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## **Abstract**

This paper explores some of the ways in which children's ethnic identities have been conceptualised by socio-cultural and critical race theory and the potential of the 'figured worlds' literature in helping to theorise the responses of young children to the cultural and educational worlds they encounter. Using some vignettes drawn from the author's ethnographic study of the ethnic identities of a group of three and four year old white British and British Pakistani children in a kindergarten in the north of England, the paper explores the potential of a figured worlds analysis in understanding how the children respond to some of the experiences of the kindergarten and in understanding how they seek to make sense of their identities. The paper concludes that whilst structural and cultural factors shaped the ways in which the children engaged or did not engage in the social and educational practices of the kindergarten and played a very significant part in how they viewed themselves and viewed others, the children were not only silent observers of what the world offered or did not offer them. A dialogic self was evident that authored and tried to make sense of the world but, in so doing, designated identities meant that only particular figured worlds were available to children for much of the time. It is argued that what a figured worlds reading offers is a means of seeking to uncover and theorise the complex ways in which young children experience and perform their identities and respond to the social and educational practices in particular contexts. This is seen as having value in providing a framework for early childhood academics and educators to work together to support children in exploring alternative figured identities that challenge, alleviate and transform the constraints that positional identities often seem to impose on them.

## **Key words**

ethnic identities, socio-cultural theory, figured worlds, critical race theory, kindergarten children

## **Introduction**

This paper explores some of the ways in which children's ethnic identities have been conceptualised by socio-cultural and critical race theory and the potential of the figured worlds literature (Holland et al, 1998) in helping to theorise the responses of young children to the cultural and educational worlds which they live in and encounter. It should be noted that although the paper draws upon some vignettes from a small scale ethnographic study that explored the experiences of ethnic identity of a group of three and four year old white British and British Pakistani children in a kindergarten in the north of England, the focus of the paper is not primarily on systematically presenting the findings from that research. Rather, the focus of the paper is theoretical and the concern is with exploring the ways in which a figured worlds approach can be helpful in supplementing how young children's ethnic identities have been conceptualised by critical race theorists (see, for example Ladson – Billings, 1998,) and socio-cultural theorists. Socio-cultural theory is a broad field and encompasses ethnic identity work concerned with 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Brooker, 2002), 'cultural ecologies' (Heath, 1983; Lee, 2008), 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al, 1992; Gonzalez et al, 1995, 2001), and 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1998; Author, 2007, 2009). The paper begins with an overview of some of these key theoretical frameworks which have been used to conceptualise children's ethnic identities. It moves on to provide some contextual information about the research from which the data extracts are drawn. Some extracts from this data, or vignettes, are then provided and the paper considers how a figured worlds perspective (Holland et al, 1998) may be helpful in seeking to illuminate the children's responses to some of the experiences of the kindergarten. The final part of the discussion reviews how such an analysis may enable us to better understand the interplay between young children's agency and the dominant social practices which shape their ethnic identities.

## **Theorising Ethnic Identities**

If, as Rogers and Mosley (2006: 468) note, there is little research which 'illuminates the construction of race with primary-grade children', there is less still that has done so with children of kindergarten age. Traditional developmental psychologists such as Aboud (1988, 2003), Nesdale et al (2003), Cameron et al (2001) and McGlothlin et al (2005) explain children's awareness of ethnic identity in terms of internal processes relating to notions of egocentrism. Awareness of self and other in these accounts is thus understood in relation to the ability to 'decentre', to recognise the perspectives of others. They argue that this ability to decentre leads to an awareness of difference but also a preference for what is the same and that this leads to the rejection of what is other. In other words, ethnic identities (and discrimination) are seen as being the result of internal developmental processes

which lead individuals to seek out what is the same and, in so doing, intentionally or unintentionally reject what is other. In this sense, ethnic identity is seen to emerge from latent internal developmental processes.

