**Chapter 1**

# Setting the scene: Introduction

*'The distinctness of a group is neither a fiction nor an essence'*
*(Modood, 2007: 115).*

### Focus and rationale for the study

It is early June and I am sitting with Annakiya as she draws a picture.[1] Annakiya, who is now five years old, arrived in the UK with her immediate family, nine months earlier, from West Africa. She has attended Sunnyside School since the start of the academic year in September. Annakiya begins to draw a picture of her future self as a princess, chatting to me as she does so. As she begins to colour in her picture she recites to me the different colours that she is using to create her rainbow dress, her pink shoes, her brown hair and her golden tiara. After she finishes colouring in these parts of the princess, she pauses and looks at the picture before telling me 'I'm not gunna colour my face because this is when I'm grown up. My hair is curly, I'm a princess and I am light, like you.' I ask her why she wants to be light when she is older. 'Now I'm dark and you are light' she continues. 'When I'm grown up I'm gunna be light, like you, and like my mum. My mum's light too.' As I reflect on this last statement I recall that Annakiya's mum's skin colour is much lighter than her dad's. I tell Annakiya that I like the colour of her skin as it is now, saying that it is very pretty. She ponders this for a while, as she continues to colour in her picture, before saying 'It's OK to be different, like *Elmer*,[2] but really I wanna be like you.'

This study unearths how a group of young children (4-5 year-olds) explore difference and identity in their peer interactions thereby raising questions for how policy and practice can begin to break down the barriers of fear that so often pervade these discourses. The conversation is just one example of how children at Sunnyside understand difference, in relation to their own identity, as being hierarchical; in this instance, 'light' skin colour being viewed as better than 'dark' skin colour. As will be seen throughout this book, children at Sunnyside regularly discuss diversity relating to ethnicity, religion and gender within the context of

1. Pseudonyms are used throughout.
2. The class project at this time focused on the story of *Elmer*, the brightly coloured patchwork elephant who discovers that 'It is OK to be different' when the other elephants in his troop accept him for who he is (McKee, 1989).

identity maintenance and (re)negotiation amongst themselves as well as with me. Within these conversations, children often use 'being …' phrases to describe themselves and others. Phrases such as 'being a girl' and 'being a boy', 'being Muslim' and 'being Christian' regularly feature in their daily social interactions. 'Being' phrases are also used by children to discuss the more abstract concept of 'being different.' Within these everyday conversations, children conceptualise and operationalise social abstractions of difference, discourses of discrimination and hierarchies of difference relating to their ethnic, religious and gendered identities. In doing this they employ both bodily and material markers of difference as they explore the performative, situated and dialectical nature of identity. Both social structure and social agency are salient in children's daily identity (re)negotiations amongst their school peers. All of these aspects will be explored in more detail in later chapters of this book.

Children's discussions about difference and identity are not constructed in isolation from wider social discourses but, as this study reveals, discourses and social structures that are dominant in both mainstream popular and minority cultures, and embedded across time and space, are foundational in children's own constructions of self and others. Consequently, as Hall (2000: 4) points out, identities can be understood as being 'constructed within, not outside [of], discourse'. Discourses of difference, and particularly fear or disdain of the so-called 'other', are prevalent in all aspects of life. From classical Western children's stories, such as Burnett's *The Secret Garden* and Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, to popular culture and science fiction, like *Battlestar Galactica*, discourses of difference are promoted, perpetuated and, at times, challenged. The recent rise of right wing politics across Western Europe, which perpetuates a fear of migrants stealing local jobs, the threat of global terrorism and the onslaught of non-Western cultural values, further entrenches discourses of difference and discrimination (Lowles and Painter, 2011). Segregated social systems in many of the countries, where children at Sunnyside have recently arrived from, create an artificial distance between communities, discouraging interaction and encouraging fear of 'the other', resulting in the prominence of systematic inequality and at times tribal factions and civil war (United Nations Human Rights Council [UNHRC], 2010). Media advertising that uses digital technology to lighten celebrities' skin colour and promotes skin lightening creams to minority communities adds to this, by creating a hierarchy of difference that views the ideal body image and so-called beauty (particularly of girls and women) as being linked to a specific ethnic identity (Glenn, 2008). Disdain of 'the other'

