment. Table 2 details the ethnic composition of children that took part bot during classroom observations and focus groups (members of the "original" group).

**Table 1**
Overview of participants and their ethnicity.

|  |  | Roma | Northern Africa | South America | West Asia |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2018/ 2019 | Original group (5-year-olds) | 12 | 6 | 0 | 2 |
|  | Total | 20 (10 girls, 10 boys) |  |  |  |
| 2022 | Group 1 (2nd grade) | 5 (2 of them from original group) | 4 (1 of them from original group) | 1 | 2 (1of them from original group) |
|  | Total | 12 (8 girls, 4 boys) |  |  |  |
|  | Group 2 (3rd grade) | 8 (6 of them from original group) | 4 (2 of them from original group) | 4 | 2 (2 of them from original group) |
|  | Total | 18 (10 girls, 8 boys) |  |  |  |

**Table 2**
Pseudonyms of participants during classroom observations and focus groups.

|  | Roma | Northern Africa | West Asia |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Group 1 (2nd grade) | Grace | Ali | Hakima |
|  | Maria |  |  |
| Group 2 (3rd grade) | Peter | Wafae | Samira |
|  | Andy | Hassan |  |
|  | Gorka |  |  |
|  | Luisa |  |  |
|  | Abi |  |  |
|  | Joana |  |  |

### 2.2. Procedure and data collection

The researchers and the school have maintained close collaboration through the years and have worked together in previous projects and training sessions. The researchers and the school staff discussed the aim of the study and the data collection techniques that might work best with children at these ages. After audio recording the in-classroom interactions during IGs in 2018/2019, the potential of inviting children to an open discussion about friendship emerged given its close alignment with children's participatory methodologies in research (Tisdall, 2015). Also, when it comes to understanding children's friendship stability, Bowker et al. (2006) argued that it can be assessed by collecting data on friendship nominations at two or more points in time and seeing whether there are still nominating the same peers. However, this study attempts to take a more open and holistic approach to studying children's friendship stability, seeking to achieve a more profound understanding by building on children's experiences and voices. This approach is coherent with the idea that children's friendship can be explored through children's reports on how long they have been friends with their peers, potentially overcoming the limitations of the nomination strategy (Rose et al., 2022). Lastly, employing focus group discussions among children provide an innovative approach that enables access to perspectives and insights that are not often captured in traditional research approaches among children (Kennedy et al., 2001).

Once the data collection techniques were discussed and agreed on by the researcher, the teachers of both groups, and the head-teacher, classroom observations took place between November 2018 and May 2019 on a weekly basis. A total of 31 h and 25 min of the children's verbal interactions were audio recorded. Meanwhile, the first focus group was conducted in the last week of January (2nd graders) and the second was held in the first week of February 2022 (3rd graders) according to the schedule that suits the children best. Both focus groups were facilitated by the main teachers of each group, along with one of the researchers.

The focus groups started with an invitation from the teacher to organize the chairs in a circle and the introduction of the researcher to the group. The researcher then briefly explained the aim of the study, emphasizing the children's key role in it. Children from the original group recalled the researcher from the classroom observations that took place in 2018/2019. Before starting the conversation, the researcher and the teacher reminded them that the activity was totally voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any point and without any consequence. No one withdrew during the focus group. To encourage responses from the children, the teacher and the researcher shared some prompts, which were informed by the literature and agreed upon with the teachers beforehand. These prompts include: *Are you friends with the same people as in Early Childhood Education?* (if positive response) *How did you manage to keep/maintain these friends? Is this school helpful somehow for you to have and maintain friends? What do you do with your friends? Why are friends important to you? What would you say is fundamental to maintain friendships?*

Turn-taking was managed by the teacher, while both the researcher and the teacher facilitated the conversation and ensured an egalitarian participation by for instance, prioritizing the participation of those who had talked less. Both focus groups were audio recorded with the assent of the children, and the preliminary results were shared and discussed with the school staff and the children in

