

Children Deconstructing Childhood

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Commentaries on childhood, whilst abundant, largely depend on secondary sources, namely adults. This research attempts to address the question 'what is childhood?' by consulting the primary source – children. This case study, of children attending a day-care centre in the West Midlands, England, adopted research tools that were developed to meet the needs of young children as research participants. Perspectives of childhood were identified and labelled the 'Playful Child', the 'Unknowing Child', the 'Needful Child' and the 'Unauthorised Child'. The findings suggest a necessary review of the role of the early years practitioner, in particular where practitioners are 'playing with' young children. © 2010 The Author(s). Children & Society © 2010 National Children's Bureau and Blackwell Publishing Limited.

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Introduction

The discussion around childhood and what it means to be a child has been explored through a variety of perspectives for some time (Ariès, 1962; Cunningham, 2006; Hendrick, 1990; Heywood, 2001; Mills, 2000). The idea that children and childhood differ in times and places is not new; childhood is not a naturally occurring phenomenon but the product of values, discourses and practices and, as such, is socially constructed.

Although childhood has been deconstructed by adults, who bring their own beliefs about its nature, less consideration has been given those who are experts in the field, namely the children themselves. This paper attempts to validate young children's definitions, discourses and actions and aims to answer the questions 'what is a child?' and 'what is childhood?' by focussing on the perspectives of young children themselves.

Dominant discourses of childhood

Ariès (1962) hypothesises that before the Middle Ages, childhood as a concept, had not existed and that this was when childhood first came into being. Although his argument is now much disputed (Mills, 2000; Thurtle, 2005), it is clearly evident that what Ariès achieved was the opening up of a debate regarding the nature of childhood.

Changes in childhood have been traced drawing upon social, political and economic influences notably in the work of Hendrick (1990), Heywood (2001) and Cunningham (2006). A recurrent discourse of childhood using this approach is that of the 'Romantic Child', influenced by the philosophy of Rousseau, who considered the child to be pure and innocent in need of protection and nurture (Hendrick, 1990). In contrast, the historical approach has also identified the impact of Christianity (at least in Western society), during the late 18th and early 19th century; which identifies the child as being in need of saving from original sin and, contrary to the purity of Romantics, being essentially evil and needing spiritual

salvation (Hendrick, 1990). Political and social reforms of the late Victorian era are identified by Hendrick (1990), Heywood (2001) and Cunningham (2006) as pivotal in redefining a discourse of childhood that demonstrates a desire to protect and provide care for children, both privately and publicly.

Analysis and interpretation of art and literature (Benton, 1996; Brown, 1993; Cunningham, 2006; Higonnet, 1998) have also contributed to the understanding that childhood is a fluid concept. Benton (1996), interpreting paintings by Gainsborough, Hogarth and Reynolds, identifies, amongst others, the discourse 'Innocent Child'. According to Benton (1996), each offered discourse implies an opposite, so 'Innocent Child' is identified simultaneously with 'Sinful Child'. The discourse of the child as innocent and pure is duplicated by Higonnet (1998), who suggests the *Age of Innocence* by Joshua Reynolds (1788), epitomises social attitudes to children at the end of the 18th century. Higonnet (1998, p. 37) also draws attention to what she refers to as the 'innocence-knowledge see-saw', whereby paintings such as Millais' (1886) *Bubbles* in which a young boy gazes at and plays with soap bubbles, demonstrates innocence, whereas Guy's (1867) *Making a Train*, which portrays a young girl's growing sexuality, depicted by the mimicking of flirtatious, feminine behaviour whilst playing at dressing-up, is the antithesis of this.

Analysis of literature has contributed in much the same way. Brown (1993) analyses literature from the Victorian era to demonstrate a number of discourses including the 'Exploited Child' and the 'Child of Faith'. These Victorian perspectives place children and childhood at centre stage for the first time (Cunningham, 2006). Both Brown and Cunningham argue that the 'Exploited Child' depicted by Bronte's *Jane Eyre* has at its heart the vulnerability and abuse of children. In contrast to this is the character of Eppie in Eliott's *Silas Marner*, who is seen as being spiritually strong, and determined. Again, we see competing discourses of childhood.