and dominant views of what is best consequently become part of wider social discourses with language such as 'us' and 'them' peppering everyday conversations. Consequently, identity becomes a salient feature of social interaction. While, as this study reveals, identity and social divisions, such as ethnicity and gender, are socially constructed, associated forms of discrimination, such as racism and sexism, are very real and can have a profound impact on an individual's life. As Modood (2007: 115) states, groups and collective identities should not be considered to be 'a fiction nor an essence' as the impact of social discourses leaves a very real mark on individuals' and communities' sense of self.

The prevalence of such discourses raise a range of questions about the social world: What unites and divides individuals? Why do we fear difference? Why do we feel a need to protect our own against 'the other'? Why does inequality and discrimination pervade all aspects of society? The answers to these and other similar questions are too big for this book. However, this study will begin to address how a group of young children explore identity and diversity in their peer interactions thereby raising questions for how policy and practice can begin to break down the barriers of fear that so often pervade these discourses. In doing so, this study begins to illuminate how and why young children are influenced by wider social structures of difference and fear or disdain of 'the other.'

Previous research that identifies young children's understanding of difference as a hierarchical social construction, in which certain identities are considered to be more valid than others, forms the foundation of this research. Earlier studies show that some young children try to deny aspects of their own identity because of this wish to have an externally validated identity and feel that they 'belong,' for example in wanting to be considered 'white' (Holmes, 1995; Nayak, 2009). These views reveal underlying structural inequalities in society that commonly view 'white as better' and majority forms of capital as more valid than minority capital (Lin, 2000). When taken to an extreme, these views can lead to racial and/or ethnic segregation but more commonly impact on a daily basis on an individual's social interactions; such as their friendship groups and social networks (Holmes, 1995). This patterning of social capital impacts directly on an individual's access to resources and services, such as education and healthcare. As the UK is a multi-ethnic society with a continually diversifying population (Nazroo, 2006; Vertovec, 2007), research, such as the current study, and policies that address the inequalities that ethnic minorities face, and aim to bring some form of social justice, are becoming more and more important.

Building on this foundation, this study fills a gap in the current literature by exploring the experiences of young children from North and Sub-Saharan African families. The rationale for this focus stems from the prevalence of research in the UK that focuses on children from South Asian families and fails to uncover the experiences of children from other backgrounds. Adding to this, previous studies that have explored notions of difference with young children have tended to frame this within a discussion about bodily markers of difference failing to unearth how children understand material markers of difference. Addressing these gaps in the literature, my study uncovers how children from a diverse range of backgrounds conceptualise and operationalise a range of identity markers in a dynamic social world, over a specific period of time.

## Aim and objectives

Building on the rationale outlined above the central aim of this study was *to uncover and improve understanding of how cultural minority children explore identity and social interaction in a multi-ethnic Early Years classroom.*

To achieve this, an ethnography was undertaken to explore young children's identities and peer interactions through sharing their stories and co-constructing an interpretation of their social meaning. Within this framework, children are understood as being 'rich', competent social actors (Moss et al., 2000). Previous ethnographies also adopting this framework, such as van Ausdale and Feagin's (2001) work in America and Connolly's (2003) in Ireland, discovered that young children actively understand and employ 'conventional' markers of difference and apply social meaning to abstract social discourses. Further to this, these studies have also revealed that children are aware of, and at times actively perpetuate, wider social discourses of discrimination and hierarchies of difference. Each of these aspects are also unearthed in the current study.