**Table 3**
Adaptation of the coding scheme by Acar et al. (2017).

| Cluster | Positive peer interaction | Description |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Acknowledgement and interest in peers | Simple acknowledgment | Child provides or receives simple acknowledgments; supports peers' statements; gains attention of peers; shows pride in peers. |
|  | Shows interests in peers | Child imitates a peer's verbalization or shows interest in what the peer does. |
|  | Joins and/or invites peers | Child verbally joins a peer (who is alone) in a specific activity or invites the peer to an activity; beginning/initial stage of play. |
|  | Asks simple questions | Child asks a question to another peer; the question should not be a help-seeking question. |
| Help and guidance interactions | Helps (active) | Child provides explanation and/or information to a peer; provides help to a peer; offers help or shares materials that she/he was using; models behavior; or indirectly helps peer accomplish or complete a task. |
|  | Seeks or receives help (passive) | Child seeks or receives explanation and/or information from a peer; requests or receives help from a peer. |
|  | Leads peers (active) | Child is leading a peer in an activity. |
|  | Is led by peer (passive) | Child is being led by a peer in an activity. |
| Expresses him/herself | Expresses emotions | Child is expressing emotions |
|  | Describes | Child describes what s/he sees, hears, wants, needs and/or does. |

June 2022 to ensure the correct interpretation of the data and validity of the results.

*2.3. Analysis strategy*

This study analyzed the observations and the focus group separately. As for the classroom observations, an adaptation of the coding scheme for positive peer interactions from Acar et al. (2017) was used to determine those that emerge during the classroom activity. Since helping, supporting, and cheering each other are among the most referred actions between friends at a young age (Irvin et al., 2021), the coding scheme was useful to encapsulate these initial features of children's friendships. The following table summarizes the categories used to analyze classroom observations, which consisted mainly in extracting those categories referring to verbal interactions due to the nature of the data collected (see Section 2.2), and focusing on those relevant in the field of children's friendship (Table 3).

As for the discussion groups, researchers followed a two-step analysis strategy to ensure a rigorous qualitative process. Firstly, audio records were listened to, transcribed, and read thoroughly to familiarize with the data. Then a thematic analysis of the children's references to elements supporting friendship creation and stability was conducted. Two main thematic clusters emerged from this process: 1) dialogic learning in the classroom, and 2) school ethos and culture of non-violence. At this point, these two main clusters were used as a reference to classify children's utterances from the transcripts of both focus groups.

*2.4. Ethics*

Ethical issues were addressed throughout in accordance with the ethical codes outlined by the European Early Childhood Education Research Association's (EECERA, 2015). Respect for the rights of children was ensured by giving them a voice and the ability to participate actively in all the decisions and actions that affected them during the research (such as when to start and stop the data collection). Consequently, the researchers ensured that the children's participation was voluntary and not coerced by collecting informed consent from the school (since families granted consent at the begging of the school year for their children to participate in research activities). In the case of the children, the researchers ensured their informed assent by explaining the details of the study and highlighting the key role that they could play in it (Truscott et al., 2019). Researchers reminded the children before, during, and shortly after the focus groups that they could withdraw from the study at any moment without any consequence. The process of guaranteeing the children's free participation and ensuring their ongoing willingness to be involved or to have their opinions recorded required close attention to their nonverbal expressions and prompts (Bitou & Waller, 2017). The children showed their willingness to participate in the study and were committed as active agents in it (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019).

## 3. Results

This section presents the results obtained through classroom observations (Sub-section 3.1) and children's reflections during the focus groups (Sub-sections 3.2 and 3.3). Overall, classroom observations confirmed that the group engaged in positive peer interactions during classroom activities characteristic of friendships at this age, particularly behaviors of support and extending help to each other. As for the discussion groups, children's voices point to two main school features that positively influence their ability to maintain certain friendships from early childhood education to 2nd and 3rd grade: on the one hand, the dialogic approach of the school creates the affordances for children to engage in meaningful relationships that potentially last through the years (Sub-section 3.2). On the other hand, the school's ethos and culture of non-violence emerged as a driver for children to have safe and supportive friendships that persist from early childhood education to elementary education (Sub-section 3.3). These results are built on the experiences of those children who took part both in the classroom observations and in the focus group discussions, while the voices of those children that only took part on the focus groups is used as additional data.