Ladson – Billings (1995, 2000, 2009) argues for the importance of factors at the societal rather than individual level in understanding ethnic identity. Drawing upon a critical race perspective, she maintains that race impacts on people's everyday lives because of the ways in which racial judgements are made through the narratives that are constructed in relation to perceived norms, which generally continue to favour, privilege and give rights (including legal ones) to whiteness and the values attached to it (and to disadvantage those who 'fall short' of these perceived norms). Following postmodernism, the norms are not seen as objective absolutes in relation to race, ethnicity and culture, rather identity is seen as negotiated and forever in flux under conditions of power (see, for example Rhedding-Jones, 2001, 2002; Grieshaber and Cannella, 2001a, 2001b; Cannella and Viruru, 2004 and MacNaughton, 2005). Race, ethnicity and culture are seen as real, however, in that the normative judgements made affect our daily lives. These judgments are then seen as coming to affect the curriculum, what is seen as being worthwhile educational experience and the ways in which assessment is conceived and carried out. Such judgements also affect which children are seen as being successful (those who understand and have experience of what is expected and those who are therefore able to negotiate the curriculum and the forms of assessment).

Socio-cultural approaches have in common a concern with the importance of understanding how children's experiences in particular communities shape their beliefs, behaviours and early experiences of education in formal settings. Drawing upon Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), Brooker (2002) argues, in a study of the early educational experiences of British Bangaldeshi children, that whilst all households were rich in cultural knowledge, only some of this knowledge was valued by the schools that the children attended and so some children were better equipped than others to deal successfully with what school expected of them. Lam and Pollard (2006: 133) note similar concerns in that 'when children start kindergarten, they cross a cultural boundary from home to kindergarten and, in fact, they may find that what they learned at home is inconsistent with the expectations of kindergarten'. In my own research (Author, 2007, 2009) I have drawn upon communities of practice perspectives (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) which conceptualise identity as being shaped by the opportunities (or lack of them) offered to individuals to participate as accepted (or, in Lave and Wenger's terms 'legitimate') novice members who are supported by 'old timers' on the road to becoming full members of the identity communities which they encounter. In the United States, Moll et al (1992) and Gonzalez et

al (1995) argue for the richness of 'funds of knowledge' about the things that matter in the lives of American Latino families but there is the same potential for what matters in these homes not to find recognition in what matters in school, rather in the way that Brooker (2002) has noted in the United Kingdom and Heath identified in her seminal work (1983) examining language and literacy practices in America. Lee et al (2003) have similarly argued for the significance of an understanding of cultural ecologies in understanding the responses of African-American children to schooling. Though focused on adolescence, they draw attention to the crossings between contexts that children from minority ethnic groups must make daily and how these can be risk factors in terms of their educational success.

Where children are not able to negotiate these experiences successfully, the danger, as Lee (2006, 306) notes, is that the 'consequences of limited opportunities to participate are limited opportunities to learn'. This, in turn has led to a concern with pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (1995, 2000, 2009) argues, though largely in respect of older children, that an understanding of critical race theory and the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy is important in order to challenge discrimination and overcome disadvantage. Riojas-Cortez (2001: 36) draws attention in her study to the significant part culturally - informed pedagogy can play in enabling children to experience educational success through the story of a kindergarten teacher whose 'cultural knowledge about the children ..... allowed her to decipher the shared knowledge members of a community need in order to engage in cultural behaviour'. Similarly, Lee (2008: 275) argues that what matters is that schools link what 'kids already know and value to that which they do not yet know'. In so doing, Moll (2010: 456) argues that 'when students witness the validation of their culture and language, hence of themselves, within the educational process, when they "see themselves" in their schooling, they combine their home or community identities with an academic identity'.

