

TITLE:

'He might have to ask god! Telling silences and subtexts in how young children live with cultural diversity.'

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by

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Abstract

Prejudice and bias often get in the way of people living together peacefully. Learning to see and work with young children's prejudices and biases is an important part of working for peace in the 21st century. Bringing children's knowings about cultural diversity to the fore is essential to this task. Children's words and their silences can challenge us to think more deeply about how they come to know about cultural diversity and about the connections between these knowings, bias and peace. This paper will explore these connections and how they can be used as a starting point for peace education in early childhood education using data collected in over 100 interviews with Victorian preschool children.

Introduction

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, 1998, p. 10)

There has been a strong move recently to hear children's voices and perspectives on early childhood. 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) and social networks (Corrie & Leitao, 1999).

The Preschool Equity and Social Diversity (PESD) project seeks to hear children's voices about equity and social diversity. To date, 62 children have participated in the project. A further 60 children will join the project in February. Table 1.1 summarises child participation by gender and first language background.

TABLE 1.1: Child participation in PESD by gender and by parents' country of origin.

Parents' country of origin	Male	Female	Total	%
China	0	1	1	1.6%
Turkey	1	1	2	3.2%
Vietnam	7	8	15	24.2%
Australia	19	24	44	70.9%
Total	27	34	62	100%

Methods

The PESD project is a mixed method study of four and five year-old children's understandings of gender, 'race' and class. It uses semi-structured individual interviews with children, group discussions, stories and observation of children's play to explore how children's gender, 'race' and class intersect with their constructions of 'race', gender and class. In the interviews and stories with the children a co-researcher and four anti-bias persona dolls help me:

- Shiree who was from an Aboriginal-Australian family.
- Willie who was from a Vietnamese-Australian family.
- Olivia who was from a rich Anglo-Australian family.
- Tom who was from a poor Anglo-Australian family.

The dolls played multiple roles:

- They acted as an icebreaker for those conversations.
- They offered a focus for conversations and for stories with children about class, 'race' and gender.
- They acted as a provocation for play.

Findings and analysis

This paper draws on the initial interviews with children to explore how the children constructed meanings of 'race' / ethnicity. In these interviews children were asked semi-structured questions about the differences and similarities between the dolls, which doll looked most like themselves and which doll that they liked most. I take a somewhat unconventional path in exploring children's responses in these interviews by focusing on what children didn't say as well as what they did say. Somewhat ironically, I want to respond to Cannella's challenge to give voice to children by reading their silences as well as their words. I am indebted to Jonathon Silin whose work on silence in early childhood (see Silin, 1995; 1999) has provoked me to think that silence matters as much as voice. He writes:

Silence can signal resistance as well as oppression, voice can create new moments for social control as well as for personal efficacy. And words are notorious for concealing and transforming as well as revealing the truth of our lives. (Silin, 1999, p. 44)

Using these words as a catalyst this paper explores the differences and similarities between silence and voice for the Anglo-Australian and Vietnamese-Australian children that have participated in the project to date.

Children's knowings through the silences

Kim, a four year-old Vietnamese-Australian girl, attended a center that was

strongly committed to bilingualism and including multicultural perspectives in their program. Kim's teacher believed that Kim spoke sufficient English to participate in the project. Heather, my co-researcher, interviewed Kim supported by a Vietnamese-Australian bilingual worker at Kim's center.

Kim entered the room holding Heather's hand tightly. Her attention quickly fixed on the dolls. I was not sure which of the dolls held her attention so tightly but I could see her staring at them. Kim sat down and listened closely as Heather introduced the dolls to her. She looked closely at each doll as Heather told her about them. Heather explained to Kim that we'd like to ask her some questions.

Kim's blushes

Heather: Do you understand, Kim?

Kim: [NODS]

Heather: When you look at the dolls can you tell me which doll you think looks most like you?

Kim: [SILENCE. SHE LOOKS AT HEATHER THEN CAST HER EYES DOWN AND POINTS AT OLIVIA. SHE BLUSHES VERY STRONGLY AS SHE DOES SO.]

Heather: I see. Can you take a good look for me and be sure.

