

## **Eclipsing voice in research with young children**

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## **Abstract**

This article uses two vignettes taken from a research project designed to give voice to children's understandings of equity and social diversity to raise questions about how this project potentially reinforced inequities in children's lives. A rhizoanalysis of the vignettes is used to raise questions about how young children performing diverse discourses of 'race' and gender were given voice through the research. It specifically focuses on the extent to which some of those voices produced in the research colluded in the production of racist and sexist practices. It uses this focus to raise questions generated through the rhizoanalysis for researchers concerned to give voice to young children. Specifically, it asks if it is time to move beyond voice in our research with young children to a concern with transforming relations of power to becoming more equitable between children through our research with them.

## **Eclipsing voice in research with young children**

In this article I use two research vignettes to eclipse (cast a shadow over) the idea that honoring children's voices in our research is a necessarily democratic research process or a sufficiently radical one. Davies writes (2001: 180) that:

"To eclipse" means to cast a shadow, to overshadow or surpass in importance.

We can overshadow the importance of discourse in our lives through refusing its effects and refusing to see it as a permanent marker on our becoming. I will draw on a rhizoanalysis (eg. Alvermann 2001) to briefly eclipse two prominent ways of seeing children's voice in research:

- naturalistic observation of children
- child interviews.

### **Introducing the vignettes and their origins**

The research vignettes used in this article are from the Preschool Equity and Social Diversity (PESD) project. This project is an ongoing mixed method study of four - and five-year-old children's understandings of gender, 'race' and class that commenced in Victoria in 1999. The PESD project aims to study the relationships between preschool children's understandings of social diversity and equity and their own gender, class and racial identities using three research techniques:

- semi-structured individual interviews with children
- stories that raise issues of equity in relation to gender, 'race' and class with young children and group discussions of the stories
- observation of children's play to explore how children's gender, 'race' and class intersect with their constructions of 'race', gender and class.

In each technique four anti-bias persona dolls are used as research tools to initiate conversations and provide a focus for stories with the children. These dolls that have also been available for the children to use in free play are:

- Shiree from an Aboriginal-Australian family

- Willie from a Vietnamese-Australian family
- Olivia from a rich Anglo-Australian family
- Tom from a poor Anglo-Australian family.

To date the project has been undertaken in six early childhood centres. A total of 112 children have participated. In two centres funding enabled the researchers to conduct the project over 15 weeks with a total of twenty children. These children participated in 3 individual interviews, 15 weekly story and discussion groups and three two hour free play sessions with the dolls. In the remaining four centres, the research was conducted over a period of 3 weeks and children participated in 3 individual interviews, 4 stories and group discussions and a majority of the children participated in one two hour free play session with the dolls. Children's participation was voluntary and the children knew that they would be video-taped during their participation.

The PESD sits amongst a growing number of research studies that have attempted to find ways to hear children's voices and their perspectives in work with young children (see Lewis & Lindsay 2000). For instance, in Australia research has brought young children's perspectives into view on issues as diverse as migration experiences (Candy & Butterworth 1998), learning to write (Martello 1999), 'racial' diversity (MacNaughton 2001) and social networks (Corrie & Leitao 1999). In this work there has been an attempt to answer Cannella's point that children's voices are not always sought or valued in our work with them:

The most critical voices that are silent in our constructions of early childhood education are the children with whom we work. Our constructions of research have not fostered methods that facilitate hearing their voices. (Cannella 1997: 10)

The PESD is attempting to bring children's constructions of 'race', class and gender into our work with them.

### **Rhizoanalysis**

Rhizoanalysis is a process for exploring what a text (eg. a research moment) 'does, and how it connects with other things (including its reader, its author, its literary and nonliterary context)' (Grosz 1994: 199). The purpose in exploring what texts do and how they connect with other things is to map how meanings and power are organized and what this means for how we struggle for progressive social change. In mapping how meanings and power are organized, one attempts to free up the ways in which we see the world and to open up new possibilities for how we construct and reconstruct our identities over time (our becoming) in it. To do this in research, Alvermann found ways to:

... connect diverse fragments of data in ways that produced new linkages and revealed discontinuities that had gone unmarked in the original analysis. (Alvermann 2001: 118)

Rhizoanalysis is a process for searching for unlikely connections between diverse fragments in the data and beyond data (Alvermann 2001). Diverse fragments of data

can be chosen because of how they differ in terms of who is involved in the fragment, when the fragment was collected, where it was collected, why it was collected and how it was collected.