### **Identity and Agency in Figured Worlds**

Whilst I have found the notion of social practice in worlds which shape and determine identity useful, I have come to feel ill-at-ease, however, with the ways in which young children's experiences of ethnic identity often appear to emerge only from the social practice and from what is 'done to children'. There is often little sense of the ways in which children respond or take up positions in relation to the social practices which they experience. There is no account, in other words, of agency. In common with Dagenais et al (2006: 208), my interest is in the ways in which 'identity is not entirely determined by social forces but can be refigured by individual actors'. My interest is also, along with Compton – Lilly (2008: 23), in the way in which 'identities are .. the result of negotiations, reversals, exchanges, rejections, adoptions, dismissals and renegotiations as we claim, abandon, and rework the ways of

being that are available to us as we find ourselves in different situations and interacting with different people over time.’ In a similar vein, Gregory et al’s recent work (2012) with children and families from Tamil Hindu/Saiva, Bangladeshi Muslim, Polish Catholic and Ghanaian Pentecostal backgrounds has examined the ways in which children weave together (or syncretize) into their play different and often contrasting rituals, artefacts and interactions that emerge from their home, faith and cultural backgrounds as they encounter new experiences and other cultures and religions, creating new narratives in the process. In seeking to theorise the space of agency, I have found Holland et al’s work (1998) on ‘figured worlds’ particularly helpful in that whilst their approach is similarly socio-cultural, drawing as it does on Vygotsky (1986) and Bakhtin (1982), it offers insights into the ways in which individuals respond to the socio-cultural worlds which they encounter and in which they engage.

Whilst there is a growing literature that explores the figured worlds of high schools and learner identity in adolescence (see, for example, Rubin 2007; Hatt, 2007; Michael et al, 2007, Urrieta, 2007; Robinson, 2007), there has been very little theorisation of young children’s identities in this way. The figured worlds analysis in relation to early childhood that has so far been carried out has particularly looked at figured worlds and children’s play. Pahl (2002) has examined the meaning making of the home as a “contested dance” in which symbolic and actual narratives, home meanings and metaphors are figured, and re-figured’ (146). Marsh (2010) and Pahl (2005) have examined the figurative aspects of virtual worlds and Pahl (2005) argues that virtual worlds offer ‘an opportunity for children to ‘play’ with different identities, and to re-fashion identities in relation to those worlds’ (128). There has also been some work by Dagenais et al (2006) in relation to multilingual young children, though they concentrate largely on how early language and literacy learning is ‘figured’ for multilingual children and make only limited use of the concepts to explore the children’s responses. In a recent paper, Park (2011) also draws on Vygotsky (1986) and Bakhtin (1982) in seeking to examine how young children make sense of racial and ethnic difference but the present paper goes further in seeking to make use of Holland et al’s (1998) fuller conceptualisation of identity as complex and multi-layered. They use four key concepts in order to conceptualise identity. First, they argue, identity is constructed in figured worlds where meaning is negotiated. Second, it depends on positionality, one’s place in the world as determined by social divisions such as race, gender and class. Third, identity emerges from the space of authoring as individuals come into contact with and respond to the discourses and practices to which they are exposed. It is this third aspect that is at the heart of the current paper. Fourth, identity is constructed through making worlds in serious play, which can create new figured worlds.

Gee (2011) argues that there are different types of figured worlds: those we espouse because we believe in them; those we use to evaluate ourselves and / or others; and those that consciously or unconsciously guide what we do and how we interact with others. He also notes that we might espouse the beliefs of a particular figured world whilst acting according to the beliefs of another. Figured worlds pre-exist us and in being recruited to them we participate in the inheritance, using already existing artefacts and discourses in our performances. The world of Western child-centred early years education (with its child – sized furniture, story times, snack times, creative and messy activities, construction materials, sand and water play, home corner and role play area) is an example of a figured world which is relevant to the present study. Later we will seek to explore, through some extracts from my ethnography, the ways in which the children responded to aspects of the figured worlds which they encountered. Gee suggests (2011) that, in order to understand which figured worlds are at play, we need to consider what deeply held conscious and unconscious beliefs must be in operation for people to act as they do. Here we have a sense of the way in which, in Foucault's terms (2002), figured worlds are manifestations of the exercise of power which impose discipline. However, in participating, improvising and responding to figured worlds, we develop them in turn and change and reinterpret ourselves in the process and therefore have access to experiences of agency.

