

Ethnicity and children

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Young children's experiences of racialisation and racism

Amir decides that he wants to draw a picture of himself playing football with his friends. Before starting to draw, Amir tells me that he likes to play football with Daud, Mubarak, Mustafa, Barak and Seif while at school and that they often pretend that they are England, Spain or Barcelona because these are 'good football teams'.

After telling me this he reaches over to the pen pot and picks up a brown pen which he starts drawing with. 'This is Mubarak' he tells me. He then draws Daud using the same pen telling me that Daud and Mubarak both have the same skin colour.

After finishing this part of his picture he looks again in the pen pot and informs me that there isn't a pen for his skin colour. He shows me his hand and says to me 'Look, there isn't the right colour'. He then picks up a blue pen and says 'let's pretend its white' also commenting that 'blue is a good boy's colour'.

He draws a picture of himself (with the ball), and then draws a picture of Barak and Seif using the same blue pen. As he is doing this he tells me that he is the same as these boys and that they are all Arab and Muslim.

After he has finished drawing Amir looks at his completed picture and tells me 'Daud and Mubarak are Muslim but they aren't Arab', like the other boys, as 'they're not white'.

Fieldnote Extract 1

Where was the research done?

This extract is taken from the fieldnotes of an ethnographic study set within a reception class of an inner city school, Sunnyside, in the North of England where the majority of pupils are from North and Sub-Saharan African countries. Over the course of the school year I spent a day a week with the class and observed the children's peer interactions (Barley 2014).

I was interested in finding out how young children explored difference and identity in a multi-ethnic Early Years Setting and whether this influenced their peer interactions. My study found that identity and diversity had a key part to play in the children's peer cultures where 'being a girl' or 'being a boy', 'being Somali' or 'being Muslim' etc was an important part of the children's peer interactions (Barley 2014). This article focuses on how the children in the class engaged with the related concepts of *racialisation* and *racism* in their peer interactions and compares the discourses collectively produced by a group of boys in the class (known as *the gang* by their peers) and a group of girls (who called themselves *the older girls*).

What is the issue?

Previous studies (for example Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001, Brown 2007 and Priest et al. 2014) have found that young children not only recognise ethnic diversity but are 'socialised to form particular attitudes about themselves and people from different racial/ethnic backgrounds' (Priest et al. 2014:2). These studies argue that young children seek to make sense of ethnic/'racial' diversity in their everyday lives as they distinguish between their experiences of *racialisation* (i.e. an awareness of ethnic or 'racial' differences) and *racism* (i.e. the unfair treatment of individuals or groups based on their ethnic/'racial' identity). Ethnic minority children are thought to be aware of these abstract concepts at a young age as they are forced to make sense of stereotypical and at times discriminatory experiences.

While drawing the picture of his friends playing football (above), Amir (Arab boy) showed that he understood that there is social meaning behind the differences that he saw between himself and his friends and that their different skin colours can also relate to other aspects of their identity. Amir did not, however, place these differences within a social hierarchy but purely commented that these differences exist showing an awareness of *racialisation*. In depicting his peers in this way he emphasised the relevance of a separate unifying group identity of 'being Muslim'.

While drawing his picture Amir mentions his two Somali 'best friends' Daud and Mubarak. Daud and Mubarak's conversation (below) about 'being black' shows how some children in the class demonstrated a sophisticated understanding that *racialisation* is deeper than skin colour. This conversation occurred at the start of the school day. The children's parents were leaving the classroom as the children practised writing their names:

Daud looks over to the carpet where his mother is still talking to Mubarak's mother and tells the group 'My mum's brown.'

'No, she's not. She's black' chips in Mubarak, 'My mum's black too.'

'Black?' asks Daud looking confused. He then puts down his pen and inspects his hand and arm before putting his arm in front of Mubarak's face informing him 'It's brown. My mum's brown. I'm brown. So are you.'

Mubarak contradicts this by saying 'No. I'm black. You are black too.' Daud still looks confused so Mubarak explains that people with brown skin are called black.

'Why black?' asks Daud.

Mubarak returning to his writing thinks about this for a minute or so before saying that he's not very sure why but 'being black is a good thing' that isn't just about the colour of your skin.

Fieldnote Extract 2

While Mubarak comprehended that 'being black' embodied a socio-political dimension, this understanding was not widely shared by his peers. As mentioned above, research shows that young ethnic minority children *can* develop sophisticated understandings of *racialisation* when they have been exposed to stereotypical or discriminatory experiences.

