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Unit G671: Exploring socialisation, culture and identity
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ADAPTED FROM: IAN BARRON, 'AN EXPLORATION OF YOUNG CHILDREN'S ETHNIC IDENTITIES AS COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE', BRITISH JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION, 28.6.2007, PP. 739-752.

There is very little research based on the nursery school years or on the ethnic identities of young children living in the UK. This was one reason why Ian Barron explored the ethnic identities of children aged three years old and four years old living in the North-West of England. He wanted to gain access to the children's everyday activities and to discover the complexities of how ethnic identity is experienced, practised and performed by a particular group of children in the contexts of their homes and nursery school, focusing on primary socialisation.

Due to the lack of available research evidence on children's experience of ethnic identity, an ethnographic approach was adopted. The research was carried out in a nursery school which was located in what was originally an area of small terraced houses. However, the area had since been redeveloped. A mosque had recently opened in a building behind the school. Thirty-two children were observed over a five month period. The children were selected using two criteria. Firstly, gender, an equal number of boys and girls were selected to take part in the research from the morning and afternoon nursery school sessions. Secondly, ethnicity, children of white indigenous heritage and of Pakistani heritage were selected, according to the overall ethnic mix of the school, which was four fifths Pakistani heritage and one fifth indigenous white heritage.

The study began with a visit to each child's home (accompanying the nursery staff) before the children started at the nursery school. This was designed to enable Barron to understand something of the children's

homes and prior experiences. This was followed up two weeks later with time spent in the nursery observing as the children settled into nursery school and further research in November and December when the nursery was celebrating the festivals of Eid and Christmas.

Ethics are always a concern in sociological research and particularly so when working with groups of children who are too young to understand the meaning of informed consent. Permission to carry out the research was gained from the Head Teacher and from the children's parents. However, as the nature of the research developed Barron had to make sure that he constantly sought the children's approval through explaining exactly what he was doing and why he was doing it. The study looked at children's play, actions, paintings, drawings and choice of friends rather than solely focusing on what the children said. As some of the children and parents had limited understanding of English, the issue of gaining informed consent was made more difficult.

Barron was concerned that the research was too subjective. Therefore he took every opportunity to share his interpretation of the fieldwork with staff at the school as a form of respondent validation.

The home visits revealed a number of markers of ethnic identity such as home decoration and furnishings, language and dress. The more affluent the Pakistani families seemed to be, the more westernised their style of home decoration. In the homes of the indigenous white children all the mothers wore casual clothes such as jeans and t-shirts. In almost all the homes of the Pakistani families the mothers were dressed in salwar kameez, although none of the mothers wore the hijab or burkha. Barron notes in his research that he felt uncomfortable in most of the homes. As a white, male, middle class sociologist he wondered if he was really viewing the homes objectively.

The research in the nursery school showed that children tended to socialise in same-sex, same-ethnic friendship groups. The lack of ethnic mix did not seem a concern to the nursery staff who thought these friendship groupings were natural. Many of the children showed little interest in the Eid celebrations, and seemed to consider skin colour as a determining factor in whether they would be celebrating it. One girl of Pakistani heritage said that mendhi should not be worn by ‘white women’. During the Christmas celebrations, the children least likely to know what was going on in the nativity play were those with limited understanding of English.

Overall, the research findings provided only tentative conclusions about how the children viewed their ethnic identity. It seemed to be based on factors such as the recognition of boundaries and differences in relation to skin colour, language and religious celebrations and practices that occur during primary socialisation.



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