Children's developing identity

This chapter shares the findings from a participatory study designed to explore children's identity. The findings illustrate 'picture making' through art and photography as a method which facilitates reflective time and space within the research process and encourages children to talk about different aspects of *self*. These findings are discussed in relation to early childhood professional practice and demonstrate how listening to children using multi-modal instruments provide opportunities for practitioners to consider the diversity of identity development across home and school contexts and enable children to share their views.

Introduction

Children convey aspects of their identity using a range of social markers, including their age, gender and ethnicity, family and group membership. This is a dynamic process in which children negotiate, construct and re-construct multiple identities. Identity is not fixed or singular, but multi-faceted and reflects a range of social, cultural and political influences .Yet focusing on these markers alone may not reveal the richness of children's sense of *self*. It is important to appreciate the distinctive ways in which children express their identity through friendship, play and many forms of social interaction. For example, methods such as photography, art, and map-making, in order to provide them with opportunities to communicate their views using methods they enjoy and can use independently. This is of particular interest to me as a researcher at the Open University where I use children's pictures as an instrument for exploring childhood. I shall therefore share with you some aspects of that research which suggests ways of listening to children which reveal insights about the way they learn and see the world.

Identity

Identity is a key foundation for children's social and emotional development and it may be valuable to consider the work of Cooper and Collins (2009) who consider how identity is related to feelings of security and self worth. Research continues to explore the association between identity, resilience development and mental health (Burns and Rapee, 2006). This process is important for anyone working with children because identity and feelings of well-being are firmly linked to life experiences.

As researchers and practitioners interested in working with children it is important to reflect on how we view and understand childhood. It is easy to misinterpret how children feel about themselves, or to overlook characteristics of their developing identity. Working with children, identifying and supporting their needs are primary objectives for educators, researchers and practitioners in the field of early childhood education, as Durand (2010, p. 839) indicates,

> If the goal of education is to truly serve *all* children and families in ways that are authentic and meaningful, it is imperative that, as early childhood professionals, we begin to broaden our knowledge about children's development, and the lenses we use to view children's developmental trajectories.

Durand draws attention to two central themes; how professionals identify the needs of children and their families and how these needs are effectively met. The vast majority of developmental theories about childhood have relied on adult interpretations. Children's own stories about *self* have been shared, but they are frequently 'told' stories (Brooks, 2006). Researchers have argued that it is important to reflect on how people make sense of their own lives (Cooper, 2013).

Children's right to be listened to, have their voices heard and taken into account is fundamental to recent developments designed to capture children's views through participatory research. Not only does this recognise children's competency in being able to contribute to research (Christensen and Prout, 2005), but re-position's them as pivotal within the research process (Clark, 2011). This reflects a children's rights perspective, in which children are valued and acknowledges how research **about** children must build upon approaches which consult **with** children.

The example which follows provides a case study of my own participatory research undertaken with a small group of twelve children aged between 4 and 6 years. This research is part of a much larger on-going ethnographic study of 210 children and young people since 2011. The research combines a number of small projects across education and care settings (including primary and secondary schools, as well as youth clubs and after school groups) in Gloucestershire. The principal focus of the

research is to explore different ways of engaging with children and young people, including the analysis of different data collection instruments, as means to examine childhood and youth identity.

Participatory research

This participatory research project was carried out at a local after school club and utilised four primary data collection instruments; focus group discussions, observations, children's photographic pictures and free drawings. The research started with a focus group discussion. We met weekly and I observed and talked with the children individually, in friendship pairs, in groups and as a whole research group. The ethical considerations of the study were discussed and all the participants were impressed of their right to withdraw at any time, the confidential nature of the work and the importance of anonymity. Consent was provided by each participant and participant caretaker. All participant names have been changed.

A sub-text for my own reflection on the research process was the different approaches I could employ. For example, I could have observed children within a particular social context and interviewed them about different aspects of their developing identity. However, I have employed these approaches in the past and recognise problems viewing children's experience primarily through an adult lens. The work of Clark (2011) and Stephenson (2009) attempted to overcome this issue. Both authors describe how many interesting insights about children often sit outside the research agenda or are overlooked by the use of particular data collection instruments. It was important for me to try and develop an approach in which children could have some level of control and freedom to express their own views.