While Mubarak and the other boys in the class were proud of '*being black*' a group of girls in the class expressed a desire '*to be white*' internalising *racist* beliefs. Fariido's (Somali girl) conversation with Fazia (Egyptian girl) during a research activity highlights this:

Fariido points to the hand at the top of the picture and says 'This is me.'

Fazia however points to the hand at the bottom of the picture saying 'Look that's your hand and that's my hand'. She points to the hand at the top continuing 'Look its whiter. Look!'

Fariido replies 'Let me see' and turns the picture round.

As she does Fazia points to the hand at the top and says again 'That's mine.' 'No, that's mine' insists Fariido.

'No' continues Fazia 'that's mine cause I'm the whiter one. Mine is lighter.'

Fariido doesn't respond to this but instead focuses on the picture.

I ask her why she thinks that it is her hand at the top.

'Cause I want to be white and she the darker one' she tells me.

Fazia again insists 'I'm the lighter one. Look!' as she shows Fariido, and then me, her hand.

'No, I'm the lighter one' replies Fariido.

'Why do you want to be the lighter one?' I ask.

'I like to be white because...' Fariido replies before pausing 'because... because I want to be white, like Fazia. She has a white face... I wish I could take this skin off and put on some like that' she states pointing back to the photograph.

Fieldnote Extract 3

Why do these views occur?

Glenn (2008) describes this notion of wanting to be light or white as '*colorism*'. This fascination with 'being lighter' was a topic of conversation that *the older girls* as a group regularly discussed amongst themselves always being careful to make sure that they were

out of earshot of the school staff. As well as discussing wanting to be lighter *the older girls* also discussed how to do this and were aware that older female family members used skin lightening creams and make-up to change their appearance. These types of beauty products can create a 'white is right' ideology (Glenn 2008).

Racism against those with darker skin is also inherent in the concept of '*colorism*'. As we will see below *the older girls* at Sunnyside not only compared their skin colours and discussed their desire to be lighter amongst themselves but also created a social hierarchy in which graduations of skin tone informed their peer interactions.

A few weeks after working with Fariido and Fazia, when doing the same research exercise with Nasra she revealed to me how *the older girls* ranked each other in their peer interactions.

Looking at the picture Nasra asks me who the children in the picture are. I tell her that I think Fariido and Fazia were there when I took the picture.

She tells me though that she thinks that it is Deka and Fazia before explaining that she and the other girls often compare their skin colours and the colour and texture of their hair.

She confides in me that the girls all think that 'it is better to be the lightest' before telling me:

'Outside in the water [area], we said, who's the lightest? Who's the darkest? And we said Deka's the darkest ... then Fariido's a browny and then... Fariido and Aniso and Annakiya and Deka are the same skin. And we said me and Fazia are together.'

Fieldnote Extract 4

Priest et al. (2014) describe this process of ranking within minority ethnic groups as '*brown racism*'. This concept of '*brown racism*' refers to the attempt to position oneself in an idealised position in relation to the power hierarchies that are at play in a given context. In this instance 'being white' was privileged in *the older girls*' social interactions at Sunnyside and therefore the girls who were perceived as being lighter were able to position themselves in a place of relative power within the social hierarchy.

While the other *older girls* often talked about their skin colours and ranked each other it is important to note that Deka (who the other girls repeatedly identified as being the darkest) did not contribute to these conversations but rather tried to withdraw unnoticed from the place where these conversations were taking place. When talking about her identity Deka emphasised her religious identity of 'being Muslim', an identity that was valued within the peer culture.

How can we change things?

It is clear from this study that young children are profoundly influenced by wider racist values and beliefs. Schools need to deal with discrimination head on giving children the time and space to explore wider social discourses in a safe environment. As Brown (2007) and Priest et al. (2014) advocate passive educational policies of inclusivity and multiculturalism are not equipped to do this. An anti-discriminatory policy that takes a multi-level approach and actively challenges racist social discourses and structural inequalities needs to be adopted that undoes discrimination and allows children to value and respect their own and others' identities. In order to effect this change teachers and other school adults need to be supported in developing a language to talk to children about identity, diversity and discrimination that avoids stereotyping and common misconceptions.

Key points:

- Young children are acutely aware of ethnic diversity and racialisation
- Some young children have a sophisticated understanding of socio-political meanings relating to specific ethnic identities
- Some young children internalise racist views and place ethnic difference in a social hierarchy.
- Children actively hide hierarchical views on ethnic difference from school staff
- School staff need to be supported in developing anti-discriminatory policy and practice that challenge these hierarchical views

Further reading:

Barley, R. (2014). *Social identity and interaction in a multi-ethnic classroom*. London: Tufnell Press.

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