Contemporary discourses of childhood, within England, are dominated by the 'Innocent Child' (Cunningham, 2006). The idea that children need protection from danger and threats, physical, biological and intellectual, is evidenced by marketing themes for child safety products, hygiene and cleansing materials, and the increasing opportunities to boost babies' brain-power. Conversely, we have an increased awareness and media coverage of the use of Child Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, which present a contrasting discourse, that children and young people are a threat and out of control. Government policies in terms of childhood in England are dominated by the Every Child Matters agenda (DfES 2004), which aims to safeguard and protect the most vulnerable children in the society. The discourse presented by the Green Paper (DfES 2004), with one outcome entitled 'Staying Safe', can be said to reflect the desire to placing the daily needs of the vulnerable child at the centre of the political agenda. Alternatively with another outcome being 'Achieve economic well-being', contemporary policy could be interpreted as seeing children as a future investment for the wider community, which Thurtle (2005, p. 169) calls 'giving capitalism a human face'.

The literature reviewed has gone some way in deconstructing childhood and understanding 'what is a child?' and 'what is childhood?' However, the main criticism of answers given to these questions is that, in each case, secondary sources are analysed, be they from history, art and literature, or government policy. There is a resulting feeling of unease and although it is acknowledged that this is influenced by personally held beliefs and values of childhood, each position reflects an adult perspective. This paper attempts to readdress this

by gathering data directly from the primary source, young children, in order to achieve greater validity.

Research design

The approach used to carry out this qualitative research was essentially that of a case study. This approach was chosen as it enabled the researcher to gather young children's perspectives using a range of methods within a natural context (Yin, 2009). Features of an ethnographical approach were assumed to enable the researcher to get as close as possible to the child's perspective of childhood. This included the researcher becoming immersed in the setting by spending time getting to know the children and being involved in their daily activities.

A decision not to assume the same roles and responsibilities as other adults in the setting was taken to be confident that the values, beliefs, perspectives and actions offered by the children were their own and were not influenced by power in terms of adult/child relationship. It was hoped also that this would mean children would be more accepting of the researcher (Cosaro and Molinari, 2008). This was crucial to the success of the research and takes into account both Fine and Sandstrom (1988) and Brooker (2001), who considered the implications of involving children, as knowledgeable research participants.

Careful consideration of research tools ensured that they matched the developmental needs of the children and attempted to address concerns regarding unequal power in adult-child relationships. This was to ensure that answers to the questions, 'What is a child?' and 'What is childhood?' captured the child's perspective and not just a child's interpretation of what he/she expected the adult to want to hear, see or know.

Three tools to gather data were utilised:

- Child conferencing (individual unstructured interviews)
- Vignettes to support small-group discussions (focus groups)
- Observations (participant and non-participant)

Child-conferencing, originally developed by Clark and Moss (2001) in their 'Mosaic Approach', was adopted and adapted. Although the fundamental feature of talking to young children to elicit their perspectives was a feature of this research, unlike Clark and Moss, a less formal approach was adopted. There was no rigid structure to the interviews but rather themes were introduced and children were allowed to follow their own trains of thought. This strategy was used to ensure that children were not unduly influenced by the adult researcher and took into account the position of Brooker (2001), who cites Hutt and others (1999), stating that adults who offer their own perspectives in dialogue with children receive more elaborate responses than those who just ask questions. Having shared a selection of family photographs in response to the children's questioning and desire to find out more about the researcher, children were invited to draw themselves and their families and discuss what it was like to be a child; their responses were gently probed and clarified. Each of these child conferences was carried out in the children's familiar surroundings during free-play time.

The use of the vignettes offered a complementary technique in conjunction with child conferences and observations. The initial proposal was to use puppets to elicit perceptions about

children and the role of the child drawing on the technique developed in the Berkeley Puppet Interviews (Measelle and others, 1998). This interactive technique for interviewing children allows responses to key questions posed by puppets to be made both verbally or non-verbally; having trialled this approach, it soon became apparent that the demands of using puppets with such young children meant that this method was not the most appropriate. It was also felt that by offering two opposing views or perceptions of childhood, rather than stimulating children to express their own, children were provided with a choice that they felt obliged to make, thus reinforcing an adult perspective, even if via the mouth of the puppet.

Therefore, vignettes were adopted as they provided a less personal, and therefore less threatening, way of exploring sensitive topics. As the focus of this research was influenced considerably by the 'voice of the child', it seemed appropriate to adopt this tool in order to promote thought, reflection and discussion in an unthreatening and therefore ethical manner. For this, a slideshow of 25 images of children was shared with focus groups. This number of images was selected as during trials children became distracted when watching lengthier slideshows. The images showed children of various ages in a range of familiar everyday situations. These included children at early years settings and schools, at home, inside and outside, involved in activity or just portraits, as individuals, pairs or in groups, both with and without adults. The images reflecting a cultural and gender mix had been selected by a small group of children as part of preliminary work that included trialling of research tools.

