The Discourse of Control: disruption and Foucault in an early childhood classroom

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ABSTRACT Disruption can be a result of a wide array of circumstances, but is commonly identified as a ‘control problem’ in early childhood classrooms. In this article, the author argues that the recognition of disruption as a ‘control problem’ is embedded in and governed by the social power and values entrenched in teaching discourses. Classroom practices draw strongly on the discourse of educational psychology and utilise its power and immanent knowledge to ‘discipline’ early childhood agents through classroom practices. These early childhood practitioners then become both an object and a subject of this knowledge. This article problematises particular discourses used in a metropolitan West Australian pre-primary classroom and aims to find alternative avenues to view disruption. To aid this search, the multiple meanings of ‘discipline’ in connection to behaviour management, learning and pedagogy are explored.

Introduction

‘Discipline’ has multiple meanings related to learning and pedagogy (Hirst & Peters, 1970; Freire, 1975; Slee, 1995). First, discipline is a synonym and verb for control and in practice utilises punishment, reward and regulation and promotes submission and subversion. This concept of discipline in early childhood education follows the fundamental principles of ‘behaviourist operant conditioning’ and uses techniques of behaviour modification (Slee, 1995). The second meaning of discipline is a form of order, but of a logically different kind (Wilson, 1971) and developed in the context of progressive education (Hirst & Peters, 1970). According to Wilson (1971), disciplined activity is performed for implicit reasons and intrinsic values, while controlled activity is achieved with unrelated reasons and extrinsic values. Thus, a person who contemplates her/his actions and performs them with consideration is disciplined. Freire (1975) expanded Wilson’s (1971) concept by claiming that knowledge produced elsewhere and passed on to learners generates a condition of passivity and therefore may end up in disruption, consequently invoking the teacher’s demand that young persons comply. Hirst & Peters (1970) summarise and clarify the connection between discipline and learning:

In the obvious case of imposed discipline the connection between what is wanted by the child and what the teacher wants him [sic] to learn is artificially created. Prizes and the pain involved in censure and punishment present very general objects of desire or aversion that are tacked on in an artificial way to what has to be learnt. So in learning what has to be learnt the child is learning an irrelevant connection as well as developing an instrumental attitude. (p. 126)

Discipline as a form of control in early childhood education is mostly seen in neo-Skinnerian behavioural terms (Skinner, 1972) and the causes of young people’s disruptive actions are often attributed to students’ family and cultural backgrounds or to the young person’s ‘abnormality’ (Malacrida, 2004). In line with this view, the elimination of discipline problems in classrooms is typically based on, first, the recognition of ‘problem behaviours’ and, second, the consequent dealing with them by employing stimulus-response conditioning (Edwards & Watts, 2004). Thus, teachers encourage appropriate behaviours by giving out rewards, for example handing out star
stickers, and inhibit unwanted behaviours with the use of punishment, such as ‘time out’. In enduring cases of discipline problems, teachers are required to develop practical competencies to better ‘manage’ disruptive behaviours. They may use therapeutic models of intervention and control (Slee, 1995) with or without the psychologist’s help, such as in the identification and treatment of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or conduct disorder.

This article considers the idea that disruption in a particular early childhood classroom is understood by practitioners mainly through a discourse of control. ‘Discourse’ is being used in a Foucauldian (Foucault, 1980) sense as a practice that is produced historically in a specific socio-cultural context, is structured by assumptions and produces power. Power also constitutes and governs individual subjects, who become subject and bearer of power-knowledge relations (Foucault, 1980). Foucault (1980) asserted that some discourses have shaped and created knowledges that have gained the ‘status and currency’ of ‘truth’, and dominate how we define and organise both ourselves and our social world, while alternative discourses are marginalised. Thus, the article similarly claims that the discourse of control in this particular pre-primary classroom became the dominant discourse of understanding and talking about participants’ observations regarding disruption. Furthermore, the same discourse formed teachers’ actions towards the conduct of young human beings, disqualified other understandings of conduct and created the only possible subject positions for both teachers and young human beings.

Methodology

Ethnographic data collected in a Western Australian metropolitan pre-primary school classroom in 2002 and 2003 provide examples of the discourses used by participants. The data were gathered through extensive observation in the classroom and other locations the class visited during school hours, for example the library or school assembly. Observations were done in a ‘passive’ manner (Carspecken, 1996) to reduce the effects of the researcher’s presence on routine activities. The observation technique was ‘priority observation’, where one person and everything he or she did was the focus, which was ‘thickly recorded’ and audio-recorded. ‘Thickly recording’ (Carspecken, 1996) means the noting of verbal interactions together with body postures and gestures, intonations, facial expressions and eye movements of the participants. Thick description also involved low-inference vocabulary (‘as if’, ‘it seems’, etc.), observer comments, contextual information and (after the notes were typed into a word processor) diagrams about sites or movements. During data collection an intensive set of notes was developed as a field journal (Carspecken, 1996) about observations and conversations made when frequenting the classroom and the school.