*3.1. Helping each other: the foundation of friendship in early years*

Classroom observations revealed that out of the 797 children's verbal interactions, 442 (the 56 %) were for helping and guiding each other. Issues such as sharing the material, ask and receive help from peers and supervise and scaffold groupmates emerged frequently from children's dialogues. For instance, when Ed (Roma) urged his team (composed by 3 Roma, 2 north African and 1 west Asian children) to gather as many pieces as possible to help Grace (Roma) solve a math task, the group's response was completely positive, collaborating to help her in the endeavor of subtracting numbers:

> "*All of them, let's give as many pieces as we can to Grace so she can think better with the blocks*"

(Ed, Roma)

In this vein, the data showed different kinds of help offered among peers, such as when Andy (Roma) said: "*if you don't know how to do it, I can help you*", "*do you need help*"? or "*if you need help, we all can help you*". One of the children that needed more help due to her developmental condition was also as keen to assist her peers. Hakima (West Asia) said to Maria (Roma) the following while she was matching the visual representation of a number with the related number of blocks: "*I can help you if you want*". In her small group while in IG, Yasin (North Africa) saw that his colleague Simon (Roma) was experiencing some difficulties solving the task and said "*Listen, Simon, you can copy mine if you want*".

Along with helping and scaffolding interactions, the data revealed that the children were particularly keen to cheer each other on and celebrate collectively when someone overcome a certain challenge while doing the assigned task. For instance, when Wafae (North Africa) was about to get the correct result after being guided by her small group, Yasin (North Africa) and Andy (Roma) celebrated their groupmate's effort by saying "*You've got this, Wafae!*" and "*Come on, you are almost done!*"

Moreover, references to friendship were also shared among children while working in IGs. For instance, Grace (Roma) alluded to the ground rule of sharing the material by explaining to Hassan (North Africa) "*You have to share the eraser with your friends*". In another group, Rachel (Roma) explained to Hakima (West Asia) that Maria (Roma) is also their friend and included her in their inner social circle while working in IGs.

### 3.2. Dialogic learning in the classroom: the power of Interactive Groups

During both discussion groups, the children affirmed that they maintained some of the friends that they built back in their ECE years due to the multiple opportunities that IGs offered for them to talk to each other. Peter's (Roma) experience exemplifies this when he explained how his ECE years and IG were essential in forming some of the most important friendships he still has. As he highlighted, the multiple opportunities for him to talk to others during the IGs were crucial in getting to know Abdel (North Africa), one of his current best friends:

> *I remember that since the very beginning, I saw Abdel and we were talking a lot (in the IG), honestly. We were together all the time and just like that… we became friends!*

> (Peter, Roma)

According to Hassan (north Africa), Abi (Roma) and Joana (Roma), the experience of learning becomes enjoyable since they get to work and talk with friends while in IGs. As Gorka (Roma) explained: "*We learn more, because in that way [IGs], you're always at ease, you feel good*". Luisa (Roma) also supported Gorka's opinion, sharing that: "*Yes, absolutely, because you get to know more about your classmates, you talk with them and if you want you can ask whether they want to be your friend and if they say 'yes' then we are friends*". In this vein, Samira (West Asia) supported Gorka and Luisa's opinion and went further by pointing out the reciprocal nature of the help that emerged as a result of taking part in IG: "*Also, you can help your friends with homework, and he can also help you*".

Along with Gorka's, Luisa's, and Samira's, more examples on experiencing joy during IGs emerged during the focus group with the 3rd graders (group 2). IG is referred to as being instrumental in building and nurturing friendships through the school year, mainly because this classroom organization fosters peer interactions and continuous help exchanges. In this regard, Emilia (Roma) shared her experience by explaining how she felt working in IG compared to her previous school:

> "*For me, it is very important to have friends at your table, and at school, because otherwise you would find yourself alone and feeling sad. I have been through this [in her previous school]. The first time I arrived here at this school I was nervous because I read very slowly but then I was happy because I found new people [and] I have improved a lot.*"

Emilia joined the school at the beginning of the 2021/2022 academic year, and she reported a positive change in the way she reads and most importantly in the way she feels about it. She linked this outcome to the IGs, sharing that "*having friends at your table*" is important to her and had been decisive in the way she had improve her reading since working with her peers in IG.

