

Focusing on children of different cultural determinations, this essay will critically examine how barriers in communication and ‘othering’ characteristics between children, can lead to social exclusion and bullying in school playgrounds. It will enquire if empathetic behaviour is inherent or whether it requires teaching and modelling to children and young people. Defining the impact of cultural difference on social exclusion, this essay will demonstrate a Swedish university case study allowing the reader to understand the concept of unconscious bias and its potential implications in situations such as child welfare. Furthermore it will discuss playground bullying and encouragement strategies for enhancing the role of empathy, the essay will then critique the prevalence of both bullying behaviour and the role of empathy in European schools, comparing bullying statistics in relation to curriculum content. Finally, the essay will conclude with the evidence that in order to reduce cultural bias and ethnocentric behaviour in children, the development of empathy skills, be them innate, taught, modelled, and communicated improves the likelihood of a relativist lens with specific regard to culture and ethnicity.

Similar to Piaget’s (1948), theory of egocentrism which confirms that as children we are born with a perceptual bias, unable to imagine that anyone would act or feel in any other way than our own lens allows for, ethnocentrism is a propensity to view reality from one’s own cultural perspective, (Yamada and Paniagua, 2013). This is a definition upheld by Bizumic (2019), who agree’s that it is a “complex attitude and a broad social-psychological concept concerning ethnic ingroups and outgroups” occurring when members of a group believe that their own idea of culture, their values, and their norms to be superior to those amongst other cultures. It is this definition of others as inferior rather than merely different that creates misunderstanding and deviance (Curra, 2016).

Thompson (2015) writes that it is dangerous to assume the global population is anything less than inter-connected nations of vastly different languages, religions, and cultures. He suggests that with the aim to reduce racism and the devaluing of minority groups, to recognise the significant attributes of people’s lives, and to break down barriers to best practice, we need to be ethnically sensitive. In order to achieve this in practice, we must recognise that this involves an ethnological diplomacy alongside non-racist attitudes, acknowledgement of cultural difference, and a commitment to the reduction of discrimination and oppression. Thompson (2015), comments that in order to work with sensitivity to ethnicity, we need to be empathetic, not necessarily simply sharing the circumstances or feelings of others, but an appreciation of the differences and how to apply cultural and linguistic knowledge to respond appropriately.

Scott and Marshall (2009), support this by explaining that in contrast to the culture of the arts such as dance or theatre, within the discipline of social science, culture is defined as the content of human behaviour that is ‘socially rather than biologically transmitted.’ And therefore, a familiar word for symbolic and acquired attributes of human behaviour.

The Literary Trust (2017), believe that in order to alleviate social exclusion, defined by The United Nations (2016), as a process leading to the sustained inability to participate in political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of life, people require sufficient literacy competence in order to make sense of their position in society and the world around them. They offer that individuals with a deficiency in these skills are significantly more likely to be exposed to adverse living conditions, poor educational and employment outcomes and experience poor health. Extensive evidence and research indicate the prevalence of literacy difficulties in adulthood stems from a low standard of language skills in early childhood. Polezzi, Angouri and Wilson (2019), expand on this by explaining that language skills are a critical requirement when engaging societally, implying that a linguistic deficit categorises an individual as different and othered, and is observed as having a lack of determination to fit in. This, they offer, when used as a proxy for integration, becomes a gatekeeper for exclusion and inclusion with the dominant force needing to adhere to the societal norm, forming a distinct lack of tolerance for individual difference, social status, or cultural diversity. Mathieson *et al* (2008), substantiate this by offering that to define social exclusion from a relativist lens allows for cultural competence, a collaboration of cross social, economic, political, and cultural commitment. This is further enhanced by Azzopari and Mcneil (2016), who propose that cultural competence is “an ongoing process whereby one gains awareness of, and appreciation for, cultural diversity and an ability to work sensitively, respectfully, and proficiently with those from diverse backgrounds.”

To contextualise this theory, we can consider key findings from a Swedish university project which highlighted the variation that personal, individualistic, and often unconscious biases can create in practice. *Simchild*, a computer-based simulation programme was designed to enhance a social work students’ ability to perform a child protection assessment by drawing attention to their stereotypical assumptions. Two cohorts were given the same child welfare scenario, the only difference being that cohort A had a family with a Swedish surname and the students of Cohort B, had families with a Somalian name. According to Egonsdotter *et al* (2020), the study found that all 176 social work students across three Swedish universities believed the

Somalian infant was less in need of protection than the Swedish child. The findings from studies such as this allow students and practitioners to reflect on the impact of having background information had on their decision making without realising. A weakness in this theory is that it is uncertain if the violence on which the premise of a child protection order was based, was more likely to be tolerated in a Somalian family than a Swedish one, or if practitioners were more inclined to protect a Swedish child. However, it can be seen that basing a person's performance against their stereotyped social identity is notoriously biased (Collange, Fiske and Sanitoso, 2009).

