

Chapter 15

More work to do: thinking through equalities with young children in Scotland

Shaddai Tembo

IS IT REALLY ‘an exciting time be living in Scotland’? Perhaps yes, if you are white, financially secure, cisgender, heterosexual and/or able-bodied. For those who fall outside of these privilege markers, things feel much less optimistic. I suspect that those unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the topics I intend to cover in this chapter will see me as a ‘killjoy’: we become problems when we describe problems.¹ Yet it feels necessary to take on this role. I am challenging the positivity we are so used to encountering in early childhood texts because things are not entirely positive.

This chapter covers three issues close to my heart: race and racism, LGBT+ equality and the role of men in the early years.² I am not attempting to convince the (white) reader that problems around these issues exist – they do. Nor will their reading it alone combat racism or any other form of inequality; much more work is needed beyond this chapter. But being clear on the argument is *the first of many steps* toward addressing issues that are, by their nature, complicated.

The theme of diversity permeates all three areas because, while it is necessary to articulate and discuss the difficulties faced by minoritised groups, there is also *a pressing need to actively celebrate and value difference in all forms*. We need to celebrate

the cultural diversity inherent in different races and ethnicities; we need to celebrate the diversity of gender as a means to overcome the limits so often placed on children; and finally we need to celebrate more men of all kinds in the early years as a means to challenge ‘sticky’ traditional stereotypes of masculinity.

I do not write from nowhere; I am a Black man from a working-class background who is deeply invested in equalities, diversity and feminism. I have now been involved in various aspects of early childhood education for the past decade, as a practitioner, a family support worker, an advocate for the profession, a research student, and now a lecturer. I note these titles not to brag, but rather as a means to challenge so-called ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’ accounts of knowledge. Positioning myself in this way is a gesture toward establishing situated accountability and responsibility for the writing that follows.³

Equalities in Scotland

From various different perspectives, we have long known that idealised notions of childhood are embedded within the moral fabric of Western societies. Childhood is continually perceived as a time of presumed innocence where children themselves are located outside of, and seen as distinct from, the ‘real world’.⁴ Such notions smooth over an understanding of the complicated ways in which children learn about themselves and others, and can also work to diminish the significance of addressing equalities with our youngest children.

Although many practitioners insist on ignoring equalities, they are submerged in a system where inequality structures both how education operates and the subsequent outcomes of education. If we believe that children are innocent, then we

must question exactly *when* do children realise the social conditions that shape their world? We must take seriously that early childhood environments are not discrete bubbles and that the pull of broader normative social and cultural norms do not get left at the nursery gates.

As Elizabeth Henderson gestures toward in her chapter, children encounter and perform signals about *who* and *how they should be* all the time, yet all too often these messages fix their capacities in place and limit their potential. There is a long history of research on gender in early childhood and the ways in which children develop their identity from birth. For instance, children often experience certain ways to be a '(big) boy' or a '(girly) girl'. When we see these categories as fixed in place and rigid, this can produce boundaries on *who* children can be and constrains the passages towards which children may become. As acknowledged through the latest practice guidance from the Scottish Government, children need to be able to realise their ambitions un-limited from the societal and cultural projections that are so often placed upon them.⁵

My own conversations with students and nursery staff regularly remind me that for many people, this remains 'risky business'. Due to the perceived danger in discussing gender, sexuality or race with young children, these issues are seen as too controversial. They are then either cloaked in softer rhetoric around 'inclusion' and 'belonging' at the expense of naming racism, whiteness, gender inequality or heteronormativity, or ignored entirely. Yet *just because these issues are not named, this does not mean that they will go away*. This is the danger of doing nothing. Such processes are already well underway and we have an ethical obligation to respond.

On race and racism

With regards to race and racism in Scotland, there has long been the felt sense that this is an issue that does not apply quite as strongly compared to the English context. The feeling has been that 'we're *all right* here' because 'we're *all white* here'.⁶ Firstly, this is a form of narrow nationalism. To recognise racism (or the perceived lack thereof) only within the confines of one's own country impedes the global struggle to end inequality worldwide. Racism is not just an elsewhere-problem for Black and minoritised people to solve. Solidarity and collective action *beyond* borders is necessary here.