Questions that aid the process of mapping and connecting include:

- What are some of the diverse fragments in this data? For example, who is present and absent, how are they present, when are they present or absent, why are they present or absent?
- How do these fragments connect to each other?
- How do these fragments connect to fragments from texts outside of it?
- How do the fragments connect to me? (Alvermann 2001)
- What do these fragments do to each other? For example, what are the discourses brought to life in these fragments (Davies 2001)? What were the effects of this?

These questions will be used to explore the research vignettes and to briefly eclipse my becoming as an objective researcher giving voice to children by raising questions about how power is organized in and through my research. An eclipse is produced by raising questions in order to generate further reflection and exploration of a text, such as research data. Instead of producing definitive answers and a final 'truth' about it what is contained in a text the fact that questions exist serves to highlight that we cannot have certainty about the text. Questions cast shadows by frustrating the search for certainty. In this article, questions are used to eclipse ideas about what are appropriate ways to give voice to children in our research with and about them.

**What are the diverse fragments in this data: vignette one - the shadows of collusion  
or diverse fragments from 40 minutes of 'free' play**

*Fragment 1:* The four anti-bias persona dolls had been carefully placed in a play area defined by large outdoor wooden blocks under the verandah near the door that led from the inside play area of the centre to the outside play area. In the play area were several large pieces of cloth, some cooking utensils and.... .

*Fragment 2:* A video-camera on a tripod was focused on the area. The children could clearly see that as they entered the area they would be video-taped.

*Fragment 3:* A researcher sat nearby taking field notes of who entered, when and for how long.

*Fragment 4:* Two Anglo-Australian girls were the first children to enter the area. They began to play with the dolls by moving the two Anglo-Australian dolls Olivia and Tom to an area on the edge of the play area. This movement of the dolls began an elaborate and lengthy period of nearly 35 minutes of dramatic play in which the dolls were fed, talked to and put to bed. During this play blocks were rearranged with great care and adjuncts to the dramatic play such as pieces of cloth and eating utensils were drawn on at several points.

*Fragment 5:* This dramatic play was punctuated on 5 occasions by the entry of individual boys, and a small group of three boys on one occasion. The boys hovered on the edge for minutes at a time before forays into the girls' play were attempted. The boys jumped on blocks being used by the girls, moved pieces of cloth, handled

Shiree roughly, moved Willie aside, stood menacingly in front of the girls, and shouted during several short bursts of a minute or two in the block area.

*Fragment 6:* The girls ignored the boys using tactics such as turning their back on them and getting on with their play to successfully suggest the boys leave them alone.

*Fragment 7:* Meanwhile, throughout the play a Vietnamese-Australian girl that I will call Mai sat to one side watching silently.

*Fragment 8:* It was at the point that the girls and the boys had vacated the area after nearly 40 minutes of play that Mai moved into the area and picked up Willie, sat him gently on a block and began talking to him.

### **What are the connections between the fragments?**

What does Fragment 8 do to the remainder of the fragments in this data? Does this fragment make sense of all that has come before? Was Mai on the edge of the play watching because of what was in the middle of Fragment 4 – two Anglo girls entering the play and choosing Tom and Olivia and Fragment 5– the boys moving Willie aside? For instance, it could be argued that Mai sat on the edge of the play precisely because she understood the ‘racial’ politics within it and those politics placed her outside of it.

### **How do these fragments connect to fragments from texts outside of it?**

I have drawn on fragments from five texts beyond the research vignette to attend to this question. The chosen texts speak to researching children, solitary behavior in preschools, identity formation and ethnic identities in education. I have also drawn on

a second research vignette from the PESD that comes to mind whenever I reflect on Vignette one. Specifically, the connecting fragments come from:

- an early childhood journal in which there is an article exploring the construction of identities
- an educational journal in which there is an article exploring the effects of the presence of ethnic minority teachers in education
- a childhood education research journal in which there is an article exploring solitary-active behavior in preschools
- a second PESD research vignette
- a book on researching young children.

In what follows I use these fragments from outside of the first vignette to attend to how they connect with the data from within it and to generate questions that can be drawn on to produce an eclipse about what are appropriate ways to give voice to children in research.

