

Marino Institute of Education



Title: Primary school age children's perceptions of family: A case study

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Declaration

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Abstract

Family is a common theme that children of primary school age are frequently called upon to examine and consider throughout their education. The concept of family is discussed and explored in many curricular and non-curricular areas. This case study examines children in 4th, 5th and 6th class in order to gauge their perceptions of family and investigate the potential influence of the child's external environment on the formation of these perceptions.

This case study is designed within an "advocacy" paradigm (Creswell, 2009, p. 9) and grounded theory is used to analyse and discuss the data.

The findings indicate the overarching impact of societal norms and cultural discourse on children's perceptions of family, in addition to a strong influence from literature, media and social interactions. Although the findings highlight an open and positive attitude towards diversity, the data simultaneously suggests a lack of familiarity with non-nuclear and non-heteronormative portrayals of family in addition to a lack of vocabulary to address these differences.

The study aims to inform the explicit need for progress in teaching about the diverse nature of families. Additionally, the researcher recommends creating more space for critical thinking in classrooms for both teachers and children to develop skills to recognise bias and discrimination.

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List of Acronyms

INTO - Irish National Teachers' Organisation

LGBTQ+ - Lesbian, gay, transgender, queer and others

NCCA - National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

SPHE - Social, Personal and Health Education

VTs - Visual Thinking Strategies

MIE - Marino Institute of Education

Chapter One: Introduction

Research Question

The purpose of this study is to explore children's perceptions of family. The aim is to examine how children in 4th, 5th and 6th class view families. The researcher will discuss the potential influence of: the primary curriculum, social interactions and literature and media on children's perceptions of families. The research will be qualitative in nature and grounded theory will be used to analyse the data. The researcher will collect the data through a series of focus group sessions. This study aims to inform improvement in current practices, with particular emphasis on challenging bias and discrimination in education.

Research Focus, Motivation and Aims

The concept of family is a core element of a child's learning experience that is frequently addressed throughout the primary education curriculum. Children are regularly called upon to examine and consider the concept of family across a range of curricular areas i.e. English, History, Geography, SPHE, Drama and Religion. The SPHE curriculum, asserts that identifying and naming "the people who constitute a family" and appreciating that "all family units are not the same" are key learning objectives for children at infant level (NCCA, 1999, p. 20). The concept of family is further addressed in the SPHE curriculum at every class level throughout primary school. Under the guidance of the curriculum, by 5th and 6th class children should be enabled to "critically examine media portrayals of families and family life" (NCCA, 1999, p. 61). The primary aim of this study is to observe the participants critical examination of various portrayals of family in order to gauge their current level of understanding about families, assess their awareness of diversity amongst families and explore the contributing factors to these perceptions.

Current literature suggests a lack of research in this area, particularly in Ireland. The researcher attended a talk, given at the 2019 Literacy Association of Ireland annual conference,

which addressed the impact of children's literature on the formation and confirmation of children's own identities and the identities of those around them. The talk inspired the researcher to closely observe the portrayals of family presented in Irish textbooks and assess the availability of books that include diverse representations of families. The researcher noted the portrayals of family in books and textbooks appeared to be largely homogeneous and represented a predominately white, heteronormative, nuclear vision of family. Additionally, Moloney & O' Toole's (2018) study confirmed the lack of diverse representations of minority groups in Irish textbooks.

The researcher is interested in the continuous improvement of current education practices. In particular, it is important to acknowledge that the researcher agrees with the concept that real recognition of marginalised groups is essential to counteract power imbalances and challenge discrimination and bias in education (Lynch and Lodge, 2004; Lynch and Baker, 2005). This study is subsequently undertaken with an aim to examine bias and discrimination in education in order to inform improvement in current practices.

Dissertation Structure

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. In the succeeding chapter the researcher will review the current literature on the topic, providing a context for the study. Chapter three will address the research methodology and outline the activities the children took part in during the focus group sessions. Additionally, the researcher will outline the limitations of the study in chapter three. The researcher will use grounded theory to analyse and discuss the data in chapter four. To conclude, the researcher will provide a summary of the main findings in chapter five and make some recommendations under the guidance of relevant literature.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter the researcher will review the relevant literature surrounding children's perceptions of family. The researcher will begin by outlining how children begin to perceive themselves and others, through the formation and confirmation of identity. Drawing on the writings of Foucault (1970;1972) and Butler (2006), the researcher will discuss the many aspects of a child's external environment and the potential influence they may have on their perception of family. The researcher will then examine the international and national research on this topic. To conclude, the researcher will outline limitations and further considerations, including the potential impact of religious ethos on children's perceptions of family.

The Formation and Confirmation of Identity

Identity is a complex entity, which scholars throughout the ages have sought to define. Clarke, Jefferson & Roberts (1977, p. 12) state that our identity is a reflection of the external structures within society and that this reflects "the positions and interest of the most powerful class unless challenged" which, in turn, will "stand as the most natural, all embracing universal culture" (Clarke et al., 1997 p. 12). This concept is echoed in the philosophical writings of Foucault (1970, 1972) who proposes that our perceived understanding of identity is often shaped by the dominant cultural discourses of the time in which we live. Often what we perceive as inherent elements of our identity are perhaps merely formed by the dominant cultural discourses, or social constructions, reinforced by the external structures within our society (Butler, 2006).

The Foucauldian concept of dominant cultural discourses (Foucault,1972) explores the notion of an accepted 'norm' and a perceived 'other' within society.

Discourses and the discursive practices emanating from them govern how we view ourselves and others, they exert power over us, control our actions and affect whose

voices are heard or silenced, marginalised or privileged. (Kelly, 2012, "Introduction," para. 5)

In 1990, Butler further developed the Foucauldian concept of identity, particularly in relation to gender identity and expression. Butler, discussing the subjectivity of human identity, proposes that at its core, identity may be nothing more than a performance led by a dominant cultural discourse. These dominant discourses are, according to Foucault, and Butler, shaped largely by language. In this way, the power dynamic within society serves to reinforce these perceived inherent elements of identity.

Children develop their understanding of the world around them from the time they are born, through constant assimilation of information that they are provided with (Piaget, 1952). Personal and group identities are often constructed through the identification and classification of similarities and differences between objects and people (Pulido-Tobiassen & Gonzalez-Mena, 1999; O'Dwyer, 2006). However, the meaning that is attached to this information is largely dependent on the language and relevant dominant discourse (Foucault, 1972; Butler, 1990).

Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, sets out a standard for the promotion of belonging and the support of identity formation in early education settings in Ireland. This standard indicates the role of the family, in addition to other social interactions and relationships in fostering a sense of belonging. This is echoed in the SPHE (Social Personal Health Education) primary curriculum in Ireland, where the continued development of personal and group identity is explored under the themes of "myself", "myself and others" and "myself and the wider world" (NCCA, 1999). Additionally, the SPHE. curriculum emphasises the importance of positive language and the development of appropriate vocabulary for the promotion of identity and belonging.

When used positively, language can build up, affirm and show respect to another human being but if used in a negative manner can hurt, diminish or demean. Children need to

recognise and become sensitive to the ways in which they themselves use language in their relationships and in their everyday interactions. Language is also powerful because it both creates and reflects a culture. Through SPHE children can begin to appreciate the connection between language and identity. (NCCA, 1999 p. 7)

Windows and Mirrors

Brah (1996, p. 20) considers identity as “an enigma, which by its very nature, defies a precise definition”. Although there are various definitions for the exact meaning of identity, a large and growing body of literature has investigated the role representation may play in the consolidation and understanding of identity. There is a large volume of published studies describing the role of children’s literature in the affirmation of children’s identity (Bishop, 1990; Dolan, 2014; Landt, 2006; Derman-Sparks and Edwards, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moloney & O’Toole, 2018; Waters, 2017). Waters (2017, p. 126) notes that children’s literature has the potential to “present children with a realistic picture of the world”. Educators who provide children with a diverse range of literature allow students opportunities to expand their knowledge of the world in which they live. In this way, these representations serve as windows of understanding into the lives of others or mirrors of self-affirmation (Bishop, 1990).

The concept of ‘mirrors and windows’ has been used by a significant number of theorists to propose the way in which children begin to understand and affirm their own identity and the identity of those around them through the external representations they encounter (Bishop, 1990; Dolan, 2014; Landt, 2006; Derman-Sparks and Edwards, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moloney & O’Toole, 2018). Conversely, a lack of representation can also have significant effects on children’s sense of belonging (Dolan, 2014).

Scholars of children’s literature have long stressed the need for turning a critical eye to the stories we tell, who is doing the telling, and who gets left out. (Tschida, Ryan & Ticknor, 2014, p. 28)

Anti-Bias Education

Derman-Sparks, & The A.B.C. Task Force (1989) proposed the need for an explicitly anti-bias curriculum to foster a more inclusive learning environment. An anti-bias education aims to provide children with the opportunity to develop real respect for their own identity and the identity of those around them. According to Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2016) prejudice is often developed through silence. Many educators believe overt discussions about difference and diversity lead to the development of certain prejudices. However, conversely, Derman-Sparks and Edwards argue that silence in this area is particularly damaging. Acknowledgement and recognition of difference is essential to tackling prejudice. The objectives for an anti-bias education include the following goals for the development of positive identity: “self-awareness, confidence and family pride” as well as “positive social/group identities” (2016, p.14). A specific need for recognition of diversity is listed in tandem with positive social identities: “each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity, accurate language for human differences, and deep, caring human connections” (2016, p.14). Derman-Sparks and Edwards place great emphasis on diversity for the development of positive social and group identities as well as self-affirmation and family pride. This suggests a need for diverse portrayals of families throughout the curriculum in an effort to implement an anti-bias education.

However, providing an anti-bias education, which aims to take “an active/activist approach to challenging prejudice, stereotyping, bias, and the isms” (Derman-Sparks, & The A.B.C. Task Force, 1989, p. 3) can be difficult for educators in a predominately white, heteronormative society.

Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is defined by Harris & White (2018, p. 335) as “the assumption that heterosexuality is the default or ‘normal’ state for human beings because of the belief that people fall into one or other category of strict gender binary”. Butler (2006, p. 9) argues that our experience and understanding of the world around us is constantly mediated through a “rarely-contested” filter

of heteronormativity. The perpetual acceptance of such a vision of the world serves to 'other' those of a minority sexual orientation and or gender identity, which can inevitably lead to the development of a power dynamic between the perceived 'normal' and 'abnormal' within society (Butler, 2006). Schools act as critical agents in the confirmation of existing power structures (DePalma and Atkinson, 2009).

Furthermore, discrimination in this regard can take many different forms and is not always visible. Discrimination can be the result of misrepresentation or the complete absence of representation. This notion of being misrepresented or one's identity misaligning with that of the dominant culture is discussed by Hegel as the denial of one's true sense of self (Douzinas, 2002). Hegel proposes the importance of acceptance from others and argues that respect and recognition may be as important as legal rights in the pursuit of true acceptance. Douzinas (2002), Honneth (1995) and Taylor (1997) concur, noting that recognition of one's identity is a fundamental human right and that lack of recognition, or misrepresentation, is a form of oppression.

Relating practically to oneself can only be acquired and maintained intersubjectively, through being granted recognition by others whom one also recognizes (Anderson, 1995 p. xi)

The Impact of Literature, Media and Popular Culture

In a heteronormative society, there is arguably a need for specific and explicit action to challenge these biases in order for children to fully access these external representations. Adichie (2014) discusses this concept of representation in her TED Talk, entitled, "The Danger of a Single Story" in which she explains that it is through stories that we first begin to experience the world. She describes feeling a disparity between her own sense of identity as a child and that of those that she was encountering in the media; which were largely concerned with white, western culture (Adichie, 2014).

Hooks (2010, p. 61) discusses the idea of “dominator culture”, which is comparable to the concept of a dominant discourse (Foucault, 1972). Marginalised groups or groups that have been exploited or misrepresented in this “dominator culture” often internalise negative stereotypes about their own identity (Bell, 1997). In this way, these groups have often been “socialized to be self hating” (Hooks, 2010, p. 61). To overcome this internal negativity, these groups must first engage in a “shift in consciousness” (2010, p.61) Hooks notes the importance of imagination in this process and how books, in particular, can be an incredibly powerful tool, “through books I learned that there were other ways to think and live in the world than the ways I knew most intimately” (2010, p. 138).

In their study of diversity in Irish textbooks in the early years, Moloney & O’ Toole (2018) noted the lack of diverse representations of those in minority groups, including those of LGBTQ+ characters and non-nuclear families. Lynch and Lodge (2004) further note the impact of heteronormative biases in Irish textbooks and curriculum content which, they confirm, gives preference to nuclear family structures.

Although national textbooks may lack in diversity, there are an increasing number of picture books and novels available for children which include representations of non-nuclear families. In recent years, in Ireland, there has been a shift in the the singular ‘nuclear’ vision of family; consisting of heterosexual parents and their biological children. This shift mirrors a greater sociological change in policy changes; most notably, the passing of the Equality Bill which amended section 37.1 of the Employment Equality Act which had allowed discrimination in employment on the basis of sexual orientation. The 2015 referendum on same-sex marriage also echoes a shift in cultural discourses.

National and International Research on Children’s Perceptions of Family

Research on children’s perceptions of family is limited. Only a small number of studies have been conducted in this field (Nixon, Greene and Hogan, 2006; Morrow, 1998; O’Brien, Alldred, and

Jones, 1996) and fewer still have included non-heterosexual representations of families (White, 2015; Kelly, 2012).

A qualitative study held in the United States with 183 children aged between eight and fourteen (Morrow, 1998) observed that children displayed an inclusive and accepting attitude towards difference and diversity amongst families. Similarly, a 2015 study based in the United States, found that while children can be largely accepting and understanding of difference, teachers have a responsibility to ensure they are actively inclusive of all family structures, as the literature they choose to provide in their classroom inevitably plays a huge role in how children perceive others (White, 2015).

In 2006, a study conducted in Ireland exploring children's concepts of family structures highlighted the changing perceptions of families amongst young children (Nixon, Greene, & Hogan, 2006). The study largely indicated that children are generally accepting of non-nuclear family structures. The results indicated a tendency amongst participants to associate families with care and closeness, regardless of who is or is not included. However, this study only examined the children's view of heterosexual family structures. The question of whether or not the children would make the same associations with non-heteronormative representations remains unanswered.

Picture books, in particular, have been examined as a stimulus to challenge heteronormativity (Kelly, 2012). Moreover, research indicates that the normalisation of perceived differences amongst families through picture books has been shown to not only deepen children's understanding of diverse family structures but also lead to the development of greater empathy (Cress & Holm, 1998).

Considerations and Limitations

Recognition is not merely enough to challenge dominant cultural discourses, as inclusion and representation can be 'tokenistic' in nature. Bryan's (2009a, 2009b, 2010) research into Ireland's approach to interculturalism is one that can also be applied when describing the current

approach to diversity of representation in Irish education. Bryan describes this as “positive celebratory interculturalism” (Bryan, 2009, p.304) This concept promotes the idea that through the expression of acceptance, rather than acceptance as a baseline, the implication is that it could be withdrawn by the embracer. Bryan states that this dynamic builds a relationship in which the embracer is in a position of power.

The embracing of an acceptable ethnic ‘other’ via interculturalism is, in effect, an ‘excluding inclusivity’ (Reay et al. 2007, 1054) which fails to disrupt, yet brilliantly disguises, power relationships between majoritised and minoritised groups in society. (Bryan, 2010 p. 3)

Therefore, even though the perceived difference is recognised, it is not done in such a manner which serves to challenge the dominant discourse. In this way, the “embracer” still becomes associated with the dominant discourse while the “embraced” is often viewed as the outlier (Bryan, 2010 p.10).

Yet it is precisely this logic, the very *raison d’être* of interculturalism in fact, which subtly reinforces the privileged status of culturally dominant groups within society by positioning them as the ‘embracer’ or ‘tolerator’ of difference, who get to decree the acceptability (or otherwise) of the ethnic Other, thereby negating the possibility of true equality ever being achieved. (Bryan, 2010 p.10)

Lynch and Baker (2005) define equality as “equality of condition”. This definition of equality is about “equalizing what might be called people’s ‘real options’, which involves the equal enabling and empowerment of individuals” (2005, p. 2). Under this definition, there are five key components in the pursuit of true equality. These are: resources; respect and recognition; love, care and solidarity; power; and working and learning (Lynch & Baker, 2005). Much of the conversation surrounding equality in education centres upon the concept of equalising access to and participation in education. However, Lynch and Baker argue that this disregards these essential components that

encompass true equality in education. Practices of “denial and depreciation” (2005, p.17) ensure that systemic inequality is perpetuated in education and echoed in wider society. These inequalities are expressed in the education system in what is chosen as worthy of inclusion and what is marginalised, excluded or misrepresented. This systematic ignorance leads to the portrayal of marginalised groups as less than or “other” (Bryan, 2010, p. 3).

Religious Ethos

An additional layer for consideration in an Irish context is the impact of religious ethos in the maintenance of dominant cultural discourses surrounding identity. On February 25th 2004, when speaking on the topic of homosexuality within the Anglican Church, Archbishop Desmond Tutu stated that “Everyone is an insider, there are no outsiders, whatever their beliefs, whatever their colour, gender, or sexuality” (Tutu, 2004). This comment from Archbishop Tutu, led to the development of the *No Outsiders Project*, which set out to understand and find effective ways of challenging heteronormativity in school contexts in the United Kingdom. DePalma and Atkinson (2009) stated that:

The title of the project is deliberately ambivalent. On the one hand, it echoes Archbishop Tutu’s insistence that there are no outsiders, while on the other hand, it reminds us that the effect of normalisation, whether in relation to race, gender, disability, sexuality or other features of identity, is to convey to outsiders that they have no place in ‘our’ society; a message conveyed not only by explicit acts of discrimination but also by simply doing nothing. (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009 p.7)

The project looks at the lack of representation of individuals and families that lie outside of the norm, in particular LGBTQ+ representations, in denominational and non-denominational schools in the United Kingdom. The project reveals a lack of meaningful representation and action in both non-denominational and denominational schools. The research conducted in this project indicates that the issues surrounding representation are not only evident in denominational schools.

However, the project suggests that challenging heteronormativity in “faith-based schools” is undeniably “more difficult” (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, p.133).

Lynch & Lodge (2004) and Lynch & Baker (2005) note that there is often a focus on socio-economic factors pertaining to equality in education. Lynch and Lodge propose that socio-cultural equality is, in fact, just as important. Therefore recognition and respect for diversity in Irish schools is central to the pursuit of true equality. According to Lynch and Lodge, diversity is often left unacknowledged due to the influence of a denominational ethos. This lack of engagement serves to perpetuate the dominant cultural discourses.

Given the teaching of the main Christian churches on sexual orientation in particular, it is almost impossible for those who are openly gay, lesbian or bisexual to feel that they have parity of status with heterosexual persons in religious-controlled schools. (Lynch & Lodge, 2004, p. 3)

Conclusion

As mentioned previously, there has been a significant shift in cultural norms in Ireland in the last number of years. This has led to the expansion of the very definition of the word family. Schools, according to DePalma and Atkinson (2009) and Lynch and Lodge (2006) have the potential to reflect these wider sociological changes. In doing so, schools provide a more accurate representation of the society in which their students are living. This, in turn, according to Foucault (1972) and Butler (1990) serves to challenge dominant discourses and indeed challenge the marginalisation and rejection of minority groups.