As the conversation went on, the children moved from reflections related to in-classroom activities to those in the playground. Some of them explained that when someone seems to be upset or alone, the group commits to giving some comfort or assistance to that person. Peter (Roma) articulated this with a recent example that involved Sara, a girl from North Africa who had recently joined the school:

> "*If Sara is with us in the IGs and you see her in the playground alone, you can ask her if she would like to play with you, or if she is OK alone. […] I remember that one day, we brought this issue up [being alone during playtime] during the assembly and we all agreed that being with others is better than being alone. I have never seen Sara alone ever since! She goes with other girls and talks a lot*".

In this vein, children stated that they always do their best to make new students feel welcome in their school. This is pointed out by Mike (South America), a newcomer who joined the class for the first time on the day the second focus group was conducted. Mike shared how he immediately felt included by his new classmates. Peter (Roma), Julian (Roma), Luisa (Roma) and Emilia (Roma) promptly shared how they had organized themselves to include Mike in their routines and how they patiently explained to him how the school works so he did not feel lost or alone. They also expressed how interesting it had been talking to Mike during the IG session since he had a different way of solving the academic tasks they had that day. As Emilia (Roma) explained, Mike (South America) even helped her find Gorka (Roma) in the playground that morning:

> "*I think Mike is funny and kind. I was looking for Gorka when I saw Mike, and we had fun while looking for Gorka… Honestly, I had so much fun during this time*".

Emilia's explanation pleased Mike, and he took his turn to speak right after to express having the same sentiments as Emilia. Alicia (Roma) then took the turn to explain that she thinks "*a friend supports you when you feel sad, he takes care of you, so you don't feel alone*". As Alicia referred to solitude, Sarah (North Africa) responded by adding her reflection:

"*Yes, because if you are alone, you get bored. But with a friend, you can play, you can learn, you can be with her a lot of time, you take care of her as she takes care of you, and much more!*"

### 3.3. School's ethos and culture of non-violence

The responses from the children's focus group discussions also alluded to the role of the entire school's ethos and culture against any kind of violence in the fact that some of the children were able to keep their friends from ECE. They choose to be friends with those who treat them well and help and support them unconditionally. This issue emerged especially in the focus group with 2nd graders. When their teacher asked when they started to be friends with their current friends, Marta (Roma), Grace (Roma), Ali (North Africa), Zeinab (West Asia) and Maria (Roma) immediately responded: "*since ECE, since we were little*".

When the researcher asked why they thought it was possible for them to keep and maintain those friends for so long, they explained that it was because they treated each other well, avoided fighting, took care of each other, and helped each other with academic activities when somebody did not know how to solve a particular task. In this regard, they claimed to feel good when offering and receiving help from their friends during IGs - friends that they have built over the sessions through sharing and exchanging ideas and experiences while they learnt. As Marta (Roma) explained: "*We treat friends well, we help them*". This statement prompted further reflections on the issue of treating friends well.

Particularly, the importance of speaking up to report any aggressive or violent situation was highlighted. This issue was pointed out by Grace, one of the Roma girls who took part in classroom observations (Section 3.1). She explained how she had an argument with Ali (North Africa) earlier that day and it remained unresolved despite her efforts to speak to him. Grace saw the focus group as a great opportunity to share what happened since it was important for her to clarify the incident, and she linked it with Marta's reflection on treating friends well. When Grace reported the situation to the entire group, Ali also took part and apologized for not solving it before with her, acknowledging the need to solve problems straight away. The teacher reinforced Grace's act of reporting what she or anyone does not like. In Grace's words:

"*And one more thing: the very moment someone tells you something that you do not like, you have to say it right away. Because it is not fair that we go to the teacher telling her that we have solved it and it is not true. We must speak up.*"

(Grace, Roma)

Meanwhile, Sally (Roma) used the puzzle metaphor to explain how she felt about her friends and framed her argument in the context of the IGs: "*When we all are seated with our group (in IG), it's like a puzzle, because we complement each other and when someone is missing, (the puzzle) is not completed*". This example led the group to reflect on who they miss the most when that classmate becomes sick or unwell. Some of the children started talking simultaneously, showing their willingness to express their ideas in this issue. For instance, John (South America) shared that he prefers being friends with those "*who help, who are brave and do not use violence*". John's statement showed his preference for non-violent peers when building friendship ties, but since he did not take part in the observations during IG conducted during 2018/2019 academic year, it is unclear if this preference plays a role when it comes to maintaining those ties.