The activities of figured worlds lend us identities, our sense of self, through our participation (as in communities of practice, Wenger, 1998) and we look at the world from the positions that we habitually inhabit. Figurative identities emerge from the stories, artefacts and practices of culture, which can have meaning across several figured worlds. Following Bakhtin (1982), and with echoes of Gregory et al's (2012) notion of syncretism, figurative identities are constructed in the manner of a bricoleur, using pre-existing words, activities and materials which act as both constraints and possibilities. Figurative identities are created from the experiences, activities and utterances provided to us by others and from our responses to them and from the responses of others to the ways in which we appropriate, participate in and transform experiences, activities and utterances. Holland et al (1998) draw upon Bakhtin's notion (1982) of the dialogic self which authors the self and the world in its response to the world's experiences and which, where it acquiesces, reproduces and, where it challenges what it experiences, has the potential to transform the figured world. Figured worlds are thus places of constancy but also of flux. However, figurative identities exist alongside positional identities and social position and social divisions, such as class, gender and race, matter in figured worlds. Again following Bakhtin (1982) and Vygotsky (1978), subject positions are not wholly freely chosen but are improvised from the cultural resources which history makes available and the improvisation is a form of practice.

Identities are thus conceived of as dialogic. From the multi-directional sense of the world of self and others that is created by participation in social activity and our responses to it and the responses of others to such participation, we find a voice or voices in, improvise and author the world – both that of the self and that of others – thereby creating a space for agency, to which others respond. This process of authoring, of orchestrating, begins, following Vygotsky (1986), with outer organising, sense making speech in activities with which we are not familiar (as we see in children’s play activities) but with age and familiarity that speech is turned inwards and becomes a means of understanding, organising and imagining the self. This does not mean, however, that we arrive at singular and integrated ways of understanding ourselves and the world around us. Hence the space of authoring is also a contested space, a space of struggle.

### **The Origins of the Vignettes**

The origins of vignettes that are used to illustrate some of the ways in which the figured worlds literature can be helpful in theorising young children’s identities are in research that was carried out as part of my doctoral studies. This research sought to understand the experiences of ethnic identity of a group of three and four year old children in a kindergarten in the north of England. The focus was on what it meant to be both white British and British Pakistani in that context. Whilst the full details of that research are beyond the scope of the present paper, some brief methodological and procedural details will help to situate the study. At that time, approximately twenty per cent of the children were white British and eighty per cent were British Pakistani. In order to seek to understand something of their experiences prior to starting kindergarten, I accompanied the staff on home visits for two consecutive years. These visits, like those of Gonzalaez et al (1995: 444) had ‘the express purpose of identifying and documenting knowledge that exists in students’ homes’. Attempting to capture as much as possible of all that happened during the visits was extremely demanding, exhausting and anxiety – making. Like Gonzalez et al (1995: 452) I found that ‘the myriad of details, of participating and observing, of interviewing and ... note taking ... was ... a numbing experience’ . I then visited the kindergarten at regular intervals for a total of approximately 40 days (240 hours) over the two year period when I typically spent between three and five consecutive days at the beginning, middle and end of each term, observing the children and the kindergarten’s environment continuously. I observed the children during their freely chosen play activities and during adult - directed activities such as story time (when the children also had a snack of milk and fruit and took part in early literacy and numeracy activities). The final visit of each year was taken up with accompanying the children on a day trip to the seaside.