Following the observations, semi-structured interviews (Spradley, 1979) of approximately 90 minutes’ duration were conducted with the following interviewees:

- seven interviews with the class teacher (B);
- four interviews with the class assistant (K);
- four interviews with one relief assistant (T);
- two interviews with the other relief assistant (R);
- seven parents interviewed individually;
- one interview with the principal (P);
- one interview with the deputy principal (DP).

All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The interviews were built mainly on descriptive questions (Spradley, 1979) such as the ‘typical day’ question or the description of specific events, to contrast and augment the data gained through the observations. Relevant policy, curriculum and professional development materials were also collated while frequenting the site to provide a broad context to the study.

Data collection and the initial analysis used Carspecken’s (1996) method of critical ethnography and followed his recommended first three stages of (1) monological data collection (observation and collection of field notes), (2) preliminary analysis of monological data and (3) dialogical data gathering (interviews) and analysis. Then the analysis shifted to another framework in the next stage (4) and utilised Foucault’s (1977) understanding of power. In this stage (4), the
analysis was built on the relationship between knowledge and power within the practices of this particular pre-primary classroom.

The data analysis started with low-level coding (minimal abstraction of data), which also enabled the selection of segments for further low-level meaning reconstruction (the least possible implication expressed in the understanding) and pragmatic horizon analysis (Carspecken, 1996) during observations. These sections were lifted from the transcripts, established as separate data blocks and analysed through Carspecken’s (1996) suggested stages (1-3). Meaning reconstruction enabled possible meanings to emerge as well as preparing the data for pragmatic horizon analysis. These data were checked on the one hand by ‘peer debriefing’ (in this case a pre-primary teacher from another school looked through the analysis), and on the other hand through the interviews by asking interviewees to reflect on chosen sections of the observations, and later on the transcribed interviews. Pragmatic horizon analysis was used to search for ‘The meaning of a meaningful act ... constituted by intersubjective assumptions (assumptions about how others in first-, second- and third-person positions could experience the act)’ (Carspecken, 1996, p. 106). This was aimed at gaining a shared interpretation of the specific act or meaning system (the selected segment) by the participants and the researcher. Meaningful acts are socially acceptable and appropriate and involve norms and rules; thus, the pragmatic analysis aspired to collect explicitly these rules and norms. Meaningful acts also claim or reference the actors’ subjective states (for example feelings and intentions), the actors’ identity and that there is a certain ‘objective state of affairs’ (Carspecken, 1996, p. 107) that exists; therefore, the pragmatic analysis identified these claims and references in order to get at the shared meanings of acts. Pragmatic horizon analysis also involved semantic analysis (Spradley, 1979) and role analysis, following Goffman’s (1981) theory of roles and statuses, to support the reconstruction of meanings and the pragmatic horizon analysis (in stage 2) and the power analysis (in stage 4). The role analysis looked for the patterns of actions which referred to the same social identity roles in various interactions (Carspecken, 1996). The pragmatic horizon analysis and role analysis were also ‘peer-debriefed’ and contrasted during the interviews. The analysis of the interviews repeated many of the analytic procedures which were used during the second stage. Field notes provided supporting information for the meaning reconstruction and the horizon, role and power analysis.

Following low-level coding in stage 2, higher-level codes were abstracted after the analysis of the interviews, which was based on meaning reconstruction and horizon analysis. Codes were organised through emergent code headings: for example, ‘teacher’s gaze directly affects student’s action’, ‘teacher uses physical contact’ and ‘teacher refers to classroom rules’. The next stage (4) focused on the analysis of power in interactions and practices. The study looked at how power, through knowledge and the use of discourse, produced certain conceptions of disruption, what effects it had on the regulation of young human beings and their teachers’, assistants’ and parents’ conduct, and how these concepts were set into practice. The study also explored how the discursive formations through the application, and with the authority, of power sustained the ‘regime of truth’, namely the understanding of disruption as a discipline problem.

The article consists of three sections. The first section demonstrates how participants ordinarily talked about a ‘disruptive’ state of affairs in the pre-primary classroom, to illustrate the ideas and logic that governed their practices. In the second section I problematise specific elements of this particular discourse in connection with the scientific discourse of educational psychology and show how this discourse, with its immanent knowledge and social power, pre-determined the identification of disruption as a control problem. The third section pinpoints ruptures in the particular discourse as possible ways to view disruption.