As Malinowski (1922) advocates, I entered the field with a clear but unrestrictive aim and an open mind as to how the ethnography would unfold. Once in the field, the project began to take shape as the children participated in the ongoing design of the study and highlighted the aspects of identity and diversity that were important to them. Based on my initial observations in the field, conversations with children and staff as well as an initial review of related literature I devised the following six research objectives:

1   To determine how young children conceptualise and operationalise identity.
2   To discover how young children view difference.

3    To uncover what part these aspects play in how patterns of interaction are formed in a multi-ethnic context.

4    To develop an interdisciplinary theoretical framework to explore the concept of identity.

5    To explore how ethnography can support and develop educational research methodology and vice versa.

6    To raise questions for consideration in policy and practice.

My initial review of the literature, highlighted a number of aspects that we already know about the nature of identity, diversity and difference as well as how young children conceptualise and operationalise these concepts. To briefly summarise this, previous theoretical and empirical research has revealed that:

identity is performative, situated and dialectical in nature;

'strong structuration' is a useful concept that allows researchers to uncover and understand social relations and practices;

research with young children predominantly adopts a developmental approach that views identity as asocial;

children are competent and capable social actors who hold important perspectives on social life that need to be heard and valued;

young children are aware of abstract concepts such as identity, racism etc.;

young children can, and do, apply 'conventional meaning' to abstract concepts.

Building on this foundational knowledge, this ethnography uncovers a group of young children's experiences of identity, diversity and inequality. In this way, it can be seen as a vehicle guiding the way in which we currently understand young children, as it seeks to influence current educational practice in an ever diversifying social world. In exploring how children from North and Sub-Saharan African families conceptualise and operationalise difference in relation to bodily and material markers this study unearths theoretical, methodological and representational insights as it:

draws together and critiques different identity theories within a 'strong structuration' framework;

adds to the growing body of literature that applies 'strong structuration' to empirical contexts and by doing so helps to develop the ongoing critique of this concept;

develops the related concepts of bodily and material markers of difference;

highlights how educational research methodology can learn from ethnography and vice versa;

shows how young children conceptualise and operationalise a complex understanding of identity in their everyday lives;

highlights the salience of identity for young children;

reveals the lived experiences of young children's experiences of identity and inequality;

uncovers the details and prominence of children's daily negotiations about identity and diversity;

illustrates how children's collective experiences can and do link global (macro) and local (micro) contexts.

The way in which this study uncovers each of these aspects will be explored in later chapters of this book.

The field location for this ethnography was a Reception class (aged 4-5) in a culturally diverse primary school, Sunnyside, in the North of England, where the majority of children are from North or Sub-Saharan African families. The rationale for selecting Sunnyside as the field location was based on advice from research colleagues, two locally based English as Additional Language Coordinators (employed by the Council), and also through reviewing recent Ofsted reports for basic school demographics relating to the minority cultural (and language) make-up of children at the school. Access was then negotiated via a colleague.

Data about the school's demographics have been compiled from recent Ofsted reports, national school level census statistics and the school's own data. To protect the identity of the school references for these documents are not given below.

Two-hundred and ten children attended the school during my fieldwork period (DfE, 2011). A number of pupils are perceived as being from deprived backgrounds as is reflected in the forty-one per cent that are entitled to free school meals , a measure described by Gillborn and Youdell (2000: 10) as 'a crude proxy of poverty'. The national average across all state-funded primary schools for the same year was nineteen per cent.

The majority of pupils, in Ofsted's words, are from cultural minority 'groups' and in 2005 (i.e. during the last Ofsted inspection before I started my fieldwork) it was reported that there were at least fifteen different home languages spoken. Many pupils are new to the UK when they first arrive at Sunnyside and have a limited grasp of the English language. The majority of children from cultural

minority families fall into two broad categories: refugees or asylum seekers, and children of international students studying at post-graduate level at the nearby university.

