Interrogating the discursive constitution of the ‘normal’ in ‘inclusive’ early childhood education

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Statement of originality

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University’s Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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Abstract

Research within the field of 'inclusion' in early childhood education is often explored within the positivist paradigm where the interrogatory gaze falls on the child with 'special needs'. This approach embedded in developmental and psychological discourses focuses on this child as the problem, their perceived difficulties within the mainstream classroom and the importance of their assessment, diagnosis, and remediation. Offering an alternative view, my thesis questions and challenges 'practice as usual' by utilising a poststructural perspective to look otherwise. It turns the gaze away from the diagnosed child toward the including group, the 'normal'. My study is inspired by previous work that conceptualises, troubles and interrupts the 'normal' as a cultural and discursive construct. I focus on the discursive constitution and maintenance of the 'normal', a mechanism theorised to exercise power by imposing limitations and conformity on subjects as it individualises, compares and evaluates difference in the classroom. Researching among children, the ethnographic study in three early childhood classrooms employs a Foucauldian discourse analysis along with the concepts of positioning theory and category boundary work to examine the observations and the conversations of human actors as well as the contribution of non-human actors in the 'inclusive' classroom. By attending to how circulating discourses are taken up by the 'normal' in everyday social practices, I make visible the category boundary and maintenance work performed by the children as they work to position themselves and each other. The children’s words and actions produce inclusionary but also exclusionary effects as they encounter the child with a diagnosis. These effects interrupt taken for granted assumptions about the 'inclusive' nature of the classroom. In my reading of them I note how traces of exclusionary historical discursive practices recounted by Foucault (2006) in History of Madness, continue to permeate current medical, psychological and developmental discourses and practices and contribute to the constitution of the 'normal' in the inclusive classroom. My thesis illustrates how sanctioned, privileged and 'naturalised' everyday practices of the discursively produced ‘normal’ operate, how they silently exclude and problematize difference and for the most part, how they remain unchallenged. My study takes up this challenge and interrogates the limits and exclusions imposed on subjectivities by the 'normal'. It demonstrates how scrutinizing the discursive constitution of the ‘normal’ and interrogating its power on subjectification present promise for 'inclusive' early childhood education.