Hakima (West Asia), who was part of the original group during classroom observations, took the turn to express that she is friends with "*the brave ones, because they help you when you're in need.*" She reported still being friends with Grace, the Roma girl whose help she would seek during IG and beyond. In fact, they were seated together and talking to each other while the focus group was being carried out. The friendship between Grace and Hakima exemplifies how under specific conditions, children from different cultures might create long lasting friendships. These results are discussed in the following section.

## 4. Discussion

Out of the 14 participants that took part in the classroom observations and the focus groups, all of them provide examples of how they maintain some of the friendships they made when they were in Early Childhood Education. Although the original group changed over the years, the participants were able to share their experiences on making their friendships last with those who kept going to this school. Data from classroom observations and focus groups showed that these children experienced positive peer interactions that are on the foundations of friendship ties, and they share examples that include peers from different ethnicity than theirs.

After observing and analyzing 5-year-old children's verbal interactions during an entire academic year while in IGs, results confirmed that help and guidance interactions were the most common verbal exchanges among boys and girls organized in small and heterogeneous groups. These results are coherent with previous findings in ECE and reinforce the potential of IGs to foster positive peer interactions and inclusivity (Aubert et al., 2017). Among such positive peer interactions, help and solidarity emerged most in the data, highlighting that offering help, seeking help, and assisting peers were common actions among the participants. As Epstein pointed out, those human abilities are understood as significant components of friendship (Epstein, 1986). If, during IGs, young children repeatedly engage in these kinds of interactions ("*If you don't know how to do it, I can help you*", "*Do you need help*"?, "*If you need help, we all can help yo*"), then IGs could serve as an appropriate framework to support young children's friendships.

In a context where peers' achievements are acknowledged and championed openly ("*you've got this, Wafae!*" and "*Come on, you are almost done!*"), children's self-esteem can be boosted. Following Osher and colleagues' findings when exploring the features that shape children's overall development, children's self-esteem was higher when they reported high-quality friendships in their lives (Osher et al., 2020). Indeed, when Peter, a young Roma boy, explained how his IG groupmates organized themselves to make Sara (North

Africa) feel welcome, he alluded to a good example of how a dialogue-based classroom activity has the potential to decrease children's loneliness. Previous literature states that children's friendship effectively counteracts solitude (Fletcher et al., 2005). Peter's example suggests that IG offered the opportunity not just of making him aware of his groupmate's situation but also supporting the newcomer in ending her loneliness.

Scientific literature points out that playground interactions and free play in the classroom are most supportive of friendships while structured activities erode them (Carter & Nutbrown, 2016; Hedges & Cooper, 2016). Indeed, the activities the children are involved in affect their opportunities for peer interactions and friendship creation. Our results reveal that when young children are grouped in small and heterogeneous groups to solve a task collectively, as in Interactive Groups, a dialogic learning approach is put into work. This dialogic atmosphere (Mercer & Howe, 2012), results in more opportunities for children to engage equally in classroom talk (and in small group talk) (Díez-Palomar et al., 2021; Snell & Lefstein, 2018) which in turn, as Peter explains, opens more opportunities to get to know your groupmates and even establish a long-lasting friendship with some of them. Thus, our results show that Interactive Groups might support children's friendships, and facilitate their stability through Early Childhood Education to elementary education. The experiences of the children who participated in this study highlighted how help and solidarity interactions influence not just friendship formation (who they become friends with) but also its longevity (whether they choose to remain friends). These results challenge the idea that structured activities completely hinder children's friendship (Carter & Nutbrown, 2016). This is a crucial finding since it decouples the dichotomy that divides academic activities and the positivity of building and maintaining good friendships. In this regard, our results are coherent with Pelligrini and colleagues' findings, because IGs arise as an academic space that foster the use of effective communication to solve disagreements (Aubert et al., 2017; Valero et al., 2018) – elements that are usually found in friendships (Pelligrini et al., 1997). Children's statements on enjoying learning with their friends while in IGs are coherent with previous results on how this specific classroom organization boosts school engagement and educational success (García-Carrión & Díez-Palomar, 2015). Thus, our findings bring schools located in culturally diverse contexts opportunities to foster this unique human capacity far beyond the playground.

