

A funds of knowledge approach to explore how play-based pedagogies support mixed ethnic identity formation: listening to children's perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Ideologies in educational research focused on the experiences of mixed ethnic children, and the importance of mediating tools of language (fundamental in Vygotskian thinking), fail to incorporate the unique contributions and agentic ways in which this group of children choose to share 'knowledge'. What appears to be missing in discourse is the child's perspective on how they choose to categorise their mixed ethnic identity. Building upon sociocultural theorisation to respond to the research question: what are the key influences on mixed ethnic children's ability to relate to and connect constructs about their ethnic identity in an early years setting? This article contends that identity development employing children's perspectives enables educators to acknowledge and respond to their unique personal identities. Created are opportunities to validate insights about how children choose to co-construct and ascribe meaning to their mixed origins. Aligned with empowerment and development of self-efficacy, praxeological methods utilise play-based experiences to generate data for accessing children's 'voices'. Drawing on the preferences of children who can identify with more than one racial group, findings reveal mixed ethnic children use new emergent terminologies of brown, light brown and whiteish with established societal classifications of black and white interchangeable in their dialogic conversations.

KEYWORDS

Funds of knowledge; mixed ethnicity; play pedagogy; children's perspectives; socio-cultural theory

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

SDG 4: Quality education

Introduction

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2021, 2024) sets the expected standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to 5 years in England. Policy rhetoric underpinning inclusion and cultural diversity does offer direction about how the issue of cultural diversity is engaged within the early year's curriculum planning and development contexts, but what is challenging with this policy framework is an expectation that assessment of each child's level of

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development must be addressed against early learning goals without ‘knowledge’ of what constitutes, shapes and defines issues surrounding children’s identities so that this learning can occur (Colilles 2020). The intention in this paper is to signify the importance of listening to diverse learners so that their ‘voices’ are given equitable status in pedagogic approaches. Plausible justification for signalling the importance of focusing on the mixed ethnic learner is linked to the Office for National Statistics (ONS 2021) findings that mixed ethnicity is one of the fastest-growing ethnic categories in England. Relevant to groupings selected in this study, the 2021 census reports 2.5 million children identify as Mixed/African and Mixed Caribbean. Positioned is a view that very little is known about what inclusion means for the mixed ethnic child in early childhood provision, particularly when analysing the language or terminology that may be used and then replicated by this group of young learners. Taken from a small-scale interpretive study conducted in England, the inquiry explored how four 3-year-old children respond to and show awareness of similarities and differences in mixed ethnic identification (Colilles 2020). The study contributes towards existing epistemologies by problematising established conceptualisations about how realities associated with ethnicity are mediated and constructed to elicit the children’s viewpoints. Offered is an understanding that the acquisition of identity is not an automatic development proceeding in passive children but involves the complexity of conscious and unconscious interactions, and children’s active attempts to understand, interpret and participate in their own and others’ identities. Suggestions that children’s identities are dialogic, where they will find ‘voice’ by participating and responding to social endeavours in which they ‘*improvise and author the world*’ (Barron 2014, 255) are also significant. Five vignettes of sociodramatic play are presented to illustrate three children’s perspectives about their developing mixed ethnic identity. The paper builds upon the work of Tizzard and Phoenix (1993), Katz (1996), Gaither et al. (2014), and applies Moll et al.’s (1992) funds of knowledge’ theorisation as a theoretical framework for analysing and interpreting children’s perspectives through a socio-cultural lens. Discussion considers concepts surrounding socialisation processes; children’s ability to engage in play-based pedagogical approaches; dynamics between power and agency and their influence on dispositions for shaping learner identity.

Literature review

Children’s racial awareness and attitude development?

Pioneering socio-cultural studies suggest that in a multi-racial society, from around the age of three, children will be aware of simple racial differences. As they grow, children will show feelings about differing groups, usually in simple evaluations of a preference for identifying with the in-group and showing some dislike or rejection of other racial groups picked up from significant others (Milner 1983). Definitions surrounding racial identification and attitude development are emphasised by ideas that parents intentionally or unintentionally transmit behaviours from their own worldview. Views possibly attributed to explanations that claim from birth, children are surrounded by a naturally restricted social world, in which they learn not only what to do, but also how things are seen by the significant adults surrounding them. Deliberation suggests that, at the same

time as learning about being in a culture, children are learning the meanings of cultures. Milner's (1983) historic study that positions attitudes do not stem from genetic configurations, nor are they transmitted genetically from one human being to another. Instead, Milner proffers all the ways of doing things practised in the immediate group or the wider culture are passed on to children either with or without their realisation through '*socialising processes*'. In the development of racial attitudes, this notable research contends '*rules of behaviour establish patterns of responding to other racial groups, whether or not children have developed those attitudes for themselves*' (Milner 1983, 73). There are assumptions that conceptions of race are socially and culturally determined rather than a biological category (Park 2011). Comparable inquiries suggest early preferences relating to racial categories, rather than being cognitively determined, are social constructions acquired 'from the outside in' (Roberts and Rizzo 2021, 479). Insomuch as attitude development is shaped by racial biases learnt either overtly, such as language heard, or via more subtle forms of expression, such as behaviours and gestures considered by scholars as microaggressions (Harris 2016; Pérez Huber and Solorzano 2015).