The research was theorised in socio-cultural terms and was underpinned by a reflexive critical ethnography. Following Corsaro (1985, 1994, 2005) it sought to make children in their social worlds the focus for study, to 'take children seriously' (Brooker, 2011) and to seek to understand the experiences and factors that shape children's ethnic identities. The data were recorded initially using contemporaneous handwritten narrative accounts or fieldnotes. These notes formed the basis for the fuller account, which I then word processed each evening. As these accounts grew over the two year period and as I gathered data that were not always relevant to the focus of the study, I selected the accounts that were relevant and used these to produce an ethnography, which was arranged around how different kinds of kindergarten practices shed light on the children's experiences and sense of their ethnic identities. In terms of the approach I took to analysis, I decided that Clarke's (2005) notion of 'situational analysis' was the most useful. She argues for pushing 'grounded theory around the post-modern turn' (21) and that there needs to be a concern with studying the discourses that are evident in what we both hear and see, in order that sufficient attention is paid to the operation of power as meso and macro influences within the specific local field to be studied. She proposes a model of analysis based on mapping all the elements in a situation and examining the relationships between them, first in messy and then in ordered and relational forms. In parallel, all the meso and macro level discourses which impact on the situation are mapped together with the different positions taken and the spaces and silences between them. In keeping with the postmodern stance, this does not lead to any singular explanatory account of what we see and hear because 'there are no one-way arrows, but instead attempts to delineate processes of co-constitution through specifying conditions and relationalities' (Clarke, 2005: 298). Elsewhere (Author, forthcoming) I have discussed a number of methodological issues surrounding the representational adequacy of field notes, the creation of ethnographies, reflexivity, and the sufficiency of the analysis of the data but these methodological concerns are largely beyond the scope of the present paper.

It is recognised, however, that it is important to acknowledge, though by necessity briefly, the issues that circulate around my part in the ethnography as a lone researcher carrying out a small scale research project. As Blackledge and Creese (2010) note, this necessitates 'deliberate scrutiny of the researcher's own positioning and performances whilst in the field' (59) and consideration of 'how and to what extent these structure the research processes' (85). Account needs to be taken of the fact that I was / am a male white British researcher who does not share the ethnic background and culture of the majority of those I was seeking to research and who does not speak any of the community's languages other than English. This led me to feel relatively powerless in some regards but sat awkwardly alongside my previous role as the kindergarten's head teacher and current one as an academic, which

tended to position me as expert. These were challenges faced by some of the researchers in Blackledge and Creese's study (2010) and in the work on faith literacies by Gregory and Lytra (2012) but I did not enjoy the benefits they did of being part of a large team where data and analyses were shared. The challenges of not sharing language, ethnicity and culture were also faced by Gregory (1994) and Brooker (2002) in their ethnographic studies of British Bangladeshi children, by Parke and Drury (2001) in their study of British Pakistani children and by Rogers (2002), Rogers and Mosley (2006), Rogers and Christian (2007) and by Compton-Lilly (2006, 2008) in their work with African American children. Rogers and Mosley (2006: 473) sought to address the challenges of carrying out research as two white women by 'cross –checking our interpretations with scholars of color as well as with white scholars who consider themselves antiracist'. Unfortunately, I was not part of a large team and did not have access to British Pakistani scholars with whom I could share my data and analyses. However, whilst I am concerned not to gloss over my whiteness and the issues surrounding single researcher studies, I do not feel that these methodological concerns lie at the heart of or detract from what is really a theoretical paper, whose focus is on examining what a figured worlds reading might bring to the existing theoretical approaches to understanding young children's ethnic identities.

### **Exploring the Children's Responses**

In my explorations of children's ethnic identities hitherto (Author 2007, 2009), I have drawn upon Wenger's conception (1998) of identity as emerging from social practice rather than as emerging from language. The work of Holland et al (1998) and Gee (2011) has led me to re-examine this conceptualisation and particularly Wenger's claim (1998: 151) that 'the experience of identity in practice is a way of being in the world ... it is not in its essence, discursive or reflective'. This is primarily how I have theorised identity in previous work. The figured worlds literature, and particularly its concern with the dialogic self, has also led me to re-examine the data that I collected to consider whether, beyond what I have already been able to glean about children's identities through their actions and the actions of others towards them, what children said may offer further insights regarding how they experienced and constructed their identities in interaction with others.

