

I' m Australian! Young Children' s Views of National Identity

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Abstract

This paper explores understandings of national identity among one group of 5-8 year old children in the western suburbs of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. Children' s responses to a series of questions about the national identity represented by four dolls-differing in physical appearance and background narrative-are reported. Results indicate that the young children who participated in this study have strong beliefs about national identity and the ways in which it is determined.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a strong public emphasis on Australian national identity. The recent inclusion of civics in the school curriculum, the referendum to decide whether Australia would retain the British Monarch as Head of State, or become a Republic, and the Olympic Games are some instances where images of Australia and Australians have attracted great publicity. This paper describes the views of one group of young children in the context of this public debate.

National identity is described by Gill and Howard (1999, p.2) as a "narrative, a story people tell about themselves in order to lend meaning to their social world". This definition emphasises the fluidity of identification and the influence of different contexts. Accordingly, it is quite possible for people to emphasise different aspects of their own narrative at different times, or to construct different narratives, in order to make sense of their social and

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cultural context. This definition differs from that used in earlier research, where children's understanding of concepts such as national identity was described as limited by their pre-operational thinking (Piaget, 1928).

In their studies of British children's identification with Scottish, English or British nationality, Carrington and Short (1995) build upon the work of Penrose (1993) in their reference to three aspects of national identity which seem, at different times, to predominate in children's understanding. These aspects are: a focus on a distinct group of people who share cultural practices, such as language; the inhabitation of a particular place by that group; and an abstract connection between the group of people and that place-the nation.

The responses of some groups of Australian children reflect varying levels of these aspects. For example, Gill and Howard's (1999) study of children aged 7-12 years reported a pragmatic approach to national identity, based largely on common language, being born in Australia and a recognition of familiar images of Australia.

In addition, there is a growing body of research investigating young children's awareness of issues such as race and class (e.g., MacNaughton, 2000), children's attitudes towards, and reactions to, skin colour (Avehart & Bigler, 1997) and the ways in which children create groups which include or exclude peers on the basis of variables such as skin colour and social class (Bigler, Jones, & Lobliner, 1997). There is consistent evidence that young children not only are aware of differences among people, but also of a range of meanings which are attributed to those differences, so that "as children become aware of difference, they simultaneously develop positive or negative feelings about each difference they observe" (Glover, 1995, p.2). In summary, young children are aware of race and regard differences in skin colour as a feature of race.

The study reported in this paper explored young children's notions of Australia and Australians. To prompt this, and to provide opportunities for children to discuss the connections they made between race and nationality, a series of dolls with different physical and family characteristics was used.