“A Shy Little Girl”: A Critical Ethnographic Study of A Four-year Old Child’s Shyness in Peer Relationships and Peer Play*

Eunae Son**

〈 Abstract 〉

The purpose of this study is to reconsider the prevailing beliefs or judgments about young children’s shyness and to recognize the unique social roles and social relationships that shy children establish in the peer groups. This study investigates the social actions and the social relationships of one 4-year-old girl who was regarded as socially incompetent due to her shyness. Mainly through 8-month-participant observations of her play with peers, I challenge the stereotypical notion of shy children’s quietness and following actions during play as a passive act. Rather than passive participation or incompetence, this shy girl’s reticence was a very active and reflective deliberation on playing contexts and interactions with the peers. Moreover, her following actions were actually indispensably important and influential roles in social collaborative relationships during peer play. Drawing on Bakhtin’s (1981) term responsive understanding in his dialogism, I propose that young children be reconsidered as a dialogic follower. With the term a dialogic follower, I highlight a shy child’s active, responsive, and reflective roles while engaging in dialogic interactions with their peers.

◆ Key Words : Social Competence, Shyness, Bakhtinian Dialogism, Critical Ethnography, Peer Culture

* This research paper is original work, partially based on a doctoral dissertation completed at the University of Georgia. This paper was presented at 8th Biennial International Conference of The Korean Society for Early Childhood Education.
** Lecturer, Department of Early Childhood Education, Chung-Ang University. (eunaeson@gmail.com)
I. Introduction

Shyness generally has long been considered an undesirable and problematic trait that needs to be overcome, to be gotten rid of, or at the very least, to be addressed (Cacioppo, Fowler, & Christakis, 2009; Coplan, Hughes, Bosacki, & Rose-Krasnor, 2011; Rubin, & Hastings, Stewart, Henderson, & Chen, 1997; Sanson, Hemphill, & Smart, 2004; Zimbardo & Radl, 1999). According to Zimbardo & Radl (1999), most parents are afraid of their child’s shyness in that shyness may ruin children’s social life and psychological health. It is perceived as something that makes children unhappy, “such as being unpopular, not feeling comfortable about peers, and being unable to communicate thoughts effectively or to express feeling directly” (p. 2). Shy children are generally viewed as being isolated and lonely because of a certain anxiety that forces them to shrink back from their social world.

The researches on social competence in the field of early childhood education consider children’s shyness as to be endowed and critical to their social competence (Katz & McClellan, 1997; Rubin et al., 1997; Sanson et al., 2004). For example, in some studies, children who were considered aggressive or shy and had negative social-outcomes were regarded as socially incompetent (Asher, 1983; Rose-Krasnor, 1997). Katz & McClellan (1997) also consider shyness, low rates of interaction, aggression, and loneliness as young children’s common social difficulties. Although the scholars referred above are those in European-American culture, the similarly negative images and connotations on children’s shyness are easily found in the academic discourse of Korean society (Park & Doh, 2006). Representatively, the common negative perceptions on shyness in Korean society are reflected in many researches on educational programs for overcoming children’s shyness (e.g., Chung & Kim, 2003; Hyeon & Park, 2009; Lee & Chung, 2004; Park & Doh, 2006). Such programs use various approaches to reducing shyness: art crafts, music activities, storybooks, puppet shows, and etc. These activities are intended to overcome anxiety and enhance self-esteem and self-assertiveness. Likewise, dominant discourses both in European-American society and in Korean society