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## Position and perspective: Research connections and tensions in a kindergarten community

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### Abstract

*There are many stories worthy of telling in early childhood education research, and multiple perspectives to consider and critique in the processes of research, including children's perspectives and positioning. Acknowledging position and perspective increases my awareness as a researcher of my relationship to what is being researched, how I create the subject that I am studying, and how I construct the knowledge of that subject. An increasing consciousness of the importance and relevance of reflexivity and how I stage the text are among the results of this exploration of research connections and tensions in a kindergarten community.*

### Keywords

Positioning; perspective; voice; fairness; diversity; early childhood education

### Introduction

How fairness and diversity were being negotiated in the lives of children, families and teachers in an Aotearoa kindergarten (research setting) was the subject of an Action Research project that I undertook in 2014. A mosaic of methods was utilised, including teacher reflections and discussions, observations of children, assessment documentation, and a parent questionnaire and focus group.

Rather than focus explicitly on the research questions and findings in this article, my aim is to focus on my relationship to what was being researched by investigating how I created the subjects that I was studying, and how I constructed knowledge of those subjects, whilst acknowledging my position and perspectives as a researcher.

Elsewhere, I have written an interpretive storyline based on a selective and thematic collection of narratives from the kindergarten community that illustrated fairness and diversity being negotiated by the participants. For the most part, I am the narrator despite me presenting participants' own words throughout my work. My worldviews, shaped by multiple identities and subjectivities, determine why I make certain choices about what to include and what to leave out throughout the research processes, including writing up the research in various formats—publications and presentations (Mazzei and Jackson 2009, 2012). Like Earl-Rinehart (2018) and many others, I recognise that I (re)present the participants' words to suit my particular aims. I make many decisions in crafting my writing using my position of authority and privilege to tell participants' stories from my perspectives.



## Research perspectives in brief

A critical ethnographic approach was used in this research where I was both observer and participant in a naturalistic setting (Mukherji and Albon 2018). I sought to gain multiple perspectives as well as insights into the contexts, relationships and behaviours at the kindergarten using multiple methods and data sources. I was known in this teaching community having previously done research there and being friend or acquaintance of all four teachers. I had previously worked as a kindergarten teacher and still held teacher registration with a current practising certificate. Hence, I was a professional colleague with insider knowledge of ECE teaching and the setting (Adam 2013). Technically, I was an outsider, but I tried to understand what life was like as an insider (Mukherji and Albon 2018). I gained many insights through participating in whatever was going on: mealtimes—morning tea and lunch; reading children picture books on request; or responding to children’s questions about my presence; or requests for assistance of some kind, whilst directly observing children and teachers (Rolfe and Emmett 2010).

Researchers make conscious and unconscious decisions about what to include and leave out as they collect/generate data, as well as a range of subjective decisions during analysis (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). In order to recognise these actions, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) coined the terms ‘field texts’ and ‘research texts’. Consistent with Hunter, Emerald, and Martin (2013, 9), I have deliberately chosen to use these terms to “draw explicit attention to shaping of information into ‘data’, and the deliberate manipulation of this data in ‘analyses’”. By describing the processes of ‘constructing field texts’ and ‘using field texts to compose research texts’ to be read in particular ways to present discussion and conclusions, I was/am reminded that I view knowledge as subjective, situated and constructed by participants (the teachers, children, families and me) in the setting.