Studies specifically relating to mixed ethnic children (Gaither et al. 2014) contend that by the age of four, biracial children have an enhanced cognitive ability in racial identification where they can identify with their two racial in-groups flexibly. To what degree this flexibility impacts learning about social preferences is debatable, because the priming mechanisms used to explore preferences in this study were obtained from three groups of mono-racial children. Earlier contributions surrounding racial attitude development suggest children not only recognised skin colour, but they were also able to decode the value attributed to skin colour in larger society (Mac Naughton 2001, 2005). These inquiries are helpful for understanding the implications of skin colour preferences in supporting all children to better recognise the social features associated with 'race' or skin tone differences. What is difficult to ignore in these findings is the socially derived influences that can contribute towards children's understanding and attitudes towards culture, race and ethnicity. Particularly, where contributions contend children are sensitive to social group information, where they are attentive towards and will adapt their learning and social preferences towards that familial shared group (Gaither et al. 2014). Observed is a tendency to objectify and deny the agency of young children where deliberations fail to incorporate the unique contributions of both the children's circumstances and the relationships encountered in their social environment outside of the early years setting; thoughts that could reasonably be perceived as rendering them to be somewhat incomplete. Terminology used in the linguistic practices of the home and then replicated in the educational play environment is helpful for exploration of new and emergent vocabularies because children will enter agentic tensions about the appropriate terminology to use (Bakhtin 1981). For the early childhood educator, an appreciation of cultural ecologies in understanding the responses offered by minoritised groupings of children facilitates an appreciation of the crossing of cultural contexts that children make daily and how these can be risk factors in terms of educational success.

Lee, Spencer, and Harplani (2003) appreciated cultural ecologies in understanding the responses offered by children from 'minoritised groups', where recognition is afforded to the crossing between cultural contexts that children from minority groupings make daily.

Acknowledged in this early study are risk factors in educational success. Lee (2006) suggests that this is because where children are unable to effectively exchange cultural experiences, there is a risk that limited opportunities of participation result in limited opportunities to learn. The significance of culturally informed pedagogy for enabling children to participate in and experience educational success should not be underestimated. Cultural knowledge about children allows educators to decipher and integrate the shared knowledge engaged in and learnt in the home and community into the learning experiences, behaviour and language used by the setting. Moll (2010, 456) contributes to these thoughts by offering:

when students witness the validation of their culture and language, hence themselves, within the educational process, when they 'see themselves' in their schooling, they combine their home or community identities with an academic identity.

The usefulness of contributions that influence views associated with children's ethnic awareness and attitude development (Katz 1996; Moll 2010; Park 2011; Tajfel 1978; Vygotsky 1978) provides rigour in theoretical debates about identity formation. Concern exists with the ways in which young children's experiences in developing their sense of self or identity often appear to emerge only from social practice of '*what is done to children*' (Barron 2014, 253). Recognising that from an early age, children are sensitive to social group information, contributions in this paper offer new epistemologies to inform understanding about the ways in which children respond to or take up positions in relation to their mixed identity acquired from previously lived experiences.

Mixed ethnic identity formation

Although there is a fixedness in notions of categorisation, the ways in which mixed ethnic children operate are '*fluid*' and '*shifting*' (Ladson-Billings 2010). Relevant are conversations that examine the fluidity or fixedness of ethnic categorisations ascribed by 'mixed ethnic' children, when applied to 'real-life' play experiences. Understanding the external influences that impact children in their formative years is extremely complex. Limitations exist where there are ongoing debates about power in relation to the adult's role in the social construction of childhood learning and development, and the agency and choice children have in their own learning. Waller, Whitmarsh, and Clarke (2011) advocate that children are not only capable of asserting their agency and preferences through the expression of ideas and negotiation of their desires, but they are also able to cause change in these interactions within their learning environments. If space is given to the agentic ability of young children, they can interact and negotiate in contexts surrounding ethnic identity. Increased efforts in research studies have strived to confront views surrounding how mixed ethnic children should be defined, but what often appears to be missing in conversations is the child's own understanding of how they make sense of and categorise their mixed ethnic identity. Goodyer and Okitikpi (2007, 85) support these views when they argue '*the views of the children ... themselves have often been ignored*'. This article, therefore, focuses on how preferences apply to children who can identify with more than one racial group, as well as the preferences these children choose to identify themselves and others.