During the focus-group discussions, prompted by the slideshow, children were asked to help the researcher who had forgotten what it was like to be a child. Portraying the researcher as depending on the children, and needing their help, shifted the power in the adult-child relationship into the hands of the children. Their 'participant status' changed as the children accepted the researcher as being less able (Cosaro and Molinari, 2008). One child rationalised this by commenting 'You need some help R ... cos [sic] you are so old'. This approach recognised that the children were the experts as the researcher had 'forgotten' what it was like to be a child, and consequently there were no predetermined responses.

Participant and non-participant observations took the form of descriptive narratives; a complete record of what children did and said was recorded in field notes. Conversations were recorded and transcribed subsequently, where possible they were replayed to the children and clarification sought; however, not every child wanted to do this. The field notes were detailed in order to evidence children's actions and provide contextual information; this ensured that observations identified how children acted out their beliefs and values of childhood. The familiarisation time was important from an ethical and methodological perspective and allowed children to become confident and secure with the researcher. During this period, numerous unstructured observations were undertaken, and it became apparent that children's levels of interaction and play were more spontaneous during free-flow time. It was then that children were taking on a variety of different roles including pretending to be adults; hence structured observations were undertaken during free-flow play periods.

The research was particularly mindful of ethics due to the vulnerability and age of the participants. Although written consent to participate was gained from the adults (parents and staff), the rights of the children were also carefully considered. The well-being of the children was paramount at all times and the children were treated with care and consideration. The lengthy familiarisation period allowed for relationships to be made at the children's pace. In particular, attention was given to ensure that children were content to participate in

the activities, to be part of the group or to talk to the researcher. Careful observation of body-language and non-verbal indicators made sure that the researcher was aware of how children were feeling, and they were free to join or leave an activity as their interests ebbed and flowed. The issue of deceit was addressed in this project by being open and honest to children, especially when they asked questions such as: 'What are you doing?' and 'Why?' In response to these questions, children were told that the researcher was writing a book about what they thought about being children and that what they said was written down so it was not forgotten. It was repeatedly emphasised that the children had important things to say about being children *because* they were children. The ideas of 'helping' and having answers to the problem were reiterated frequently, and this concept was quickly adopted by the children.

The research was carried out in a 60-place day-care nursery situated in a socially deprived area of a large city in West Midlands, England. At the start of the study, the children ranged in ages from three years two months, to four years three months. Of the 16 children who participated, five were boys, five were Black, one was Pakistani and the remainder were White UK. Although data were not analysed in terms of gender or ethnicity, this information is shared here to demonstrate the diversity of the group. In total, data were drawn from seven child conferences, three focus groups and six observations. These were completed following a familiarisation period of eight weeks during which non-participant observations were carried out that informed the design of the research. This preparation period not only enabled research tools to be trialled, but also allowed the time for trusting relationships to be built with children and staff and for the researcher to become immersed in the culture of the setting. Data were collated over a further eight-week period using a combination of participant observations, child conferencing and focus group activities using vignettes, which took place at different times of the day and different days of the week. These processes relate to what Aubrey and others (2000, p. 57) identify as 'special trustworthiness measures' and ensure the validity of data gathered.

Analysis

To ensure that analysis was rigorous and that the findings were reliable and validated the actions and interactions observed, whilst gathering data the researcher sought to access the children's reflections, assumptions, attitudes, feelings and actions that could be thematically organised to attempt to understand their perceptions of childhood and answer the questions: 'What is a child?' and 'What is childhood?' The analysis was ongoing and cyclical; themes that emerged in one dataset, for instance child conferencing, required *constant comparison* (Johnson and Christensen, 2008) within and between datasets (vignettes and observations). Hence, similarities, differences and regularities in the data were identified. As themes emerged from the data through inductive analysis, this cyclical nature of analysis not only revealed the themes, and the relationships between them, but also highlighted the need for a researcher to be disassociated with the power structure of the setting to elicit these evident themes. This carefully selected methodology ensured that the disadvantages of direct questions were eliminated, and importantly that power and control remained, so far as possible, with the children. This contributed to reducing adult bias, although it is acknowledged that any analysis offered here is affected by the researcher as an adult and by personally held values and beliefs about children, each of which are influenced by the dominant discourses and practices of childhood as held within Western society in general, as well as local values and practices in the setting. Detailed analysis identified four themes, interpreted as children's

constructions of childhood: the 'Playful Child', the 'Unknowing Child', the 'Needful Child' and the 'Unauthorised Child'.