Current studies suggest that children’s perceptions of family are formed through their social interactions with groups of people (Pulido-Tobiassen & Gonzalez-Mena, 1999) including those provided by representations in literature (Bishop, 1990; Dolan, 2014; Landt, 2006; Derman-Sparks and Edwards, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moloney & O’Toole, 2018; Waters, 2017). Literature may serve as a tool to promote the inclusion and normalisation of marginalised groups (Kelly, 2010)

in addition to the potential development of empathy for others in young children (Cress & Holm, 1998).

In the subsequent chapter, the researcher will outline the methodology used in this study to examine the participants' perceptions of family. The researcher will further address the current literature and discuss any connections formed with the data in chapter five.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter addresses the methodology that was applied in this research study. The researcher will discuss the research purpose and subsequent questions posed in this study. The researcher will also outline the specific methods chosen to answer the research questions and the various considerations involved in selecting such methods for data collection and analysis. The chapter will also outline the limitations and validity of the study, in addition to the necessary ethical considerations that were undertaken by the researcher.

Research Purpose

In their study of diversity in Irish textbooks in the early years, Moloney & O' Toole (2018) noted the lack of diverse representations of those in minority groups, including those of LGBTQ+ characters and non-nuclear families. In recent years, Ireland has experienced a shift in the singular 'nuclear' vision of family; consisting of heterosexual parents and their biological children. The researcher's own practical experience in Irish classrooms, in addition to a review of the associated international literature, led to the proposal of a research study which aimed to explore how children living in twenty-first century Ireland perceive families. A review of the national literature revealed that research in this field was scarce and generally outdated.

In 2006, a study conducted in Ireland exploring children's concept of family structures, highlighted the changing perceptions of families amongst young children (Nixon, Greene, & Hogan, 2006) The study largely indicated that children are generally accepting of non-nuclear family structures. However, this study only examined the children's view of heterosexual family structures. The researcher felt that a study examining children's perceptions of various family structures, including those of non-heterosexual families would be beneficial in informing and advancing current teaching practices.

Theoretical Framework

The researcher primarily considered the larger question of which paradigm or philosophical worldview was most applicable to this study. Given that the aim of the study is to greater understand children's perceptions of families, and therefore, their perceptions of the wider world, the researcher first proposed a social constructivist perspective. This worldview asserts that meaning or assumptions about the world around us is constructed by human beings. The aim of social constructivism is to understand the pattern or development of certain assumptions about the world (Crotty, 1998).

Following a comprehensive review of the literature in this field, it was evident that the researcher would, in fact, adopt a different perspective in this study. The worldview the researcher would adopt would be one of "advocacy" as outlined by Creswell (2009, p. 9). According to Creswell, this philosophical worldview often relates to marginalised individuals or groups within society. There are many aspects of this research study which relate to critical theory and, indeed, queer theory (Fryer, 2010). This is particularly evident in relation to the representation for LGBTQ+ families in Irish schools. While this particular study aims to understand the perceptions that children currently have of families, the research to date on this topic indicates a need for greater progression and action to improve the representation and inclusion of marginalised groups. Therefore, the researcher concluded that the most accurate paradigm under which to conduct this research would be one of "advocacy" (Creswell, 2009, p. 9).

During the initial proposal stage of the research study, the researcher considered various applicable methods for conducting the study. However, further reading and consideration indicated that qualitative methods would be best suited to the research question. Creswell (2009) notes that qualitative methods are useful for understanding "social or human problems", while quantitative methods are, generally, applicable for "testing objective theories" (Creswell, 2009 p. 4). As this research study focuses primarily on the participant's perception of a concept, the researcher felt that

the depth and quality of the data provided should be prioritised over the quantity of the data collected.

Denscombe (2014, p. 245) notes that “qualitative research uses words or visual images as the unit of analysis”. The researcher felt that the use of visual images and words for data collection would allow the participants the opportunity to provide more detailed information. Additionally, according to Denscombe (2014, p. 245), qualitative research is linked with researcher “involvement” rather than “detachment”, typically associated with that of quantitative research. The wider philosophical worldview undertaken by the researcher is one of advocacy, therefore, a research design, focusing on qualitative methods, linked with researcher “involvement” (Denscombe, 2014, p. 245) was adopted.

Research Design

The researcher considered a number of qualitative strategies to guide the approach of the inquiry. Initially, the researcher considered phenomenological research, as this method is centred upon the lived experiences of the participants and typically involves the study of a “small number of subjects” (Creswell, 2009 p.13). Although there are many elements of phenomenological research which would be applicable to this study, phenomenological research generally involves studying subjects for prolonged periods of time in order to observe emerging patterns (Creswell, 2009). Due to time constraints, the researcher felt that this method would not be suitable for this study.

Action research was also extensively considered by the researcher. Goodnough (2010, p. 167) notes that action research generally “involves a social practice that has the potential to be improved”. Kemmis (2010, p. 417) describes action research as having the potential to transform “people’s practices, their understanding of their practices and the conditions under which they practise”. A qualitative strategy, such as action research, that explicitly aims to inform improvement in current practices would, perhaps, be applicable, given that a philosophical worldview of

advocacy would be adopted for this research study. However, action research is a cyclical process which involves critical reflection followed by the implementation of a specific action in an attempt to improve certain practices (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988). The researcher had a limited amount of time allocated for the study and would not have access to a study group over a prolonged period of time in order to implement these actions. Additionally, action research conducted with children creates a range of complex ethical considerations (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). Therefore, action research was deemed unsuitable for this study.

According to Bryman (2001), case studies examine a single community over a period of time. Simmons (2009, p.3) further defines case studies as a means of examining “the singular, the particular, the unique”. Bassey (1999) suggests that case studies involve researchers collecting data in multiple ways in order to extract meaning from it. A case study was deemed to be the most applicable for this study as the researcher would focus on one particular setting and endeavour to collect and analyse multiple forms of data. The researcher aimed to ensure the collection of rich data through the use of data triangulation, which according to Denzin (1978), increases the credibility of conclusions reached by the researcher. Data triangulation will be further addressed later in the chapter when the researcher outlines the activities created for the focus groups.

Sampling. Purposive and convenience sampling were used for this study. Purposive sampling places less emphasis on the number of participants and greater focus on the “criteria used to select them” (Wilmot, 2005 p. 3). The researcher purposely selected 4th, 5th and 6th class children for this study as at this age the children would be more equipped to engage in critical thinking. Ethical considerations were also extensively considered in relation to the age range of the sample. Active agreement, given by the children for participation in the study would be paramount (Thomas & O’Kane, 1998). The children would need to be informed about the purpose of the study prior to giving their own consent, in addition to the consent of their parent or guardian. For this reason, purposive sampling of 4th, 5th and 6th classes were utilised in this study.

Additionally, convenience sampling was also employed. The researcher would ideally have chosen to do a comparative study with mix of boys and girls as well as a range of school environments (denominational and multi-denominational) in order to broaden the terms for data analysis. However, due to time constraints, the researcher utilised convenience sampling in regard to the geographical location and access to the sample group. The limitations associated with this choice of sampling will be further discussed later in the chapter.

Focus Groups. As this research is solely based on the experiences of children, the researcher's primary focus throughout was to ensure comfort and ease for the children involved. Focus groups aim to create a relaxed environment that can allow for the collection of high-quality data, particularly when focus groups include "pre-existing social groups", such a class or friend groups (Bloor, & Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001 p. 16). Morgan (1998, p. 33) notes that focus groups must allow the participants to interact with each other as well as with the moderator. The researcher's aim was to allow for a good flow of conversation amongst the participants in order to engage the participants in true critical thinking. Focus groups provided the researcher with a semi structured environment in order to direct or refocus the conversation where necessary, while simultaneously allowing the participants to guide the discussion. The researcher would use images to stimulate discussion during the focus groups, in addition to non-verbal tools for the communication of ideas, such as prompt sheets for drawing. According to Thomas & O'Kane (1998, p. 342) a range of tools for communication can be useful when working with children as they "enabled children to communicate non-verbally" as well as offering the children more than one option to engage with during the process.

Data Collection

Focus groups consisting of five to seven children were utilised during this study. The researcher conducted five separate 20-40 minute sessions with classes ranging from 4th to 6th class. This consisted of: one 4th class group, two 5th class groups and two 6th class groups. The children

were kept within their own class groups with an aim of maintaining the “pre-existing social groups” to create a more comfortable environment (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001 p. 16). The researcher also felt it would be useful in analysing any differences in the data collected from the class groups that could, perhaps, show a correlation to the stage of development or age range of the children.

As previously stated, the researcher used data triangulation. Therefore, the sessions consisted of a number of different activities to stimulate discussion. The activities were chosen at random for each age group. The researcher was allocated more time with some class groups, therefore some groups engaged in multiple activities during the session. The first 5th class group were asked to observe a selection of images (see figure 1 and 2).