Developments within the sociology of education have witnessed an expansion in research methodologies to embrace participatory approaches, in which creative multi-modal tools, such as images, map-making, photographs and pictures are used to work with children in ways which respond to children's interests and strengths (Clark, 2011). These facilitate opportunities for children to reflect on how they communicate important messages about their lives and which does not rely solely on 'talk'.

The project therefore integrated 'picture making' (drawings and photographic pictures) as instruments which are flexible and which children can use independently a 'reflective method' as Liebenberg (2009, p. 444) describes, where the researcher and participant can discuss images created by participants, which 'situates participants as authorities on their lives, better at controlling research content'.

A research case study

As a research group we began with an introductory focus on 'who am I'. Each child drew a picture of themselves. This provided a starting point to situate each child within the research group and confirm cohort details, such as age, gender and ethnicity.

Bernie and Duncan, illustrate how the children used pictures and drawings to communicate aspects of their developing identity. I use the pictures and accompanying narratives to try and build what some of the older children called 'personality pictures', in which the children were invited to draw and take pictures as a means to tell me and share with the research group features of their identity.

Who am I?

Bernie (aged 6) took an interesting approach in introducing himself through his drawing (picture 1). On first glance you can see that Bernie has drawn himself, as a boy (and a house), alongside other objects, including a car, oven and fridge. When I asked Bernie about his drawing he talks about himself 'as a boy', who is 6 and has 'brown hair', and also about when he 'grows up'. The following exchange with myself (R) illustrates how Bernie chooses to talk about how he wants to be an inventor.

Picture 1

> B: It's me. I am a house here. It's my home. I could invent a home like me. I would live next door to Simon. I want to be an inventor when I grow up. Well and sort of a designer. I am going to design a house which looks like me (pointing to his picture) and I am going to design a car with wheels on the bottom, at the side and on the top (points and laughs) and an oven which cooks meals all by itself.
>
> R: I would like one of those…
>
> B: I can make you one.
>
> R: How will the cooker know what to cook?
>
> B: You just have to think about what you want and it will cook it for you. You might have to wear something on your head. To get your thoughts.

This extract illustrates how Bernie used his picture to convey a range of themes about himself, including his hopes, sense of place, significant others, as well as the 'things' he found interesting and might invent in the future.

In contrast, Duncan (aged 4) describes his picture about himself and his cousin's dog 'Bubba', and in doing so, introduced different themes, most notably, his relationships with others;

> Bubba is a brown dog. He's been ill at the vets when we saw him on Saturday. My picture is me and Oscar's dog. I have a hamster called 'fluffy'. It's not my hamster but my brothers.

Picture 2

Whilst talking about his picture, Duncan shifted from talking about himself, his friends and family and then in a similar way to Bernie, his likes and thoughts about the future;

> D: It's me. I am four. I have one brother. And Bubba.
>
> R: Who is Bubba?
>
> D: Its Oscar's dog. My cousin. He's new. I don't have a dog, but we do have a hamster called Fluffy.
>
> R: Do you?
>
> D: My Dad would like a dog when we have got all our grass. I can then play on the grass.
>
> R: Do you like playing on the grass?
>
> D: I like drawing. I am good at drawing with felt pens. I will be an artist I think.

Children typically use social markers such as age, gender, friends, family, ethnicity and hobbies to convey aspects of who they are. Sometimes an aspect of identity is clearly signaled by appearance. When considering a child's developing identity it is necessary to reflect on how a child projects an image but also their subjective awareness of *self*. It is interesting to see how Duncan and Bernie use a variety of social makers to build up a picture of who they are, with references to place, friends and family.

This response can be set within the research work of Bronfenbrenner's in his *ecological systems theory* (1979). He argues for the importance of understanding child development within social and cultural systems. This recognises how children relate within social *micro-systems* such as home and nursery and how these systems interact as *meso-systems,* to influence social behaviour. The child is

not passive within this process, but an active agent who in turn influences the social systems within which they are placed. Understanding children therefore warrants a holistic process in which practitioners can explore children's sense of *self* across various contexts and so acknowledge the wider influences of friends, family, community and culture.