The children who participated in this study highlighted that they are friends with those that treat them well, take care of them and support them unconditionally. This challenges the idea that arguments and confrontation might be a common part of a friendship (Deegan, 1993). If friendships are influential only if they are both high-quality and stable (Berndt & Hoyle, 1985), it is essential to guarantee that they have a strong nonviolent foundation, so that schools can nurture those kinds of bonds that are known to avert victimization and buffer the mental health consequences of bullying (Adams et al., 2011).

## 5. Summary and conclusions

The aim of the present study was to analyze whether a particular school organized as a Learning Community situated in a culturally diverse area has the potential to support children's friendship stability, and if so, what school-related elements are key in such a process. The scarce scientific literature exploring children's friendship stability has rarely been focused on culturally diverse school contexts. Moreover, little previous research in the topic has exclusively been built upon children's voices and experiences, which are at the core of the present study.

This study presents evidence on how a particular school model fosters children's friendship stability in a culturally diverse context. Extant literature defends that alongside gender being a strong element in building friendships (Bertran, 2015), the cultural diversity within schools appears to be a decisive factor in choosing friends at an early age (Deegan, 1993). Scholars also allude to ethnicity being influential in children's friendships stability, whereby same-race dyads might last longer than mixed-race friends (Deegan, 1993; Pica-Smith, 2009). However, in a school with a high rate of Roma and migrant children organized around small heterogeneous groups fostering positive peer interactions (Aubert et al., 2017; Valls & Kyriakides, 2013), evidence from this study points to a flourishing of mixed ethnicity friendships. For instance, the relationship between Hakima (West Asia) and Grace (Roma), or Peter (Roma) and Abdel (North Africa), are just some examples of how under specific conditions, children from different cultures build friendship that last from ECE all the way to the first years of elementary education.

To conclude, this study has prioritized children's voices and the significance of its findings lies in the right of children to participate in scientific research in issues that are central to their lives (Powell & Smith, 2009). Indeed, scientific literature on children's friendships has rarely considered their experiences beyond the nomination technique, in which each child is asked to nominate a peer of their choice at two or more times (Asher et al., 1996). Even though such techniques have yielded interesting findings (Rose et al., 2022), they exclude children's narratives and voices, giving little room for children to reflect on the topic. Thus, the present study capitalizes on children's knowledge as it is entirely rooted on their experiences and their thoughts about their friends to unveil what school-related elements they found particularly helpful in maintaining their bonds.

This study has limitations that future research can consider when designing research on children's friendship at early ages. Due to the high mobility of students in this school, the original group has changed over the years, including new children and splitting the group in two different grade levels. As such, results must be read with caution. The present study has also delved deeply into children's experiences and thoughts around friendship and its longevity over three years in a particular school context, mainly based on children's voices. This certainly acts as a limitation, but it has been a decision to value and acknowledge young children's capacity to explain their views and thoughts on such an important and intimate issue as friendship. However, families' views in this regard are also essential since they play an important role in children's socialization opportunities. Research in this field points out the importance of families' choices and their availability to join in particular social activities in shaping children's opportunities to make and keep friends. Lastly, future research could explore longitudinal studies that gather observations and track children's opinions and choices around their friends more frequently or over a longer span of time. Indeed, school closures due to the pandemic has made it impossible

for many children to go to school and continue their learning and social activities. Even if this paper does not explore the effect of the lockdown in children's friendship stability, it is an issue to be analyzed in the future. Also, the present paper has not explored in detail the potential effect of the findings for children with disabilities. Although only one of the participants (Hakima) has a diagnosis of developmental difficulties, it is an issue that this paper has not considered in detail, which could be overcome in future research by gathering more systematic background information of the participants and specifically looking into the intersection between friendships in schools and neurodiversity.

## Funding

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