Kim: [NODS AND THEN POINTS AGAIN AT OLIVIA THIS TIME HOLDING HEATHER'S GAZE. SHE BLUSHES AGAIN.]

Kim was silent but responded clearly and unambiguously to us. She told us that she looked like Olivia, not like Willie, Tom or Shiree. This was particularly interesting given that later in the interview she identified facial and skin tones as the main differences she could see between the dolls.

Kim was not the only Vietnamese-Australian child to make this identification. Two of the girls made a similar self-identification and two of the Vietnamese-Australian boys self-identified with Tom. Only one child spoke to tell us which doll looked most like her. She said pointing to Willie that he looked most like her "... because this one skin most like me".

With these self-identification comments and silences about skin tone in mind, I want to place Kim's moment of silence alongside a moment of 'voice' and silence in James's first interview. James was a four year-old Anglo-Australian child.

Lovely is lighter

Researcher: Well this is Olivia and this is the last of the dolls you will meet today. Is there anything you can tell me about Olivia?

James: She is very pretty.

Researcher: What makes her pretty?

Researcher: What's that you are pointing at, her dress. Is there anything else that makes her pretty?

James: This does.

Researcher: What's that, can you use your words to tell me?

James: Legs, these are knees.

[JAMES THEN LOOKS AT OLIVIA'S FACE VERY CLOSELY FOR SEVERAL SECONDS. THE RESEARCHER PICKS UP ON THIS CUE AND THEN ASKS A QUESTION.]

Researcher: What about her face, is there anything about her face you can tell me?

James: Her face is lovely like mine because it's lighter. It's like Tom's.

James's clarity about Olivia's loveliness sat alongside his silence about Willy. Like the majority of Anglo-Australian children we interviewed (42/44) he offered no comment on the word 'Vietnamese'. In fact, only two Anglo-Australian children responded to our questions about being Vietnamese. One child said that Vietnamese people have "a strange name" and "shop in markets", the other said that they have "yellow faces" and "black hair".

Layered into Anglo-Australian children's silences about Willy and about being Vietnamese were comments that Willy was "not Australian". We first learnt this when one child told us that Willy "could not be Australian". This comment prompted us to add questions about being Australian to twenty of the initial interviews.

The children that responded to questions about being Australian did so by saying that being Australian meant having 'white' skin. Additionally, these children said that:

- Willy couldn't be Australian because he was born in Australia but he is still Vietnamese.
- Willy and Shiree are not Australian because "they've got different faces".
- Willy and Shiree must ask God if they want to be Australian. God might allow Shiree to be Australian but not Willy.

Those children's clarity that 'whiteness' constituted being Australian was most powerfully exemplified by James:

James

Researcher: These dolls all live in Australia. I was wondering do you live in Australia?

James: I was born in Australia.

Researcher: Do you think all of these dolls were born in Australia?

James: No.

Researcher: Can you tell me?
James: [INTERRUPTS AND POINTS TO SHIREE] That's Aboriginal isn't she?
Researcher: Yes that's right. So was she born in Australia?
James: [SHAKES HIS HEAD.]
Researcher: No? Where do you think she was born?
James: In Aboriginal.
Researcher: In Aboriginal land. And can you tell me about Australia? What it means to live in Australia?
James: That you all have white skin.
Researcher: So what about Willie? Do you think Willie was born in Australia?
James: [SILENCE.]
Researcher: And is there anything else about Australia, you can tell me?
James: There are lots of policemen.
Researcher: And how have you noticed that?
James: Cos, I've gone past [UNCLEAR] police stations.

Anglo-Australian children also used 'whiteness' as a category when deciding which doll looked most like them and when discussing Shiree. One child's *only comment* during her interview was in response to the question, 'Which doll looks most like you?'. Pointing to Olivia she said, "I'm white".

Kailyn, on the other hand self-identified as white in response to a question about Shiree.

Shiree's skin is different

Kailyn

Researcher: Does Shiree look like Tom?

Kailyn: [SHAKES HER HEAD.]

Researcher: What's different?

Kailyn: Her skin.

Researcher: Is there a word you can use to tell me what's different about her skin?