The feminist post structural theoretical framing that underpinned the research dictated how research texts were created to be read and re-read critically and discursively, leading to the final ‘research text’ (Kelly-Ware 2018). According to Taylor (2013), this framing enables us to “celebrate the multiple and contradictory; value subjectivity; and challenge social inequities” (p. 9). Meanwhile, Weedon (1987) describes feminist poststructuralism as

a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes, and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change. Through a concept of discourse, which is seen as a structuring principle of society, in social institutions, modes of thought and individual subjectivity, feminist poststructuralism is able, in detailed, historically specific analysis, to explain the working of power on behalf of specific interests and to analyse the opportunities for resistance to it. It is a theory that decentres the rational, self-present subject of humanism, seeing subjectivity and consciousness as socially produced in language, as sites of struggle and potential change. (40)

## Theoretical concepts—position, perspective and voice

Positioning and perspective challenge the notion “that researchers can achieve a ‘God’s eye view’ or aspire to ‘a view from nowhere’” (Moss 2016, 89). Moss’s alternative contention is that this is because “the researcher and the researched are inescapably situated in particular positions and knowledge, therefore, is unavoidably perspectival and contextualised” (89). These ideas about power and knowledge, position and perspective were foremost in my mind during this research. Discursive forces affect us all, and I am mindful that here in this space, and elsewhere, the participants are not representing themselves; they are being represented by me in keeping with the stories that I chose to tell and re-tell.

Mazzei and Jackson (2012) trouble or problematise ‘voice’ from a research perspective arguing that when researchers select data from interviews, deciding what to highlight, and what to ignore, it is not appropriate to then present the findings uncritically or naively as “letting the participants speak for themselves” (Mazzei and Jackson 2012, 746) or in my case as the voices of the children/teachers/parents.

Meanwhile, Kamler (2001) describes research in classrooms using cameras and observations as looking and likens it to writing—“a kind of composing—a selecting and ignoring—a looking and not looking” (11). Filtering occurred on my part as the researcher when I decided which subjects’ voices were recorded, and as an author when I chose to highlight some subjects’ voices over others given them primacy, and downplay or even leave out voices, contingent on my particular ways of seeing and knowing particular subjects, and the story/stories being told.

### Writing reflections—Grace’s story

Early in the kindergarten-based research, consistent with the proposition that “the most important step in working with a diverse classroom is for the teacher to first examine his or her own attitudes about differences” (Walker Tilestone 2010, 14), I asked teachers to write an initial reflection about themselves. In this way I was beginning to construct them as subjects, albeit using their own words. I was keen to have them record why they wanted to be involved in the research and, where applicable, the origins of the social justice intent in their teaching. I provided the four teachers with a template which they each filled in and returned to me after much prompting.

#### Teacher Reflection One

Please share where your understandings about diversity and difference, and your inclinations towards social justice in your teaching, come from.

Why did you choose to be involved in this research?

I have chosen to examine one response—Grace’s Reflection—and connect it to wider socio-cultural and theoretical understandings to illustrate how position and perspective impact on teachers’ work. Grace (pseudonym) engaged in reflexive and reflective journaling and wrote a brief compelling auto-ethnographic narrative, an excerpt from which appears here.

... eldest of four children in a small, white, working-class town. My Dad was racist, and I accepted this as the norm, until a black family moved into the area and two children started at my white Primary school. Not only did I have to listen to my Dad, I saw how they were treated in school ... by chastising my Dad, I was taking my life into my own hands—but I did it, I challenged his thinking, questioned his beliefs, and befriended Priscilla. To my surprise, my Dad listened, saw how upset his words were making me, and accepted Priscilla into our home. I made a difference. An eleven-year-old me made a difference!! This experience has shaped my life ... agent of social justice, endeavouring to challenge and interrupt the oppression that children and families face on a daily basis. (Grace, Teacher Reflection One, June 2014)

### Narratives and self

Grace’s story of her personal experience is an embodied text; a narrative production that relies on space and time (Broadley 1994 as cited in Kamler, 2001). The production of Grace’s narrative “involves her body (sexed, gendered, racialised, classed) [that] cannot be written out or ignored, where the body insists on occupying some space and will not be silenced” (Kamler 2001, 5). Bruner (2002) argues that

it is through narrative that we create and re-create selfhood, and self is a product of our telling and re-telling. We are, from the start, expressions of our culture. Culture is replete with alternative narratives about what self is or might be. (86)

Grace's description of a childhood incident in Britain in the 1970s is a powerful reminder of the discursive forces that positioned and impacted on children, adults and communities at that time, and in that context—namely gender, class, ethnicity and geographical location. In her narrative, Grace positions herself, her family and her school as 'white' in line with the dominant race in their geographical location—'white Anglo'. Meanwhile, she positions Priscilla and her family as 'black' and newcomers to the town. Grace does not mention where these migrants came from or their ethnic origin, but it is likely, given the time and place, that this family emigrated from the Caribbean, Bangladesh or Pakistan (Owen 1995).

