



**Colilles, S. (2023) 'Play and listening to children's narratives',
Early Years Educator, 23 (20), pp. 20-21.**

This document is the Accepted Manuscript version of a Published Work that appeared in final form in *Early Years Educator* copyright © MA Healthcare, after peer review and technical editing by the publisher. To access the final edited and published work see <https://doi.org/10.12968/eyed.2023.23.20.20>

ResearchSPAce

<http://researchspace.bathspa.ac.uk/>

This pre-published version is made available in accordance with publisher policies.
Please cite only the published version using the reference above.

Your access and use of this document is based on your acceptance of the
ResearchSPAce Metadata and Data Policies, as well as applicable law:-

<https://researchspace.bathspa.ac.uk/policies.html>

Unless you accept the terms of these Policies in full, you do not have permission to
download this document.

This cover sheet may not be removed from the document.

Please scroll down to view the document.

Children's voices

Play and listening to children's narratives

Early childhood is a time when children should be building a positive self-identity, a time when they need to explore who they are, and a time for understanding and making sense of their place in the world. A play based pedagogical approach is key for supporting exploration of children's many ways of sharing ideas about their ethnic identity.

Dr Sharon Colilles

Senior lecturer Early Childhood, Bath Spa University

Defining Play

Pioneering perspectives have shaped thinking about the purpose and value of play in early childhood education. Pioneering theorists identified and promoted play as an essential element of early learning, though not with universal agreement about its status and form. For example, Susan Isaacs' (1885-1948) contribution positioned play as being essential for emotional and cognitive development, coining the term that 'play is a child's work'. Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) stressed the importance of imaginative play and that through this form of play children learn at the highest level. What better way to think about children and childhood than through Vygotsky's (1978:102) view that "a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour: in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself"? Moving forward to modern day innovators' Bob Hughes development of play types has inspired and shaped more specific understanding about play and how children learn. Of course, I could not write an article such as this without mention of Tina Bruce's body of work surrounding the features of play, who coined the term 'free flow' play which has influenced the way children are offered a 'choice' in early years curricula.

Benefits of play for exploring ethnicity

Taking such rich insights forward, play can be a meaningful way in which young children develop, learn, and explore socially constructed ideas about their ethnicity. Play has the potential for giving children control and power in learning activities that facilitate developing ideas about a raced identity. In play children can become deeply involved in their learning as they take the things they already know well and combine them in new ways so that their understanding deepens. The central importance of play cannot be underestimated here as it is a valuable vehicle in which children will build upon and interpret ideas about themselves. By using a truly participatory approach with children play can be used as a mediation tool and a '*cultural bridge*' (Broadhead & Burt, 2012) for connecting ideas about how groups of children choose to share and co-construct knowledge about their ethnicity with peers and practitioners.

The role of the educator

As educators we understand the significance of reflection. Reflection on established learning interventions that are offered in provision regarding inclusion is key to creating newly informed spaces for play-based participatory pedagogies. It is acknowledged that these are unprecedented times of challenge for the early childhood sector but where possible educators should start by examining approaches that may already exist or may need adapting for the children that they work with. A way of increasing practitioner knowledge about children's unique identities needs to start with conversations with parents and carers. Next steps should include creating space in curricula design so that children can explore their ethnicity in their play. Why? Because the insights young children offer are too often overlooked but are important and valid contributions in understanding issues that directly affect the children themselves. When thinking about the influence of the interactional nature of play pedagogy, adults have a role in advocating for and developing authentic and ethical inclusive practice. Observation and evaluation of the wonderfully unique individual perspectives and ethnic information that children choose to share in their play repertoires will strengthen inclusive practice; ensure that educators do not inadvertently discriminate or limit what is offered to young children; and develop new understandings about inclusion, equality, and equity.

Listening as an approach for understanding children's perceptions of self and others

Young children are acutely sensitive to their surroundings and very rapidly acquire understanding of the people, places, and routines in their lives, along with an awareness of their own unique identity. Respecting play in a framework that is understood by children and participation in sociocultural activities will help educators to understand the complex ways how children see and define themselves. In spaces of truly dialogic conversation between peers and adults, where time is given to play, and children are encouraged to take charge of sharing their understanding about ethnicity, some of the narratives most meaningful to children will grow.

