

Race, Gender and Critical Reflexivity in Research with Young Children

**Professor Paul Connolly
Queen's University Belfast**

Featured Workshop for 7th International CEIEC Conference:
Honoring the Child, Honoring Equity 7:
Transforming connections – local and global possibilities

15-17 November 2007, University of Melbourne

Three Key Starting Premises

1. Race, gender and childhood are all socially constructed
2. Young children are socially competent and actively involved in the negotiation of their social worlds
3. The researcher cannot be divorced from the research process

The Research

- Connolly, P. (1998) *Racism, Gender Identities and Young Children* (London, Routledge).
- Ethnographic study of 5-6 year old children in a multi-ethnic, inner-city primary school in England.
- Observations and friendship group discussions with the children.

Critical Incident #1

Nicky: Everyone keeps saying they go out with me!

PC: Do they?

Nicky: Yeah

PC: Who says that?

Nicky: Don't know their names, but they know my name

PC: Why do they keep saying that, do you think?

Nicky: Don't know

PC: Do they just say it about you or do they say it about anybody else?

Nicky: About me!

PC: Jamie and Daniel from Mrs Scott's class - they play with you a bit, don't they?

Nicky: Yeah, he says he goes out with me

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Critical Incident #1

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PC: Which one?

Nicky: Daniel

PC: There's also somebody from Mr Wallace's?

Nicky: No, that's Emma's boyfriend [...] Emma goes out with James and Michael [*both black*] ... I hate black boys!

PC: You hate black boys?

Nicky: Yeah

PC: Which black boys do you hate?

Nicky: Kylie said to me that Michael and Devan go out with her!

Kylie: No, James goes out with me! [...]

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Critical Incident #1

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PC: But why do you hate black boys, Nicky?

Kylie: Because they're always around us, ain't they, Nicky?

Nicky: Yeah! ... What? Kissing?

Kylie: [*laughs*] No, chasing!

Nicky: Well, Daniel's always chasing me!

PC: But Daniel's white, isn't he?

Nicky: Yeah

PC: So it's not always black boys that are around you, is it?

Kylie: Yeah

Nicky: No!

Critical Incident #2

PC: Where's Jordan today?

Stephen: He's at home boiling his head off!

Jamie: No! Kissing his girlfriend!

PC: Kissing his girlfriend? Who's his girlfriend?

Stephen: He's waiting at his girlfriend's house

PC: Is he? Who's?

Jamie: Yeah, waiting for her

Stephen: And when she comes in, he's hiding right, and when she comes in he's going to grab her and take her upstairs and then she's going to start screaming and he's going to kiss her ... and sex her!

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Critical Incident #2

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PC: And sex her? And why's she going to be screaming?

Stephen: Because she hates it!

PC: Because she hates it?

Stephen: Yeah!

PC: So if she hates it why does he do it?

Stephen: I don't know!

Jamie: Because he loves her!

Stephen: He'll sing 'I want to sex you up!'

Critical Incident #3

Clive: I don't like Pakis!

Amit: You do like Pakis, stupid!

Clive: No, I don't - I only like you!

PC: Why don't you like them?

Mark: 'Cos they speak Gujerati!

[...]

PC: Clive, why don't you like them?

Mark: Because they smell horrible.

Amit: 'Cos they smell like a clock!

Clive: Yeah, like Amit does!

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Critical Incident #3

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PC: You like Amit, don't you Clive?

Clive: Yeah.

PC: You like Amit, and yet Amit's an Asian as well, isn't he?

Clive: Yeah.

PC: So, you said you don't like them - why not?

Clive: 'Cos he ain't a proper Paki!

PC: Why isn't he a proper one?

Clive: Because he doesn't smell right!

Critical Incident #4

Daniel: Miss! Miss! Miss! [referring to PC] me and Annette we broke off Stephanie's peg! [in the cloakroom]. When we're upstairs [i.e. for an interview] we'll tell you!

PC: What peg?

Daniel: Annette saw it wobbling and Annette broke it off! [Annette walks over to the table and remains standing]. Annette, didn't me and you break off that peg?

Annette: [nods and smiles before calmly putting her work on the table]

Jamie: And me!

Annette: [Shakes head]

Jamie: Yeah! I did didn't I Daniel?

Daniel: [no response]

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Critical Incident #4

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Jamie: Come and sit here Annette [pulling back the chair next to him for her to sit on]

Annette: [walks over and sits next to Jamie]

Daniel: [to Jamie and Annette] Are you two going to have sex? [...] He pinches your bum!

PC: Who pinches your bum?

Daniel: Jamie!

PC: You've just said they're going to have sex - who do you mean?

Daniel: Yeah them two are going to have sex! [pointing to Jamie and Annette]

Jamie: No! Them two! [pointing to Annette and another boy sat at the table]

Daniel: No! Her and him [pointing to Annette and then PC] are going to have sex!

Annette: Nnoooo!

Taking Two Steps Back ...

- Pervasive discourse on childhood within the school and the children's ongoing struggles in relation to this
- Children's introduction of discourses on race and gender could partly be understood in the context of this struggle (see also Valerie Walkerdine, 1981)
 - Challenging the adult/child distinction
 - Appealing to me as a White, adult male

Implications for interpretation

- There is no 'true', 'authentic' voice of children to be identified and recorded
- The data are always produced through the interactions between the adult researcher and the children
- Two things can draw from incidents above:
 - Social competence of the children and knowledge they have of race, gender and sexuality
 - Insights into significance of this knowledge in their social worlds

Further Information

- See Connolly, P. (2008) Race, gender and critical reflexivity in research with young children, in: P. Christensen and A. James (eds) *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices*, Second Edition (London, Routledge).
- Paper can be downloaded from:
www.paulconnolly.net