The significance of play in children's construction of identity

Vygotskian notions that the child operates at a higher level when engaged in play (where the zone of proximal development [ZPD] requires a certain type of play) provided a rationale for exploring insights into the nature and role of play and its links to matters associated with race, ethnicity and culture in child development. Recognising that playful activities hold educational meaning, sociodramatic play is presented to make a case about how the mixed ethnic child reconstructs and makes meaning of their pre-existing diverse repertoires of socio-cultural activity. Foregrounding ideas about the purpose of play, scholars such as Hennig and Kirova (2012) and Karabon (2017) inform us that play can act as a mediation tool for connecting ideas about how mixed ethnic children choose to share and co-construct knowledge about their ethnic identity. There is rigour in perspectives that argue play has the potential to act as a powerful 'bridge' between children's home and 'school' communities (Lam and Pollard 2006). Characterising play and definitions of learning through play in early childhood environments can seem somewhat incongruent with ideas in research because play and child-centred pedagogy in practice can be perceived as coming with biases and culturally specific ways of operating. Defined for the most part by the values of those who lead in educational processes. Achieving an appropriate and sensitive balance between child-initiated and adult-directed play-based experiences is dependent on practitioner confidence, training and experience, particularly when also operating with the external influences from outcome-driven inspection frameworks; constraints of adult:child ratios; pressures from parental expectations of early childhood education, and meeting expectations from more senior practitioners (Colilles 2020).

The practitioner's own ideology about the interests and needs of the children within their learning community also influences the adopted types of play and pedagogy. There is the potential for tensions to exist where there is a mismatch between cultural play contexts and dialogical conversations in which individuals participate. Bhabha (1998) speaks of the existence of 'liminal spaces' between cultural groupings, which may serve to limit the emergence of new meaningful identities amongst children, peers and practitioners. What is often seen are external pressures negating opportunities for giving voice to shared understandings in culturally appropriated play activities because of the subtle tailoring of practitioner assumptions about the children with whom they work (Colilles 2020). Space for the development of a sense of self in play is vital for children coming from diverse multicultural societies and relationships. The vehicle of play facilitates comprehension of how experiences in educational settings impact young mixed ethnic children when they cross the cultural divide (Lam and Pollard 2006) between the home/community environment and that of the early years setting. Opportunities are afforded to explore the complexities surrounding how children are empowered (or not) to share cultural knowledge acquired prior to entering educational environments through their play.

Methodology and methods

Theoretical underpinning

Young children's developing understanding of cultural and ethnic identity in socialisation processes (Barron 2014; Corsaro 2015; Gaither et al. 2014; Rogoff 1990) is recognised

as an appropriate theoretical framework in the study. Particularly, existing epistemologies that examine the significance of mediating tools of language (fundamental to Vygotskian thinking) for exploring terminology used to express new and emergent categorisations ascribed by the children within their conversations. A praxeological approach creates situated contexts to explore rights-based participatory methods alongside children in their everyday play activities. Pascal and Bertram remind the researcher that praxeological methods can be viewed as operating at two levels: one, to *'produce knowledge and actions which are directly useful for individuals*, two, *it seeks to empower individuals to pursue social transformation through a process constructing and using their own knowledge'* (2012, 482). This advice informed adopted approaches for problematising contexts pertaining to selfhood, as well as questioning debates about culture and identity. Participation is useful because of its value for demonstrating trustworthiness in qualitative studies (Formosinho and Oliveira Formosinho 2012; Formosinho and Pascal 2016; Pascal and Bertram 2009, 2012), as well as establishing ethically respectful and reciprocal relationships with children (Shenton 2004). Praxeology facilitated the emergence of the children's ethnographic narratives that moved beyond generalised conversations in educational research. Techniques using video software, culturally appropriate resources such as skin-coloured paints, and children's literature afforded opportunities for encouraging children's stories to emerge. Made visible was a range of wider expressions in the form of the children's drawings and paintings, together with rich descriptions from video-cued ethnographic accounts with peers and practitioners. Provided over time were opportunities for the children to 'name their worlds' when considering thoughts about their mixed ethnic identity. Demonstrating the interplay between mediation, participation and identity formation, the filmed material elicited a range of responses from the children, where play acted as that 'cultural bridge' (Broadhead and Burt 2012) between the home and educational setting.

Inspired by strategies for raising consciousness, empowerment and the development of self-efficacy in Pascal and Bertram (2012), participatory research influenced methodological approaches in the study. Synthesising philosophies associated with rights to participate and young children's capacity for sharing knowledge provided additional theories that suggest young children will bring with them 'funds of knowledge' (Barron 2014) from the home into their play and learning repertoires. Discussion draws upon five vignettes of play to respond to the research question:

Using the 'voice' of the child, what are the key influences on mixed ethnic children's ability to relate to and connect with constructs about their ethnic identity in an early years setting?