This view provided the stimulus to use photography as the primary data collection instrument; designed to broaden the research focus to include a more holistic exploration of the child across various contexts, including school, home and with the aim of incorporating 'other' significant people such as family and friends. Children were given a digital camera to use at the after school club and at home independently. They took photographs for 10 minutes each day. Whilst each child's parent/carer supervised the activity the children were free to take photographs of things which they felt reflected, 'all about me'. At the end of the week, the cameras were collected and the photographs were stored.

All about me

During this study each child was invited to 'talk me through' each of their pictures. This reflected my interest in how children construct meaning and communicate their views within a research process rather than focusing on the pictures and drawings as a research product. Narrative evolved as an essential feature of our discussions as the children talked about what their pictures meant to them.

They were encouraged to select their favourites. I then merged a selection of pictures into a series of photographs (see pictures 3 – 5). We then used these pictures to talk in more detail and to build up 'personality pictures', as one older member (Liam, aged 6) of our research group describes;

> The pictures can tell all about the things you do and your friends. It's a good way of finding out about you. The things that other people might not know.

Case study 1: Identity and 'other'

Bernie selected a range of photographs which signposted to other people, such as friends, family members or pets. Bernie talked freely about each picture which also provided him with an opportunity to introduce important people within his life, such as his mum, cousin, pet hamster and cousin's dog.

Picture 3

My hamster has red eyes and is a girl. So is my Mum. That's her favourite red cup for tea. My cousin is a girl. Molly. That's her feet and her dog. My best friend Simon is a boy, like me and he has a dog and we battle a lot. He likes it a bit better than me. We play it at school. He can be very silly sometimes. He's leaving school. Moving to Scotland. I think I will need more friends when he's gone. I like to be popular.

Bernie's reference to his friend Simon, his type of play and desire to be popular indicates how children move in and out of different social contexts which are important factors which shape children's experiences. A point that resonates with *Social identity theory* (Tajfel, 1981) who examined how children take on a personal identity as distinctive individuals, as well as a social identity, which may reflect group membership. There is also the work of Holloway and Valentine (2000) who explored the impact of social dynamics on children's developing identity and the fluidity of this process, with a particular emphasis on the significance of place.

Case study 2: Identity and place

Duncan selected his photographs and was keen to talk about his 'home' and most importantly, his 'bedroom'.

Picture 4
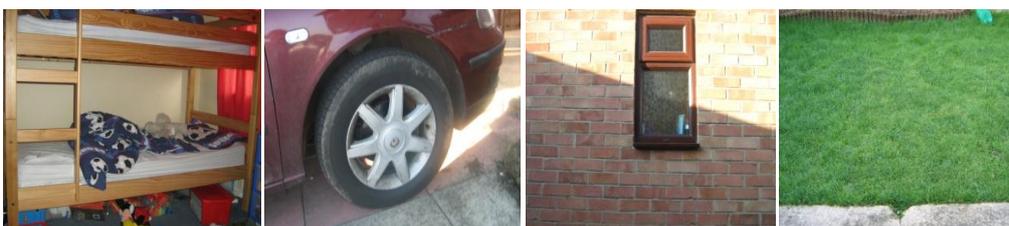
My room I share with my brother Dan. It's messy always (laughs). My mum tidy's it up. I have a football duvet. The car. It travels you quicker. We go to granddad's in it. If I walked to grandma's it would take for ages. It would take so long we would be dead (laughs). You can see my house here (pointing). The window. The toilet's in there. We have new grass. Nearly new. You can't walk on it yet can you? I will play on my scooter and my bike then.

Duncan uses his picture to reflect on a variety of important people within his life, including his mum, grandma and grandpa as well as referencing to a number of places, including his home and spaces within his home, such as his bedroom and his garden, as well as places he travels to, such as his grandparents home. Children's developing identity represents how they feel and project their sense of *self* in place and time.