It is recognised, following Blackledge and Creese (2010), that the data extracts or vignettes that I have chosen will have been influenced by my gender, culture and ethnicity and by the relationships that I established with both the kindergarten staff and the children. It is also acknowledged that what I 'found' and what sense I make of it is affected by what data I was able to collect and by the position from which I interpret it. The extracts are drawn from my observations of the children's activities and experiences in the kindergarten rather than from my visits to the children's homes primarily because the

kindergarten, rather than the home, was where I observed the children's responses to the world that they encountered. The home visits focused on talking to and noting what parents said about their children and on recording details of the environment of the children's homes in order that I could gain some sense of familial, cultural and socio-economic influences. The field notes from the visits are not, therefore, rich in data about what the children said in their home contexts and so could not form the basis of vignettes for this paper. The selection is not based on any claim that the vignettes are somehow representative. They are not representative in that much of my study is centred around the actions and behaviours, rather than the words, of the children in response to what the kindergarten offered them. This approach reflects the age of the children and the fact that few of them were fluent in English and I do not speak the community's languages and did not have access to an interpreter. This is not to suggest that the data collected was impoverished in any way because a richness of 'voice' was pieced together that was made up of more than their words as I observed them and their homes, talked to their parents and studied their play, actions and interactions in the kindergarten. It is true, however, that the vignettes are some of a relatively small number of examples of what children actually said and have been chosen primarily because they are seen as offering opportunities to explore the contribution that a figured worlds theorisation can make to understanding young children's ethnic identities as played out in the kindergarten's activities. This is not to say, however, that what children's spoken responses suggest about how their identities might be understood in these few vignettes is untypical of the way in which children responded through their actions and behaviours in the wider ethnography from which the vignettes are drawn.

The first vignette suggests the ways in which, especially for the British Pakistani children that I studied, positional and figurative identities were constantly in complex interaction with each other. The extract is one of a number of occasions where the children's speech appeared to be partly social in nature but where there were also signs of the young child's inner speech spoken aloud in the manner described by Vygotsky (1986) and Bakhtin (1982) as an early form of authoring, as the children sought to establish their own sense of who they were and to make sense of the experiences they encountered.

A girl of Pakistani-heritage made her calendar and came to show it to me and said 'it's for my Eid'. She then said 'Eid isn't my happy birthday, I had my happy birthday yesterday, I'm four now.'

(Extract from field notes)

In this example, it is suggested that she demonstrates her awareness of the figured worlds of (her) Eid and (her) birthday and the positional world of age and the ways in which they are similar to, different from and interact with each other. Whilst her speech is serving a communicative and social function in relation to another, what she says seems primarily concerned with her need to make sense of recent celebrations and aspects of her experience and identity. She appears to be authoring the world by responding to a forthcoming celebration which is concerned with figurative religious and cultural identities and also a recent celebration that was concerned with age and constructing a model of who she is and wants to be in the manner of a bricoleur, struggling to reconcile different aspects of her identity. It may be that the kindergarten has decided that what matters is the celebration of Eid but perhaps she is concerned to make clear to us that other celebrations, other parts of her familial and community experience and who she is, are important to her.

Religious and cultural celebrations similarly form part of the attempts to grapple with different aspects of identity in the second vignette, which is also concerned with preparations for Eid. I had first met Mitchell, who features in this extract, much earlier in the year when I had accompanied the staff as they visited him at home before he started kindergarten. I knew from that visit that the family were regular church goers and when I noticed Mitchell making an Eid card with one of the staff, I went to observe and speak to him, wondering what sense he would make of preparations for celebrations relating to another religion and how awareness of other religions was shaping his sense of self and the range of possibilities open to him.