Research design and data collection methods

Located in an English private day care setting, a period of 9 months was spent recording a range of experiences following children's intrinsic ways of being in both freely chosen and adult-directed play experiences. Culturally appropriate resources (Colilles 2020) were utilised in activities such as storytelling, self-portrait painting and pretend film-making as provocations for listening to and reflecting on responses associated with a mixed ethnic identity. Formosinho and Pascal's work endorses the range of collection methods where they contend that making use of expressive activities to capture children's

narratives provides ‘*more authentic accounts of pedagogic practice ... as well as unmask[ing] some of the often-hidden aspects of understanding and meanings which flow from evidence*’ (2016, 82).

This article presents data from transcribed video recordings generated from mixed ethnic children’s dialogic conversations and interactions with practitioners. Incorporated are researcher notes from observation of children’s non-verbal cues (messages and actions) that occurred in filmed episodes of play. Transcribed data also included documented responses from ethnographic field notes immediately after each activity (the rationale being to gather children’s additional interpretations when viewing the recordings). Methodologies of this kind are defined by Tobin et al. as ‘*multivocal ethnography*’ (2009, 261), which is helpful when describing approaches for generating thick descriptions from observations of children. Practitioners were asked to maintain reflective journals of their own interpretations of pedagogic practice, along with reflections of what they perceived was being learnt in these shared play experiences. No attempts were made to edit the filmed footage before showing it to the children and practitioners. Instead, the transcribed dialogic conversations were selected by the children and practitioners and so shaped what constituted the emergent findings. Justification is to limit subjectivity in the choice of recordings and to ensure, as best as possible, the creation of meaningful opportunities for children (and practitioners) to participate as co-researchers. Co-constructed learning experiences in video recordings acted as cues for contributing to understanding about the influence of peers and pedagogic action in facilitating the children’s judgements and preferences about their own racial identification and that of others. Adopted approaches also demonstrate how to afford descriptions from everyday participative activities to evolve to establish case study vignettes of the children’s sense of self-identity. Illustrated in the vignettes are some of the ways in which children share perspectives surrounding a mixed ethnicity.

Ethical considerations

Sampling

Use of ethnic categoricities Black Caribbean/Other and Black African/Other significantly influenced the sample size of children who could participate. Viewed as being ‘purposive’ (Miles and Huberman 1994; Siraj-Blatchford 2010), the sampling strategy used was informed by methodologies that sought to explore the influence of play pedagogy on mixed ethnic children’s ability that relates to and connects with constructs surrounding their ethnic identity. Based on these ethnic categorisations, three ‘focus’ children were nominated by the nursery manager and deputy manager as appropriate participants. Other factors influencing the selection of children, other than meeting the ethnic categorisations, were based on the managers’ knowledge about the children’s competence to respond to situated contexts about their own ethnic identity and the ethnic identity of others, as well as their stages of development. Practitioner confidence about the maturation and stage of development of the selected children, therefore, influenced the final sample size. The study, therefore, made use of three children as research participants, where sampling choices consisted of two children from Black Caribbean/White origin, and one child from Black African/White origin.

Ethical concerns and measures

While full ethical approval was granted in 2016 from Birmingham City University, the importance of negotiation, member checking with gatekeepers in consenting to continuous access, as well as the ongoing significance of checking assent with the children, is where rigour is afforded within this study. Signifying the importance of listening and developing trust, participatory approaches ensured giving power, space and time for children to express their views in whatever form they chose. Differing in approach for generating thick descriptions, observation of co-constructed learning experiences acted as cues for developing understanding about the influence of peers and pedagogic action on mixed ethnic children's judgements and preferences about their own racial identification and that of others. Reflecting on ethical concerns, Siraj-Blatchford (2010, 277) advises:

in ethnography access becomes a process of continuously establishing and developing relationships with the research participants.

Approaches for better understanding participatory social practices, slow knowledge (Clark 2023) and positioning children as lead voices supported the development of reciprocity and ethical relationships in the process of research. Actions for affording respectful interactions and equity in matters associated with assent involved becoming more familiar and attuned to the children's personalities and behaviours (Bertram et al. 2025). An example of this was making the decision to stop recording when a child showed signs of frustration due to his stammer and ability to respond to conversations with his peers and the practitioners. Other times involved the need to respect children's privacy when they were so engaged in their play that they did not notice the researcher's presence. While the video footage served to act as prompts for encouraging reflection and discussion between the children and practitioners, instances where the children expressed or showed non-verbal cues for filming to stop were immediately acknowledged as their right to withdraw and for filming to be suspended. Shown here is a deliberate commitment towards understanding human rights within the socio-cultural context in which it occurred. By critically observing children's changing dispositions, the importance of recognising their right to participate directly, or indirectly, to engage passively or to withdraw was managed by flexibly adjusting and making changes in observation. Addressing concerns regarding the subjective nature of selection processes, vignettes were selected based on the most significant responses that emerged in the analysis of the data. Selection was informed by the children's emergent rich sources of knowledge that were regarded as having been learnt from everyday experiences with family and community.