Sunnyside works hard to celebrate the diversity and cultural capital that each child brings to the school. They do this via whole school projects, school assemblies and class-based activities. Sunnyside has also teamed up with the initiative *Our Languages* that aims to promote the use of community languages in schools across England. As part of this initiative, Sunnyside is teaching Somali, which is one of the most common community languages within the school, to all Year-3 children and staff. By promoting the Somali language, Sunnyside hopes to support Somali parents in encouraging their children to speak Somali at home, promote self-esteem amongst Somali children and raise the status of the language amongst the whole school community. As Chapter 6 reveals, Somali families are less likely to value their own linguistic capital than other minority families in the school (particularly Arabic speakers). Therefore this is an important initiative that can help families see the importance of their own minority linguistic capital.

Building on this whole school initiative of celebrating diversity and each individual's cultural capital, the Reception class incorporates these principles into the everyday fabric of the classroom, most notably through using multilingual and multi-ethnic resources and topic work, such as multilingual signage and reading books, toys that reflect the ethnic and religious diversity of the children in the class, and anti-discriminatory topic work such as the story of *Elmer*, the patchwork elephant (McKee, 1989).

In 2011/12 (the academic year in which my fieldwork was conducted) the Reception class at Sunnyside was staffed by a classroom teacher (Mary), teaching assistant (Susan) and were scheduled to be supported for two half day sessions by multilingual support workers. At Sunnyside children call staff in the early years by their first names. I was therefore automatically known to the children as Ruth. Throughout the course of the year a number of college students were placed in the class. In January a final year teaching student conducted her final placement there.

Owing to pressures throughout the school, multilingual support workers were often required elsewhere meaning that the Reception class regularly did not receive the multilingual support that they had been timetabled for. According to the senior leadership team (SLT), financial constraints mean that the school as a whole is understaffed in this area. When language support workers are

required elsewhere on a regular basis, lack of support for a particular class can have a profound impact on the learning of children with little English, as well as their social interaction with peers across languages.

Arabic and Somali were the two key languages, other than English, that were spoken in the class. Most children took part in the study in English though the school's multilingual and bilingual support workers were used as translators when appropriate. Peer translators were also used as and when children required. In our conversations some children interspersed English with an Arabic or Somali term, such as *Aljana* (Arabic for heaven) or *Ayeeyo* (Somali for grandmother). Children's own (emic) terms have been used throughout this written ethnography.

The class had two intakes during the course of the year, the first in September and the second in January. In September there were nineteen children in the class: ten girls and nine boys. In January an additional ten children joined the class: five girls and five boys. Due to ongoing migration, two children left the school over the course of the year and two new children joined the class. A total of thirty-one children therefore took part in the study.

On starting school, Sunnyside collected registration data for all children. This data refers to all thirty-one children who were in the class during the course of the year. Additionally data pertaining to the children who joined the class in the second term is included in the January starter data to further protect their anonymity. Key points of interest are highlighted below.

## Registration data

The ethnic categories given on the registration form were as follows: Black Somali; Other Black African; Yemeni; Bangladeshi; Other Asian; White British; Other ethnic group.

It should be noted the information in Figure 1.1 relating to ethnicity was provided by families and does not always reflect the child's self-definition of their ethnic background. As Russell (2011) highlights family-defined ethnicity, such as this, can conflict with children's individual ethnic identification. This was at times the case in the present study. Children's views on their ethnic identity were explored as part of the project and are described in later chapters.