Disruptive State of Affairs in the Pre-primary Classroom

The majority of research participants (except two parents who had no issue with disruption) portrayed the pre-primary class as having serious problems with disruption or, avoiding judgmental categorisation (as the teacher (B) did), describing it as a really ‘unusual’ class. They described young persons as being ‘sneaky’ (K), ‘tricky’ (parent, PE), ‘interesting’ (B), ‘tiring’ (T), ‘difficult’ (R), ‘inappropriate’ (DP), ‘not well-adjusted’ (P) and ‘shocking’ (parent TB). During my first visits to the classroom I saw the class as needing firm control, but spending more time there enabled me to
observe things in a different light. I stopped seeing ‘naughtiness’ and concurrently started questioning what made me, initially, and others to see the situation as a lack of control in the classroom.

The following excerpts from interviews with the relief assistant (T), the class teacher (B) and one parent (TB) demonstrate the climate in the pre-primary classroom and the way these participants saw disruption: ‘I can’t stand...I dread coming here, because the day is so chaotic. The children, these particular children are so bad, their behaviour is so terrible, you do anything’ (T’s interviews, p. 5). When I asked the class teacher (B) about the difficulties encountered that year in the classroom, she gave the following answer: ‘Ah, it’s mostly [pause for three seconds] ... it’s behaviour [pause for three seconds] to have so many children with ... [pause for 10 seconds] with interesting behaviour that we have in one group’ (B, p. 22). The pause of 10 seconds indicates that B hesitated and carefully considered her use of words to describe the behaviour. The pause might also suggest that she saw the behaviour and the ‘naming’ of it as problematic. One parent (TB) identified some ‘naughty children’ in the classroom and implied that there was a lack of sufficient control:

In pre-primary it has been a shocking year. It has been a real eye opener ... I’ve never had pre-primary like this. It’s been a real eye opener and I think Peter and I are counting the days until it’s finished. [She laughs.] ... I worked out that six really naughty children, yeah I just don’t feel that they have got much better. They seem to be, to get away with things and I even had Peter come home and say: Yeah, they were naughty, but they still got the lolly at the end of the day. (TB, p. 3)

These excerpts demonstrate that for these three participants, disruption in the classroom was understood on the grounds of young persons’ conduct or, as the last quote shows, their ‘naughtiness’. Consequently, as is implied in the parent’s (TB) words, the teacher’s (B) job should be to ‘better them’ by controlling them to remedy the situation. Other possible causes for the disruption, for example lack of interest in the topic or process of the activity, or lack of understanding of the task, rarely arose as explanations. The way these participants looked at disruption utilised the notion of discipline (Slee, 1995) as the control of young human beings. When seen this way, possible solutions for the problem focused on the employment of tighter control by using rewards or punishments. Participants mentioned several avenues for eliminating the problem. In the last excerpt from a parent (TB), the solution was to be found in ‘bettering children’. The other relief class assistant (R) pointed to the lack of tight supervision: ‘[She laughs.] Sometimes there are things that [pause for three seconds] I wouldn’t classify as acceptable, [pause for three seconds] but [pause for three seconds] it is a kind of overlooked I suppose’ (R, p. 1). The class assistant (K) felt that her ‘ability’ to deal with the problem needed improvement:

this year sometimes a little bit frustrating with the children, with the little challenges that we’ve had. They’ve been quite strong challenges. Not bad, but ... perhaps tested our ability to get around them and work things out, [laughs] which has often not been a problem for me, but this year it certainly tested me. (K, p. 2)

The principal (P) was aware of the situation in this particular classroom and problems associated with disruption. He pointed to the teacher’s (B) lack of skills to deal with ‘problem kids’ and as a solution he called for ‘consistency’ and ‘consequences’ from the teacher (B):

Last year’s group of five-year-olds had an unusual number of children who had [pause for five seconds], so it was not a usual group of children [pause for five seconds]. And the teacher not necessarily had the skill to cater for that many kids with problems, so we set up a mechanism by which there was an attempt to be very consistent how the children were dealt with and bear consequences. [He talked very slowly, emphasising each word.] And one of the consequences was time out. Out of the room. So the children don’t get reinforcement from their peers. (P, p. 4)

