



We're Friends, Right? Inside Kids' Culture. Corsaro, William A. Washington, D.C.: Joseph Henry Press, 2003. 248 pp.

ANNE HAAS DYSON, *Michigan State University*

adhyson@msu.edu

In the midst of politicized efforts to measure the worth of Head Start programs through alphabet quick tests and the like, of heated debates on the developmental pros and cons of institutional life in day cares for the very young, William Corsaro has the marvelous audacity to write in praise of children's lives with other children. In his book, *We're Friends, Right? Inside Kids' Culture*, Corsaro invites readers into the workings of childhood cultures established by 3- to 6-year olds and, in the process, reveals the complexities of those cultures as well as of the professional roles of childhood sociologists and, less directly, early childhood teachers.

Corsaro has been a key figure in scholarly efforts to re-imagine childhood itself. Across disciplines, young children have been seen as the objects of sociocultural and/or cognitive forces. In education, particularly, children are displayed as individuals who progress, with varying degrees of ease, toward adult knowledge and logic. In contrast, in current sociology of childhood, attention is paid to the collective action of children, who appropriate resources from the adult world to formulate their own cultural worlds.

As Corsaro illustrates, this research approach has necessitated a new role for the adult researcher, who has to establish a rather odd role for an adult in institutions for young children—that of a nondirective, friendly, and non-threatening adult who seemingly enjoys watching children and occasionally playing with toys. In this book, as in other writings, Corsaro engagingly details his own trials and tribulations in adopting such a role.

The focus of this book, though, is on children's efforts to gain and share control over interactive, if not physical, space. To explore these efforts, Corsaro draws primarily on his own data from research projects in early education settings, separated in time (covering a span of 30 years), socioeconomic circumstance, cultural membership, and societal attention to the needs of young children. These settings include American preschools for upper and middle class children, Italian preschools for middle class children, and American Head Start programs for low income, African American children. Corsaro has not approached the book as a set of methodologically detailed research reports, nor as a highly theoretical treatise. Rather, he has written a thorough introduction to his vision of "kids' culture," a view that emphasizes the ways in which children appropriate resources from the adult world for their own practices and, in so doing, actively contribute to society's reproduction.

Throughout the book, Corsaro does justice to the social and cognitive complexity and, indeed, to the often intense passion and pleasure played out in what might be dismissed as simple scenes of, for example, children chatting in the sand pile, arguing at the drawing table, and



waving wildly from the climbing bars. Among the illustrated aspects of children's cultures (with my added *s* to emphasize a plurality) are: shared routines or rituals; friendships based in social action; and, in varied forms, play. The forms of play include fantasy play, in which children become improvisational actors, responding to each other as well as to the evolving scene, and dramatic play, in which they become reflexive role players, examining their own potential futures. Sometimes, to ensure space for play, children become adroit workers-of-the system, for example, slipping away from a messy area when "clean up time" arrives.

These aspects of children's cultures are present in all the settings in which Corsaro studied, but there were differences too, including variations in children's interactional styles, the degree and nature of gender segregation, play themes, and children's ways of making, and disputing with, friends. Clearly, children's cultural worlds appropriate from adult worlds, and so the existence of such differences is not surprising. Still, this aspect of the book is not as developed as the common aspects of "kids' culture." The settings studied all seem so neatly classified, relative to the complex mixes of children from diverse cultural and language backgrounds found in many U.S. urban public school pre-kindergartens. Then there is the sheer exuberance of Corsaro's writing about the Italian preschoolers, which in and of itself seems to set those children apart. Certainly the Italian early education system is admirable, particularly given the tremendous inequities faced by young children and their families in the U.S. As well, the years young Italian children spend together as peers surely contributes to complex and well-developed peer cultures. These institutional and cultural factors seem overshadowed, though, by the seeming exoticism of the children's translated Italian and the warm affection Corsaro displayed for the children—not to mention his apparent enjoyment of being the amusing American visitor from afar.

Nonetheless, Corsaro's pleasure in being with the young may be an important message in and of itself. It may help entice others to ethnographically examine kids' cultures in varied relatively unexplored settings. More broadly, Corsaro's highly readable book may introduce the notion of childhood cultures to a broad audience, including students in sociology, anthropology, and education courses. Most importantly, perhaps, Corsaro might enlist the concern of all readers with his straightforward critique of our society's discrimination toward and neglect of the very young. The tolerance of child and family poverty, the narrowing and intense structuring of children's lives in educational institutions, the disappearance of space for play, the limited opportunities for social connections between young children and people of different ages, particularly the elderly—all suggest that we have much to do in this society to be better friends of children.