Figure 1.1: Family-defined ethnicity
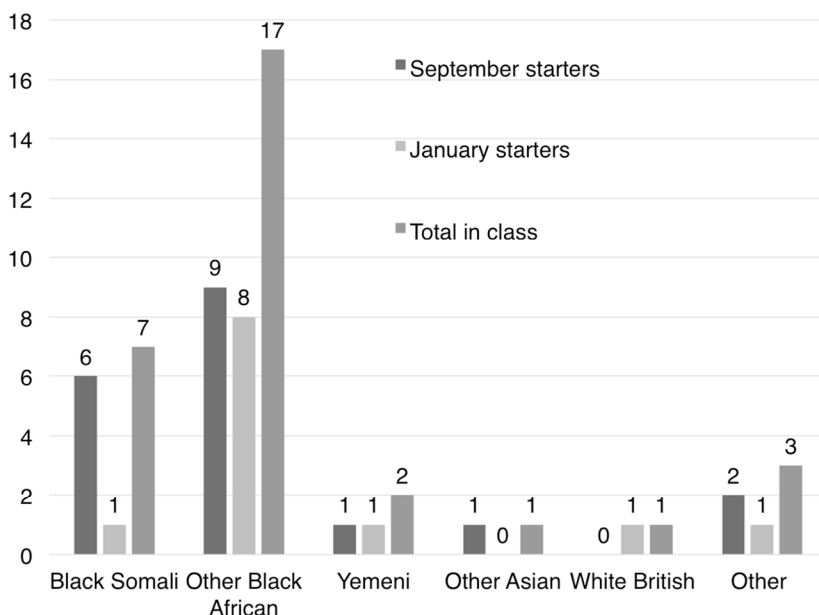


As can be seen from the above figure it is notable that there were (according to the school's official records) no White British children in the September intake. However, what is not clear from this data is that the three children (two September and one January starter) in the 'other category' are both from a mixed heritage with one white English parent.

Additionally it should be noted that categories that are used in this figure were supplied by the school and are problematic, as they mix both national and ethnic categories and also inappropriately include a number of umbrella terms. Umbrella terms, such as Black, can be effectively employed when discussing the politicised nature of ethnic identity i.e. as a term to refer to minority status and inequality. This, however, is not the way in which this term was employed in Sunnyside's school registration data.

The category 'Other black African' is particularly problematic as families from a number of North African countries, e.g. Egypt and Libya, are included here with families from Sub-Saharan Africa. Some children included in this category adamantly self-defined as 'being White' in our research activities.

Within each of these nationalities, families are also from a range of diverse ethnic and cultural 'groups'. Across the whole school, 98% of pupils are from an ethnic minority group. These figures are in stark contrast to the national picture where only 13% of school pupils in state funded primary schools in England are from an ethnic minority group (DfE, 2011).

As can be seen from Figure 1.2, the majority of children in the class speak Arabic as their first language. Within the class children speak four different first languages. This is in stark contrast to the fifteen languages that Ofsted identified across the school.

Figure 1.2: First language profile
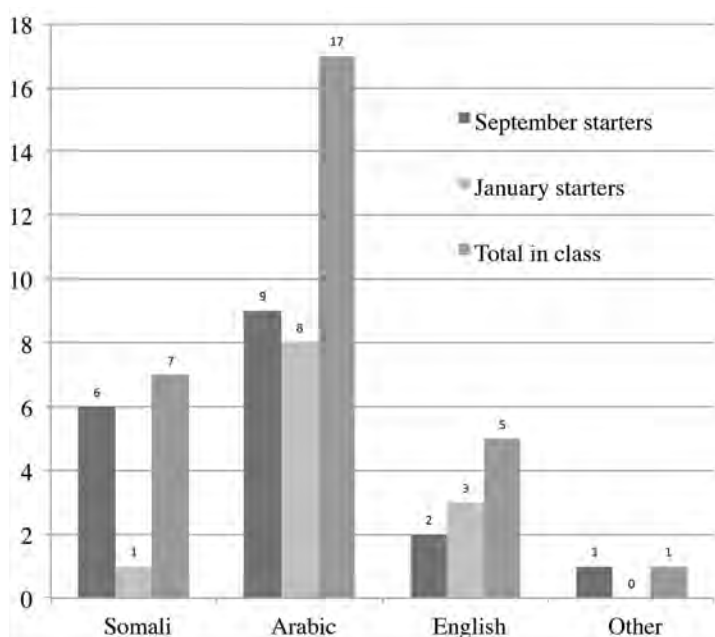


Within the class there were twenty six children who spoke English as an additional language (EAL). Notably, 84% of children in the class spoke a first language other than English compared to the whole school average of 88% and the national average of 17% (DfE, 2011). This figure relates to state funded primary schools in England. Out of the September starters, four children had no (or very little) English at the start of the school year. In January, eight of the January starters also had no (or very little) English. These twelve children received extra language support throughout the course of the year.