Grace's commanding metaphor—"taking her life into her own hands"—adds considerable weight to her narrative; this metaphor is powerful and dramatic. Challenging her father's ways of being and thinking was clearly engaging in something risky, and there is a suggestion of violence, injury or even death. I omitted to ask Grace to explain what she meant by this metaphor, but it is unsurprising that her narrative stayed with me long into the research. Grace, a child, challenged/chastised her father at a time and place when it was not acceptable to do so. Despite her father's positioning as a racist, Grace, the pre-adolescent girl, acts in a contrary manner and befriends Priscilla, the black girl.

In her narrative, Grace's perspective is clear in terms of alternative selves. From being the daughter of a father who changed (from a racist to accepting Priscilla into their home), Grace grew up continuing to advocate for others. She recognised that this role is ongoing and necessary given that families and children still face oppression on a daily basis similar to what she observed her friend and their family experiencing many years earlier. Positioning herself as an adult teacher who stands up against oppression, Grace writes herself—her agentic self, including her body (standing up/own hands)—into the research topic about diversity and fairness in her place of work.

Mapping these locations now is significant herein as later in the research, there were unforeseen connections with a child's seemingly racist statement and Grace's response.

### **"No one with brown faces is coming to my birthday party"**

During the research, a significant conversation began one lunchtime when a group of 20 kindergarten children aged 4–5 years were having a meal together. Dylan (pseudonym) emphatically stated, "No-one with brown faces is coming to my birthday party." This comment provoked tension within the group of children. Much discussion took place, facilitated by the four teachers present. The children seated around the large dining table were encouraged to take part in this significant conversation in line with Albon (2014), where she notes that social gatherings, such as mealtimes, offer places and spaces where significant conversations are likely to take place.

Throughout this lunchtime conversation, I was intrigued to hear a range of children theorising about ethnicity and skin colour, as well as teachers' provocations and responses. Through their provocations and responses, the teachers were encouraging children to have their say in this democratic community supporting them to be inclusive. The conversation was well underway when Grace stood up for Sachin (pseudonym), a Punjabi boy, in the face of repeated exclusionary statements by Dylan, the protagonist, about children with brown faces not being welcome at his birthday party.

Grace (Teacher): What about my beautiful friend Sachin here? Can he come to your party?

Dylan: If they have a brown face, they can't come.

Grace (Teacher): So, what about Sachin?

Dylan: Err, if they have one brown face they can come.

Grace (Teacher): So, can he come to your party?

Dylan: Err, I can choose (indiscernible) err, I choose...

Jack: Alfie!

Dylan: Al - fie!

Grace (Teacher): So, you are only choosing one person with a brown face, is that what you're saying?

Dylan: Yeah!

(Excerpt from transcript of lunchtime conversation, 14 August 2014).

I was interested in how Grace described Sachin as 'beautiful' and as her 'friend'. Grace can be seen to be championing Sachin. She could be seen to be expressing a positive judgement about his ethnicity—one of the learning outcomes described in *Te Whāriki*, the Aotearoa New Zealand bicultural early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education 1996—the version that was current at the time of the research). Grace repeated her question several times as if willing Dylan to not exclude Sachin, the child with the brownest face of all at lunch that day.

