

## Exploring young children's gendered discourses about skin colour

BARLEY, Ruth <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0958-9619>>

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## **Exploring young children's gendered discourses about skin colour.**

### **Abstract**

Drawing on an ethnographic study conducted with young children (4-5 year olds) in a multi-ethnic Early Years classroom in the north of England this paper shows how young children's discourses about skin colour are informed by intersections with their gender identities. This ethnography uncovers how young children engage with the related concepts of 'race'/ethnicity, racialisation and racism in their peer interactions alongside how they appropriate 'markers of difference' to promote their own identity and ascribe an identity to their peers. By comparing the discourses collectively produced by two groups of children in the class this study argues that there is a need for whiteness to be educationally discourses in a way that uncovers the violence of racism and exposes the cultural and political privileges of 'being white.'

**Key words:** gender, skin colour, racialisation, racism, whiteness, colonialism

## **Introduction**

As previous research has shown (Isik-Ercan 2014; Miller 2015; Priest et al 2016), children's discussions about difference and identity are not constructed in isolation but against social discourses and social structures dominant in both mainstream popular and minority cultures. Consequently, these discourses are foundational in children's own constructions of self and other. As Hall (2000:4) points out, identities can be understood as being 'constructed within, not outside [of], discourse'. Isik-Ercan (2014) and Miller (2015) both highlight that these (micro) identity negotiations are further complicated by wider (macro) social experiences both historically, such as colonialism, and currently, such as Islamaphobia. The current study further illustrates these complex identity (re)negotiations. Exposure to multiple, and at times conflicting, discourses about identity can compel children to reflect on and (re)negotiate their own identities in a diverse, complex and at times contradictory social world (Isik-Ercan 2014). Isik-Ercan's (2014) work further contends that children from culturally diverse backgrounds are active agents in (re)negotiating aspects of their identity that wider society views as being incompatible with mainstream values.

Miller's (2015) work highlights the ways in which racism continues to penetrate global, national and local discourses often in subtle and implicit ways and the impact that this has on young children's identity discourses. She outlines the role Western education systems play in maintaining racially stratified societies and how 'racism in its implicit forms is insidious as it is taught and learned in the lives of children' (Miller 2015:138).

Building on this, Priest et al. (2016:809) argue that young children not only recognise ethnic diversity but are 'socialised to form particular attitudes about themselves and people from different racial/ethnic backgrounds.' They contend that young children seek to make sense of these social constructs in their everyday lives as they distinguish between their

experiences of ‘race’/ethnicity, racialisation and racism. Skin colour is often viewed as a key marker of identity within these discourses.

The current longitudinal ethnography sought to explore children’s discourses of identity and its impact on peer interactions. In early stages of the study children’s peer interactions regularly centred on discourses surrounding ‘race’/ethnicity<sup>i</sup>. This was not a focus that I, as the ethnographer, expected. As a result, I was prompted to question my privilege as White and middle class (albeit from a working-class background) and reflect on my positionality as unexpected themes emerged from my data. Clearly, my whiteness influenced the ways in which the children interacted with me and the stories that they chose to share with me.

As the narratives that are discussed in this ethnography played out, I became aware of the constraining vocabulary that was available to me when trying to tell the children’s stories in the colonial language of English. This language ‘race’ knot, which does not permit a full discussion of ‘race’/ethnicity, has been a constraining factor that I continue to reflect on and attempt to unravel. Despite these linguistic constraints it is important to enable the telling of these stories, as by not doing so we become complicit in ‘the silence [that] is perfectly smooth in its oppression’ and are consequently unable to take part in the ‘decolonial dismantling of the master’s house’ (Raghavan 2017:194).

As will be seen in this paper, the children at Sunnyside discussed skin colour as a ‘bodily marker of difference’ (Barley, 2014:79) in different ways. At times their discussions were set within a racialisation framework (i.e. the differentiation of individuals or groups based on their ethnic identity) and at other times within a racist hierarchy (i.e. the unfair treatment of individuals or groups based on their ethnic identity). However, it must be noted here that due to the dominance of wider social structures that all discussions about ‘race’/ethnicity need to be considered within the context of privilege.

These two distinct but related concepts of racialisation and racism provide a lens by which to interpret the children at Sunnyside's peer interactions. As will be seen below children's interactions relating to 'race'/ethnicity, both in the form of racialisation and racist discourses, were influenced by the intersections of their gendered identities and are actively linked by some of the children to their religious and national identities.

Miller (2015:138) argues that:

‘while much work in early childhood education points to young children as capable and complex thinkers in their own right recognition of young children as capable of constructing understandings about race is largely unexamined in the field of education and in the field of critical race studies.’

By ethnographically exploring in-depth a group of young children's gendered discourses about skin colour this study starts to fill this gap in the literature.

