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Author	Siân Mitchell MacGregor
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Eye-Level With the Child: Family, Power, Performance

Siân Mitchell MacGregor
University of Aberdeen / Imaginate

When I was approached to write a reflective piece for this edition of Forum on the theme of family, I was immediately pleased and at the same time conflicted. I was buoyed to be asked: that it was perhaps a signal that the work happening in my discrete field of young audiences was gaining visibility outside of it. This made sense: the important work in supporting children's arts experiences by my doctoral partner, Imaginate, has gained prominence and impact in the decades since its inception. Its internationally renowned Edinburgh International Children's Festival is ever-growing in stature and influence, alongside year-round determined support and advocacy for professionally made children's theatre and dance. The corresponding scholarly field has similarly expanded, nestling between the sub-genres of performance studies and audience studies and borrowing from many others including psychology and early childhood scholarship - intersecting topics in the realms of arts and society.

Yet I felt uncomfortable discussing a theme of family, as my research addresses only one assumed component of it – the child – and I prefer to consider children on their own terms: individual, expert, visible, unembedded. I have often found that discussing the family as a whole potentially risks the erasure of the child as a standalone entity. Furthermore, I interact with children in the specific research context of watching live theatre and dance especially made for them – the wider family usually only chaperoning, secondary, and often problematic as such. Additionally, it is a persistent struggle to explain to those outside its immediate circle that this genre of children's theatre *exists* as a specific and professional specialism that is well-founded in artistry. Hence, I was startled at how an unexpected provocation – the offer to reflect on the topic here – in fact offered a hitherto unseen view of a subject I have come to know thoroughly – or thought I did.

My current project is entitled *Valuing Young Audiences*. I have long reasoned that to *value* a young audience requires me to understand them. And to do this successfully means being alongside and amongst them – witnessing the child's eye view literally and figuratively

– especially in relation to them watching live performances. Hence, my research methodology centres the child or young person at all stages – at times purposefully dodging or ignoring adult influence except in terms of safeguarding and carer consent. I aim to be on the children's side – metaphorically and physically on their level. With the children and young people who informed my study, I have talked but mainly listened, watched and shared artistic outputs and transcribed hours of their conversations in an attempt to really value them – as well as to discover what the children themselves value - and what this truly means.

From this vantage point, I can clearly observe children acting simultaneously as both individuals in their own right and component parts of a family. I captured this in multiple settings and responses and observed children operating in many more than one 'family', if the definition is taken less literally: amidst relations, peers, and educational settings to name only a few. Indeed, in my sector of professional theatre and dance, I have witnessed even the youngest children ably operate outside of traditional family structures, which in turn challenges assumed structures and functions of families as we think we know them. Moreover, I have come to experience theatre and dance as spaces where children can develop and exercise their agency away from familial and familiar restrictions, which again troubles a notion of a family as a single, established, cohesive and ineluctable entity. It does, however, cement the need to (re)consider the family as a lens and structure.

This May, I co-organised an event on the theme of children's theatre, rights and authenticity with the Scottish Graduate School for Arts and Humanities (SGSAH) which aimed to capture and showcase the research and specialist work happening in our sector and how it impacts and interweaves through professional performance work, academia and beyond. Given the success of the event, I initially wanted to make it the core of this reflection, as it spoke appropriately to the theme of family – interlacing through and linking families of different kinds – reflecting the dualism of components and cohesion: individuals working together. It seemed to offer a fitting appetiser to a wider consideration of the family – as metaphor, as core, as variable framework. However, this reconsideration of a definition of family and the child's place within it revealed an issue which undermined my carefully constructed research practice and the neat trajectory I had hoped for here. Despite lively and meaningful discussions about them and heartfelt advocacy for their genre, children were not

present at the event we organised. And it had taken retrospective reflection weeks later to suddenly expose the irony of this to me.

As a scholar of young audiences, and one who places the child at the heart of my research practice, this felt unacceptable, but disappointingly familiar: doubly so as I had thus inadvertently constructed my own case study of exclusionary practice. All this despite being aware of the ample research which has proven that children are capable of contributing to or understanding wide-ranging settings. As Claire Cassidy asserts, children are not 'deficient' in their abilities to contribute fruitfully, but it is merely that they are lacking practice and tools: they have "had fewer opportunities to engage with the world of which they are a part" (Cassidy 8; see also Dockett & Perry). It is not clear to many that children are expert contributors, and that nobody, not even former children, can better understand or express what it is to be a child. The exclusion of children's voices from the workshop therefore felt like a betrayal of my most key informants and principles; the rest of my work aims to directly include children: nothing about them without them, to appropriate the WHO's phrase.

In our defence, this exclusion of children at our event was unusual for its festival setting, and definitely for my work in general; it was done for practical – and ultimately appropriate – reasons. The session was primarily a meditation on and sharing of practice which aimed to explore and improve performance work for children, as well as its overall advocacy. In short, its structure catered to adults' modes of thinking and expression. Nevertheless, and for reasons of simple pragmatism, we had temporarily turned our backs on our own ideology: the children were talked about, not conversed with. They were separated out from any other group by their absence, and as Denzin and Lincoln describe, they were 'othered', which in a public sphere like this risked reinforcing an exclusionary stance against this often-overlooked minority. Paradoxically, however, the children's apparent invisibility drew heightened attention to their input. For once, their absence was somewhat helpful: this scenario bluntly reminded me of the need to look carefully again (and again) at what we assume individuals and groups to be, who they include, and what they do - for worse, but also for better. A reconsideration of established assumptions and relationships, a recognition of bias or mistakes, especially those obscured by good intentions.