An interesting feature of the all the children's photographs was pictures taken of material 'things', such as Duncan's picture of his family car, to position important artefacts, routines, places as well as special toys and achievements.

Case study 3: Identity and 'things'

Bernie took many pictures of different artefacts in his own home and outside. Many of the objects included toys, everyday artefacts and his 'special things'.

Picture 5
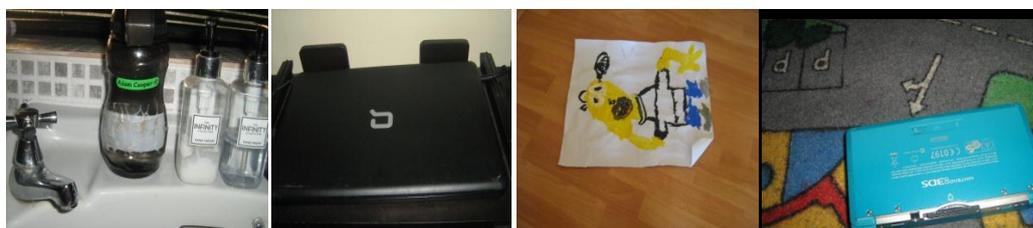
In the following extract, Bernie talks about some of the *things* he has photographed:

I like my 3 DS. It's my favourite thing. I play on it all the time at home. I like the computer. It's my dad's but I have my own account. I go on Amazon. I am good on the computer. Do you

know that's Homer Simpson. I painted that. I love the Simpson's. When I get my own. I can't have a room of my own yet. Cos. Well, it will be a Simpson room I think. And at night I always have my night time water. See. My name's on it. It helps me sleep. I know it's time for bedtime.

It is interesting how Bernie had selected artefacts to signpost an array of features not only about himself and the things he liked, but also his achievements and pleasures as well as the everyday routines within his social life, such as bed and leisure time. Authors (Horton and Kraftl 2006; Jones, 2008) suggest that materialism has been a largely neglected aspect of childhood research yet provides rich insight into children's everyday social life and developing identity.

The case studies illustrate how the insights gained come from the actual research process rather than the pictures as an end product. As a meaning making activity, 'picture making' provided many opportunities for each child to reflect and present a distinct feature of their developing identity as they chose it and not as an adult version. The children were able to raise themes and issues which they deemed important and which I, as an adult researcher, may not have considered.

Reflective point

As a research exercise, the discussion of each set of photographs was time consuming but well worth the effort. It allowed me to work in partnership with the children, be guided by them and establish a relationship where we could talk and share ideas. The children were all very different in how they talked about their photographs. It is a shame that these pictures cannot fully convey the affective dimension within this research process, including the laughter, joy and pride as the children talk about their pictures and photographs. For example, Duncan's laughter when describing his 'messy' bedroom and Bernie's pride and joy in talking about the picture of 'Homer Simpson' he painted. Age was a factor which appeared to influence the nature and length of individual discussion times. The younger children, aged 4, were easily distracted. Despite this, the discussion times provided rich opportunities for me to listen to the children; to engage with different aspects of their lives reflected in their pictures and to gain some insight into the things which they liked, disliked and the fine nuances about their lives which often sit outside conventional research agenda's.

It is important to acknowledge that images are not 'records of reality' (Liebenberg, 2009, p. 445), but can be used to represent experience. Meanings always depend on when, how and where the images were constructed, by whom and in how the images are interpreted in one way or another. The emphasis upon meaning making here is important for a number of reasons. Not only does this acknowledge research as a process in which knowledge is produced, but recognises children's role in contributing to this process. In this sense, data is not extracted by the researcher to be represented elsewhere, but that research as a process is able to capture how meaning is constructed. The use of 'picture making' is valuable here as a tool which children can control, direct and so provide a means through which to witness how they choose to share their sense of *self*.