**Methodology** This ethnography is set within a Reception class of an inner-city school, Sunnyside<sup>ii</sup>, in the north of England where the majority of pupils are from North and Sub-Saharan African countries. Over the course of an academic year I spent a day a week with the class. Due to a high mobility rate as a result of ongoing migration, a total of 31 children were part of the class. Fieldwork took place over a nine-month period comprising of over 180 hours of participant observations, six participatory visual method activities and unstructured interviews with school staff. Data from participant observations and two participatory visual methods, ‘My friends are picture...’ and the ‘Activity station ranking’ exercise, are discussed in this paper. See Barley (2014) for a full explanation of the methodological approach and discussion about how research ethics were operationalised during the study.

As Tanner (2017) advocates, I utilised my reflexive fieldnotes as a means to analyse my own assumptions about 'race'/ethnicity in the attempt to make my own whiteness visible

throughout my study and in subsequent written outputs. 'Reflect[ing] on where one is speaking from' (Raghavan 2017:192) in this way is essential to ensuring that privilege is named and consequently that marginalised silences are given a space in which they can be voiced.

### ***The children***

Eleven of the children from the study are included in this paper. Each of them is introduced here.

Shortly after the start of the school year three of the older boys in the class became known by the other children as *the gang*. When allowed this group of boys always chose to play together. All had been at Sunnyside's nursery prior to starting the Reception class. Amir, the self-styled leader of *the gang*, was born in the north of England and actively described himself to his peers as Arabic. When Amir arrived at Reception he was already in his own words 'good friends' with Daud and Mubarak, i.e. the other two *gang members*. Daud and Mubarak, who were both born in the UK, are from Somali refugee families who have permanently settled in the UK. 'Being Muslim' was important for all three of these boys and was by their own definition an integral part of gang membership. While these group of boys formed a strong core friendship they also interacted regularly with some of the other boys in the class when playing football and other larger games in the outdoor play area. Three boys that they regularly played football with were Mustafe, Barak and Seif. All of these boys were living in the UK temporarily while their parents studied for a postgraduate degree. All three originate from North Africa and had been living in the UK for one year before the start of the reception year.

Seven of the girls in the class formed a parallel friendship group to *the gang* calling themselves *the older girls*. Five of these girls feature in this paper. Fariido, Deka and Nasra

were all born in the UK after their families fled Somalia during the Civil War. Deka and Nasra are first cousins. All of these families have settled permanently in the UK. Fazia and her family are from Egypt and were in the UK on temporary student visas while her parents both studied for their doctorates. Fazia had been living in the UK for one year before starting at Sunnyside. Annakiya's family, who are from Nigeria, had just arrived in the UK a few weeks before the start of the school term. They are planning to stay permanently in the UK. The gendered discourses of these 'groups' of children are discussed focusing on their discourses relating to skin colour and identity. As has been discussed, previous research has found that prominent discourses around gender and 'race'/ethnicity are often closely connected. This paper will explore how the intersections between gender and 'race'/ethnicity played out at Sunnyside. Throughout the following sections any identity markers that are used, such as 'being light' or 'being Muslim', are the identity terms that the children utilised throughout the fieldwork period in their identity discourses with their classroom peers. It is important to point out here that while the children themselves introduced the phrase of 'being' into their peer conversations that 'beingness' is a Western concept that is 'designed and maintained by discourse and symbolic rules' that are inherently oppressive (Asante 2006:647). While the children's voices are represented in this study (in part) through the use of these 'being' phrases their use of these phrases needs to be reflected on within this wider context as the children's voices are impeded by wider discriminatory discourses.

**'We are brothers 'cause we are both Muslim': *The gang's* discourses about 'race'/ethnicity**

*The gang's* peer interactions and discussions with myself clearly revealed that these young boys understood the social meanings that are often ascribed to ethnic difference and more specifically to skin colour. This is clearly highlighted when working with Amir in late January:

*Amir decides that he wants to draw a picture of himself playing football with his friends. Before starting to draw, Amir tells me that he likes to play football with Daud, Mubarak, Mustafe, Barak and Seif while at school and that they often pretend that they are England, Spain or Barcelona because these are 'good football teams'. After telling me this he reaches over to the pen pot and picks up a brown pen which he starts drawing with. 'This is Mubarak' he tells me. He then draws Daud using the same pen telling me that Daud and Mubarak both have the same skin colour. After finishing this part of his picture, he looks in the pen pot and informs me that there isn't a pen for his skin colour. He shows me his hand and says to me 'Look, there isn't the right colour'. He then picks up a blue pen and says 'let's pretend its white' also commenting that 'blue is a good boy's colour'. He draws a picture of himself (with the ball), and then draws a picture of Barak and Seif using the same blue pen. As he is doing this he tells me that he is the same as these boys and that they are all Arab and Muslim. He picks up a green pen and draws some grass. With the same pen he draws Mustafe. He tells me that when they play football Mustafe is always the goal keeper and that the goal keeper needs to be a different colour from the other players. After he has finished drawing Amir looks at his picture and tells me that Daud and Mubarak are also Muslim like himself and the other boys. However, he explains 'they aren't Arab', like the other boys, as 'they are not white' but rather that 'they are Somali'.*