- Researcher: Will you be having Eid at your house?
- Mitchell: No I will be having Christmas but not just yet, it's not Christmas yet
- Researcher: Why won't you be having Eid at your house?
- Mitchell: Because we're not dark are we, silly? We'll be having Christmas.
- Researcher: Would you like to have Eid at your house?
- Mitchell: Yes because I could get a Spiderman suit for my new clothes.

(Extract from field notes)

There are signs here of an identity that could be understood in essentialist terms and much could be made of Mitchell's stereotypical association, perhaps reflecting religious, familial and community influences, of celebrating Eid with being 'dark' and celebrating Christmas with not being 'dark'. In my interaction with him, I was seeking, somewhat clumsily, to provide him with opportunities to try out and discuss different identity potentialities. Offering such possibilities, it is argued, is what early childhood educators need to do in order to challenge stereotypes and seek to reduce discrimination but it is not easy work in the face of a myriad of constraining influences. In terms of the work of Holland et al (1998), his sense of who he is (as 'not dark') could be understood as a positional identity or, in Sford and Prusack's (2005) terms, he inhabits a designated identity as someone who is white, which his experience tells him, makes only certain identities available to him. Whilst his positional or designated identity is dominant and has become aligned to a figurative identity as someone who celebrates Christmas, it is interesting that there are many factors at play in shaping his responses and that religion interacts with other influences on his identity. In this sense Gregory et al's notion (2012) of 'syncretism' is very much at play in that he has an awareness of the part that new clothes play in Eid celebrations and weaves this notion together with his desire, influenced perhaps by film, advertising, consumerism and the media, for a Spiderman suit, which now becomes part of celebrating Eid for him. A narrative is therefore created in which celebration of Eid is considered worthwhile in order to secure a new Spiderman suit, creating a possible new figurative identity for himself in the process. He recognises, however, that this figurative identity is probably closed off to him – because of the ways in which hegemonic positional identities tend to make only certain figurative identities possible

In a final example, there is a rare explicit example of an interaction that is concerned with negotiability and non – negotiability of nationality and ethnicity. It occurred during the final trip on which I accompanied the kindergarten to the seaside. As someone who is very uninterested in sport, I found myself being called upon to play cricket with one of the more confident British Pakistani boys. As the only man accompanying the children on the trip to the seaside my designated identity as male, appeared to influence the figured world that both of us found ourselves inhabiting but there were other identities also at play:

Hamad.:                    You be England and I'll be Pakistan.

I know nothing about cricket and was a little unsure what would happen next. Hamad rubbed the ball on his trousers and did the kind of run up and over arm bowling that I remembered from less

than enjoyable games lessons at school. I tried to hit the ball and succeeded.

Researcher: I'll be Pakistan now and you can be England

Hamad. No, I Pakistan. You be England. I live in England but my country is Pakistan. I Pakistan guy.

(Extract from field notes)

In this extract, Hamad appears to use ethnic and national heritage as the basis for his view of our cricketing identities. In terms of critical race theory, it illustrates Ladson-Billings' point (1998) that whether or not race is 'real', people behave as though it is and so it has effects in every day life. It is interesting to note that his concern is at a number of levels. He does not want me to 'be' Pakistan because he sees that as his role and not an identity that is open to me. He does not want to 'be' England because that is not how he sees himself. This could be understood in the critical race terms noted above or a more sociocultural reading could be applied which would seek to take account of the ways in which Hamad's family and community have shaped how he understands his nationality. From a communities of practice perspective (Wenger, 1998), his sense of familial and national identity could be theorised here as involving imagination in identifying with people (including relatives perhaps) living at a geographical distance and alignment with another nation. This alignment with Pakistan could also be theorised in terms of Holland et al's notion of a positional identity based on ethnic origin. Hamad is not, however, living in Pakistan and so is also answering a world in which, though he lives in the United Kingdom, he sees his identity in this case as being Pakistani – 'I live in England but my country is Pakistan. I Pakistan guy.' In this example, positional and figurative identities blur and intertwine and whilst I saw my educative role as being to negotiate the meaning of our identities, to open up a space of authoring where he could try out a new figured identity, for Hamad an English identity is not one which he wishes to take up.