Kailyn: It's brown.

Researcher: Do you think she is brown all over?

Kailyn: [SILENCE THEN NODS.]

Researcher: She is, isn't she. Are you the same color all over?

Kailyn: I'm white.

Of the 24 (56%) children who gave a reason for their choice of doll to self-identify with 38% of the Anglo-Australian children used skin color as the basis for this

identification (see Table 1.2). These findings echo Ramsey (1991) and Lawrence (1991) who found that racial characteristics, such as skin color were more salient in children’s decision-making than gender characteristics.

TABLE 1.2: Anglo-Australian children’s reasons for self-identification with the dolls

Responses for self-identification with the dolls to the question, ‘Which doll look most like you?’	No (%)
Skin color	9 (38%)
Physical attributes – eyes and hair color	11 (46%)
Gender	2 (8%)
Clothes	2 (8%)
TOTAL	24 (100%)

In comparison all but one of the Vietnamese-Australian children remained silent about why they had self-identified with a doll. They did, however, comment on skin color when identifying differences between the dolls. Half of the Vietnamese-Australian children identified skin and face color as the first and main difference between the dolls.

The focus on Shiree’s skin color by the Anglo-Australian children was also associated with uncertainty, discomfort and, at times, her active rejection by a small number of Anglo-Australian children (6 – 14%). Most often this discomfort and rejection was felt through powerful silences. The only silences in Jamie’s interview followed questions about Shiree. They were full of discomfort.

Put it back

Researcher: Shall we choose another one? Which one would you like to choose next?

Jamie: [SILENCE, THEN POINTS AT SHIREE.]

Jamie: That one, would you like to pick her up?

[SILENCE, THEN JAMIE SHAKES HER HEAD, SHIFTING NERVOUSLY.]

Researcher: What do you notice about this one?

[SILENCE AND JAMIE AVERTS HER EYES.]

Jamie: I don’t know.

Researcher: I shall tell you that her name is Shiree, and Shiree is an Aboriginal doll. Do you know any Aboriginal people?

[SILENCE, AND JAMIE SHAKES HEAD AGAIN.]

Researcher: No. Have you heard about Aboriginal people?

[SILENCE.]

Researcher: What do you know about Aboriginal people?

[SILENCE.]
 Jamie: No. Put it back.

The other five children’s responses to questions about Shiree were accompanied by a strong verbal or physical refusal to touch or hold Shiree. Sally expressed this simply and powerfully:

Sally
 Researcher: This one is Shiree. Would you like to hold her?
 Sally: No yuk.

Sally had wanted to hold each of the other dolls.

Silin (1999) suggests that silence can mean many things including:

- thoughtfulness
- resistance
- oppression
- concealment
- inner dialogue.

However, Jamie’s final act - she asked Heather to put Shiree back- was accompanied by a powerful expression of disapproval. It was consistent with research in the USA (see Aboud & Doyle, 1995) and Australia (Black-Gutman & Hickson, 1996) showing that white children are often negatively biased against black children. Was this so for Jamie and the other children that refused to touch, talk about or look at Shiree? How does their silence sit against Kim’s?

TABLE 1.3 summarises the differences and similarities between the Anglo-Australian and Vietnamese-Australian children’s silences and comments during the initial PESD interviews.

Table 1.3: A comparison of Anglo-Australian and Vietnamese-Australian children’s silences and comments during initial interviews.

Issues	Anglo-Australian children	Vietnamese-Australian children
<i>Meanings for Vietnamese</i>		
What it means to be Vietnamese.	Silence	Comments
<i>Meanings for Aboriginal</i>		
Rejection and discomfort about Shiree	Silence	<i>No rejection shown</i>
Shiree’s skin color.	Comments	Silence
<i>Meanings for Australian</i>		
Australians have	Comments	<i>No comments made</i>

'white' faces.		
Shiree and Willy can't be Australian because of their skin color.	Comments	<i>No comments made</i>
<i>Self identification with dolls</i>		
Self-identification with the white dolls on the basis of skin, eye and hair color	Comments	Silence – one child commented
Labeling themselves and others on the basis of skin color.	Comments	Silence (one child only)
White' is lovely and pretty.	Comments	<i>No comments made</i>
Why children chose to self-identify with the dolls or chose dolls as a friend or to take to their birthday parties.	Comments	Silence
Differences between the dolls linked with skin, eye and hair color.	Comments	Comments

Reading the voices and silences

How do we read these moments of voice and silence?