Secondly, Scotland is clearly not free from racism, neither historically in relation to its colonial heritage, nor in the present moment. The latest report from the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights reveals that rates of poverty in Scotland for children in minoritised ethnicity families have risen in recent years.⁷ Moreover, a Black or minoritised person is nearly twice as likely to experience relative poverty as someone from a white British background. The experiences of Black and minoritised people within predominantly white places are no less important than the experiences of those in more visibly diverse communities.

These issues need to be addressed and minority cultures need to be celebrated just as much as white Scottish culture, along with recognition that 'culture' itself is not a monolithic entity. Different families and children from different backgrounds have different values and different ways of being with each other. Rather than aiming to treat everyone the same or assuming a universal norm, we need to value the diversity that comes with race and ethnicity.

Readers might counter my argument that not enough is being

done to address disadvantage as it relates to poverty in early childhood in Scotland. Indeed, the recent groundswell of support for the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) movement has done well to foreground both the importance of ‘well-being’ and also the importance of relationships and attachment.

However, it is important that we pay attention to both ‘how’ and ‘for whom’ the word ‘well-being’ is used. As a Black scholar deeply invested in countering racism within educational contexts, I am interested in the underpinning beliefs about *what counts* as being well, and also *to whom* this term applies.

What, for instance, are the implications of invoking well-being when there is, as shown above, clear evidence to show that experiences of racism within Scotland have not only remained the same but worsened in the past decade? Who is ‘well’ here? Certainly not Black people.

It is a discursive sleight of hand, a (white) privilege, to recognise adversity in a way that ignores the salient effects of racism. I believe that diminishing the significance of equalities, or smoothing over the need to address them, by advocating for well-being alone, will not help, and may in fact reinforce, the racism experienced by Black and minoritised people. It is ultimately a distraction, shifting our attention away from the more salient issues at hand. For these reasons, *I refuse to centre well-being until all Black and minoritised children are well first.*

On LGBT+ equalities

Despite ambitions to make Scotland the ‘best place to grow up’ for children, there is evidence to demonstrate that not enough

has changed in the past decade in terms of LGBT+ equalities.⁸ For instance, a recent report from LGBT Youth Scotland (2017)⁹ shows that 71 per cent of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+) young people have experienced bullying in school on the grounds of their sexual orientation. This is a rise from 69 per cent in 2012 and 60 per cent in 2007, and while the percentage of LGBT+ young people who think that Scotland is a good place to live has risen over the last decade, essentially the same number believe homophobia is still a problem for Scotland.

LGBT+ inequality, of course, does not only begin in formal schooling contexts. It starts in the early years when we fail to recognise how children are already caught up with sexuality in ordinary, everyday, and mundane ways. Children are routinely figured as matching in terms of their gender and the sex they are assigned at birth, cisgender, and also as heterosexual until they decide otherwise.

The widespread anxiety around transgender children within contemporary Western culture as a threat to the *status quo* illustrates my point here. The question of what is age-appropriate for children in relation to gender and sexuality follows a logic of innocence where it is claimed that children are exposed to ‘too much too soon’. Yet, holding on to the promise of heterosexual childhood is a normatively problematic desire when we recognise the consequences for many children of *not* fulfilling the lives that are, whether consciously or not, assumed of them.

Insofar as we recognise the need to challenge gender stereotypes, *children who actually do it* – who recognise the constraints placed upon them and resist – should be celebrated.

To be really clear here, despite the persistent media fear-mongering and dog whistle tactics, *trans and non-binary children exist, they have always existed and deserve to be heard*.¹⁰ This means taking a good look at our practices, resources and environments for the children to ensure that their ideas for who they would like to be are not shut down or ridiculed. The best way to do this is to actively challenge habits of thought, celebrate difference, and again highlight diversity wherever possible.¹¹ This includes being critical of idealised images of what counts as family life, most notably in the form of the nuclear private household.

More men of all kinds?

In recent years the Scottish Government has become much more proactive in addressing gender equality in early childhood. There have been a number of guidance documents including *Improving Gender Balance* (Skills Development Scotland, 2019)¹² and *Gender Equal Play* (2019)¹³, in addition to local authority initiatives promoting the *Gender Friendly Nursery* (2018).¹⁴ While the inconsistency of terminology in places is frustrating, on the whole these efforts should be celebrated.¹⁵ Here, I would like to turn my attention to gender among the profession and the issue of more men in the early years, commonly referred to by the acronym MITEY.