Analysis

Approaches for understanding what factors influence how children are empowered to mediate their existing knowledge involved viewing 135 h and 20 min of video recordings across eight learning experiences. Sixteen vignettes detailed rich conversations and descriptions that occurred in the play experiences between the practitioner and the focus children. Charmaz (2014) proposed that coding is the pivotal link between collecting data and developing emergent themes to explain that data. With the intention of

presenting an analysis that made explicit mixed ethnic identity formation informed by children's viewpoints, the initial stages of analysis involved ascribing codes to closely examine words, themes and incidents from transcriptions of the audio recordings. Colour coding techniques were utilised to group and highlight the most salient categorisations from the children's conversations to identify cultural elements exhibited during sociodramatic play. Flanagan's (1954) critical incident technique (CIT) captured observed incidents of children's behaviour. Descriptions of children's behaviour in response to pedagogical actions were established by watching all the video recordings again without sound as a distraction. These observed actions were incorporated alongside the transcribed ethnographic responses. Detailed journaling throughout the study also supported the process of reorganising, rewording and revising coding. The longitudinal nature of the study allowed for five iterations of data reduction and summarising until saturation was reached.

Findings

Presented below are five vignettes, taken from the larger study, to communicate how children explored their mixed ethnic identity. Findings foreground the special friendships that enabled dialogic conversations about ethnic identity constructs to emerge amongst the children. The findings also offer insight into the influence of pedagogic interactions to offer ways of looking at the everyday world views of the participants.

Self-portraits

Amanda invites the children to engage in an adult-directed group experience using skin-coloured paints. [Figure 1](#), vignettes 15.2 and 15.3 illustrates a pedagogic approach where open questioning skills, interaction and co-construction of ideas about ethnicity are encouraged while developing self-portraits. Paraphrasing the children's responses accommodates shared terminology that is heard and discussed. Highlighted is Jake's capability in defining characteristics associated with not only how he perceives his own ethnicity, but also terminology to define his peers and family members. As a dominant actor in the play, [Figure 1](#) shows how Jake can offer preferences that align with terminology heard in institutional mechanisms such as the ethnic census categorisations of 'black' and 'white' seen in the Office for National Statistics (ONS 1991, 2001), together with new descriptions of 'sort of white' and 'whitish colour' to self-identify.

Provided next is an example of the children's ability to relate to ethnic identity constructs. Observed conversations in [Figure 2](#), vignette 16.25 highlight the children's strong preferences and interchangeable nature for using the terms 'black' and 'white' as well as new descriptions in recognition of skin tone, such as 'light brown' and 'brown'. The children's ability to relate to previously encountered experiences and to interact with ethnic identity terminology to make sense of existing funds of knowledge is evident. This perception is suggested because the vignette reveals how adept children are at exploring racial similarities and differences among themselves. There is limited evidence in the data shown here to demonstrate that the children's descriptions have been influenced by the verbal/non-verbal cues of the practitioner.

[Figure 3](#), vignette 16.9 and [Figure 4](#), vignettes 13.5 and 15.5 taken together demonstrate how the interrelated nature of significant friendships serves to facilitate children's conversations about ethnic identity constructs. [Figure 3](#), vignette 16.9 recognises that

<p><i>Summary of recorded footage</i></p> <p>Situated in the training room, the four children take it in turn to paint a self-portrait. The purpose of this learning experience is to provide the children with an extended opportunity to paint themselves using skin coloured paints. Observation shows that Amanda's focus and interaction is with Freddy. Using pedagogic skills that makes use of open questioning, Amanda makes use of the children's interaction to explore their thoughts about their ethnicity.</p>	
<p>Example 2</p> <p><i>Extract from transcript</i></p> <p>Vignette 15.2 - 15.3</p> <p>The children demonstrate a confident and strong preference for the terms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'light brown' (used to define self); - 'dark brown skin' (used by Freddy to describe his mother) - 'well I've got a sort of white colour' (used by Jake to describe self) - 'but my mummy's got white colour' (used by Jake to describe his mother) - 'My daddy got black like' ...<i>doesn't finish her sentence</i> (used by Fay to describe her father) <p>When Amanda questions Edie about other members of her family, Edie's responds, and then totally unprompted Jake offers his thoughts about his father ethnic identity;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Oh, he's got, he's got black skin, the same as Freddy's mummy (Jake shares his thoughts with Fay about his Father). 	

Figure 1. Vignettes 15.2 and 15.3. Pedagogic approach.