Consistent with her childhood challenge to her father's racist comments about non-white otherness, Grace stood up for Sachin, a young boy of Punjabi descent, who Dylan was professing to exclude from his birthday party. Grace's response can be related to the notion that the stories we tell about ourselves influence our sense of self and agency (Hull and Katz 2006; Bliss and Fisher 2014). Grace's advocacy on behalf of Sachin could be seen as intended to make Dylan more empathetic towards him. At the time, Dylan did not rescind his stance of excluding Sachin from his party. Later, during our recorded team meeting, Grace was seemingly divided within herself, expressing her concern about her failed advocacy, and Sachin's feelings as a result. Whilst Grace had initially championed Sachin, now she appeared to be seeing him as a victim of Dylan's exclusionary remarks.

### More reflections

This conversation caused us all to reflect deeply on children's working theories/theorising about ethnicity, fairness and friendship, and teachers' consequential responses. Here was a statement and ensuing conversation that surprised us and illustrated tensions within the community. In accordance with Moss and Petrie (2002), the incident made us think, "ask critical questions, [and] appreciate the peculiarity of what we have taken for granted". It also caused us to wonder about what "implicit understandings and values" it illuminated (148). I positioned this discussion as a 'critical incident' or 'telling example' that made the kindergarten's culturally inclusive narrative stutter and opened up new understandings and possibilities for us all (Kelly-Ware 2018).

In our research discussion later that day, I alerted Grace to the connections/parallels between her experiences as an eleven-year-old child (described in her initial Reflection) and 30 years later as a teacher during the 'No one with brown faces' discussion (Kelly-Ware 2018), albeit without the risks of 'taking her life into her own hands'. I prompted Grace to recall her experience standing up for, and befriending, Priscilla based on her narrative in Teacher Reflection One. I was re-constructing Grace through my connections between her past and present as 'an agent of social justice'. I located her latest actions in the context of theorising stories from our past that can be seen to be affecting the present and embodied ways of knowing (Kamler 2001).

Because the 'no one with brown faces' conversation was especially significant from my perspective, I gave teachers a template asking them to describe and explain their initial reaction to Dylan's statement, 'no one with brown faces is coming to my birthday party' (Teacher Reflection Two), as part of the construction of research field texts (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). I had identified tensions within the lunchtime conversation evident in the various roles the teachers played.

### Teacher Reflection Two

On 14 August, what was your initial reaction to Dylan's statement that "No one with brown faces can come to my birthday? Why?

Have you had further discussion with Dylan? Seen any evidence of him taking another's point of view?

How have you/might you respond to his working theories? Intentional teaching strategies?

My questions can be seen as a deliberate attempt to get the teachers to reflect on the roles they played in the conversation and their motivations. I was also interested in multiple perspectives of their provocations and responses based on my theoretical location.

The power of what happened during the lunchtime conversation was likely still swirling around Grace as she reflected on-action and for-action (Schön 1987) describing her instinctive reaction:

I immediately thought about how Sachin would be feeling on hearing this and asked in his defence—"What about my friend Sachin?" In discussion with (the researcher) afterwards I think I reacted similar [sic] to how I tried to defend Priscilla and her brother when I was younger (in my reflection). I am also wondering how much of the initial statement that Dylan made, Sachin actually heard but by me naming him individually, I turned the focus on him. I thought that this may make Dylan more empathetic; however, it did not and I was concerned about Sachin's feelings afterwards. (Grace—Teacher Reflection Two, August 2014)

Seemingly, Grace realised that the 'stuff that happened at lunchtime' amounted to her shining a light on Sachin as having a brown face—the brownest face at the lunch table. In a later discussion, Grace described how her concern about the child's feelings related to her singling him out as part of the small minority of children with brown faces at the kindergarten. While Grace might have been positioning Sachin in this way, he was already being positioned by his otherness as he had been heard speaking his home language at kindergarten with Punjabi peers and having some issues with grammar when learning to speak English, an additional language.