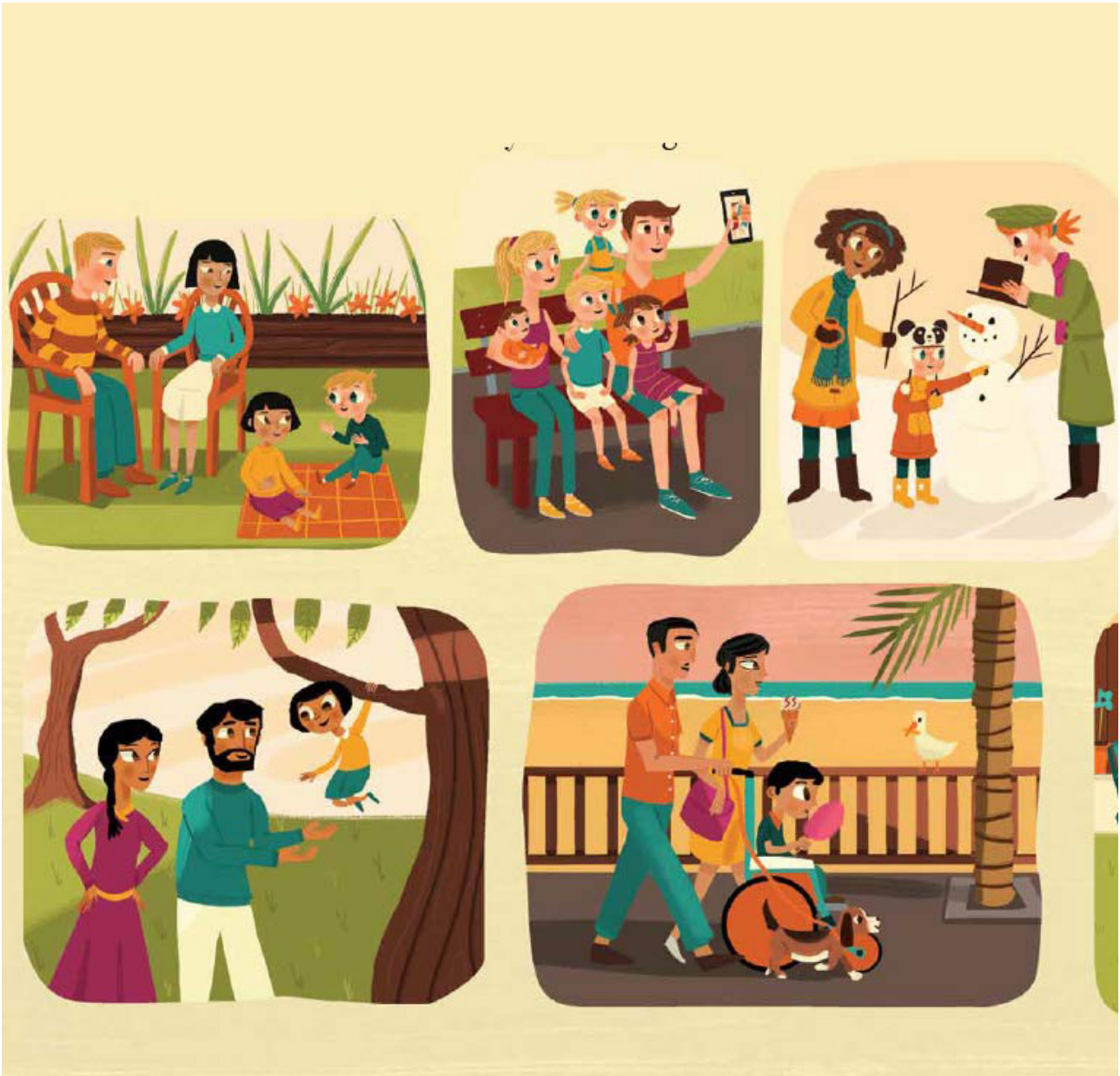


Figure 1. Images from the book “We Are Family” (Hegarty & Wheatcroft, 2018). The text was removed for the purpose of the study.

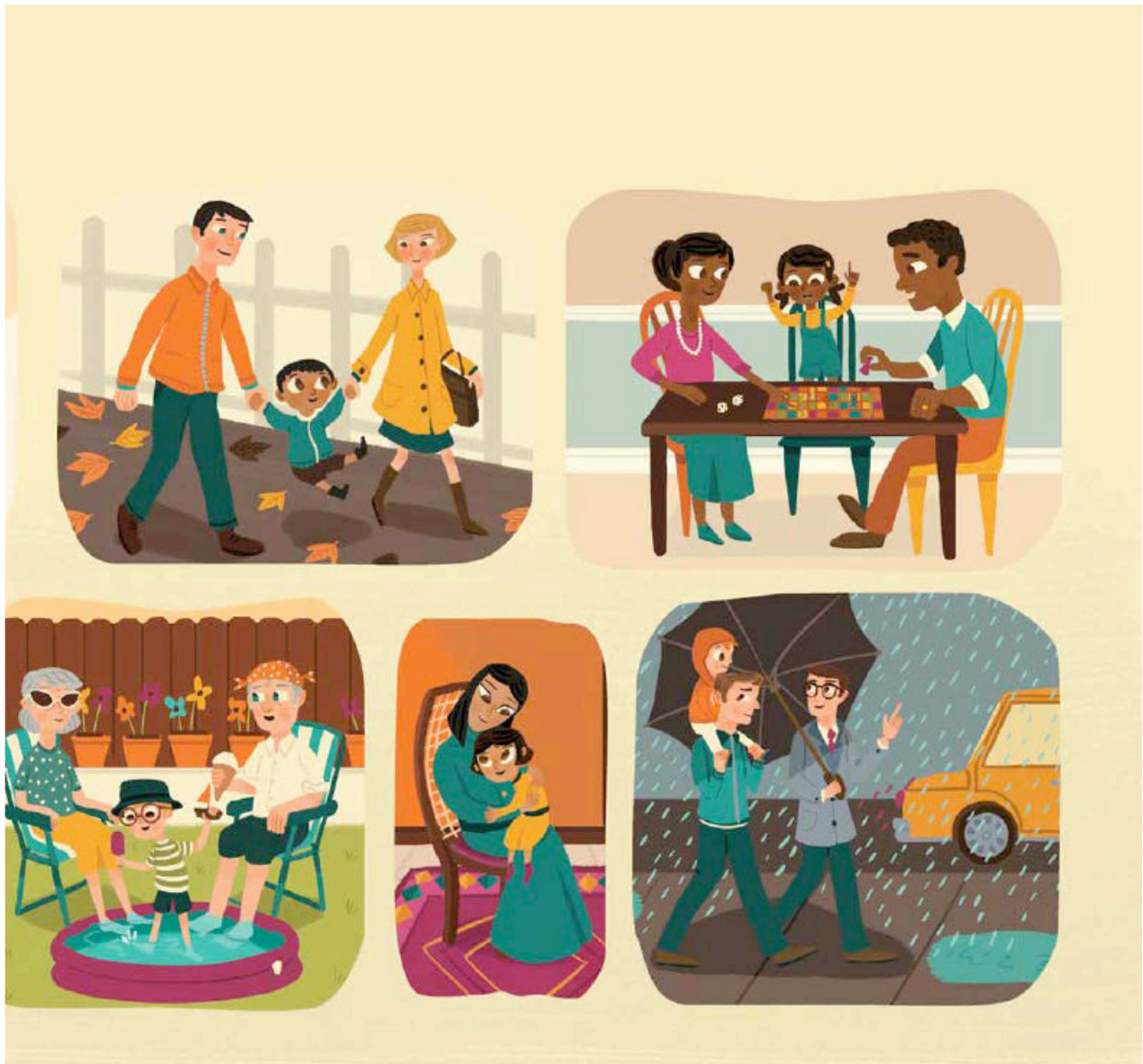


Figure 2. Images from the book “We Are Family” (Hegarty & Wheatcroft, 2018). The text was removed for the purpose of the study.

The children were not given any prior information about the images. The children in the school are familiar with, and regularly use, the ‘inferring’ comprehension strategy when decoding images and text (Courtney & Gleeson, 2010). Therefore, the children were asked to utilise this strategy when observing the images. The researcher held a discussion with the children, during which time they shared any inferences that they had made about the images. The discussion was guided by but not limited to conversation stimulated by the images.

The second 5th class group and a 6th class group engaged in a drawing activity. The children were provided with a prepared sheet (see figure 2) containing the prompt sentence, “families of all different kinds visit the park every day” (see figure 3). The children were asked to visualise this scene and provide a suitable image to match the text. The researcher asked the children to explain what they had drawn and a discussion was held.