Fieldnote Extract 1

***Insert Figure 1: Amir's picture of playing football at school***

During this researcher directed activity, Amir shows that he understands that there is social meaning behind the differences that he sees between himself and his friends and that their different skin colours can also relate to other aspects of their identity. Amir does not,



however, place these differences within a social hierarchy but rather purely comments that these differences exist showing an awareness of racialisation. In depicting his peers in this way Amir utilises skin colour as a ‘bodily marker of difference’ and in doing so emphasises the relevance of a separate unifying group identity of ‘*being Muslim*’. Concepts of similarity and difference, core to the definition of identity, are central to Amir’s discourse. It is important to note that this interaction occurred out of earshot of school staff. As is noted below, some children at Sunnyside hid discussions of ‘race’/ethnicity from school staff.

As mentioned above, when drawing Mustafe, Amir uses the colour green to depict Mustafe as a goal keeper rather than representing him via his skin colour as he does with the other boys. Throughout the course of the year when playing football Mustafe always chose to be in goal and relished this role. As the other boys prefer to play in other positions, Mustafe soon becomes known as the class goalkeeper. It is therefore not surprising that in the context of the picture above Amir chose this as the over-riding aspect of Mustafe’s identity to depict. In this respect Amir shows that he is aware of the multiple identities that he and his peers have. The salience of these identities, for Amir, also appear to change depending on the social context as at other times Amir refers to Mustafe as primarily ‘*being Muslim*’ highlighting shared aspects of their religious identities such as the ritual of *Salah* (prayer) that both boys practice at home.

A conversation between Daud and Mubarak at the start of the school day in late March reveals that they, like Amir, utilise skin colour as a ‘bodily marker of difference’ within the context of racialisation and in the case of Mubarak that some children are also aware (even if not always fully able to explain the significance) of wider socio-political meanings commonly attached to specific terms depicting ethnic diversity.

*I am sitting at the edge of the classroom as Daud and Mubarak enter with their mothers. The boys both say hello to me but don’t come over. They sit down and begin*

*to write their names. As they are doing this their mothers chat to each other a few feet away from them. Nasra comes into the classroom with her mother. She comes over to the table that the boys are sitting at and begins to write her name. Her mother stands nearby watching. Daud looks up from his writing and says to Nasra, 'Your mum's white.' Nasra doesn't respond to this but looks up and smiles at her mother who also doesn't comment about Daud's statement. Daud then looks over to the carpet where his mother is still talking to Mubarak's mother and tells the group, 'My mum's brown.' 'No, she's not. She's black', chips in Mubarak, 'My mum's black too.' 'Black?' asks Daud looking confused. He then puts down his pen and begins to inspect his hand and arm before putting his arm in front of Mubarak's face and informs him, 'Its brown. My mum's brown. I'm brown. So are you.' Mubarak contradicts this by saying, 'No. I'm black. You are black too.' Daud still looks confused so Mubarak explains that people with brown skin are called black. 'Why black?' asks Daud. Mubarak returning to his writing thinks about this for a minute or so before saying that he's not very sure why but that 'being black is a good thing' that isn't just about the colour of your skin.*

#### Fieldnote Extract 2

While Mubarak comprehends that *'being black'* embodies a socio-political dimension, this understanding is not widely shared by his peers. As Van Ausdale & Feagin (2001) have previously argued young children can develop sophisticated understandings of abstract social concepts when they have been exposed to such discourses. Mubarak regularly talks to his peers about his older brother who he likes to spend time with. When telling me about his brother he mentions that he often talks about *'being black'* and *'being Muslim'* with his brother and that these are things that they are both proud of. Borrowing Hall's (1991:55) terminology, Mubarak's brother has and continues to teach Mubarak that *'being black'* is not

about a ‘paintbox’ but is instead related to ‘what’s in your head’ and in doing so is helping Mubarak ‘[to] learn... to be black.’

Van Ausdale & Feagin (2001) show in their work, as I also argue is the case with Mubarak, that young children do not just repeat what they have been exposed to but are also able to apply meaning to these social discourses. In this way children do not ‘passively reproduce’ these wider discourses but ‘actively appropriat[e], adapt ... and reproduce[e]’ them (Connolly, 1998:104). In the conversation with Daud above, Mubarak appropriates the socio-political dimensions of ethnic diversity that he and his brother have discussed, adapts this understanding to relate to the present context, and actively reproduces these discourses in response to Daud’s questions. In doing this Mubarak promotes his identity of ‘*being black*’ within the non-hierarchical framework of racialisation.