### Gender stereotypes or leadership among peers?

A second example that illustrates the varying positions, different knowledges and multiple perspectives of the teachers and I is 'the sandpit meeting'. The following abridged section from a previous work (Kelly-Ware 2018) reports on multiple readings of a child-initiated meeting, a common occurrence in this kindergarten that took place on 28 May 2014.

Several girls initiated a meeting by talking to teachers about their concerns. Teachers responded by gathering everyone together in and around the sandpit. They made sure the children were all listening as several of the older girls addressed the crowd. The girls' message was clear—everyone needed to keep the sandpit storage shed tidy in future as they had spent ages that morning organising the toys, sweeping out the sand, and tidying up the space.

In the previous paragraph I am once again constructing the teachers as inclusive and democratic agents facilitating children's important social learning. However, later that afternoon, I challenged the teachers, noting that I had seldom seen these, or any other girls playing in the sandpit. I proposed that the mess in the shed was not caused by them; they had taken responsibility for cleaning the mess of others, predominantly the boys who regularly played in the shed environs. At that time, Grace agreed with my feminist analysis of the inequitable gender dynamics in this situation. Jasmine initially condoned

the situation, arguing that the girls were not directed to do the cleaning and noting that it was a voluntary act on their parts.

Grace: The girls actually cleaned the boys, it was the boys', the boys' mess.

Researcher: I know! That's what I mean, cos girls are cleaners and boys are mess makers?

Jasmine: Well they volunteered, it wasn't like ... but actually the boys did all opt out, they chose not to bother cleaning it up.

(Discussion transcript, 28 May 2014).

Six months later, I consciously chose to identify the 'sandpit meeting' among the critical incidents and telling examples that occurred during this research (Research discussion Agenda, 27 November 2014). Unsurprisingly, a tension developed as I was constructing the teachers in particular ways, for example as ignoring harmful gender stereotypes. However, the teaching team had apparently had 'second thoughts' as their feedback shows.

Jasmine: We weren't sure about the fact that they were girls, more about the fact that they were the oldest in the programme at that time. They took the utmost responsibility for making those things happen.

Researcher: It was just my observation that they were girls, and that they probably hadn't made lots of that mess.

Grace: Yeah, it was more about their character, as opposed to the fact that girls should be cleaning up the mess that the boys had made.

(Discussion transcript, 27 November 2014).

From my perspective, teachers appeared to be minimising the gender factor at this juncture, suggesting a different, possibly broader analysis. Their focus was on children's leadership. Grace's earlier position, where she supported my reading of gender inequities inherent in the situation, had changed, presumably after she had given it more thought. She and Jasmine invoked the discourse of 'responsible elder'. In this everyday practice, teachers were referencing an important facet of children's social relations at kindergarten; their expectations of older children based on age and seniority within the group. However, what was not evident from their new perspective or positioning was teaching with social justice intent regarding 'gender fairness' (Derman-Sparks and Olsen Edwards 2010), or consideration to disrupting the social order or power relations that currently exist in society (Vandenbroeck 2007).

### Seeing things differently

From a feminist perspective, teachers could be seen to be perpetuating the status quo and normalising gender inequities. Normalising discourses are a prime site where disruption is necessary (Robinson and Jones-Diaz 2006). Six months earlier, there had been some acceptance by teachers of my feminist analysis-based challenge. I had been attempting to disrupt, what I saw at the time, as a normalising discourse about who cleaned up whose mess in this place. Coming at the end of the research, this solidarity and 'about turn' on the part of several teachers may have been an attempt to 'correct' understandings of issues in the social world (Areljung and Kelly-Ware 2016) or reinforce the kindergarten's 'inclusive narrative' (Moss and Petrie 2002) in respect to gender.

At that time, I saw these "different and even conflicting perspectives" as tensions and as problematic. They were evidence of constructed knowledge in their situated context destined to replicate the status quo, rather than transform it. Conversely, I now see that these perspectives are "positive and productive", and have "generative possibilities" (Brooker, Blaise, and Edwards 2014, 3). My initial readings set the teachers and me up in opposition to each other, when more readings were possible, and could have generated less tension and more possibilities.