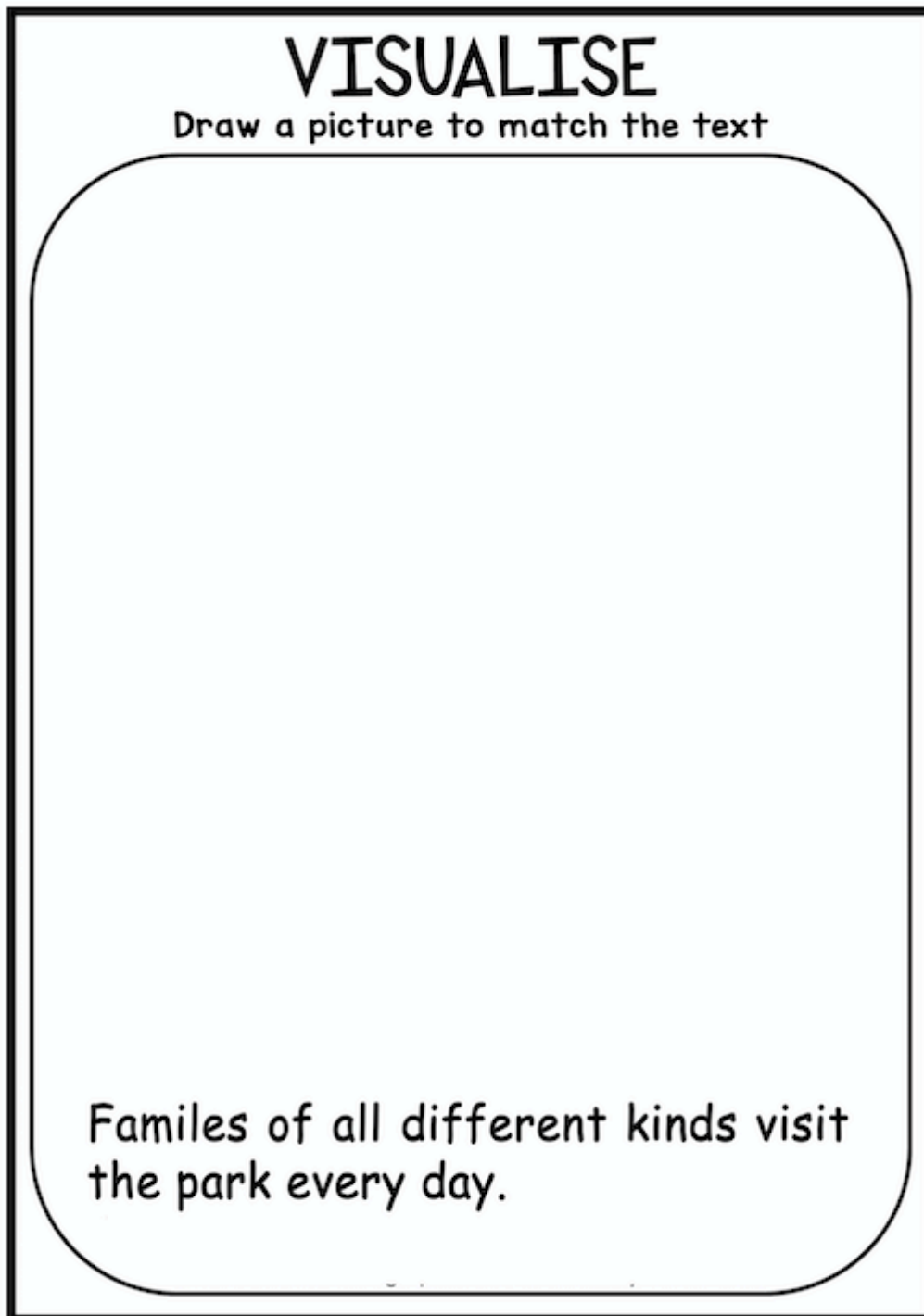


Figure 3. Visualisation and drawing activity prepared by the researcher for the children.

The second 6th class group were asked to observe and discuss an illustration depicting various types of families walking through the gates of a zoo (see figure 4).



Figure 4. Image from the book *“And Tango Makes Three”* (Richardson, Parnell & Cole, 2005). The text was covered for the purpose of the research.

The 4th class group were asked to observe and discuss figure 4. Following the discussion, the children were asked to write a short piece of text they felt could suitably accompany the image.

Additionally, the 4th, 5th and 6th class groups observed the following stock photographs (see figure 5 & 6). The children were asked to use their comprehension strategy when looking at the images. The researcher and the children had a discussion about the images during which time the children discussed any inferences they had made. Where necessary, the researcher would use questions to guide the discussion i.e. Who is in the image? What are they doing? Do these people know each other? Who might have taken this photograph? These particular illustrations and

photographs were chosen as they are ambiguous enough to allow the children to engage in critical thinking about the context of the image while simultaneously presenting a diverse representation of different types of families.



Figure 5. Stock images of various types of families which were used as stimuli.

Rocketclips, inc. (n.d.). Couple doing their finances with laptop. Shutterstock. Retrieved from <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/couple-doing-their-finances-laptop-233217244>

Syda Productions (n.d.). Happy grandfather teaching boy how to ride bicycle at summer park.

Shutterstock. Retrieved from <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/family-generation-safety-people-concept-happy-503558458>

Africa Studio (a, n.d.). Little children painting their father's face while he sleeping. April fool's day prank. Shutterstock. Retrieved from

<https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/little-children-painting-their-fathers-face-1051797254>

Monkey Business Images (a, n.d.). Girl with her female parents, preparing meal in the kitchen.

Shutterstock. Retrieved from <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/girl-her-female-parents-preparing-meal-411224533>



Figure 6. Stock images of various types of families which were used as stimuli.

Monkey Business Images (b, n.d.). Same Sex Female Couple With Daughter Preparing School

Lunchbox At Home Together. Shutterstock . Retrieved from <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/same-sex-female-couple-daughter-preparing-1515641477>

Africa Studio (b, n.d.). Male gay couple with foster son taking selfie. Adoption concept

Shutterstock. Retrieved from <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/male-gay-couple-foster-son-taking-716580346>

Liderina (n.d.). Help in the game. Family playing basketball. Shutterstock. Retrieved from

<https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/help-game-family-playing-basketball-1205164723>

Monkey Business Images (c, n.d.). Senior man fishing with grandson. Shutterstock. Retrieved from <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/senior-man-fishing-grandson-102593639>

Ethical Considerations

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs' (2012) guidance for developing ethical projects involving children, states that researchers must always consider the potential impact research could have on participants, particularly when working with vulnerable groups or children. Prior to the study, a number of ethical considerations were made, in accordance with the MIE *Ethics in Research Policy* (2018), in order to minimise any potential risk of harm. Additionally, the researcher chose activities for the focus groups that were firmly grounded in the primary school curriculum.

Morrow and Richards note that "the biggest ethical challenge for researchers working with children is the disparities in power and status between adults and children" (1996, p. 98). Specific strategies were used at all stages of this research in an effort to counteract this power imbalance. The researcher ensured that the children were informed about the nature of the study, prior to taking part, using appropriate, child friendly, language. Permission slips and information sheets (see appendix A) were distributed for the parents and guardians, in addition to active agreement forms (see appendix B) for the children themselves (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998). The children were only selected for participation if both forms were completed.

The children's contribution was on a voluntary basis at all times, and both they and their parents had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage (Greig & Taylor, 1999). When engaging in discussions during the focus groups, the researcher remained neutral and avoided being judgemental. The researcher used 'Visual Thinking Strategy' (VTS) prompts to paraphrase the children's contributions, repeat them back and make connections between their observations (Yenawine, 2013). The researcher avoided the use of any terms that could be interpreted as forms of confirmation or dismissal.

All participants and their parents were informed prior to the research that their contributions would be entirely confidential, however, if any disclosures were made by the children in relation to the Children First Act (Tusla 2015) where the researcher believed there was “a risk of significant harm”, I would be obligated to disclose this information (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2012, p. 4).

Data was stored on a password protected computer throughout the process and will be destroyed once the research has been assessed by the researcher's institute of education.

Data Analysis

The researcher considered grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to be most applicable for this research. Charmaz (2006, p. 2) defines grounded theory as a strategy that consists of “systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analysing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves”. Interviews and focus groups are generally associated with grounded theory. Grounded theory involves the use of coding to analyse the data that is collected and focuses on developing theories about common themes or categories emerging from the data. Additionally, a central element of grounded theory is constant comparison (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). The researcher concluded that the outcome of the research would be, largely, unpredictable, therefore grounded theory would provide a solid structure for meaningful analysis.

In addition to grounded theory, the researcher used Braun and Clarke's (2006) ‘phases of thematic analysis’ as a guide. Following an initial stage of familiarisation, the researcher used open and axial coding to organise the data into categories. Subsequently, the researcher began a process of constant comparison with the data from each of the groups. The researcher aimed to reach a point of theoretical saturation with the data through constant revision, refinement and comparison. Theoretical saturation is reached at the point during data analysis when no new concepts emerge from the data (SAGE, 2007).

Limitations

Flyvbjerg (2006) notes that case studies have several limitations and are not generalisable but that they can still be valuable tools for learning. The researcher used convenience sampling in relation to the geographical location of the participants and had a limited amount of time to conduct this research. Subsequently, this case study was conducted in an all boys, Catholic school in a middle-class area on the North side of Dublin. This limits the study to that of this specific setting. It is important to acknowledge that experiences in other schools may vary greatly.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the researcher discussed the methodology that was chosen for this research study. The researcher also addressed the methods chosen to answer the subsequent research questions and the various considerations involved in selecting such methods for data collection and analysis. The chapter also outlined the limitations of the study, in addition to the necessary ethical considerations that were undertaken by the researcher.

Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Discussion

Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher will outline and discuss the data that was collected during this study. As mentioned in chapter three, the principles of grounded theory were used to guide the researcher during this process. In line with this theory, the researcher will use a thematic approach in analysing, presenting and discussing the data. A thematic approach refers to the process of analysing data through emergent themes (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Many of the themes that emerged from the data will be discussed in relation to the current literature that was outlined in chapter two. Additionally, themes unrelated to or contradicting the current literature also emerged from the data. The researcher will address these themes with the support of quotes taken from the focus groups throughout the chapter. Finally, the researcher will review the research question and analyse the progress made to address this question.

The Impact of Social Interactions and Literature on Children's Perceptions of Family

As mentioned in chapter two, a common thread in this field of research is the impact of social interactions on the formation and confirmation of children's own identities and the identities of those around them. Piaget (1952) and Pulido-Tobiassen & Gonzalez-Mena (1999) align with a social constructivist view which asserts that children begin to identify and classify groups in their environment through their social interactions. Additionally, many researchers emphasise the importance of utilising children's literature in order to present children with broad representations of identity (Bishop, 1990; Dolan, 2014; Landt, 2006; Derman-Sparks and Edwards, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moloney & O'Toole, 2018; Waters, 2017). Throughout the data, the researcher found references to popular culture in the form of books, movies and television shows.

Researcher

Okay so you said four is a normal amount for a family, can you tell me more about that?

Child F

I don't know it's just kind of like ... mam, dad, sister and brother

Researcher

Okay so two parents and two children is it?

Child D

Yeah cause it's like, you see that in books and movies and like TV and things you know?

The children often made connections between the images used in the focus groups and those they had seen in books or on the television. Words and phrases relating to popular culture, were repeatedly referenced throughout. Commenting on the setting of the image in figure 4, three different focus groups made reference to the same movie they had seen. The children stated that it appeared to be similar to a zoo they had seen in a popular movie. Although this related to the setting, and not their perceptions of the families in the image, the researcher found it relevant to note that the children all drew from the same experience with popular culture in interpreting the image they were presented with.

Although the children frequently referenced popular culture, media and literature the researcher found that the children primarily drew on their own social interactions and their immediate environment during the discussions. During the drawing activity, most of the children drew their local park or the park near their school. When asked about the families they drew, a number of the children explained that they had chosen to draw families that they would often encounter in the park themselves (see figure 7).