The larger societal landscape traditionally frames the child as integral to the family, but that same framework often denies much agency to the child. There are clearly good reasons

for this – safety and education, for example – but the fact is that often this assumptive position continues beyond young childhood, with little influence afforded to the child to redress power imbalances or to fully express their own needs. Without regular and careful reconsideration of such structures, those with least puissance remain smothered, othered, frustrated – their capabilities destabilised through lack of opportunity. I have witnessed this first-hand in the surprise and mild confusion amongst my young informants during research sessions, who required encouragement to express their own, instinctual responses during our conversations, having long been schooled to offer that 'right' answer.

A critical perspective on the modern conception of the family has been delivered by Queer theory, which continues to examine, question and challenge established frameworks, whilst conversely also using components of the family as launch points or touchstones. Lee Edelman's concept of the child and futurity, and Kathryn Bond Stockton's exploration of the queer child are just two examples of fruitful new pathways of thought. Incidentally, these also underline the values which are vested on the child without the complicit knowledge or agreement of any children, but that simultaneously liberate the child from some of the assumed values attached to them.

Indeed, the idea that families come in all shapes and sizes remains an enduring trope which is still often supported by research showing that such shapes and sizes continue to alter. This change in established societal norms has nevertheless drawn attention to notions of power and relationships previously unchallenged or unnoticed. It is in this power imbalance - which I have deeply investigated and attempted to neutralise within my project - that I found something more universal to contemplate and to share, in the context of the child's world. With a shift in attitude, ways of considering and listening to children can apply more widely to anyone within any kind of family setting. So too can specific research methodologies. These can aid researchers to widen and diversify research practices and thereby offer different angles, accessibility and equity; for myself, they have garnered data from observations and immersion in others' worlds. My research discovers that children are surrounded by different types of family, the varying ways they are able to navigate and inhabit each, and how they imprint their needs upon them, especially through inclusive creative practice.

These findings were most starkly illustrated to me during a professional engagement which morphed into a fortuitous ethnographic encounter: I worked for a few weeks as a stage

manager with a show featuring a professional dancer and a primary school-aged performer. Joining the project in its final stages, I noted immediately the sincere efforts that the company made in involving the child both in their preparatory process and later in the content of the piece, relating to him as ordinary company member in most respects: the child performer joined initial creation, warm-up, timetabling and check-in sessions as an equal, expressing ideas verbally and physically that were retained and developed in the same way as an all-adult company would. In short, the young performer was involved throughout, enveloped in this artistic family but offered agency to contribute to and perform the material created. This not only aided in his own developing artistic journey, which in turn added to the authenticity of the piece but also meant that his own true interests and creativity as a youngster were shown on stage for peers in the audience to connect with. He attended rehearsals without his usual family members or school staff: he joined in as individual and part of the creative whole – invited in but equally occupying his own space.

An unexpected juxtaposition of his worlds occurred during this time when his classmates came to see the show; his loyalty to the accuracy of the performance collided with a need to maintain a certain standing amidst peers which sometimes demanded dissent or clowning behaviour. In this situation, he could not fully be part of either 'family' as both were present. The fact that he performed the piece with his usual precision and charm that day indicated his ability to navigate two worlds at once – to retain agency in both through inclusive opportunities and mutual respect – to reconsider the family structure less as guaranteed support but more a pathway to choose to follow, or escape.

Reconsidering the family and centring the child sincerely and in different settings offered me a new lens and methodology and challenged existing power structures; reflecting on my processes and actions offered an in-built critique. The fact that, even so, I still sometimes fail to include children as a matter of course reveals the persistence of prevailing norms and how these should be constantly revisited and questioned. In all of my work, I aimed to place the child at the centre and show what effect this positioning has – the child is not surrounded so much as agential, catalytic, creatively disruptive, in a way that any member of a family should be - and any family can offer this support.

In short, families inspire and surround, but the individual navigates their own path through several of them. So too can academic researchers be inspired and nurtured by their

families, but equally use them as launchpads, to rail against, challenge or support – and at all times to reflect on those elements which seem assured and fixed. For examining our own practice and uncovering our assumptions reveals that which is hidden and can be made anew.

Siân Mitchell MacGregor is in her final year of the SGSAH-funded doctoral project *Valuing Young Audiences* at the University of Aberdeen. She is based in the school of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture, with additional supervision from Anthropology and industry partner *Imaginate* (Edinburgh), as part of a collaborative doctoral award. Siân's background is arts-based, primarily in theatre studies, holding an MA and MLitt from the University of Glasgow. Before coming back to study, she spent two decades working backstage in theatres – mostly in contemporary dance and children's theatre and dance.

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