Isik-Ercan’s (2014) and Miller’s (2015) studies illustrate how exposure to multiple, and at times conflicting discourses, about identity can compel children to actively reflect on and (re)negotiate their own identities in a diverse, complex and at times contradictory social world. They argue that if a child has only experienced one discourse that remains unchallenged this process of reflection may not take place. Further Priest et al. (2016) argue that individuals with a minority status, and particularly those who have experienced discrimination, often treasure and promote their identities more than those with a majority status showing that racialisation and racism are entangled and cannot be completely separated. They argue that this not only impacts on how family members operationalise their individual but also their collective identities, resulting in them often stressing the importance of this aspect of identity to their children.

Following on from the extracts above where *the gang* reveal that they recognise skin colour as a ‘bodily marker of difference’ and apply social meaning to this marker within a racialized

framework my observations noted that some children are also aware of wider social structures and racist discourses and how these impact on their own and others identities.

During a session in late March Susan, the classroom assistant, tells me of an incident that she observed earlier that week when Amir and Fariido were having an argument in the outdoor play area.

*Susan tells me, 'The argument started when Fariido comes and tells me that Amir has lied to the other children. Amir denies this and becomes frustrated when Fariido keeps insisting that he has lied and begins to tease him saying that he will get into trouble.' Susan goes onto explain that the two began to argue, resulting in Amir retorting 'Somalis are stupid.' Susan tells me that she feels that Amir responded in this way as Fariido was 'winding him up' and 'he felt like he was being shown up by a girl' in front of his classmates.*

#### Fieldnote Extract 3

Susan's interpretation corresponds with numerous previous (and subsequent) incidents that I had observed where Fariido regularly argues with and teases the other children causing them to get upset and/or angry with her. Additionally, as Amir's two closest friends at school, Daud and Mubarak, are Somali his derogatory comments about Somalis are likely to stem from frustration with the aim of insulting Fariido. Other observations contend that Amir does not view his Somali friends, or Somalis in general, as stupid. Despite this, Amir's choice of a racial slur as an insult, rather than any other form of retort to Fariido's teasing, shows that he is aware of the offensive nature of such a comment and associated racist discourses.

Connolly's (1998) research shows that young boys are taught from an early age to be competitive and that when they feel they have lost face in a competitive and public situation they can resort to employing racist slurs in an attempt to reassert their perceived dominant

social position. Amir's reaction above to Fariido's teasing similarly shows these gendered discourses relating to 'race'/ethnicity being played out at Sunnyside.

Brown (2007) highlights that young children pick up on social discourses of discrimination and hierarchies of inequality that are prominent, both overtly and covertly, in wider society (i.e. structure) and incorporate these into their own identities and social interactions in a similar way to Amir's outburst above. In doing this, children consciously replicate dominant discourses of inequality that associate 'race'/ethnicity, gender and other social attributes with power and privilege into their everyday social encounters. Children's peer cultures can consequently be viewed as perpetuating and being perpetuated by social structures.

While Sunnyside's children often had theoretical discussions about '*being Muslim*', they also understood that '*being Muslim*' had practical implications for their collective identities. This is illustrated by the way in which Amir and Mubarak told me, '*we are brothers 'cause we are both Muslims*'. While *the gang* understand that there are differences between them, relating to their ethnic and national identities, '*being Muslim*' is understood as being important in bringing them together under the banner of a fictive kinship. Interestingly all of the boys in *the gang* are also Muslim. When Daud becomes friendly with Callum Amir repeatedly tells him that it is *haram* (forbidden) to be friends with non-Muslims and actively bars Callum from gang membership. Daud, however, at times starts to play on his own with Callum separate from the gang's activities.

'*Being Muslim*' was particularly important for Amir, Daud and Mubarak. They collaboratively conceptualised their religious identity as uniting them in a special brotherhood forging 'fictive kinship' ties. For these boys '*being Muslim*' is understood as being important in bringing individuals from a diverse range of ethnic, national and language backgrounds together and uniting them under the umbrella of a collective identity. While

each of these boys was aware of ‘bodily markers of difference’ and associated forms of discrimination they, in their everyday interactions, did not translate this to a hierarchy of difference that informed their patterns of interaction. Rather they actively adopted ‘material markers of difference’ (Barley, 2014:79) relating to their religious identity of ‘*being Muslim*’ as a way to stratify themselves from their non-Muslim peers.

One example of the (imagined) ‘material markers of difference’ that *the gang* used to emphasise their Muslim identity in their role play games was that of the ‘*Muslim beard*.’ The first time that I heard these boys discuss ‘*Muslim beards*’ was during a researcher directed activity where Daud and Mubarak both came to work with me, creating their ‘My friends are...’ pictures.