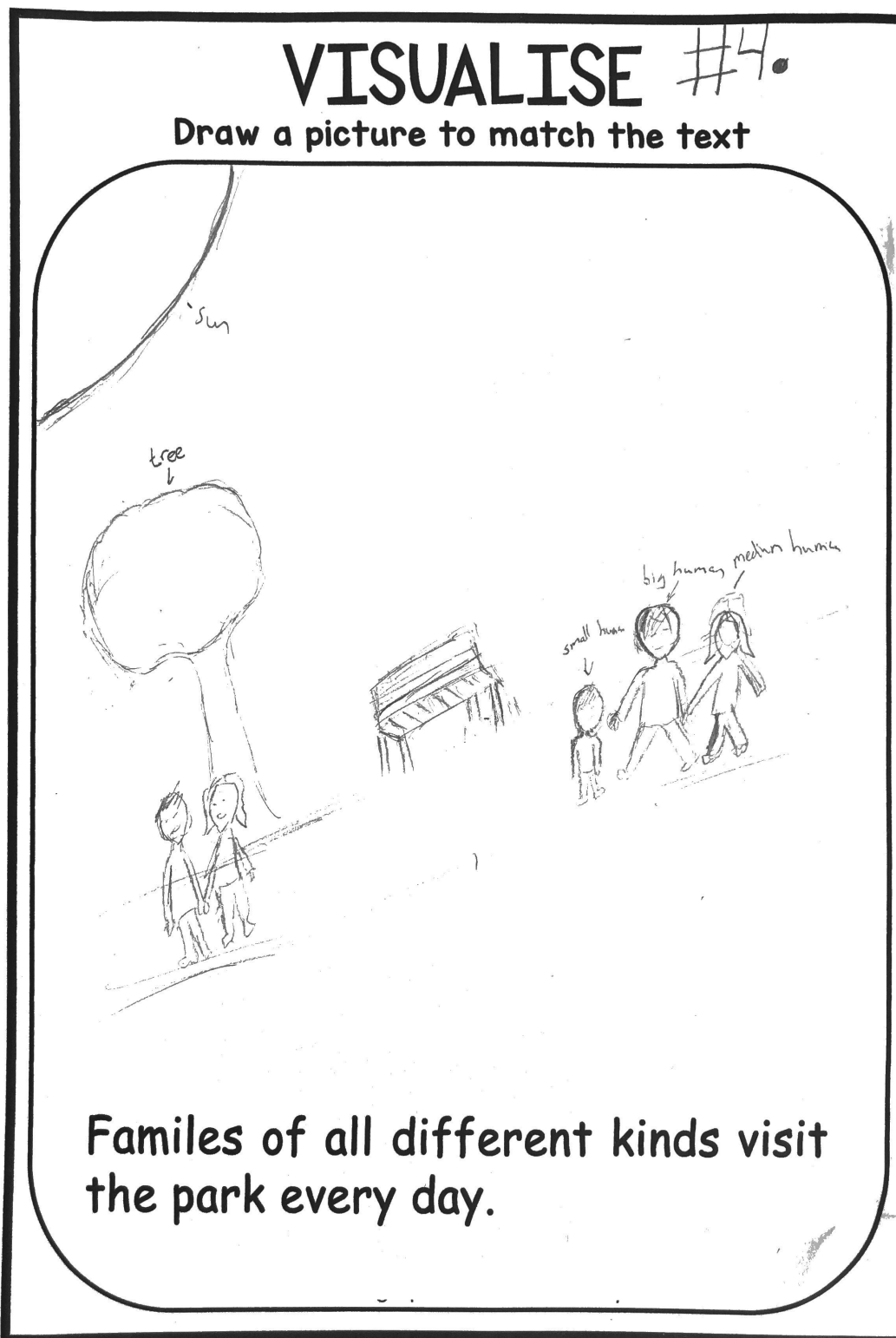


Figure 7. Child 4's drawing. See excerpt below for corresponding discussion.

Researcher

So why did you choose to draw those two different groups?

Child 4

Well, because I see a lot of families like this in the park walking around and the couple too because well, why not, I just wanted to draw that and because yeah sometimes I see that too in the park.

Researcher

And who's in that family?

Child 4

The dad, mam and a child

Researcher

And the couple, would you say they are a family?

Child 4

I would say they are because they're walking together and they spend their time together.

As noted by Waters (2017) and Bishop (1990), if the child's immediate environment is limited in the picture it can provide about the wider world in which they live, literature may act as a medium through which the children can access new experiences to expand their knowledge. Indeed, the children in this study seemed to draw on their own experiences as well as reference literature, media and popular culture. This will be further addressed later in the chapter, where the researcher will discuss the limitations of the immediate environment and the potential impact of dominant cultural discourses (Foucault, 1972).

Family Composition

The composition of the family was a prominent theme that consistently emerged from the data. There were various elements of the family's composition that were considered by the children,

including: who could be in a family, the number of people in a family and resemblances within families. As previously noted, the children often drew on their own experiences or interactions when discussing who could be in a family. The children would refer to their own family composition or mention their friends and classmates' experiences. The following extract is a discussion amongst the 4th class group about who can be in a family.

Researcher

Who can be in a family?

Child A3

Anybody

Child E3

A mam, a dad or brother or sister, like a cousin or grandad and granny, auntie and uncle

Researcher

Does it have to be all of them?

Child E3

No and like second cousins, third cousins, fourth cousins

Child B3

Maybe even like people who are adopted. Would people who are adopted be in it?

Child D3

No, not related like

Child B3

But they would be in the family

Researcher

What do you think boys? That's an interesting question.

Child B3

Yeah. Would people adopted be related to you?

Child A3

I don't think they would be

Child E3

I think they would be

Child D3

They wouldn't be related but they'd still be in your family

The children in all of the groups felt that physical resemblance amongst families was relevant but not always obvious or necessary, particularly when discussing adoption. This particular discussion on adoption amongst the 4th class group led to the children questioning the nature of the word 'relation' as the children were unsure of who could be appropriately classified as a relation. Drawing on their own experiences again, one child stated: "well you know the way your mum might give you a kiss, well if she gives you a kiss then you'd be related, as long as you get a kiss you're related". In all of the groups, the children frequently associated families with a similar sense of care, closeness, and love. This mirrors Morrow's (1998) study on children's perceptions of families in the United States and Nixon, Greene and Hogan's (2006) findings in their study, exploring Irish children's perceptions of family structures. Both studies noted that the children perceived the word 'family' to be a fairly broad term, closely associated with love and care. The data suggests a similar tendency amongst these children to prioritise the emotional aspects of family, over its physical structure.

Researcher

How do you know somebody is family?

Child C3

I think a real family is loving

Child D3

I think a real family is loving and caring and they have to get along with each other or they kind of aren't really family. Well, they are still family like, but they could be a better family.

Normativity

Although the children often considered the word 'family' in broad terms, a significant portion of the data suggested traditional or normative perceptions of families were prevalent amongst the children. This was particularly evident in relation to family structure. The nuclear family was the most common family represented by the children in their drawings. Additionally, when asked to provide a sentence to accompany figure 4, most of the participants in the 4th class group chose to write from the perspective of the family that appeared to be nuclear in structure. This is largely concurrent with Butler's theory (2006) of normativity, in that the children perhaps chose that which is most recognisable or familiar to them. Most notably the tendency to draw or discuss the nuclear family often occurred initially before any influence from or discussion with their peers, who may have had a different view. Although, it seemed that when the other children in the focus group provided an alternative perspective, the children were accepting of this perspective. The term "normal" arose frequently during discussions as a means for the children to discuss those they felt were similar to themselves, in relation to: family structure, appearance, religion and ethnicity. However, on several occasions some of the children asked for clarification on, or attempted to correct others on their use of the term. This will be discussed later in the chapter, in relation to the children's general positivity, and open attitude towards difference.

When observing the photographs in figure 5 and figure 6, the children were asked by the researcher to consider who might have taken each of the photographs. During discussions about the images depicting a single parent family, there was a tendency amongst the children to state that the photograph must have been taken by whichever parent was absent in relation to the traditional,

nuclear family structure. When the researcher asked the children to explain why they felt this might be the case, the children frequently noted that it was because there was “no mam there” or that there was “no dad” present in the image. On one occasion, a child added that it could be “an older brother or a sister, because the mam is out”. The researcher found that the children seemed to express a level of understanding about single parent families, noting that “some families might only have one mum or one dad”, and some also chose to represent these families in their drawings (see figure 8). However, it also appears that there was a consensus amongst the children that the absence of a father or mother figure in the images indicated that they were taking the photograph.

Child B

So I drew a family, they could be like immigrants from like the middle east, so I drew an African Irish family and I drew an Irish family. You know like a white family, maybe from like Dublin

Researcher

Okay and so these people, how are they all different?

Child B

Like their ancestors come from different places and they all have different backgrounds of how they got to Ireland

Researcher

And is that their whole family or is there anyone else that is just not at the park?