Additionally 26% (n=8) of the total number of children in the class were entitled to free school meals. While this figure is considerably lower than the school's overall figure of 43% (n=88) it is considerably higher than the national average where 14% of children under the age of five years old and 18% of all primary aged children are eligible for free school meals (DfE, 2011). These figures relate to maintained nurseries and state funded primary schools in England respectively.

## Key definitions

Before outlining the structure of this book I will first define the key terms that are used throughout this study. As some of these terms are debated and disputed it is important to outline the way in which I use them. Key terms are listed in alphabetical order below.

*Culture*: Building on Geertz' (1973) work, culture is understood as being *the lens through which an individual interprets their social world*. This interpretation stems from an individual's identity, which can incorporate their gendered, national, ethnic, religious, class, educational, positioning in their social context. Aspects of identity such as gender, ethnicity and religion are therefore not purely understood as variables of analysis but rather as social attributes that qualitatively affect how an individual conceptualises and operationalises their identity. The intersecting nature of an individual's identity consequently reveals that the different identities that an individual subscribes to means that their overall worldview may share aspects of another's worldview based on a common identity (e.g. religion) but at the same time may differ based on another aspect of identity (e.g. gender). Additionally an individual's life experiences [as described by Denzin and Lincoln (2003)] such as experience of (in)equality, belonging, community and so on, also has a part to play in how an individual interprets their social world.

*Discourse*: Adopting Connolly's (1998: 26) definition, discourse can be interpreted as *the way in which we think about the social world*. In order to make sense of the social world discourses employ labels and categories to delineate socially accepted ways of thinking and behaving. Discourses, consequently, 'influence and shape the way in which the social world is structured' while also 'underpin[ning] our knowledge of … the social world.' Discourses, as this study highlights, are fundamental in the development and maintenance of identity.

*Ethnicity*: As Salway et al. (2009a: 2) highlight, 'the term 'ethnicity' is employed in diverse and contradictory ways in social research as well as in wider societal

discourse'. It can refer to shared origins and ancestry, cultural values and beliefs, geographical origins, biological features and socio-political dimensions. For the purposes of this study *ethnicity is understood as being socially constructed*. Children's own definitions of the significance of ethnicity are employed when uncovering their emic perspectives. Some children employ shared origins while others refer to cultural values, biological features or socio-political dimensions in their conceptualisations of ethnic identity. The multi-faceted and fluid nature of ethnicity and ethnic identity is therefore integral to this study. The term ethnicity is employed throughout instead of the term race due to the latter's common association with genetic stratification.

*Gender*: Like ethnicity, *gender is also viewed as being socially constructed*. However, the prevalence of the male-female binary as a central component of dominant gender discourses is also acknowledged (Davies, 2003) as is its incorrigible prevalence in the discourses that were employed by children at Sunnyside. Within this binary relationship, gender and gendered interactions can be heavily sexualised (Walter, 2010).

*North Africa*: The United Nations (UN) includes seven countries in its geopolitical definition of North Africa: Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia and Western Sahara. North Africa is considered to be part of the Arab World. There were children from Egypt, Libya and Morocco in the reception class at Sunnyside.

*Operationalise*: The term operationalise refers to the ways in which individual's perform and embody aspects of their identity. This concept depicts the fluid ways in which identity can be enacted and incorporates the way in which social structures can influence and constrain identity (re)negotiation as well as the role that social agency has in how individuals replay and reinvent their identity as a form of agentive borderwork.