*After writing down the names of his friends Mubarak rubbed his chin as if he was stroking an imaginary beard, saying ‘I have a moustache and a beard.’ Daud looked up and told him, ‘You are Muslim.’ Turning to me, Mubarak explained, ‘Muslims have beards.’*

#### Fieldnote Extract 4

After this interaction, the boys in the gang often pretended to have Muslim beards in their role play games, where they would be ‘*Muslim scientist boys*’ or ‘*Muslim taxi drivers*.’ During these games, Daud would regularly come up to me and say something like, ‘*Can you see my little beard?*’ or ‘*I’ve a Muslim beard*’ and often instruct me to ‘*write that down*’ in my fieldnote book. In all of these games having a ‘*Muslim beard*’ was expressed by the gang as being a unifying symbol that represented their common identity of ‘being Muslim.’ ‘Being Muslim’ can, therefore, be interpreted as a ‘superordinate identity’ for *the gang*, which is defined by Gaertner et al. (1999) as a salient identity that comes to the fore in diverse social situations as a way of promoting a sense of togetherness. For these boys, the uniting identity

of *'being Muslim'* is considered to be more important than the divisive racial hierarchies that *the older girls* have internalised (see below).

*'Being a boy'* and *'being Muslim'* is essential for gang membership with the boys creating *fictive kinship* ties as *'Muslim brothers'* and actively excluding other children who do not fit their membership criteria. This 'superordinate identity' unites *the gang* members, irrespective of their skin colour, as Muslim brothers. While recognising racialisation, in creating this discourse, gang members generate a unifying *internal structure* relating to ethnic diversity that challenges the divisive *external structures* promoted by powerful factions in wider society.

***'I wish I could take this skin off and put on some like that': The older girls' discourses about 'race'/ethnicity***

Throughout the course of the year *the older girls* began to take an interest in 'bodily markers of difference' relating to their own skin colour, and after the Easter break they carefully used a range of skin-coloured tone pencils when drawing pictures of each other. At this time, as I will discuss below, they also began to talk about the colour of their skin with each other, with some of the darker skinned girls expressing a wish to be white or light. This is in stark contrast to Mubarak's expressed pride in *'being black'* and *the gang's* unifying discourse of *'being Muslim brothers'* irrespective of skin colour, as discussed above. While almost all of *the gang's* discussions about skin colour were framed within a racialisation discourse *the older girls'* discussions placed skin colour within a social hierarchy that afforded symbolic capital to those girls with the lightest skin tones.

Previous research shows that discourses of discrimination mean that some young children try to deny aspects of their own identity because of their wish to have an externally validated majority status, for instance in wanting to be considered by others as 'white'

(Brown, 2007; Nayak, 2009). Wanting to be white or light at Sunnyside was a gendered discourse which *the older girls* discussed in relation to body image and their own conceptions of ‘*being pretty*.’ While in some contexts a distinction is made between wanting to be light and wanting to be white (Tate 2009) the girls at Sunnyside used these two terms interchangeably and did not appear to distinguish between them. Notably, while ‘*being Muslim*’ was also important for all of the girls involved in the extracts below, apart from Annakiya, *the older girls* did not view their religious identity in the same ethnically unifying way as *the gang* did. Rather they created a complex hierarchy based on skin colour drawn from wider racist discourses which informed their peer conversations and permeated into their games.

A photograph of the playdough table, which I took for use in the ‘activity station ranking’ exercise, prompted a number of conversations around racial hierarchies of skin colour with some of the girls in the class. Two of these conversations are outlined below. As can be seen from the photograph two children were playing at the table while I took this picture and their hands are showing in the resultant photograph. When looking at this photograph the first thing that a number of *the older girls* commented on was that one of the children has darker skin and the other lighter skin. Other photos taken at the same time, however, reveal that the two children playing at this area were Fariido and Fazia.

***Insert Figure 2: Photograph of the Playdough table***

Coincidentally, Fariido and Fazia jointly took part in this ranking exercise with me in June using this and other photographs. As the two girls are looking through the different photographs they discover this picture and begin to discuss who the children in it could be. As I had taken the photograph over a month before we completed this exercise it is not surprising that neither remembered being there.



*When they ask me, I tell the girls that I remembered them both being at the playdough table as I took the photograph. Fariido points to the hand at the top of the picture and says 'This is me.' Fazia however points to the hand at the bottom of the picture saying, 'Look that's your hand and that's my hand'. As she points to the hand at the top she states, 'Look its whiter. Look!' Fariido replies, 'Let me see', and turns the picture round. As she does Fazia points to the hand at the top and says again, 'That's mine.' 'No, that's mine,' insists Fariido. 'No,' continues Fazia, 'that's mine cause I'm the whiter one. Mine is lighter.' Fariido doesn't respond to this but instead focuses on the picture. I ask her why she thinks that it is her hand at the top. 'Cause I want to be white and she the darker one,' she tells me laughing. Fazia doesn't laugh with her but again insists, 'I'm the lighter one. Look!' as she shows Fariido, and then me, her hand. 'No, I'm the lighter one,' replies Fariido. 'Why do you want to be the lighter one?' I ask. 'I like to be white because...' Fariido replies before pausing, 'because... because I want to be white, like Fazia. She has a white face... I wish I could take this skin off and put on some like that.'*

#### Fieldnote Extract 5

In this incident both girls view skin colour as a 'bodily marker of difference' that holds different levels of symbolic capital. A similar conversation occurs with Annakiya a few weeks later, during a researcher led activity, as she is drawing a picture of a princess.