Child B

Maybe some families might have like only a mam or only a dad and maybe some families might have like a few members that aren't at the park

Child A

I actually know an African Irish family with only a mam and no dad

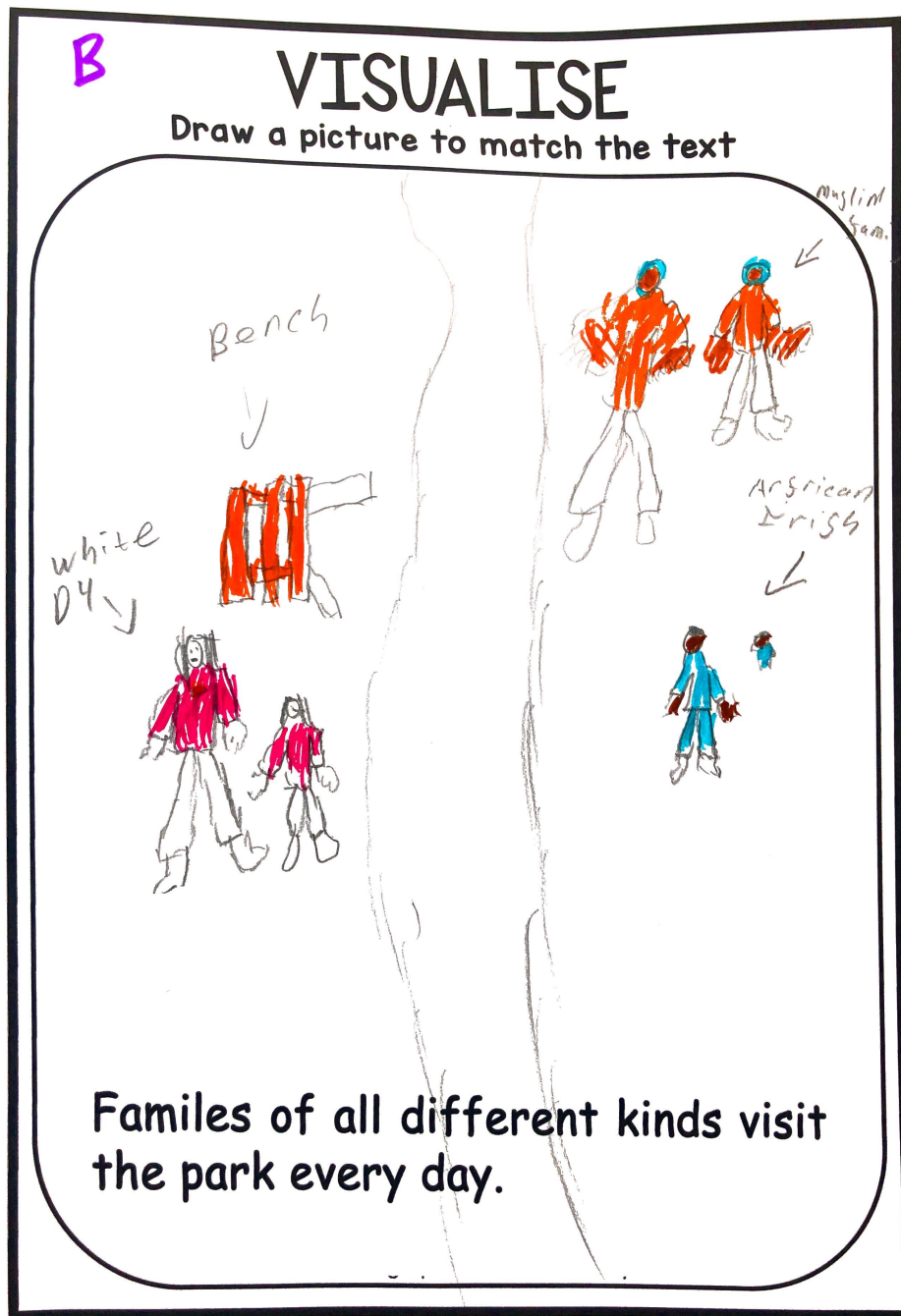
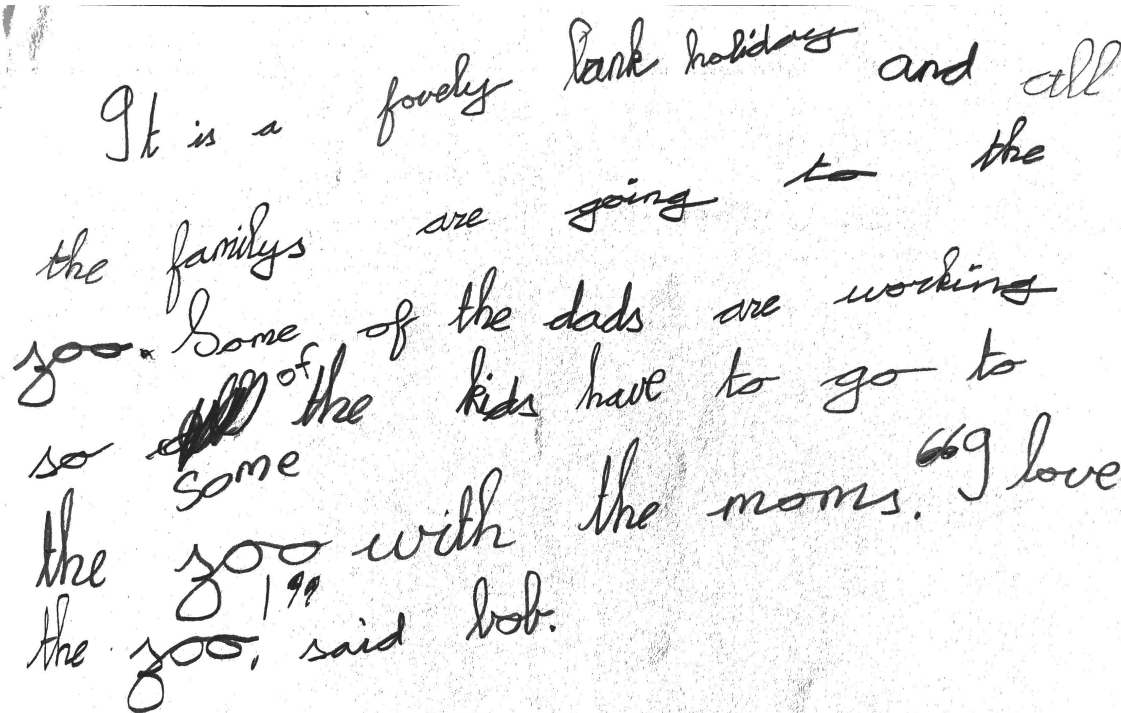


Figure 8. Child B's drawing depicts families with different ethnic backgrounds and includes representations of single parent families.

Additionally, when asked to write a sentence to accompany figure 2, Child A3 chose to write from the perspective of the parent alone with her child, noting that the father was “working” (see figure 9). During a discussion about the sentence, the other children in the group agreed that the father was “probably working” or maybe “parking the car”.



It is a lovely bank holiday and all
 the families are going to the
 zoo. Some of the dads are working
 so ~~all~~ some of the kids have to go to
 the zoo with the moms. "I love
 the zoo," said bob.

Figure 9. Child A3's sentence to accompany figure 2.

Heteronormativity

The children most commonly used the following nouns to discuss the people depicted in the images: mam, dad, brother, sister, child, granny, grandad, aunty, uncle. Differences in opinion relating to the use of these nouns frequently arose during discussions about the depictions of non-nuclear families represented in figure 5 and figure 6, in particular those presenting portrayals of same-sex families. Although some children suggested that it could be a depiction of a same sex-family, the majority of the children provided alternative explanations i.e. suggesting they could be "a caretaker" or an "aunty". However, the children in all of the groups, quickly established and agreed on the structure of the nuclear families presented in figures 1,2,4,5 and 6. Butler (2006) notes that our understanding of the world is continuously filtered through a heteronormative lens, due to the dominant discourse of heteronormativity within our society. The children seemed to easily establish the heteronormative portrayal of a family that was, perhaps, more familiar to them.

Religion and Ethnicity

Normative perceptions of family amongst the children extended beyond family structure. Particularly in an Irish context, religious ethos and indeed, the impact of religious ethos is an important element to examine. It is important to note, in relation to the impact of religious ethos, that this study was conducted in a Catholic school.

Religion was a key topic which consistently emerged from the data. The children addressed this overtly and covertly throughout the sessions. When observing figure 1 and 2 several participants believed that the families may all have different religious backgrounds. Child C1 felt that some of the families in figure 1 and 2 looked like they were “from Ireland” and therefore he felt that they were likely to have a similar religious background to himself and his classmates.

Child C1

I think they're all different religions,

Researcher

What makes you think that?

Child C1

I think three of them are the same and two of them aren't. I think those two are like Indian religions and those three are like... normal

Child B1

What's “normal”?

Child C1

Like our normal

The concept of “normal” expressed by the children, in relation to religion, firmly echoes Byran's (2010, p. 10) theory in the establishment of a power dynamic between the “embracer” and “embraced”. Child C1 established his own experience and religious background as normal and, subsequently, those that are different to his as somewhat abnormal. DePalma and Atkinson (2009)

note that schools, particularly denominational schools, can serve as critical agents in the confirmation of these power structures. Normative perceptions were less prevalent amongst the children in relation to ethnic background or race, although still present, as shown in figure 8. Child B and some of the other children closely associated ethnicity with religious background.

Additionally, the children frequently addressed the concept of marriage, mostly citing a traditional perception of marriage, particularly in relation to images depicting couples who appeared to have no children. During a discussion with the 4th class group the children debated whether a couple could be considered a family if they were not married.

Child C3

No when you get married you're related before you get married you're not

Child A3

Actually yeah, because if you're boyfriend and girlfriend, you're not related.

Researcher

So if you're just boyfriend and girlfriend you're not is it not a family?

Children

No, not yet.

Researcher

So it's when you get married you're a family, is it?

Children

Yeah. Pretty much, yeah.

Researcher

Okay, so if there's two people in a family and they're married, they're a family?

Children

Yeah

Child A3

If they break up they're not. It's only if they're married.

Although the 4th class group agreed that in order to be classified as a family a couple would have to be married, the researcher found that the children in both the 5th and 6th class groups did not consider marriage entirely necessary in order to classify a couple as a family. Instead, the children stated that they could be classified as a family if they “spent a lot of time together” or if they “lived in the same house”. This may reflect the younger children’s ability to think critically due to their age or perhaps their social interactions and experiences to date. These findings are similar to those discovered by Nixon, Greene and Hogan (2006) where younger children believed that marriage was a consolidating factor in the confirmation of family status.