My own experience as a man in early years was complicated. The gender diversity of the profession, like most issues relating to equalities, is often not given the attention that it should merit on early years degree level courses. So, while I recognised that my gender identity clearly had an effect on the young children I worked with, I did not truly understand gender until perhaps the final year of my degree, and even then it took a lot of time

to for me understand the consequences of my own identity when working with young children, and the importance of addressing gender stereotypes.

We seldom discussed this issue within the nursery and when we did it felt as if the onus was on me, as the ‘designated man’, to do something about it. I used to think that my women colleagues and I were in an ideal harmony of sorts, that we ‘balanced’ each other because. . . well, we were opposites.

But in fact, in the moment, in the nursery on a daily basis, we all had similar roles. We all spent times outside doing what are seen as traditional ‘manly’ roles and rough-and-tumble play, and I also read books, played dress-up and spent time in the home corner just as often as anyone else, regardless of gender. I wasn’t necessarily doing anything different from my colleagues but I have now come to realise that *that in itself is incredibly significant*.

The point of the argument for more men in early years is not necessarily that we bring with us this ‘innate manliness’ that the profession has been missing. This does a massive disservice to the profession when we apply a deficit approach. The point is more importantly about representation and that men working with young children can challenge traditional stereotypes about how men should be (strong, doesn’t show feelings, likes sport, boisterous) by instead being caring, compassionate, vulnerable, and more playful! So, rather than calling for MITEY, I believe we should be calling for is more men of all kinds in the early years – MOAKITEY. Admittedly, this acronym isn’t exactly catchy but, in terms of promoting gender diversity among the profession, perhaps it is a more accurate expression of the ambition Scotland wishes to realise.

What next?

What does this all mean for early childhood in Scotland? Should play continue to be the way? Yes, absolutely so. As a creative endeavour against broader cultural determinations that can limit what children can be and become, play is crucial. As philosopher and social theorist Brian Massumi explains in his usual verbose style of writing:¹⁶

Invented styles of taking flight, improvised ways of surpassing the given in (play), experimental orbits of escape from the known situations and their generic themes, might suggest, by analogy, creative lines of flight out of other situations where a heavy dependence on the already-expressed imposes itself with a life-crushing weight of the imperative to conform.

What Massumi is suggesting here is that the capacity for play, in its most spontaneous sense, offers a line of flight away from conformity and allows children to express their full potential outside of the constraints of normative culture. Against a complicated backdrop of testing, inspections, monitoring, audits and ever new modes of measuring children, we need to retain the capacity for experimentation in play without constraint. Needless to say, this should apply throughout childhood and most certainly up until the age of seven.

As others within this book have done, I might now turn to the approach taken by the Nordic countries as an example for the future. In terms of the later transition into formal schooling, these countries certainly give children the privilege of playing for longer. However, they are by no means perfect. *These countries are not free from issues of racism and inequality.* It feels to me that advocating their approach without this crucial

caveat could be a form of cruel optimism, a desire for something that may ultimately impede our flourishing.¹⁷

I am wary of concluding with any sort of neat ‘action plan’ or by providing ‘next steps’ to take forward. Inequality does not work like this and will not be resolved in a formulaic way. The issue of workforce diversity, for instance, is not merely a quantitative issue of greater male or non-white recruitment. Indeed, there are currently wider concerns regarding the ways in which some people within the profession (people who do not fit the mould of how practitioners ‘should be’, according to their race, gender, or sexuality) *are already excluded* by virtue of their difference.¹⁸

I opened this chapter by noting that the first step toward addressing these complex issues is to be clear about the arguments, and I hope the points I’ve made about race, LGBT+ and men in the profession will stimulate discussion and generate action beyond this text. If Scotland’s ambitions for its youngest children are to be realised, everyone working in the early years has to challenge aspects of normative thinking around equalities and diversity. I’m grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this process.

So, am I also hopeful for the future of early childhood in Scotland? To an extent. As I stated at the outset, things are not entirely positive at the moment. Until they are, none of us can afford to be complacent. □