<p>Extract from transcript: Vignette 16.25</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responses of children - terminology heard <p>Freddy: <i>Because I'm black</i> Jake: <i>It's purple</i> Edie: <i>I think its white</i></p> <p>Fay: <i>I think it black</i> Fay: <i>black like me?</i> Freddy: <i>its, I'm just, I'm just....</i> Jake: <i>White</i></p> <p>Freddy: <i>No I'm not white I'm, I'm just...</i> Jake: <i>What colour?</i> Freddy: <i>I'm light brown</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies with familial individuals <p>Freddy: <i>Look that's we, when I meet that lady – points to the picture of a black lady on the wall</i></p> <p>Amanda: <i>can you remember her name?</i> Freddy: <i>No</i></p> <p>Amanda: <i>Her name was Alison when we went to the care home. We saw some of our friends</i></p> <p>Jake: <i>He's not, He's not Alison</i></p> <p>Amanda: <i>It's Alison, and she's holding a big gold plate</i> Fr <i>is smiling, his arms are more relaxed as he recalls his visit to the care home.</i></p>

Figure 2. Vignette 16.25. Children ability to relate to ethnic identity constructs.

hierarchies exist in children's play, where dominant leaders can and do assert their own values and beliefs about contexts being discussed within friendship groups. Although sound foundations in positive relationships have already been formed, the children use membership within the group to challenge and influence their chosen responses within their play.

Figure 4 reveals the special relationship that existed between Fay and Edie. Fay and Edie's friendship is a key influence on Fay's ability to respond to opinions offered in vignettes 13.5 and 15.5. Video footage always shows both children entering the training room together, holding hands. Being extremely quiet by nature, it is notable that Fay's

<i>Summary of recorded footage</i>	
Observed as the 'major' actor in play, Jake views dominate emergent perspectives within the vignette below, where he is observed to directly challenge perspectives not of the significant adult who is directing the play, but instead Freddy's view (who is the central focus of the practitioner's attention) is challenged.	
Example 1	Still footage from vignette 16.9
<p><i>Extract from transcript</i></p> <p>Vignette 16.9</p> <p>Amanda: <i>there you go, oh you've got your black on. Why are you putting your black down there?</i></p> <p>Freddy: <i>Because I'm black</i></p> <p>Amanda: <i>Ah ok, that's really good</i></p> <p>Jake: <i>You're not black</i></p> <p>Freddy: <i>Yes, am are</i></p> <p>Amanda: <i>So Fr describes himself as black but he has talked about how his skin as brown</i></p> <p>Jake: <i>It's not brown</i></p> <p>Amanda: <i>Oh what do you think it is?</i></p> <p>J: <i>It's purple</i></p> <p>Amanda: <i>What! purple</i></p> <p>E: <i>I think its white</i></p> <p>Fa: <i>I think it black</i></p> <p>Amanda: <i>I think so too. Now</i></p>	

Figure 3. Vignette 16.9. The interrelated nature of friendship.

perceptions about herself are not elicited from practitioner cues; instead, they are expressed from her positive sense of self, formed in part from her relational friendship with Edie. Through participation in play, Fay is also confident to correct the perspectives offered by her peers about her ethnic diversity.

Camera case and photo activity

Emphasised next is the importance of observing non-verbal cues as an alternative form of communication exhibited in co-constructed learning experiences. Footage in [Figure 5](#), vignette 1.1 shows Freddy holding pictures of his family and himself close to his body. When asked to show the researcher his family members, his initial reaction is to lie face down on the floor. He also chooses to position his whole body in the opposite direction to the researcher. This alternate form of non-verbal communication is perceived as a desire for privacy. The play episode also highlights exhibited behaviours and levels of motivation to engage (or not) as the children navigated the intentions meant behind pedagogical actions.

There is an observed moment when Freddy is asked to consider featural similarities and differences between the researcher and his mother. Ignoring the researchers' attempts not to state the noticeable similarity between herself and his mother (skin colour), using long contemplative pauses to show active listening, Freddy's response '*but my mummy has dark skin*' conveys his clear recognition of skin tone similarity. Such critical incidents concur with contentions that young children are not only able to recognise skin colour, but they are also able to decode the value attributed to skin