The impact of religious ethos on children’s perceptions of the validity of a family, was highlighted by DePalma and Atkinson (2009). Their study indicated that teaching about diversity and challenging heteronormativity in “faith-based schools” was significantly more difficult. It appears that while the children were generally aware that there was great diversity amongst families, only a small number of the children discussed or had the language to discuss different types of families. When the children lacked the terminology to discuss differences in religion, ethnicity, gender and structure amongst families, there was a tendency to refer to those families that appeared to be more traditional in structure as “normal”, subsequently ‘othering’ (Byran, 2010) those outside these boundaries. This reflects Lodge’s (2004) suggestion that diversity in denominational settings is often not truly acknowledged which, in turn, could serve to perpetuate the dominant cultural discourse of a white, heterosexual, nuclear family. The data seems to indicate the relevance of Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2016) proposal for educators to continuously consider how they address difference and diversity in an effort to provide an anti-bias education.

Openness to Diversity and Inclusivity

It is important to note that although the data suggests a tendency amongst the children to establish a nuclear structure as the default or 'norm' off which they based their perception of families, many of the children frequently expressed an awareness of the diverse nature of families. Additionally, a number of the children attached a negative stigma to the term "normal" when referring to families, indicating critical thinking and a sense of social justice. There were some occasions during the focus groups when the children debated the use of the term "normal" amongst themselves.

The following is an extract taken from a 5th class group discussion of figure 2, in which the children debate the use of the term "normal". Child G1 uses the term to describe the nuclear family in contrast to the same-sex couple. Child A1 and B1, question his use of the term and child G1 inevitably comes to the conclusion that the only difference is the sex of the child.

Child G1

I think they're all different families like, they might be gay. They might be another
they might be grandparents and then that's like a normal family and they're a black family

Child A1

Well there's nothing different about them, like there's no difference there though?

Child B1

No, there's not

Child G1

Yeah no. Well, except one of the kids is a boy and one of them is a girl.

The researcher found that the children often seemed to lack the vocabulary to discuss specific experiences that were, perhaps, less familiar to them. However, they showed acceptance for diversity when it did arise within discussions. Additionally, when asked what the images in figure 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6 had in common, the children consistently stated that "they're all families", indicating

they did indeed recognise the diverse nature of families. The researcher found that the children displayed open and accepting attitudes towards difference, similar to those found by White (2015), Kelly (2012) and Morrow (1998). Moreover, the children seemed to express a real understanding of the concept of difference. Child D3 and Child E3 felt that differences in families and indeed differences in identity are important.

Child D3

Everyone is different. Even people in your family are different to everyone else in your family.

Child E3

Yeah if you're all the same, it'd be boring. Then we'd all look alike and you'd do all the exact same stuff and you'd be as good as each other. You couldn't put people on teams, like they'd all be as good as each other and you'd just have a 'nil all' match.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the researcher found that the children in this study were generally very open to the concept of diversity amongst families. They displayed a sense of sensitivity in their choice of words and an awareness in addressing difference amongst families. However, while most of the children recognised a wide variety of family types and did indeed classify them as families, the children often referred to the nuclear family structure as a default state of existence. This baseline of normativity seemed to largely underpin their perceptions of families. Lynch and Lodge (2004) believe that it is essential to tackle this concept of a 'normal' state of being in the pursuit of true equality in Irish schools.

Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations

Summary of Findings

In recent years, Ireland has experienced a significant change in societal norms and structures. The traditional, nuclear vision of family life has been broadened to include a diverse range of family structures. This change has been led by a shift in cultural discourses and reflected in changes made to public policy. This case study examined, children in 4th, 5th and 6th class and explored their perceptions of family. The research highlights the children's open and accepting attitude towards difference and diversity. However, the underlying tendency amongst the children to centre their concept of family upon a largely white, heteronormative, nuclear portrayal indicates the need for explicit action and further progress in teaching about diversity amongst families in primary schools.

Broadening Children's Experiences

As mentioned in chapter four, the children in this study largely drew on their own personal experiences when discussing families. This generally related to the social interactions they had in their own lives as well as the experiences of their peers. However, the children also referenced popular culture, literature and media throughout the sessions.

Cress & Holm (1998) and Kelly (2012) note the role of children's literature in the development of understanding and empathy. In this way literature, and indeed other forms of media, serve as a medium through which children can begin to broaden their experiences (Waters, 2017; Bishop, 1990). The importance of using literature and media as a tool in education should not be understated and is particularly salient if the child's immediate environment is limited in the range of experiences it can provide, as is often the case in a predominantly white, heteronormative society.

Teachers, therefore, have a responsibility to engage in critical reflection in an effort to improve current practices in education. Specific and explicit action is required by teachers in order to provide children with experiences outside of those in their immediate environment. While

teacher's may have limited authority in relation to the textbooks they use in their school, they have the prerogative to make choices about the literature and media they use in their own classroom. This research highlights a strong tendency amongst participants to draw on their experience with literature, media and popular culture. Therefore, literature and media which includes representations of diverse family structures may provide children with valuable experiences that they may not otherwise encounter (Kelly, 2012). These experiences serve to normalise these representations and provide children with appropriate language. In turn, this may begin to counteract the innate power imbalance between the societal "embracer" and the perceived "other" or "embraced" (Bryan, 2010, p. 10).

The Importance of Language

Developing an awareness about the importance of language is highlighted as an essential learning objective in the SPHE curriculum (NCCA, 1999). The children in this study indicated an awareness of the importance of language by questioning the use of terms such as "normal" or "different" and attaching a negative stigma to these words when used in certain ways. However, they also notably lacked the language to address families outside of their zone of familiarity and subsequently reverted to using a white, nuclear, heterosexual family as a 'standard' or societal norm off which they based their perceptions. The SPHE curriculum notes that the development of language awareness "can also contribute to building positive relationships by enhancing communication and fostering genuine understanding" (NCCA, 1999, p. 7). Teacher's have the opportunity to explicitly seek out and provide children with diverse literature. This will inevitably provide children with opportunities to expand their current vocabulary, broaden their experiences and, subsequently, improve their communication skills.

It is important to acknowledge that while teachers have a certain level of accountability in improving their own practices, a whole school approach to inclusivity is always preferable.

Loreman (2007) argues that whole school commitment is a crucial element for true success in inclusive practices.

For inclusion to be truly successful, the entire school needs to be committed to making it so, as it is extremely difficult for individual educators to 'include' in isolation. (Loreman, 2007, p. 27)

Denominational Settings

As noted by DePalma & Atkinson (2009, p.133) teaching about diversity of identity and indeed families in "faith-based" or denominational schools can be "more difficult", most notably teaching about LGBTQ+ families. This is particularly relevant to this study as it was conducted in a Catholic school. The SPHE curriculum supports broadening children's experiences, including the recognition of diverse families. However, given the Catholic Church's teachings on morality there is an inevitable amount of uncertainty faced by teachers in these denominational settings surrounding LGBTQ+ content. In 2019 the INTO called for explicit guidance for teachers in teaching about LGBTQ+ issues, noting that:

Although teachers are legally allowed to teach children about LGBT+ issues as part of the current SPHE curriculum and to comply with national school anti-bullying guidelines, many teachers do not feel comfortable or informed enough to teach the topic. Some teachers are afraid to teach children about LGBT+ issues because of their schools' ethos. (Hegarty, 2019)

Further Research

While the children in this study were largely open to and accepting of difference, their understanding of and experience with it is indeed limited to that of the knowledge they are provided with. This is perhaps further constrained by the limiting nature of a religious ethos. The researcher proposes that a similar study in a non-denominational or multi-denominational setting would be

beneficial in order to further examine the potential impact of religious ethos on children's perceptions of family.

Key Recommendation: Developing Critical Thinking

Perhaps the most salient message for educators to take from this research is the children's ability to engage in critical thinking. The activities the children took part in provided them with the opportunity to engage in critical thinking, subsequently creating an open dialogue between them and their peers which often allowed them to access new perspectives.

As discussed in chapter four, VTS prompts were used during the focus groups. This method for developing critical thinking through the use of art can be easily applied in the classroom (Yenawine, 2013).

The researcher recommends that educators endeavour to create a space for critical thinking in the classroom. The development of this skill may allow children to access new perspectives (Hooks, 2010) and promote understanding and empathy (Cress & Holm, 1998). Although critical thinking itself does not innately challenge bias or discrimination in education, it does equip children, and indeed adults, with the tools to recognise it.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Parental Consent Form and Information Sheet



Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Aine Clerkin and I am a Professional Master of Education (PME) student in my final year at Marino Institute of Education. As part of my final year, I must conduct a research study which I have chosen to base around SPHE curriculum topic of “family”. As part of this research, I would like to conduct some small group SPHE lessons and discussions with the children of 4th, 5th and 6th class.

Family is a key element of the SPHE primary school curriculum and the purpose of this research is to learn more about how 4th, 5th and 6th class children perceive “families”.

The lessons will be audio recorded. The data will be stored on a password protected device and will only be used by me for the purpose of my research. I will ensure full confidentiality of the children.

Participation is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to allow your child to take part in the study or may choose for your child to leave the study at any time.

If you agree to allow your child to participate, your child’s identity will remain completely confidential. His or her name will not be attached to any information collected nor will any information be viewed by anyone other than qualified researchers working on this study.

Should you have any questions please feel free to email me via the email address below.

Yours sincerely,
Aine Clerkin
aclerkinpme18@momail.mie.ie

Please complete one of the two options below:

I do consent to allow my child _____ to participate. (Print child’s name)

I do not wish my child _____ to participate. (Print child’s name)

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____

Appendix B: Children's Active Agreement Form

Dear 4th, 5th and 6th Classes,

Miss Clerkin will be doing some research on the SPHE topic of "myself and others" and needs your help.

If you decide to help, you may be called out of class for a short SPHE lesson and group discussion.

I will take some notes and record audio during these group discussions.

If you would like to take part in the group discussions tick the box, sign your name below.

X

Students Name

X

Class