*Identificatory positions as consequential to children: how does it connect?*

That what happens in young children's lives matters to their processes of becoming seems so obvious as to not warrant calling it forth. However, as many poststructuralists argue (eg. Butler 1997; Davies 2001) the processes of becoming are full of tensions as children negotiate different possibilities for themselves as gendered, 'racialised' and classed beings and attempt to clarify which forms of becoming are possible and desirable. In this process of clarification, children come to identify with particular ways of thinking and being, and to resist, reject or 'disidentify' (O'Loughlin

2001) with others. O'Loughlin (2001) provides a detailed examination of these processes in relation to the development of racial identity formation:

While it would seem, intuitively, that identification with one's own racial or ethnic group is essential to identity formation, some writers suggest that, at least for Caucasians, the development of a white racial identity may depend as much on defining an Other that they are not, as on defining some essential characteristics of whiteness with which to identify. (50)

What processes of becoming were made possible in this research moment? To what extent did each of the children perform discourses that will be consequential to their becoming because of the research? Children have the capacity to create their own meanings about difference and to act from these and because of these (Smith 2000). Were they learning about racial difference through the moments constructed in and by the research inevitable and consequential? What was Mai learning? Should this vignette be read as a consequential moment for each of these children or just for Mai? O'Loughlin invites us to at least consider that it might be consequential for each of the children involved:

The one thing we do not want to do, I think, is assume that subject formation is inconsequential, or that we need to do nothing because the inherent innocence of children will protect them from performing hateful acts. (O'Loughlin 2001: 63)

Would this consequential moment have existed without the research? O'Loughlin's discussion subject formation raises questions for me about the effects of research as a social intervention in children's lives on them and how they form their subjectivities in and through it. Can we assume that research moments in which children are active participants are inconsequential and innocent moments in their subject formation and do nothing but observe what is brought forth through it? Or, should research and children's participant in it be understood as always consequential because our presence in children's lives as observers will always place us in the position of colluding with their becoming? If we are present we are potential colluders. The questions for me as researcher have become, 'what is it I want to collude with in children's becoming?' and 'is an innocence possible for researchers?'. Notions of objectivity that underpin much research suggest that it is. For me connecting Vignette one with O'Loughlin's point about the consequential nature of subject formation connects me to those questions and prompts me to begin to trace the organization of power in my work as a researcher. It does this because it raises for me questions about the subject formation of children and of researchers and how research as a social and political process construct the social contexts in and through which subject formation occurs for young children. If this is the so, then how might research with and about children be connected with and touch who they are becoming? So, whilst O'Loughlin does not speak of research her text from outside of the texts of research serves to raise questions that can be borrowed by researchers to ask questions of consequential nature of their own place and position in the subject formation of young children.

*The power of presence of the 'Other': how does it connect?*

Quioco and Rios (2000) present a detailed review of what has been learnt through research between 1989 and 1998 about the experiences of minority group teachers in the preservice training and as they move into the educational profession. They write:

One theme that has emerged is the perception of the 'marginalized' teacher. In Feuerberger's (1997) study of immigrant teachers in Canada, the teachers' personal narratives were used to talk about the complexities of being marginalized. ... In spite of the training they received, these teachers were treated as second-class citizens and began to see themselves as such. They found themselves catapulted into a culture that refused to recognize either their strengths or the strengths of their students. (Quioco & Rios 2000: 509)

Their text is not of early childhood education or of young children's dramatic play. However, asking, 'how does Quioco's and Rios's text connect with the data fragments presented here?', leads me again to questions. At what point does marginalization of minority groups begin within education? Is this what Mai is experiencing? What are the complexities of this marginalization for children from minority groups, such as Mai, in early childhood education? To what extent do young children from minority groups in a particular early childhood program or a particular moment from a research project become treated as second-class citizens and begin to see themselves as such? What did Mai come to learn through her involvement in my research project? How was her experience in those 40 minutes of the research project connected with experiences beyond it? Mai sat on the edge of the active play with the persona dolls in this research project moment. She did not talk, she watched. Was her

watching on the edge actually the most central and most consequential fragment of data in this research text? Would it have been produced without the research? Seeking connections with a second disparate text takes me to again to questions about how power is organized in my research.

*Solitary play as dysfunctional: how does it connect*

The impact of early education on young children's learning and future life chances has been widely discussed over many years. The concern with giving children a 'best' or a 'head' start through early education is so great that children's positive adaptation to early childhood programs has become a source of interest and concern to researchers. Coplan, Wichmann and Lagacé-Séguin (2001) are three researchers who have been studied the dysfunctional effects of solitary play behavior in preschools. Solitary play includes non-social play, reticent behavior and solitary-passive behavior. From their work comes this description of reticent behavior:

... *reticent* behavior involves such activities as sitting/standing unoccupied, and observing others without subsequently attempting to join the interaction. ... The display of reticent behavior in the preschool seems to be reflective of social anxiety and wariness. In this regard, reticent behavior in the preschool has been associated with maternal ratings of child shyness and negative emotionality, as well as teachers' ratings of children's internalizing problems... . (Coplan, Wichmann & Lagacé-Séguin 2001: 165)

Nonsocial play including reticent behavior that appears in free play moments in the preschool are linked to 'different forms of social and emotional maladjustment in this

milieu' (Coplan, Wichmann & Lagacé-Séguin 2001: 164). How does this connect with Fragment 7? Mai's observation of others and her reticence to join in any of the other fragments in the 40-minute free play vignette could be explained as shyness and as evidence that she has internalized emotional problems. It could point to her social and emotional maladjustment to preschool. How does this connect to my texts of marginalization (Quiocho & Rios 2000; O'Loughlin 2001) and of the consequential in how the discourses of 'race' are performed and experienced in young children's lives? Is it Mai who has internalized emotional problems or is it the children who never notice her and never invite her or Willie into their play? What is the consequential? How is racialised power organised in and through this research moment?