- Did the Vietnamese-Australian girls really believe that they looked like Olivia?
- Were Kim and the other Vietnamese-Australian girls merely mistaken about their looks when they chose Olivia?
- Were the Vietnamese-Australian children resisting our efforts to classify them?
- What was Kim revealing or concealing to us about the truth of her life?
- Were the Anglo-Australian children showing us racial bias?
- Why was Shiree the most rejected doll and Olivia the only one seen as pretty?

50 years of international research on 'race' and children offers one source for insights. It has consistently shown that:

- Young children can and do demonstrate racial prejudice (Hirschfeld, 1995; Aboud & Doyle, 1995) and that this may be as early as year years of age. (Black-Gutman & Hickson, 1996)
- Both Black children and white children consistently show a positive bias towards 'whiteness' and a negative bias towards 'blackness'.
- Black children consistently choose white dolls as those that they'd like to

- play and as the ones that look pretty (Go-Paul McNicol, 1995).
- Black children showed a bias towards lighter skins (Averhart & Bigler, 1997).
 - Black children showed racial preference to whites (Kelly & Duckitt, 1995; Johnson, 1995).

To this extent, the responses of the children in the PESD study are not surprising. These findings have generally have been explained in terms of children's cognitive capacities. For instance, twenty-two out of the twenty-four pieces of published research in the last five years on this topic each explained children's attitudes to racial and ethnic difference in terms of specific and general cognitive skills and concepts. More specifically, these studies were mainly Piagetian and explained ethnic/racial bias in terms of children's inability to hold multiple perceptions and to conserve and their natural need to sort and classify objects and people. (See Black-Gutman & Hickson, 1996 for an in-depth discussion of the cognitive base of these studies). From a cognitive standpoint, preschool children cannot view other 'races' as acceptable or desirable, therefore, bias develops. Bias decreases with age, as children begin to take multiple perspectives and to conserve. It also decreases as children begin to see other 'races' as similar to their own and to see differences between individuals of the same 'race'.

So, from a cognitive perspective, the Anglo-Australian children's constructions of 'whiteness', 'blackness/brownness', being Australian and being Vietnamese link to their need to sort and classify and their inability to conserve and hold multiple perspectives. Bias, from this perspective, will reduce as these skills develop in each individual child. It is a developmental phenomenon that naturally disappears.

However, Spivak (1990, p. 21) cautions us to be ever vigilant in these postcolonial times and to reflect on what is 'edited out' of our accounts of 'race'. More particularly, we should think about the silences in our accounts, especially the questions that cannot be asked in our story.

For me, questions that remain unanswered by the current cognitive studies stories of 'race' and young children surround how a need to classify and sort explains the following phenomenon.

- Young children give predominance to sorting people by skin color and other physical attributes rather than by equally obvious differences produced by gender or the clothes that we wear only. Some children do this. Why do many not? What makes physical characteristics such as skin color that have historically been named as 'racial' so prominent in young children's classifications? Spivak (1990, p. 62) calls this process of basing decisions on skin color 'chromatism'. Why is 'chromatism' a part of how the children understood who they were?

- Several Anglo-Australian children use the term 'white' to describe themselves and others. What makes children classify using an inaccurate color descriptor? Some children struggled to name their skin color and used words such as 'pinkish', 'sort of light, gray-brown'. Why did those Anglo-Australian children who were certain about their color use the term 'white'? How did they come to use a term that is a politicized signifier of difference rather than an accurate descriptor of color?
- Anglo-Australian children's discomfort with Shiree but not with Willie. Children shied away from Shiree even though they (1) knew more about being Aboriginal than they did about being Vietnamese and (2) saw both Willy and Shiree as different to themselves. Why was it Shiree with her darker skin that created discomfort?