Having a culturally different sounding name can cause all manner of problems for a child in a school playground, especially if that name comes with more 'othering' characteristics such as language barriers. Children can be particularly vulnerable to exclusion both by adults who should offer a more conscientious approach and by their peers who are renowned for their lack of sensitivity when it comes to difference due to their (perfectly normal) social immaturity and inherent ethnocentricity (Edwards 2015). Gibbons (1991), offers that the playground atmosphere is vital to children's social development allowing a child the opportunity to make friends and take part in playful activities. She states that the visual and physical context of gesture and body language is a significant part of communication advancement, without which, a child is excluded by their peers. This is perpetuated by school staff who misunderstand long periods of solitude or silence of a language impaired child as an unwillingness to integrate themselves. In doing so, teachers misinterpret the confusion and complexity of children negotiating the socially linguistic codes necessary in foreign language acquisition within their own language context (Payet and Deshayes, 2019).

Craig and Peplers (1997) research into playground bullying highlighted the requirement to not only acknowledge the individual personality factors of bullies and their victims but also the 'social ecology' such as race and culture in peer interactions during episodes of bullying.

They state that in order to effectively understand the bullying and the responses to it, there is a need to combine both the theoretical and social perspectives and consider both within an ecological framework of positional authority amongst playground peers. Research shows that children are intensely anxious about being stigmatised, excluded or being seen as different and will be determined to align themselves with their contemporaries (Ridge, 2002). Conversely, Robinson and Diaz (2016), argue that by the time children reach primary school age their perceptions of difference are already aligned with the predominant linguistic and racialised

prejudices that dominate society. Continuing to confirm the theory of socialisation, they argue that children carry a countless measure of observations of difference, gleaned from their families, communities, peers, and media, re-negotiated, and interpreted into representations of their own identity. However, according to Duschinsky, Lampitt and Bell (2016), there is no control over the terms in social relationships when people are brought together, explaining that arguments occur when individuals consider their subject differently from another with neither realising that this occurs. Playground bullying, relational to a power imbalance, a social interaction, Smith and Thompson (1991), where the intended purpose is for an individual to cause fear, harm, or distress to another, Jiloha, R.C. (2018), occurs when these observations of cultural and/or language difference are mistakenly perceived as flaws (Polezzi, Angouri and Wilson 2019).

Mulvey, Boswell & Zheng (2017) observe two definitive approaches to responding to incidences of peer exclusion and bullying. They suggest that education settings demonstrate either further exclusionary tactics by way of social sanctions and suspension, or social upskilling programmes designed to improve the playground attitude. Strategies such as bystander interruptions offer incentives to encourage peers to challenge exclusion and rejection within friend groups. This is seen as an attempt to regulate the cultural and behavioural norms of children's interactions into an environment of tolerance and acceptance. Salmivalli *et al* (1996) enhance this theory by identifying six participant roles that children may take on in a playground conflict. These include 'victim, bully, bully reinforcer, bully assistant, defender and outsider'. They state that defenders take on the greatest role by taking sides with a victim and providing comfort and support.

Research by Aboud (2003), determined that the bystander intervention was particularly effective in instances of ethnic name calling. They state that less physical more psychological bullying occurs when racial and ethnocentric insults are incorporated into peer conflict, setting the norm for the tolerance of public discrimination. However, despite initial hesitancy to participate in bystander/defender behaviours due to anticipated humiliation, from peers as a result of standing up for others, Mulvey and Killan (2016) found that both children and adolescents regularly demonstrate high levels of support for those pupils who acted with equity and inclusivity. Attributed by being seemingly unafraid to become a victim themselves, or an appreciation for providing consolation to the targeted child, Salmivalli *et al* (1996) propose that bystanders and defenders have the highest level of both social skills and social status amongst peers. This is reinforced by Caraviti *et al* (2009) who agree that defenders are on the

whole more emotionally stable and share the sentiments of others, a foundation from which empathy training within schools serves to challenge the behaviour of bullies.

Gaines *et al* (2019) present a career in teaching is an emotional one, maintaining that teachers require the skills to feel and react appropriately to the fluctuating emotions of children.