*Vignette two: but she might like it and how does it connect?*

Olivia, the Anglo-Australian persona doll is from a rich family. Her family has just moved to a new house and Olivia is choosing new curtains for new bedroom. Her choices are between fabric with pink hearts, pink and blue cats and dogs, fire engines or bulldozers. Ten children (5 boys and 5 girls) sat listening to the story. The children are asked which fabric that they think that Olivia will choose. A majority opt for the fabric with pink hearts on it. One child dissented. A girl (Sandy) said uncertainly, "I think she might like the fire engines." The other children laughed at her suggestion and restated loudly their first choice. Amongst this Sandy again said but with a little more determination, "I think she might like the fire engines." She repeated her efforts four times before finally hanging her head quietly. She stayed silent for the remainder of the discussion.

Are connections possible between two disparate girls, times, places and parts of the project? Can they be connected through texts about marginalization, reticence, resistance and how being non-social might be produced in preschools? Can they be connected through a research project whose efforts to give voice to children's knowings produced and/or played a part in producing their silences? How was power organised through the practices of observing children at play with physically diverse dolls and talking with children in groups about gendered choices?

### **How do these fragments connect to me?**

In the PESD the search for children's knowledge of 'race', class and gender has drawn heavily on well-trodden research paths for knowing others – watching them and talking with them. The use of naturalistic observational studies of children to understand children's perspectives on the world has a long history. It has its roots in a positivist understanding of knowledge and the scientific study of the child and in empiricism. An equally acceptable way to bring children's voices into research is through the use of group and individual interviews with children (see Dockrell, Lewis & Lindsay 2000). To this extent, the PESD draws on what are considered 'appropriate' ways to give voice to young children. My concerns should be not so much with these techniques but with how I interpret what I learn through them. Dockrell, Lewis and Lindsay (2000) caution researchers about the need for objectivity and clear strategies for finding the 'true' indicators of what children think and know and warn of type 1 and type 2 errors of interpretation that undermine the value of data collected from children:

Errors that occur because we underestimate a child's competence (commonly called a type 1 error) and errors that occur because we overestimate a child's competence (commonly called a type 2 error). (Dockrell, Lewis & Lindsay 2000: 53).

My efforts at rhizoanalysis lead potentially to type 1 and type 2 errors. I may have underestimated what children can and do know about gender, 'race' and class and I may have been drawn potentially to overestimate. For example, by situating it inside adult politicized ideas of 'race'. I could have as a researcher, through my efforts at empiricism, colluded in the production and reproduction of marginalization through not intervening in moments in the research when Willie and Shiree were marginalized and when Mai was on the 'sidelines' of the play. However, we could recast type 1 errors as errors in interpretation that result from an underestimation of the organization of power and its effects in our research. We could recast type 2 errors as errors in interpretation that result from us overestimating our capacity to do research that is objective and reaches a final and single truth. Research that generates answers and not questions.

### **What do these fragments do to each other?**

I have placed disparate fragments of text about research, voice, children, equity and social diversity up against each other and explored briefly how they connect. In doing so, I am led to new vantage points on the operation of power in and through the PESD. The fragments talk to each other in ways that highlight for me dangers in seeking to give voice to young children in our research without first asking:

- which children's voices will come forth through it?

- what will the consequence for each child who participates be?
- how might one child's voice, silence that of another?
- what can and should I do when the voices I hear and others hear are racist or sexist?
- how might intervening in one child's voicing of their knowledge enable another child to speak?
- how will I honor those children whose voices struggle to be heard?

These questions come to me not as the final stage of analysis but as a prompt to re-meet my becoming as a researcher in ways that can do more than give voice to children. By briefly eclipsing my own research using rhizoanalysis I am led to ask, 'can we find ways to transform childhood research by becoming politically engaged researchers transforming with children the performance of discourse and its effects on our becoming rather than merely reporting how it works?'. Bringing forth children's voices is indefensible if those voices merely serve to silence some, marginalize others or reinforce unjust ways of becoming.

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