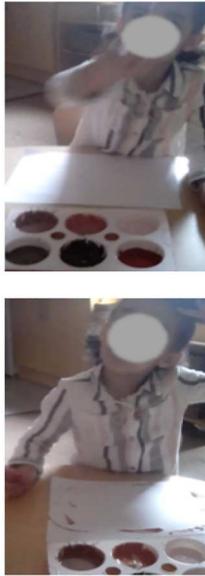
<i>Summary of recorded footage</i>	
<p>The focus in this vignette of play is on Fay. Conversation is centred on constructs about self, where Amanda makes use of the children's interaction to explore their thoughts about their ethnicity. Positive relationships between the star children is again evidenced in vignette 13 and 15. Fay is actively engaged in the learning experience, where she makes use of verbal and non-verbal form of communication to share her viewpoint about elements about her ethnic identity.</p>	
<p>Example 2</p> <p><i>Extract from transcripts</i></p> <p>Vignette 13.5</p> <p>Fay shares knowledge about how she perceives her skin colour. Descriptions are shared (verbally and non-verbally) about the colour of her skin and hair colour.</p> <p>Fay: <i>"My skin is Brown"</i> strokes the outline of her face with both hands. She uses her right index finger to dip into the chosen colour.</p> <p>Edie: <i>Hers is black</i></p> <p>Fay: <i>This is brown</i> Holds up her index finger up to the camera, with the paint on it.</p> <p>Fa: <i>and my hairs black - strong emphasis on the word Black, which she pats.</i></p> <p>Vignette 15.5</p> <p>Fa: <i>My daddy got black like ...</i> doesn't finish her sentence</p> <p>E: <i>Mummy and moo have white skin like me.</i></p> <p>Amanda: <i>Mummy and moo have white skin like me.</i></p> <p>E: <i>And baby Me</i></p> <p>J: <i>Oh he's got, he's got black skin</i></p> <p>J: <i>the same as Fr's mummy</i></p>	<p>Still footage from vignette 13.1</p> 

Figure 4. Vignettes 13.5 and 15.5. Significance of the friendship between Fay and Edie.

colour in larger society (Mac Naughton 2001, 2005; Robinson and Jones Diaz 2006). While this inquiry is small in terms of scale and design, Freddy's response goes some way towards confirming views that children enter educational settings with a myriad of cultural perceptions (funds of knowledge) potentially learnt from family, community, peers and media influences.

Discussion

Children's funds of knowledge

Coinciding with Moll et al. (1992) theorisation that children will practice the cultural behaviours transmitted by their families, using them as a resource to enhance their play, the children's actions and shared perspectives in the presented vignettes could be reasonably perceived as being learnt and internalised from engagement in lived experiences in the home, wider community, as well as wider social influences. Interestingly, there was no evidence in the evaluated data to indicate the children's perspectives about the ethnic origins of practitioners. Illustrative of the wider study, the five vignettes

<p><i>Summary of recorded footage</i></p> <p>Like play experiences in the setting, family celebrations in the home, visits to the community care home stimulate a shared interest among the children. The children are sat in a circle with Leah who is holding a camera case containing pictures. The children are motivated to look at the pictures of past events and the significant people who they have shared the experiences within camera case and photo activity. The children have engaged in this activity before. In the example below Freddy appears to be theorising about concepts that connect similarities in ethnicity between his mother and myself (researcher). Although I refer to physical features such as glasses and nose piercings, Freddy appears to be connecting understanding about our similarities in skin colour.</p>	
<p><i>Extract from transcript</i></p> <p>Vignette1.1</p> <p><u>Evidence</u></p> <p>Leah: <i>Can you show your mummy to Researcher (whispers)</i></p> <p>Freddy moves round Fa and E to show me his picture</p> <p>Freddy: <i>me and mummy and I was a baby</i></p> <p>Researcher: <i>You were and isn't your mummy beautiful</i></p> <p>Researcher: <i>Does your mummy look a bit like me, I have glasses like that</i></p> <p>Freddy: <i>Yeah but.... pauses, looks thoughtful.</i></p> <p>Researcher: <i>I haven't worn my glasses today</i></p> <p>Fr is looking back and forth at the picture of myself and his mummy</p> <p>Freddy: <i>but my mummy has dark skin Critical incident</i></p> <p>Researcher: <i>I have a nose piecing too but it's in a slightly different place. she's very pretty</i></p> <p>Freddy: <i>Yeah</i></p> <p><u>Evidence</u></p> <p>Researcher: <i>Your daddy showed me a picture that you drew of them, can you remember what you said? You said this is my mummy and she's brown, and I'm brown and baby R is brown, but what did you say about daddy, can you remember?</i></p> <p>Freddy: <i>White Critical incident:</i></p> <p>Researcher: <i>your daddy is going to share that picture with me. Is that ok.</i></p>	

Figure 5. Vignette 1.1. Children's non-verbal cues as an alternative form of communication.

in this paper foreground the key influences on this group of children's ability to relate to and connect with constructs about ethnicity. Arguably, the importance of friendship acts as a mechanism by which knowledge is shared when co-constructing meaning about a sense of self and others (Colilles 2020). Examples showcase agentic and complex ways in which participatory peer relationships facilitate expressed perceptions about a mixed ethnic identity between the children's differentials. Particularly, experiences are shaped in familial groupings and membership. In acts of secure friendship and peer interaction, young children validate similarities and differences to self, which can be heard in discourse associated with skin colour, as in Figure 1, vignettes 15.2 and 15.3. Footage in vignette 13.5 indicates how Edie enables Fay to share both verbal and non-verbal perceptions about herself. Through participation in play and significantly belonging to a safe group (membership), children also correct what they perceive as incorrect categorisations surrounding ethnic diversity (Figure 3, vignette 16.9). It is important to note that young children's perspectives will be expressed in the predictable and safe recurrence that they have come to understand from previously encountered lived experiences. Revealed in this paper is children's preference in identifying with skin colour differentials, particularly strong is a preference for using the terms *black*, *white*, *brown*, *light brown* and *whitish*. Noteworthy is the mixed ethnic child's demonstrable ability to use terminology associated with ethnic categorisation interchangeably. Data suggest that they make specific reference to shades of 'brown', interweaving new interpretations

relating to ethnicity into their conversations. Findings demonstrate that through processes of social interaction, children will participate in cultural routines (evolving beyond the strong emotional bonds established with parents) outside of their family (Corsaro 2015), where they will comfortably relate to ethnic identity constructs.