The 'Playful Child'

Few would be surprised to note that one of the main responses to the questions, 'What is a child?' and 'What is childhood?', resulted in lengthy and at times animated discussions about play and playfulness. Play was also found to be a key feature of research by Mayall (2002), which elicited older children's perspectives on motherhood, fatherhood and childhood. In Mayall's study, the children expressed a desire to have more play opportunities; the much younger children here did not, but were clear, however, in their views on play.

The children identified play not only as being firmly fixed within their domain, but were also clear that it was their predominant occupation. Although the idea of a culture of play in children's lives is not new (Opie and Opie 1959, cited in Cunningham, 2006), these children see the adult as being excluded from the art of play, despite the fact that staff at the setting are frequently observed playing alongside, and apparently immersed in the children's play, and demonstrate commitment to play-based learning experiences. However, the children repeatedly made it clear that play for adults, even their key persons, is different, and they perceive that the purpose of adults playing alongside them is merely to provide 'help'. When asked whether the children's key persons play with them, the response is: 'They play and help you ... they ... they ... don't do 'tending – [sic]. They do sweeping in the sand and we do sweeping in all.... I like sweeping. Sweeping's not playing'. The concept of imagination or in the child's words *tending* is another indicator that the child has a specific understanding of play, which is expressed as being unlike an adult's understanding of play.

The idea that adult play is not about imagination is further demonstrated by the children's incredulity when the researcher joins in their play. Despite efforts to become involved in the child's world and experiences at the setting, on a number of occasions the children laugh at the researcher and check it is understood the situation is only pretend. There appears to be concern evidenced by the children's voices and body language that the adult has either misunderstood, or does not know how to play the game. On one occasion, whilst in the home-corner, a child brings a plate of playdough saying; 'Want your dinnertime now?' When the researcher responds by pretending to eat the dinner and compliments the chef, he stops and says: 'You're funny ... it's not really peas you know?' It can be argued therefore, that this indicates that children do not expect adults to play in the same way as they do, and when the adult attempts to do so there is some confusion.

Towards the end of the data-gathering period when seeking permission to join in a game in the outside play area, the response is a firm 'No'. The children again appear slightly bewildered as to why an adult should want to play. This is evident from the facial expressions, laughter and an attempt to clarify the situation. One child seeks confirmation from her friends: 'She can't ... can she?' and proceeds to offer an explanation as to what opportunities are on offer for the adult, saying: 'No, cos the playing bit is not for grown-ups, you ... you ... you could help us, you wanna do that?' (said seriously, whilst affectionately rubbing the researcher's arm). A second child joins in saying: 'Yeah you say the story and we do it, we do 'tending [sic] bit.' This taken together with the idea that adults, as far as children are concerned, have a facilitatory role confirms the interpretation offered here that the 'Playful Child' discourse in fact offers adults no opportunity to take part in children's imaginative play experiences, illustrating, in this case,

that young children see childhood characterised by play and playful interactions, but this play excludes adults and is controlled by children themselves.

The 'Unknowing Child'

The children in the study repeatedly demonstrated inquisitive and curious minds; however, also demonstrated was their perception that they lacked knowledge or understanding about a range of situations, information or abilities. During an outside free-play session, children played a game of 'cops and robbers', an argument began about the reality of modern day policing. 'Sometimes policemen get shot, then they are hurt.... I saw it ... and my Dad said so,' (said with furrowed brow and serious expression). The child illustrates a view that a significant adult, in this case his father, has a valuable contribution to the debate being held, and that this additional evidence (Dad's view) carries more weight than his own opinion. By adding his father's confirmation to his story, he is indicating that adults have knowledge and, in relation to this, children are unknowing.