How children express their identity can vary according to social circumstances within any given situation. There are aspects of *self* which may be regarded as enduring, such as, ethnic origin for example, whilst there are other features which are quite different and evolve over time and place (Kelleher and Leavey, 2004). This research examines the complexity of identity development which encompasses a host of important factors, including friends and family as well as material *things* which make reference to features of children's play, achievements and social interaction. Identity is not fixed or pre-determined and can change over time and space as children move in and out of social contexts, such as home, garden, bedroom and school. The core of this research addresses how children choose to communicate 'who I am' and 'all about me' rather than selecting a research approach in which adults attempt to construct another's sense of *self*.

Implications for professional practice

The value of addressing children's experiences has increasingly been the focus within education, health and social care professional contexts. Clark (2011) has developed the essence of 'listening' within the Mosaic approach, which recognises how children can use multi-modal instruments, such as map-making, photography and art as a means to voice their views.

Engaging with and listening to the views of children involves more than just acknowledging what children tell us verbally, and includes the rich multi-modal experiences that constitute children's lives

and so reflects how they play, interact with friends and family, their experiences at school and outside of school as well as their likes and dislikes. A multimodal approach acknowledges how meanings are not solely dependent upon 'talk' but recognises that communication is negotiated through combinations of 'modes' including gesture and movement as well as through words and through different media, such as picture making.

Listening to children, using a range of senses is central to early year's professional practice and encourages practitioners to take stock of the diverse ways in which children communicate features of their emerging identity. Getting to know and understand children means being responsive to these diverse modes of communication as well as the rich array of factors which influence identity development.

Children draw upon their sense of place, significant others as well as material 'things' to convey their sense of *self* and provide opportunities to witness the layers of rich social experiences that make up social life. Understanding identity formation involves building up an in-depth picture of the *whole child* (Cooper and Collins, 2009). In order to understand children practitioners must venture to consider both the individual child and how he or she interacts and experiences social life within a distinct social dynamic (Brofenbrenner, 1979).

Overview

The essence of this investigation rests upon research as a meaning making exercise in which the process facilitates opportunities to talk, reflect and take time to listen to children. Children's drawings and photographic pictures are flexible instruments which enable children to reflect and draw upon experiences 'outside' and 'within' a given research context.

This investigation provides one example of research which engages with children. It is by no means recommended as the best way, but has attempted to demonstrate the different approaches children use to impart aspects of their developing sense of *self* and the diverse ways in which professionals can work in partnership with them. This is important in so many ways; not only does working with children respect and value what they have to say but acknowledges that there are many ways to

listen. It is important also to consider how research **with** and not **on** children can provide opportunities to address diverse needs which is central to developing supportive environments for all children.

Critical learning activity

In this chapter I have discussed research as a process and attempted to impart the value of meaning making within research practice. So often the evaluation of research focuses on the end product rather than addressing many important features within the investigative process. This critical learning activity encourages you to address the research process and the important questions that need to be addressed when evaluating any research.

This activity sets out a critical template and encourages you to ask a range of *what*, *how* and *why* questions which are important when designing as well as when evaluating research, such as;

> *What* are the purposes of this research?
>
> *What* can this type of investigation achieve?
>
> *How* has the study been designed to meet its objectives?
>
> *Why* is the research important?

This type of questioning allows careful consideration of how a study has been designed and the methods and data collection instruments that have been used to satisfy the research objective. The results of any investigation can then be examined critically and within the context within which they have been generated.

Table 1 provides an over-view of the critical process for any researcher or anyone interested in engaging with research literature. It provides a series of questions which allow you to evaluate the process as much as the findings. Use this template now and address each question in relation to this research example. Compare your answers to my reflections which I share in appendix 1.
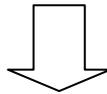
Table 1

Research purpose – what are the aims of the research and what can the research achieve?
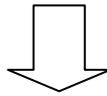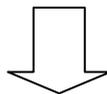
Research design – how has the research been designed to fulfill its objectives?
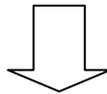
Research methods – what data collection instruments have been used and why?

Results – what are the findings from the research?

Discussion - why is this research important and what are the wider implications of this research? Does it challenge how you think about and understand children; does it relate to policy frameworks and professional practice?

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