Pedagogic action

For individuals interested in research studies of this nature, it is important to recognise that limitations will exist when engaging in sensitivities surrounding ethnicity and racial identity. Complexity exists beyond simplistic notions that pedagogic action and planned learning experiences using culturally appropriate resources have the potential for engaging young children in explorations about how they choose to co-construct and categorise meaning about their mixed ethnic identity. Findings in this paper confirm pedagogic action ensured the purpose of the play experiences directed and maintained a focus on exploring ethnicity and cultural understanding of self and 'others'. Culturally appropriate materials acted as a socialising agent and 'mediation tool' (Kabaron 2017) for facilitating reflective ideas about identity with children. While a play-based pedagogic approach can accommodate co-construction of ethnic identity, findings position practitioners' discursive dialogue accompanying the children's responses appeared to be underdeveloped. Concurring with studies of Han, West-Olatunji, and Thomas (2011), emergent themes only displayed limited cross-racial/cultural awareness, where practitioner perspectives appeared to be drawn from views learnt from practice with other colleagues. Dialogic conversations and pedagogic skills using effective questioning types do provide a degree of stimulus for prompting children's perceptions in the presented learning activities. Interpretations of data reveal limitations in models of pedagogic cultural understanding beyond what the children already knew about their ethnic and cultural origins. In other words, observed was the practitioner's inability to scaffold and extend children's descriptions surrounding identification further (Colilles 2020).

Conclusion

While acknowledging the small-scale and culturally specific context of this inquiry, in response to the research question, what are the key influences on mixed ethnic children's ability to relate to and connect with constructs about their ethnic identity in an early years setting? The perspectives of three mixed ethnic children foreground original insight into exploration about how pedagogic techniques, interactions and the use of resources facilitate opportunities for engaging with their knowledge from previous cultural and racial experiences.

Opportunities to explore precisely what makes mixed ethnic identity unique are extremely challenging to pinpoint, because the processes of how children internalise adult knowledge about ethnic categorisation were not explicitly evidenced in these learning experiences. That said, this paper pursued a move beyond Vygotskian (1978) ideologies where the adult 'expert' in the ZPD interacts and shares knowledge with the 'novice' child, towards doctrines that demonstrate how children's contributions may serve to inform new categorisations from their own perspectives about similarities and differences in mixed ethnic origin. Although examples relating to new terminologies

(whitish, light brown and brownish) heard in this article signal some of the ways mixed ethnic children choose to identify themselves, and others, what is missing in these findings are interpretations of play pedagogy that incorporate children's ethnic and cultural funds of knowledge. Positioning affordance in methodologies of listening and respecting rights to participate (and withdraw) will be key in studies of this type, so that children's perspectives and experiences pertaining to a mixed identity can be centrally positioned. Play pedagogy utilising funds of knowledge theorisation will be particularly helpful for educators interested in making sense of children's complex forms of expression in play-based approaches. Lastly, the power of environmental resources in these instances, and their ability to determine what children learn about themselves and people differing from themselves, cannot be underestimated.

Adapting a phrase used by Palaiologou (2016), this paper proposes that individuals working with young children in the context of developing a mixed ethnic identity should move towards helping children to develop a 'unique personal identity' (Colilles 2020). Adding value to existing epistemologies, this term can be used to transform a pedagogy of play that forefronts contexts associated with ethnic origin and embraces other aspects of diversity that make a child distinctly unique. Socio-cultural perspectives help educators to obtain deeper knowledge and understanding of the 'whole child' Chesworth (2016, 297). A socio-cultural lens also opens possibilities in situated contexts for mixed ethnic children to co-construct categorisations, so that a better understanding is offered about how they choose to ascribe meaning to their ethnic identity. These understandings have the potential for offering an alternative lens in which educators can interpret children's play, reflect on their practice and transform pedagogical approaches, rather than delivering provision that serves to privilege certain interests over others.

Taken together, children's existing funds of knowledge play pedagogy and culturally appropriate resources (Colilles 2020) have significant potential for accommodating co-construction of mixed ethnic identities. All three must connect; children will mediate and use play to create their own narratives: narratives that feasibly mirror dominant and normalised cultural ways of being within early years settings.

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