The 'Unknowing Child' is demonstrated as a discourse in relation to both knowledge as information and knowledge as a skill. Children recognised that some skills are beyond their own reach, albeit momentarily. Most frequently, this related to shoe and coat fastenings, door handles and scissors. Children in the case study expressed their understanding of the reasons why they came to nursery; this in relation to adults who did not 'come' as they were 'working'; a repeated opinion expressed was that work was something for adults, and play was something for children. For one child, the idea of the size of adults being incompatible with the size of furniture at the nursery explained why adults do not attend, although he later dismissed this when acknowledging that the practitioners and indeed the researcher were also 'big'. This discussion was a pivotal moment in terms of revealing how fully the researcher had been accepted by the children as they did not discuss the researcher and practitioners as one group but separately. The children eventually agreed that, in fact, adults do not need to attend nursery, as they are already 'knowing'. 'They don't come nursery cos they go work [sic] ... anyway they know the words already ... when we are singing ... they know the words'. There is agreement: 'Yeah and know the jigsaws ... how to do it' Finally, 'Yeah and they know all the colours in all [sic]'. It would seem to these children that knowledge is valuable and this insightful dialogue illustrates the perceived value that they place on certain features of everyday early years experience.

It is challenging to determine whether children's perspective of the 'Unknowing Child' complements or contrasts dominant adult discourses of childhood. There are some similarities with the 'Romantic Child' as identified by Hendrick (1990), which encompasses the idea of the child being an empty vessel needing nurturing, likewise the discourses that identify the child as innocent and unknowing, albeit with regards to sexuality (Brown, 1993; Higonnet, 1998). However, where these adult discourses overlap with the children's perspective of the 'Unknowing Child' is that each is understood in relation to adults. For the children, there is an apparent need or desire to move towards adult knowledge; illustrative of the child as a 'non-adult' in dominant Western discourses of childhood (Christiansen and Prout, 2005).

The 'Needful Child'

The decision to identify this perspective as distinct from the 'Unknowing Child' was taken cautiously as it was necessary to illustrate subtle shifts in perspectives held by the children.

Here, the children appear to be demonstrating their dependency or trust for adults to 'make it better', to provide physical care, solve problems and protect. It is subtly different to the 'Unknowing Child' as there are no indicators that information or skills form the foundation of this need, rather it is an emotional state that is satisfied by the nature of the relationship with the adult. The title given may initially be taken as deficit; however, what was interpreted from the data gathered, and cross-referenced, is that this reliance and trust in the adult is not seen as deficit but rather a genuine reflection of the intensity of effective emotional relationships between adults and children. There are repeated incidents of children role-playing adults and offering emotional support to 'children' in their games by stating 'Mummy make it better', or in response to pictures of a baby crying: 'He needs his Mummy, she's coming now'. Throughout the data analysed, it was only adults – Mummies, Daddies and Practitioners who appeared to meet the children's emotional needs; be these either real or imagined by children, enacted through dolls, or by peers role-playing babies. There was no evidence in their games or reflections of these young children wanting to have their emotional needs met by peers or other sources, that is, through comforters or cuddly toys.

The 'Needful Child' has characteristics of the 'Romantic Child' offered by Hendrick (1990) and the 'Innocent Child' offered by Benton (1996). Furthermore, it illustrates the position of Cunningham (2006) who considers the dominant discourse in contemporary Western society to be one that presents the child as an innocent, in need of adult protection from danger and threats. This perspective is surely evidence that discourses are socially constructed in response to contemporary society, whether at a micro or macro level, and that the script being lived out by the children has been taught and learnt from those social interactions.

The 'Unauthorised Child'

The final theme offered follows the same model, although the distinction between this and the preceding two perspectives is that the 'Unauthorised Child' presents the child as struggling to remove itself from dependency on the adult, which appears to be accepted in both the 'Unknowing Child' and the 'Needful Child'.

Having carefully analysed the verbal interactions, the body language and social context of the behaviour in the data gathered, it became apparent that there was a struggle occurring. Children showed frustration and dissatisfaction when they demonstrated an ability to solve problems, complete tasks or knew what to do next, and this was quashed by the social rules of the situation. Children appeared to accept unwillingly that rules are different for them because they are children, and consequently, they are not given permission by the adults and, in some circumstances, by their peers to see things through.

Whilst playing mummies and babies, a child demonstrated that she perceived that it is the adult who makes decisions and has control, regardless of how the 'baby' feels about it: 'My baby crying, she don't wanna go [sic] nursery today but she has to. I'm going working. She's gonna [sic] do sticking and playing and everything. M (practitioner) will look after her'. The statement of 'she has to' speaks volumes and illustrates the perception that a child is unauthorised and not allowed to make choices. Similarly, in another example, the boy is clearly unauthorised by his peers to lead the group in an activity: 'I'm in charge, I'm in charge it's my den ... you've got to do it my way cos [sic] it's my den'. Another child challenges his authority: 'You're not in charge, L's (Practitioner) in charge'. As the bickering increases, a practitioner intervenes. The second child somewhat gleefully comments: 'See you're not in

charge ... L's in charge now'. To which the first child admits defeat saying: 'You do it L, ... you make a den for us, you do it please' (spoken calmly and quietly).