What is more interesting in a sense, perhaps, is to understand the processes by which this has come about. There are questions about how far this is a freely chosen identity, how far other identity options have been made available or closed off, how far Hamad has chosen to accept or not accept the identities made available to him and how far those hegemonic positions have already influenced Hamad's sense of which identities are available to him. Sfard and Prusak's notion (2005) of designated identities is helpful here with narratives which suggest an identity which 'for one reason or another, is

expected to be the case .... because the person thinks that what these stories are telling is good for her, because these are the kinds of stories that seem appropriate for a person of her sociocultural origins, or just because they present the kind of future that she designated to have according to others, in particular according to people in the position of authority and power' (Sfard & Prusak, 2005: 18). In the decision that Hamad takes concerning his identity, perhaps because of familial and community influences, it seems that he 'may be led to endorse certain narratives about (him)self without realizing that these are "just stories" and that there are alternatives' (Sfard & Prusak, 2005: 18). Sfard & Prusak point out that what others say about us is often incorporated into our sense of ourselves and so, mindful of Rogers and Mosley's aspiration (2006: 485) that children are 'afforded opportunities .... to try on different roles, and to experiment with the social construction of race', I saw part of my role, as academic and former early childhood educator, as involving offering alternatives to the narrow identity possibilities that Hamad appears to see as available to him. The insights of Sfard & Prusak (2005) are helpful in understanding why he responded as he did when they argue that alternative selves may or may not be accepted as part of who we are according to how these alternatives relate to individuals' understandings of the notions of self that are offered and also according to the status of the person offering the alternative account. In this case, my status seems insufficient to encourage Hamad to take up a different position for, as Sfard and Prusak (2005: 18) note 'the owners of the most influential voices, are carriers of those cultural messages that will have the greatest impact on one's actions'. Others, with more influence, have already perhaps helped him to decide that he is a 'Pakistan guy'. That I was not able to influence him, serves to highlight the importance of early childhood educators seeking to provide children with alternative possibilities for their identities and of gaining the kinds of influence with children and their communities that mean that these possibilities stand some chance of being accepted and becoming a part of who they are.

## **Conclusions**

We see in the present paper that a figured worlds reading enables us to theorise young children's responses and agency as they encounter social and cultural practices which shape their identities. The figured world of the kindergarten as glimpsed in the vignettes created a context for social interaction with peers and adults but also one where the children responded with inner speech spoken out loud as they sought to make sense of their place in the world and the different influences on their positional and figurative identities. Whilst the dialogic self that authored and tried to make sense of the world demonstrated some agency in so doing, positionality and designated identities meant that only particular figured worlds were available to the children for much of the time. The children had few, if

any, opportunities to make things up from scratch: a range of positional and figurative factors suggested to Mitchell that he could not celebrate Eid and get a Spiderman suit for his new clothes and to Hamad that he could not, or should not want to, play cricket for England. In this sense, their agency appeared to be largely in the opportunities to respond to what the figured worlds offered.

At one level, this could be seen to be a rather depressing theorisation seeing children as largely constrained by positional and designated identities. However, the circumstances which create these identities are socially produced and the space of authoring creates a space where those circumstances can be transformed. There is thus a sense in which understanding the encounters from a figured worlds perspective provides scope to develop an understanding of how to change them. It is argued that what a figured worlds reading offers is a means of seeking to uncover and theorise the complex ways in which young children experience and perform their identities and respond to the social and educational practices in particular contexts. This is seen as having value in providing a framework for early childhood academics and educators to work together to support children in creating a space for authoring where alternative figured identities can be explored which challenge, alleviate and transform the constraints that positional identities often seem to impose on them.

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