*Patterns of interaction*: Due to the challenges of defining friendship with young children the term patterns of interaction will be used throughout. It should be noted though that when discussing with children who they like to play with the term 'friend' was often used by them and subsequently was also used by me when employing research activities.

*Religion*: The concept of religion and associated concepts of religious belief and identity are defined by Durkheim (1912) as *a collection of cultural belief systems or worldviews* that manifest themselves in a collective identity. This collective role of religion was also expressed by children at Sunnyside as a way of uniting themselves with, or separating themselves from, their peers.

*Sub-Saharan Africa*: Sub-Saharan Africa refers to all countries that lie (either partially or fully) south of the Sahara desert. Geopolitically Sub-Saharan Africa contrasts with the Islamic countries in North Africa. In the reception class at Sunnyside there were children from two countries in Sub-Saharan Africa: Nigeria and Somalia.

## Rationale for book structure

Following on from this introductory chapter Chapter 2 *Being in the field* discusses my methodological approach and justification before shedding further light on my fieldwork location, sampling strategy, research methods, collaborative analysis, ethics and researcher positionality.

As Wolcott (1995; 1999) advocates, a full ethnography in terms of its focus, process and output was adopted throughout this study. Consequently, the main body of this book has been constructed as a written ethnographic account where literature, data and reflections are inter-woven to create an overall narrative that elicits children's emic perspectives of diversity and identity. Therefore Chapters 2-6 all deal with a theme or set of related themes that have emerged from my data. The narrative in these chapters is presented in an inductive-deductive circular approach. The titles of these chapters incorporate a 'being ...' phrase that the children at Sunnyside used in their conversations about identity and diversity.

Chapter 3, *Being me* introduces children's narratives about their own and others' identity, while also laying the theoretical framework on which these encounters will be built through examining the concept of identity itself. By using Mill's (1959) concept of the *sociological imagination* and Stones' (2005) notion of *strong structuration*, this chapter shows why identity is important, before moving on to discuss the roots of the term and its fundamental notions of similarity and difference. Goffman's (1959) theory of *dramaturgical analysis* is used to reveal the agentive nature of identity before Hughes' (1945) *master status theory* [sic] highlights the structural discourses that can constrain an individual's social agency. Jenkins' (1996; 2008) work then shows how *the duality of structure* is important within this discussion through interpreting identity as a dialectical process.

Chapter 4, *Being all of me* reveals how children conceptualise and operationalise the complex ways in which aspects of their identities intersect. The concept of intersectionality grounds these narratives in a theoretical framework. This chapter then explores how children at Sunnyside operationalise their intersecting identities through symbolic mediation. Building on Goffman's

(1959) theory of dramaturgical analysis, this chapter explores the concept of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1962) as well as how dynamic aspects of identity play out in the lived experience of children at Sunnyside.

Chapter 5, *Being different* explores in more detail how Sunnyside's children view difference and conceptualise and operationalise their identities amongst their school peers. The chapter starts by discussing how children understand notions of self and others before moving on to discuss how wider social discourses of discrimination and hierarchies of difference play a part in how children understand ethnic, religious and gender diversity. This chapter then moves on to reveal how children discuss identity in their peer conversations before showing how children used imaginative play to operationalise their identities at Sunnyside.

Chapter 6, *Being friends* initially explores the relationship between language, identity and patterns of interaction. Building on previous chapters, it will then uncover how children at Sunnyside negotiate their patterns of peer interaction both at and outside school in relation to how they conceptualise and operationalise their identities.

Chapter 7, *The story so far* summarises the key arguments in the book and discusses how some children actively challenge structural discourses of discrimination (both *external* and *internal*) at Sunnyside and in the process reveals how children can unlearn discrimination, highlighting the role that educational settings can play in this process. In doing this, this concluding chapter will raise questions relating to how policy, practice and future research can respond to the key findings in this study.