A significant aspect of this discourse comes in the final comment and is interpreted as the boy accepting his lot and adopting a less dominant role, as indicated by the fact that, on three occasions, he passes over control to the adult. This may well illustrate the 'see-saw' of discourses as proposed by Higonnet (1998), by which the child moves from believing to have authorisation to disbelieving this. Whilst being unable to find similarities with acknowledged adult discourses of childhood, in particular those previously presented by Hendrick (1990), Brown (1993), Benton (1996) and Cunningham (2006), this final perspective may illustrate the concern proposed by Moss (2006), in that the struggle identified in the 'Unauthorised Child' may indicate that this discourse is constricting, and keeps the notion of what it is to be a child, firmly within the domain of orthodox thought.

The aim of the research was to attempt to deconstruct children's perspectives of 'What is a child?' and 'What is childhood?' The methodology adopted ensured that the voice of the child was heard, not least because the researcher was not included in the power-structure of the setting. The relationships between researcher and children were positive; children were frequently pleased to see the researcher and wanted take part in discussions and activities alongside her. The richness of the data gathered from the children across each dataset evidences that their perspectives were elicited. The extent to which it can be confidently stated that these analyses of primary sources are valid for other children and other settings is debatable as they remain an adult interpretation of specific children's perspectives. Despite this, and acknowledging they represent the limitations and challenges of adults attempting to penetrate the children's real world (Fine and Sandstrom, 1988), the positions offered here are not invalidated. On reflection, the case study sets the challenge of developing an improved and extended methodology in order to increase the reliability, validity and trustworthiness of children's perspectives of childhood. This may be achievable with a larger study of children at different ages and even the possibility of children researching children themselves might reduce adult bias further.

Conclusions

The case study has proved to be successful on a number of levels, notably in the development of an effective research methodology, which allowed children to contribute fully as research participants and present their perspectives of childhood not only allowing the reader to share these, but also to recognise and value the children as competent thinkers and social players.

How, if at all, these perspectives relate to discourses acknowledged previously may remain a speculation, but it is important to remember that previous discourses of childhood have reflected solely an adult perspective rather than a child's. However, what this research does achieve is to begin to identify the distinct perspectives of childhood that young children hold.

These perspectives highlight contrasting positions of power and control; those entitled the 'Unknowing Child', the 'Needful Child' and the 'Unauthorised Child' all appear to demonstrate the fact that children apparently perceive themselves *only* in relation to adults. This is in keeping with developmental psychology perspective that understands children to be

working towards *becoming* adults rather than individuals in their own right. It is worthwhile considering whether the children in the study were either only *able* to express themselves in relation to adults or, conversely, made a conscious decision to do so. As these perspectives appear to offer a more orthodox position, at least from a Western perspective, they could be said to be socially constructed by those who maintain the power and control within society. If this is the case, then the final perspective of the 'Unauthorised Child' may be illustrating a subtle development of the orthodox to heterodox, as it would appear that the child is struggling against the norm and orthodox position, indeed it could be that in the future the 'Unauthorised Child' becomes the 'Authorised Child'.

In contrast, 'The Playful Child' perspective appears to have as its heart a more activist position; presenting the child as having power and control. Although the child is again seen in comparison to the adult, this is from a position of power and the child appears to make the positive decision to exclude the adult. If this is indeed the case, it is not without implications. For if so, then the role of the early years practitioner, in relation to a contemporary early years curriculum that uses play as a tool for learning, needs to be re-examined. Does this finding perhaps indicate that, by pretending or being involved in imaginative play, rather than facilitating or supervising play, adult practitioners are in fact crossing over a line which a child may find challenging? Consideration of the rights of the child is important here, for if children apparently allow adults to cross this line, is this under duress and an example of adults invading children's space and experiences? When children *do* allow adults to play with them are they in fact only maintaining the orthodox position whereby adults take control and children are subservient? In which case are there ethical considerations to be explored here? Alternatively, if children seem to have an understanding of when this happens, are adult practitioners in fact being humoured by children when they are allowed to take part in child-lead play?

Although the perspectives of young children in the case study are cautiously presented, it is hoped that the findings will prompt reflection and discussion amongst those adults who wish to understand more about what it is like to be a child.

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