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AS GCE SOCIOLOGY

G671/01/SM Exploring Socialisation, Culture and Identity

PRE-RELEASE STIMULUS MATERIAL

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Holden, A (2011) “Happily ever after?” Children’s play in mixed communities in Sociology Review, Volume 20, Number 4

Issues of integration in ethnically diverse areas are often the subject of social and political debate. In this research, Andrew Holden focused on children’s play in local park playgrounds and school playgrounds – spaces occupied by children from different ethnic groups. He wanted to examine the extent to which children’s play at different ages and in different settings either reinforces or overcomes the segregation of different ethnic groups. He also studied the attitudes of parents towards integrative play – children from different ethnic groups playing together. He aimed to establish what the parents felt about integrative play and whether they thought it could have a positive effect on communities. Holden focused his research in Blackburn, Lancashire, an ethnically segregated town in northwest England. 5

Holden used a variety of methods to carry out his research. In the first three months of the study, he carried out secondary research to build up a detailed background knowledge. A substantial amount of information was collected from published documents such as the census, the local council’s play strategy, Early Years publications, and website material. 10

Three months into the study, during the spring and summer months, Holden carried out a series of overt non-participant observations which gathered mainly quantitative data. A total of 21 observations were conducted in public parks and school playgrounds – spaces occupied by children from Blackburn’s two main ethnic groups (white and Asian), where one might expect to see some integrative play taking place. The parks chosen were Blackburn’s three largest parks, two of which were situated in heavily Asian-populated areas and one which was in a mixed community. The schools selected for the observations included three primary schools and three secondary schools. These six schools were chosen on the basis of their ethnic and cultural diversity and none of the schools had less than a 25% white or Asian population. The schools were located in or around the town centre. Observations took place at lunch-times in school playgrounds where free play could be readily observed. 15
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The observational data was recorded on a structured schedule, the purpose of which was to identify the nature and extent of children’s play in Blackburn and to establish whether play was integrated or segregated. Shortly after the observations had taken place, a parental attitudes survey was carried out in the form of a self-completion structured questionnaire. The aim of the survey was to establish what parents thought about integrative play and to consider how this could be best facilitated. Using opportunity sampling, the researchers gained access to the parents of children from each ethnic group in a variety of public settings including schools, colleges, community centres and workplaces. Of the 516 questionnaires that were distributed, 303 were returned and recorded. Computer software was then used to analyse the data. 25
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The results of the park observations showed that although there was plenty of free play happening, there was very little integrative play between different ethnic groups. White and Asian children played in close proximity with each other, but there were few signs of conversation between different ethnic groups and no real evidence of mixing. In contrast, the primary school observations revealed that during their playtime, the children engaged positively with members of different ethnic groups. Play was lively and spontaneous, and consisted of groups of children who enjoyed playing together and for whom ethnic membership seemed insignificant. The secondary school observations produced very different findings. There was very little ‘play’ because lunchtime was seen more as a time for relaxation. The majority of secondary school students rarely mixed with members of other ethnic groups. 35
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The parental attitudes survey showed plenty of support for integrative play. Over 85% of white and 97% of Asian parents stated that it was either very important or fairly important for children from different ethnic groups to play together. 45

In conclusion, Holden's research findings both support and refute the suggestion that children's play can promote integration. Although integrative play was more common in schools than parks, there were also variations in play between the different educational sectors. Most encouraging of all was the high level of support for integrative play among parents.

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