Murphey, turbit and norman (2019) confirm this by agreeing that teachers view their role as facilitators of these emotions, aiding students with sympathy and empathy as well as a commitment to promoting the acquisition of these positive moral habits, productive for life in the diverse communities of their students. Studies into socially enhanced curriculums are currently very popular, with many researchers contributing to the discourse. An example can be found by (Levine 2013) who describes his 'social delivery lessons'. So called for their ability to guide children in self directed discoveries about their peer groups, rather than just being 'others' in a classroom. This he specifies, creates meaningful conversation and promotes emotional intelligence, both of which are fundamental to strengthening empathetic and socially competent environments in schools. Bialystock and Kukar (2017) however, strongly reject the educational enthusiasm for teaching empathy in schools, which they reveal, is cleverly disguised as citizen education in the pursuit of social justice. They dismiss the practice advising that there is little that is concrete on offer with which to model empathy and that the assumption that a sense of self from which empathy develops is easy to teach and to achieve. However, in a study of classroom empathy training Aslan & Akyols (2019) found that such programmes significantly improved the 'perspective taking' attributes of primary children. A limitation of this research is that the longevity of improvement was not measured for longer than one month.

By law, all state schools in the UK have behaviour policies which include measures designed to protect playground victims from bullying. These policies, prepared usually by the schools themselves, are used in addition to anti-discrimination law which asserts that staff must take action against acts of discrimination, harassment and victimisation in their institutions Department of Schools and Eductaion (no date), and to follow the public sector equality duty as assumed by the Equality Act 2010. Public bodies are expected to foster good relations between those who share protected characteristics and are arguably more at risk of prejudice with those who do not. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2018), the prevalence of bullying in the UK is high in comparison to other EU countries, with 29 percent of British head teachers reporting weekly bullying episodes. This is in contrast to Denmark at the lower end of the scale boasting only 4.6 percent.

Bangor University (2021) report that there is currently a school based antibullying initiative being piloted in schools in England and Wales. Developed in Finland, the *KiVa* Programme has ongoing funding until 2022. The syllabus is promoted as a whole school curriculum designed to reinforce solution focused interventions for victimised peers, whilst encouraging self-efficacy for bystanders and defenders, (KiVa Programme, no Date). Of the first findings report, conducted in 2018, episodes of bullying had fallen by 4 percent in England and Wales. When KiVa was piloted in Finland, rates of bullying incidences also fell and the programme is now delivered in 90% of Finnish Schools. However, Finland remains at the top of the statistical data for bullying prevalence in Europe (OECD, 2018). A weakness in these statistics is that instances of bullying are not broken down into categories such as ethnicity, however, it can be seen that taking an empathy specific focus to teaching on the Danish curriculum has a beneficial impact on school based conflict.

Consistent with the figures in the OECD (2018) tables, Denmark is one of the happiest countries in the world (United Nations, 2020). This is due to the direct recognition of empathy as a taught core subject in Danish schools between the ages of six and sixteen. Open communication within the safety of a classroom with children free to discuss anything on their mind with the invitation of peer perspectives has served not only to build relationships and preventing anti-social attitudes it has also improved the success of children's learning, (Sandahl and Alexander, 2016). Statistics from the University of Southern Denmark (2021) *Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children Study*, boast that in 1998 one in every three children had an experience of being bullied, in 2018 the figure had dropped to one in twenty, putting Denmark at the top of European countries in terms of success in eliminating bullying in playgrounds and classrooms.

To conclude, it can be seen that in the pursuit of cultural relativism, in order to decrease instances of cultural bias and to encourage perceptive, globally minded young people, facilitating the development of empathy is key. This essay has shown that the benefits of perception taking skills amongst peer groups is fundamental to determine a reduction of an ethnocentric attitude and related social exclusion in school classrooms and in playgrounds. Furthermore, given that the linguistic and language ability of a child is less developed than of an adult, it can be seen that although children can communicate in an ethnocentric way, they do have the capacity to learn empathetic skills in order to view diverse circumstances, cultures, classes, religions and abilities in comparison to their own as different but not wrong. The purpose of this essay was to identify the role of empathy in the reduction of an ethnocentric

attitude that children display in school playgrounds, however, the evidence gathered has also determined that the teaching and modelling of empathy can lead to better educational outcomes alongside the social benefits. Limitations in the research of this essay are despite incidences of bullying being broken down into categories such as violent, psychological, and racial, it is difficult to find statistics relating to ethnicity in its purest form. Assessments of bullying experiences need to include questions regarding ethnic and or culturally based conflict and further research is needed in order for professionals to become more effective at targeting ethnocentrism specifically.

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