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Paper Session

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Chair:Ann Quennerstedt

Contribution

Young Children's Rights, Identity(ies) and Social Justice Education:Children's views on Exclusion

The nursery setting can be viewed as a meeting place for diverse individual and group identities (DECET, 2008). Under the UNCRC (1989), every child from birth, along with other rights, has a right to an identity (Article 8) and non discrimination (Article 2). Balancing between developing positive individual and diverse identities with more collective and universal identities is a challenge for every early years setting. Under The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 (RRAA,2000), the Scottish government has shown commitment to the promotion of equality and social justice. There has also been an increasing interest in understanding, and listening to, children's perspectives on their own lives (OHCHR, 2005). Children therefore are seen as social actors who can shape their identities and create and communicate valid views about the social world. But what is happening in the everyday life of the nursery setting, in terms of the coexistence of the diverse identities and social justice? This paper is based on a three-year, ESRC funded, research project in two nursery settings in Scotland, one mainly white and one multi-ethnic. One year was spent in the two nurseries using ethnographic methods. Four key research questions were identified: What are young children's emerging constructions and perceptions of identity and difference in Scottish nursery settings, and to what extent is ethnicity salient? What are the social implications of children's emerging constructions of identity and difference in terms of their views and attitudes towards other children? Do young children experience discrimination, and if so, how do they construct discrimination? Lastly, what approaches do staff adopt to 'race' equality education in Scottish nursery settings and how do they introduce issues of diversity and fairness to children? The overall aim of this doctoral research was to listen to young children's views regarding their constructions and experiences of identity and difference and to examine the social implications these may

have on their everyday life. Listening closely to such views could develop early years practice, particularly in terms of aspirations for social justice and equity, in ways that would reflect and respect children's lives. Social construction theory and post-modernism are the basic theoretical frameworks, through which Identity(ies) and Childhood have been perceived in this research (Gillborn, 2006; Hall,2000; Morrow & Connolly, 2006). Influenced by the Sociology of Childhood (James & Prout, 1997) children are seen as individuals, as agents, as social actors, with rights to be listened to (Alderson, 20008).

Method

In such theorisations of identity (ies), where individuals may see themselves through a variety of lenses and where individuals are free to choose their identity (ies), there is a challenge for researchers to try to find the conceptual and methodological tools to describe a complex reality. In this particular study drawing on ethnographic methods, which included naturalistic observations, informal and semi-structured interviews with staff and parents/caregivers, in-depth, informal conversations and participatory activities (drawing activities and persona doll activities) with the children, I will discuss the social implications that such constructions of identity and difference had on children's lives. This paper is based on children's accounts.

Expected Outcomes

Identity (ies) seemed to be a rather important part of children's everyday lives. Drawing on children's stories about their life in the nursery and about 'who they are', it was made clear that a plethora of identities operate, which intersect and which are rather complex. Along with other parts, the development of children's multiple and complex constructions of ethnic identity was considered rather salient. All of these complex, fluid but at times rather fixed notions of children's views on identity (ies), have social implications in terms of children's friendship groups, feelings of belonging, self-confidence and exclusion. By engaging and listening closely to children's stories on identity(ies) and exclusion there could be a positive impact on the development of social justice in early years practice, in a way that represents and respects children and their diverse but also common lived experiences.

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