Another reflexive turn might see me consider that the conversations between myself as a researcher and the teachers might have been unresolvable, and to acknowledge the discursive forces that caused me to position myself in ways that I did. I was not an expert in this research setting, having no ongoing stake in the kindergarten, the pedagogy and the relationships therein. Nor was I their leader, professional development facilitator, coach or mentor, and this raises the issues of role ambiguity, insider knowledge and entanglement (Adam, 2013), which will likely be the subject of another paper.

As a researcher, as previously stated in Moss's words, the teachers, children, and I were "... inescapably situated in particular positions and knowledge, therefore, is unavoidably perspectival and contextualised" (Moss, 2016, 89). Mine is not privileged knowledge, rather it is informed by particular perspectives based on my personal politics, gender, age and location in a university. Once my work was done, I moved on.

With hindsight and some prompting, I see the sandpit meeting scenario as another opportunity for me to resist the urge to simplify things according to modernist binary thinking of either/or. There were other possibilities, or perspectives that could be read from the scenario, including perspectives consistent with the Mana Tangata Contribution strand of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education 1996). "Children develop: the self-confidence to stand up for themselves and others against biased ideas and discriminatory behaviour" (Ministry of Education 1996, 66). These older girls were not timid or passive; they used their initiative to clean up the shed, and then organised a meeting consistent with the kindergarten's democratic focus. They assertively spoke to their peers, making demands about what needed to happen to change the (unfair) distribution of cleaning work. Implicit in their message was the notion that each person who used the shed/sandpit should take responsibility for putting things away and tidying up. This was a powerful demand for these children/girls to make. It showed leadership and collective responsibility, and the teachers applauded them for it.

### Concluding comments

At the outset of the research discussed herein, teachers individually and collectively expressed a commitment to social justice. From my perspective, their teaching was generally informed by liberalism, a concern for the individual and their freedom. This philosophical orientation contrasted with my feminist post structural positioning from which I sought to disrupt commonly held understandings about what is 'normal' and 'true' and analyse inequality, "specifically gender inequality, with an orientation to gender politics, power relations and sexuality" (Hunter, Emerald, and Martin 2013, 36). Unsurprisingly, on occasion there were tensions between us as a result. The teachers and I could be seen to be talking past each other, as the final analysis of the sandpit meeting shows, for example.

Teachers had varying kinds and degrees of reflexivity and self-knowing, as well as theoretical knowledge to draw from in terms of children's thinking. The gulf in our theoretical understandings was wide and served to reiterate the importance of shared understandings in future collaborative endeavours with teachers. Nowadays, in a user-pays environment, time for professional reading, and widespread professional development are not readily available to teachers, and initial teacher education is unlikely to cover the breadth and depth of theoretical issues traversed in this article and associated works. Notwithstanding these issues, the teachers' experience, subsequent intuitiveness, and deep knowing of many of the children and their families were highly significant to this research, their individual and collective teaching practices and to their support for children's learning.

Moss (2016, 89) argues that what acknowledgement of position and perspective calls for "... is for researchers to be more aware of their relationship to what is researched, how they create the subject that they study and how they construct the knowledge of that subject". Looking back on this research, and ahead towards future research and its dissemination, I am increasingly conscious of the importance and relevance of reflexivity and my selectiveness in terms of how I stage the text and what decisions I make in presentation (Earl Rinehart 2018). There are many stories worthy of telling in early childhood education research, and multiple perspectives to consider and critique in the processes of research, including children's perspectives and positioning. My research, like education, is "first and foremost a political and ethical practice in which all citizens [including children] can and should

participate, in which there are real and conflicting alternatives upon which we must deliberate and dialogue” (Moss 2016, 90).

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