Cognitive accounts of children's constructions of 'race' do not answer these questions because they 'edit out' our political pasts and presents that make possible young children's current 'race' constructions. These pasts and presents include the voices and discourses that show how a history of colonialism has formed and continues to inform the discourses of difference into which all Australian children are 'interpellated' (Althusser, 1984, p. 37). In particular, it edits out ways of speaking about:

- The traces between children's ways of making sense of themselves and others adult's ways of making sense of others, in particular their 'chromatism' (Spivak, 1990, p. 62).
- The complex negotiation of identities in which children such as Kim engage as they knowingly self-identify as 'white'.

Chromatism

Many adult Australians still categorize people chromatically and still discriminate on the basis of that categorization. In the late 1990s, more powerful examples of that were associated with the 'politics of resentment, best exemplified in the phenomenon of Hansonism' (Rizvi, 1998, p. 5). Kim and the other children in this paper were in their preschool years as Hansonism was at its height. Can we reasonably make a link between the two? Can we reasonably deny a link between the two?

Ashcroft et al. (1998) argued that cultural hegemony in postcolonial moments, such as Australia's present, operates "... through an invisible network of filiative connections, psychological internalizations, and unconsciously complicit associations" (p. 207). The power to define what should be said and thought about social and cultural difference and diversity is rhizomical. It is "diffusive", "intermittent, overlapping and intertwining" (Ashcroft et al, 1998, p. 208). It is not a simple, singular, ongoing and monolithic process of domination. Young children's constructions of 'race' in postcolonial moments are formed through

diffuse, intermittent, overlapping and intertwining discourses of culture, difference and identity. The links to past colonial discourses of 'race' will be diffuse and intermittent but they will exist. They will exist through family, through others and through how children internalize the cultural meanings they meet. Whatever the processes of connection, the connections are undeniable.

Hansonism is certainly an obvious way in which colonial discourses of 'race' from the past diffused intermittently into the Australian present. They overlapped with anti-immigration, white Australia discourses and intertwined with amongst other things with fears of unemployment and racial hybridization. Can children connected to adult culture through family, the media and their capacity for making meaning remain untouched by the discursive rhizome that is the Australian racist past and present? Is it enough to say children's chromatism results from a natural cognitive phenomenon that drives them to sort and classify?

Negotiating 'migrant' identities

Of the Australian 'migrant' experience, Gunew (1990, p. 66) asked:

“... if you are constructed in one particular kind of language, what kinds of violence does it do to your subjectivity if one then has to move into another language, and suppress whatever selves or subjectivities were constructed by the first?”

To what extent is Kim's silence a resistance to the violence of reconstructing her subjectivity in English? To what extent is her self-identification with Olivia attempting to tell us that she is an Australian-Vietnamese? To what extent is her embarrassment a recognition that we may not see her that way?

Kim's blushes suggest that she knew, we knew, she knew, she didn't look like Olivia. Despite this she remained determined in her choice. In addition, despite her English-language proficiency and the presence of a bi-lingual assistant, she chose not to speak.

In her choices, Kim did more than just sort and classify. She engaged with the politics of how we sort and classify people. Whatever the reason for Kim's choice, she knew that her choice had implications for her and for us.

Finally

Bringing children's knowings about 'race' and identity to the fore arises from my keen commitment to anti-bias work with young children. In the Preschool Equity and Social Diversity Project we have just begun to puzzle over children's knowings. It is clear from this work that preschool children can use sophisticated

concepts of 'race' to define themselves and others and that they understand how power and control is linked to 'racial' understandings. They know that how they categorize people matters to adults and they that know that skin color somehow matters for them.

For anti-bias pedagogies to be effective, we need to find ways to increase our understandings of how 'race' matters and why. To do this, we must listen not to just what the children say but also to their silences. Their words and their silences can challenge us to think more deeply about how they come to know about 'race'. Children can also challenge us to see how the rhizome of colonial discourses still grows in these postcolonial times. In doing so, children remind us that their knowings are inextricably linked with adults. Can we afford to just wait for them to grow out of sorting and classifying? Can we hope to change their discourses of 'race' without also changing ours?

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