*After she finishes colouring in the princess, she pauses and looks at the picture before telling me, 'I'm not gunna colour my face because this is when I'm grown up. My hair is curly, I'm a princess and I am light, like you.' I ask her why she wants to be light when she is older. 'Now I'm dark and you are light,' she continues, 'when I'm grown up I'm gunna be light, like you, and like my mum. My mum's light too.'*

## Fieldnote Extract 6

Glenn (2008:1) describes this notion of wanting to be light or white as colorism and defines it as ‘the preference for and privileging of lighter skin’ in the formation of a social hierarchy. Inherent in this definition is also ‘discrimination against those with darker skin.’ As we will see below *the older girls* at Sunnyside not only compare their skin colours and discuss their desire to be lighter amongst themselves but also create a social hierarchy in which graduations of skin tone inform their interactions at Sunnyside.

This fascination with ‘being lighter’ later on in life was not just restricted to Annakiya but was a topic of conversation that *the older girls* as a group discussed amongst themselves. As well as discussing wanting to be lighter *the older girls* also discussed how to do this and were aware that older female family members used creams and make-up to change their appearance. As discussed above individuals have limited capacity to adapt ‘bodily markers of difference’, such as skin colour, though evidence shows that some go to great lengths to try and do so. Glenn (2008) argues that the use of skin lightening creams is becoming increasingly popular in the Global South, where the families of a number of the children at Sunnyside originate. Glenn contends that these types of beauty products perpetuate a ‘white is right’ ideology while simultaneously endorsing the consumption of Western cultural values and products. I contend that as a number of the families at Sunnyside have fled conflict in their country of origin in the Global South this desire to consume new cultural values might be stronger than for those individuals who are not trying to leave aspects of their past behind.

These discourses reveal underlying structural inequalities in society that commonly view ‘white as better’ and majority forms of capital as more valid than minority capital. As discussed above, Brown (2007) and Nayak (2009) reveal that ethnic minority children’s desire to be white is not just limited to *the older girls* at Sunnyside. When taken to an extreme these views can lead to racial segregation but more commonly impact on a daily

basis on an individual's social interactions, such as their friendship groups and social networks (Brown, 2007).

A few weeks after working with Fariido and Fazia, when doing the same ranking exercise with Nasra she reveals to me how *the older girls* discuss wider social discourses amongst themselves and reinforce these structural inequalities in their peer interactions.

*Looking at the playdough picture Nasra asks me who the children in the picture are. I tell her that I think that Fariido and Fazia were there when I took the picture. She tells me though that she thinks that it is Deka and Fazia before explaining that she and the other girls often compare their skin colours and the colour and texture of their hair before confiding in me that the girls all think that, 'it is better to be the lightest'. She then goes on to explain that they rank themselves based on who has the darkest and lightest skin tones, with the girl with the lightest skin tones being afforded the highest social status and the girl with the darkest skin the lowest status. Nasra identifies Fazia as having the lightest skin colour and Deka as having the darkest. Nasra goes back to her drawing. As she is drawing Nasra asks if I saw the older girls playing in the water area earlier in the day. She asks me what game I think they were playing. I tell her that I saw the girls playing with the water wheel showing her where I had written it in my fieldnote book. Nasra agrees that that was part of what they were doing but whispers to me that really they were doing something else. 'What were you really doing?' I ask. 'We said, who's the lightest? Who's the darkest?' she replies, 'And we said Deka's the darkest... then Fariido's a brownny and then... Fariido and Aniso and Annakiya and Deka are the same skin. And we said me and Fazia are together.' 'So, you have a different skin colour?' I ask. 'Yeah,' Nasra replies, 'My skin's lighter like Fazia's... [but] do you know, we're all friends.' Nasra goes back to*

*her drawing and then whispers to me 'Don't tell Miss but write it in your book so you have it.'*

#### Fieldnote Extract 7

Priest et al. (2016), building on Washington's (1990) earlier work, describe this process of ranking within minority ethnic groups as 'brown racism'. This concept of 'brown racism' refers to the attempt to position oneself in an idealised position in relation to the power hierarchies that are at play in a given context. In this instance '*being white*' is privileged in *the older girls*' social interactions at Sunnyside and therefore the girls who are perceived as '*being lighter*' are able to position themselves in a place of relative power within the social hierarchy. In yearning for lighter skin the older girls have internalised a racist hierarchy of difference. It is interesting to note here that Nasra confides in me (a white woman) this incident which she clearly does not want school staff to know about.