Listening as an approach to understanding children's perceptions (funds of knowledge) about their ethnicity can be developed to create both personal and shared narratives; Professor Alison Clark helpfully supports my call to action, a need for reflection and a 'shift' in practice to illuminate new and ethical ways of challenging the unmeasurable "*...practice that tunes into young children's views and experiences can draw attention to the difficult to measure and bring other kinds of knowledge into focus*" (Clark, 2020:137). Over time practice of this nature will serve to inform the implementation of a culturally reflective and inclusive curriculum. Practice will be transformed because positioned at the heart of pedagogy is a deep understanding of children's perspectives about their cultural and ethnic origin. When children have a positive sense of self and a 'real' sense of belonging because of relationships developed with trusted adults then the foundation for understanding the unique child is positioned in educational processes.

Developing curricula that gives status to children's 'voices' from an equitable standpoint in educational experiences is key for engaging with children's unique contributions so that democracy is positioned at the heart of participation and practice (Pascal and Bertram, 2012). These approaches will enable educators to notice and respond to complexities in children's play so that through processes of dialogic conversation wonderful opportunities are created for exploring a raced identity.

Artefacts and the enabling environment

The environment is ideal for talking to children about diversity and for providing contexts in which to value and validate children's diverse ethnic backgrounds. In an environment where the centrality of play is embedded children can become deeply involved as they take things they already know and combine them in new ways of knowing so that their understanding deepens. I am reminded in this instance about the power of play; that it does and should belong to children. Helping children to reconnect with what they understand about their sense of self can be achieved by introducing 'culturally appropriate resources' (Colilles, 2020) into learning activities. Resources can facilitate exploration as well enabling children to participate and connect home-setting cultures in the reconstruction of 'knowledge' (Corsaro, 2015) about racial similarities and differences.

Slowing down pedagogy (Clark, 2017) and affording opportunities for children to deeply immerse in their play to explore a sense of self is highly beneficial for all young children. In these explorations cultural artefacts can be used as a *"social toolkit"*, to facilitate *"the language used to talk about racial and ethnic difference [which] is an important tool that young children use in learning to understand these differences"* (Park, 2011:394). When children see themselves in educational experiences then learning can truly begin!

Conclusion

Play (as a form of expression) can ignite curiosity, exploration and enthusiasm for the young learner. Affording space for children to truly participate in play experiences about their own identity and the identities of others offers transformative learning in practice. Offering time in curricula for the co-construction of 'new' knowledge from the perspectives of children gives status to their voices, as well as creating wonderful opportunities to engage with children's unique perspectives. Young children have so much to share, so do celebrate what they have to say!

References

- Barron, I. (2014) *Finding a voice: A figured worlds approach to theorising young children's identities*. Journal of early Childhood Research. Vol. 12. No3, 251-263, Sage.
- Broadhead, P. and Burt, A. (2012) *Understanding Young Children's Learning through Play*, London: Routledge.
- Clark, A. (2017) *Listening to young children: a guide to understanding and using the mosaic approach*. Expanded third edition forwarded by Peter Moss. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Clark, A. (2020) Towards a listening ECEC system. In: [Cameron, C and Moss, P \(eds\) \(2020\) Transforming Early Childhood Education in England: Towards a Democratic Education. London: UCL Press.](#) (free open access pdf): Chapter 9 pp134-150.
- Colilles, S. (2020), Exploring how play-based pedagogies support mixed ethnic identity formation, PhD, Bristol City University
- Corsaro, W. A. (2015) *The Sociology of Childhood, 4th edn*. London: Sage.
- Gaither, S.E., Chen, E.E., Corriveau, K.H., Harris, P. L., Ambady, N., and Sommers, S.R. (2014) Monoracial and Biracial Children: Effects of Racial Identity Saliency on social learning and social preferences. *Child Development*, Vol 85 (6) p.2299.
- Karabon, A. (2017) They're lovin' it: how preschool children mediated their funds of knowledge into dramatic play. *Early Child Development and Care*. Vol 187 (5-6): 896-909.
- Park, C. (2011) Young children making sense of racial and ethnic differences: a sociocultural approach. *American Educational Research Journal* Vol 48 (2): pp.387-420.
- Pascal and Bertram, (2012) Praxis, ethics, and power: developing praxeology as a participatory paradigm for early childhood research, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 20 (4): 477-492.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978) *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Process*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p102.