Within the context of *the older girls*' social interactions, discourses such as these can be often heard when the girls are out of earshot of school staff. These peer conversations, more often than not, follow a similar pattern to my conversation with Nasra above. The girls compare their skin colours, re-affirm their social status within the hierarchy and the roles within their games that their status affords them before reassuring each other that they are all still friends.

At Sunnyside while the other *older girls* often talk about their skin colours and rank each other it is important to note that Deka (who the other girls identify as being the darkest) does not contribute to these conversations but rather tries to withdraw unnoticed from the place where these conversations are taking place in a similar way to the participants in Zinga and Gordon's (2016) study.

When talking about her identity Dekka emphasises her religious identity of '*being Muslim*' and does not discuss her racial/ethnic identity. In the games that she directs, '*being Muslim*' comes to the fore in the Eid parties that she organises or her family's excursions which often visit a mosque either in passing or as a final destination. In these games Dekka always takes on the role of a Muslim matriarch, either as the Eid party's hostess or '*the bossy Muslim mum 'cause Muslim mums are bossy!*' She actively asserts her Muslim identity and avoids as far as possible reference to her skin colour in the games that she organises. Dekka's approach can be seen as the way in which she attempts to regain control of the group's interactions and tries to reassert her own value within the group's complex hierarchy. By exercising her social agency in this way Dekka begins to challenge the dominant structural discourses that her peers adhere to and promote in their interactions. By beginning to challenge these discourses Dekka engages in a form of reflexive feedback where her social agency confronts the dominant social structures that are instrumental in *the older girls*' games as well as their use of skin colour as a 'bodily marker of difference' within a racist social hierarchy.

## **Discussion**

'Racial'/ethnic diversity, as captured by the 'bodily marker of difference' of skin colour, plays a part in young children's patterns of interaction at Sunnyside. Children not only notice difference based on skin colour (racialisation) but are 'socialised to form particular attitudes about themselves and people from different racial/ethnic backgrounds' (Priest et al. 2016:809). As seen in previous sections, the children at Sunnyside's discourses about skin colour are influenced by wider social structures of racialisation and racism and intersect with children's gender identity.

This paper reveals that *the gang* and *the older girls* respond differently to discourses relating to racial difference. As discussed above, gang members discuss skin colour and racialised

difference within the context of their religious identity. *'Being Muslim'*, for these boys takes on the role of a 'superordinate identity', which can be defined as a collective salient identity that comes to the fore in diverse social situations as a way of promoting a sense of togetherness (Gaertner et al. 1999). This 'superordinate identity', as seen above, takes on a fictive kinship role where the boys are united, irrespective of their racial background, as *'Muslim brothers'*. When highlighting their ties to each other *the gang* often use the kinship term 'brother' to define their relationships. In creating this discourse, gang members generate a unifying *internal structure* relating to racial diversity that challenges the divisive *external structures* promoted by powerful factions in wider society. As was the case for the boys in Carey's (2016) study, *the gang* actively adopted rituals connected to their minority identities as a way of forging fictive kinship ties with their peers. Within their discourses *the gang* do not place ethnic difference into a hierarchy. As Priest et al. (2016) point out it is important not to conflate these types of discourses (i.e. racialisation) with racism as children need to discuss ethnic difference as they explore their own identities within a multi-ethnic environment. They argue that conceptual ambiguities which frame race-based speech can inaccurately result in any mention of 'race'/ethnicity being viewed by some as racist.

While most of *the older girls* also self-define as *'being Muslim'*, they, unlike *the gang*, do not conform to Islam's assertion that all individuals are equally valued as part of the wider Muslim family irrespective of their racial background. Skin colour, for these girls, relates to a hierarchy of racial difference which draws upon and perpetuates *external structural* discourses of discrimination and informs how they interact with each other in their school context resulting in some girls *'wish[ing they] could take this skin off and put on some like that'*. It is important to reassert here that my positionality as a White researcher was undoubtedly at play when children shared sentiments such as this with me. My own

whiteness and associated privilege was and continues to be, in Gordon's (2008) words, 'a haunting presence' in this study.

In '*wish[ing they] could take this skin off and put on some like that*' some of the *older girls* at Sunnyside had internalised racist ideologies of 'white is right.' Glenn (2008) argues that this yearning for light skin is a widespread and growing global phenomenon, which requires re-education that equally values different skin tones and dislodges the 'white is right' dominant discourse that pervades society alongside a call for greater restrictions on the media and companies who promote racist discourses, for example through the promotion of skin lightening creams.

As Miller (2015) contends, these nuanced forms of racism are entrenched in global, national and local communities. She claims that only by acknowledging and understanding the roots of these discourses can they be questioned and changed. In order to understand the roots of these discourses the way in which they are educationally discourses has an important role to play. This involves not only exploring the ways in which dark skin colour is discourses but also needs to critically explore the social construction of whiteness as intrinsically tied to social status by making white cultural and political assumptions and privileges visible (Giroux 1997). Such discourses of whiteness are intrinsically bound up in critical events of colonial domination (López 2012). Unless these intrinsic links between race and power, including the horrific violence of colonialism and white domination, are problematised there is a risk that attempts to challenge a 'white is right' ideology, that *the older girls* at Sunnyside have internalised, will fail. All of *the older girls* who self-identified as 'being white' or 'being light' were from a mixed race or Arab heritage and may have been 'racialized as not quite white' by wider society (Abdulrahim 2008:135). In a similar way to how Irish Catholics fleeing colonial oppression embraced cultural and political privileges after emigrating to

America (Ignatiev 2009) research shows that immigrants from the Middle East can engage in a process of 'becoming white' by actively renegotiating their identities to position themselves in a position of relative privilege within the racial hierarchy of their adopted country (Gualtieri 2009), as the *older girls* at Sunnyside have done.

Miller (2015) and Priest et al. (2016) argue that if childhood norms, such as 'white is right' ideologies, aren't challenged they can become internalised adult ideologies that perpetuate racial stratification. The current study shows that the promotion of counter discourses and re-education need to start at a young age, as young children are bombarded with discourses from home, their peers and the media that promote 'white is right' and that they consequently internalise the unequal values that society commonly places on ethnic difference at a young age.

These racist structural discourses profoundly impact on children's lives and should not be underestimated, as appears to unintentionally happen with the promotion and implementation of some inclusive and multicultural educational policies and notions of good practice (Miller 2015). Consequently, discrimination needs to be dealt with directly giving children the time and space to explore wider social discourses in a safe environment the problematisation of whiteness as occupying a position of cultural and political privilege. School staff who are able to deconstruct their own position within this hierarchy are better placed to deconstruct cultural norms of whiteness that are systematically prevalent, if unacknowledged, in pedagogical and curricula practices. As Brown (2007) and Priest et al. (2016) advocate, passive educational policies of inclusivity and multiculturalism are not equipped to do this. An anti-discriminatory policy that takes a multi-level approach by deconstructing whiteness and actively challenging structural inequalities needs to be adopted that undoes discrimination and allows children to value and respect their own and others' identities. In



order to effect this change school staff need to be supported in developing tools to talk to children about identity, diversity and discrimination that avoids stereotyping, exposes white privilege and, as Priest et al. (2016) argue, protects against the danger of conflating racialisation and racism. In doing this children's silences, including the historical silencing of race, need to be deconstructed as well as what children voice.

Durden et al. (2016) argue adopting such an approach promotes a number of challenges for teacher training programmes but is a change that is essential if these discourses are to be seriously challenged. If these discourses are not challenged they can have a profound effect on the wellbeing of young children who are pushed to the bottom of a racist social hierarchy with long term ramifications for the individuals and communities involved.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has shown that ethnic diversity, as depicted by the 'bodily marker of difference' of skin colour, plays a part in young children's peer interactions at school. Young children not only notice difference based on skin colour but seek to understand associated social constructions of 'race'/ethnicity in their peer interactions. This is not an isolated process, but rather these discourses are influenced by intersections with gender and are actively linked by some of the children to their religious and national identities. Consequently, some children internalise the unequal values that society places on ethnic difference.

Accordingly, there is a need for whiteness to be educationally discoursed in a way that uncovers the violence of racism and exposes the cultural and political privileges of 'being white.' Current education policy in the UK, which is influenced by the controversial Prevent Strategy<sup>iii</sup>, requires schools to 'actively promote fundamental British Values' (DfE 2014:4). Worryingly, their guidance documents are blind to the violence of British colonialism and

discourses of whiteness and consequently endorse a discourse of white privilege. If this, and other educational policies, are left unchecked there is a risk that pedagogical and curricula practices will continue to contribute (either intentionally or unintentionally) to the 'white is right' ideology that has been internalised by some of the children at Sunnyside. Borrowing from Willis's (1997) term, rather than 'learning to labour', children from minority backgrounds are *learning for marginality* within our schooling system. Until education policies critically unpick the structures of privilege, power differentials will be replicated and maintained within our schools (Dewey 2006) and in doing so children will continue to be marginalised.

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<sup>i</sup> In using the combined term 'race'/ethnicity I am seeking to capture both structural factors relating to racial difference that can be imposed from the outside as well as cultural factors that can be self-defined.

<sup>ii</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout both in terms of the name of the school and the children.

<sup>iii</sup> Prevent is one of four strands of the UK government's controversial counter-terrorism strategy, known as Contest.