In these excerpts, all six participants viewed disruption in this classroom as located in young persons’ conduct and/or in the lack of teaching skills to address it. Other causes and other avenues for dealing with the issue differently, for example the lack of attention of the young persons to the teacher or tasks and/or their co-operation with the teacher or each other and/or their concentration or lack of it on the task, the change of teaching style or curriculum content, were left
unexplored. The way participants described the situation, the expressions used and the chosen avenues forremedying the problematic experiences show that disruption was understood as the teacher’s (B) problem with control or young persons’ lack of self-control (‘naughtiness’). Suggested and tried ways of eliminating the problems – closer attention to ‘problem kids’, as the principal (P), the relief class assistants (R and T) and some parents (PE, TB, S and E) suggested, and/or the use of rewards such as stickers or praising, as the class teacher (B), the class assistant (K), the relief class assistants (T and R) and the deputy principal (DP) utilised, and/or punishments, such as time out, employed by the class teacher (B) and the principal (P) – consequently required the use of firmer control by the teacher (B) and the principal. The dominant discourse of control in the classroom – namely the grounds for evaluating young persons’ conduct and treating the problem with controlling techniques – marginalised other understandings and resolutions. Thus, disruption in this pre-primary classroom was considered as a ‘discipline problem’ in a sense of needing control related to extrinsic means, as distinct, for example, from the educationally more desirable understanding, the lack of disciplined activity, which is performed for intrinsic purposes (Wilson, 1971).

In the previous excerpts and in other classroom discourses all participants used words that originate in the discourse of behavioural science. Young persons’ actions, the expression of their emotions and their talk were placed under one summarising term: behaviour. Other words and phrases, such as ‘change the behaviour’, ‘mechanism’, ‘consistent’, ‘consequence’ and ‘reinforcement’, are drawn from the discourse of behaviour management. The literature about behaviour management was influenced by educational psychology, especially by Skinner’s (1972) behaviour science, the theory of marking out ‘behaviour boundaries’ by Glasser (1969) and the process of ‘active listening’ by Rogers (1969). Behaviour management draws strongly on the scientific discourse of psychology. According to Foucault (1972, p. 222), (scientific) ‘disciplines’ govern our thinking and:

are defined by groups of objects, methods, ... the interplay of rules and definitions, of techniques and tools: all these constitute a sort of anonymous system ... without there being any question of their meaning or their validity being derived from whoever happened to invent them.

Foucault shifted the emphasis in ‘discipline’ away from control of behaviour to focus on rationalities or ways that we make meaning of things in our everyday lives. ‘Disciplines’ and their techniques exert their effects by making us objects to know, control and regulate (Foucault, 1977). Educational theories and practices draw heavily on psychological theories and findings. Psychology, as a ‘discipline’, has made persons objects of examination and created understandings through the vocabularies and discourses it supplies.

The teacher (K) and the assistants (K, R and T) were scrutinised by each other, the parents and the principal according to whether they had the necessary knowledge and skills to deal with behavioural problems. Vocabularies such as ‘mechanism’ (P) and ‘reinforcement’ (P), rewards and punishments, and practices like ‘time out’ (B and P) or sitting on the listening chair (B) created a tight framework of stimulus-response conditioning (Skinner, 1972) to understand situations in the classroom. ‘Psychology is an “intellectual technology”, a way of making visible and intelligible certain features of persons, their conducts, and their relations with one another’ (Rose, 1996, p. 3). Moreover, the ‘discipline’ of psychology provides us with knowledge about us and we subject ourselves – by controlling and regulating ourselves – to this knowledge. Thus, Foucault supports the Baconian idea that knowledge is power in the way it empowers and serves as an instrument of power, and that the effects of knowledge are modes of control (Wess, 1996). Consequently, teachers acquire and utilise psychological knowledge about children, teaching and learning and by exercising these knowledge they exert power over children (Rose, 1990). For example, by identifying an individual who is ‘behind’ in literacy skills according to a psychological standard, the teacher is able to determine this person’s further career in school. At the same time teachers are also controlled by this knowledge, because they have to act according to it – for example, the knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) – as they are judged and evaluated on the grounds of forming their practices in line with it. Teachers are treated as professionals if they use the most up-to-date techniques and pedagogies of teaching and learning: hence the controlling effect of knowledge (Cannella, 1997).
The ‘discipline’ of psychology and its specific areas – behaviour management, learning and teaching – comprise objects, methods and rules and utilise certain techniques, which are mechanisms and tools that prescribe certain ways for teachers to understand situations, to act and to talk. This is a specific discourse that excludes others who do not conform. Seeing disruption as a ‘problem with control’ in this classroom is pre-defined by the use of particular discourses derived from the scientific discourse of psychology and used in the pre-primary classroom as exemplified above. The teacher (B) and assistant (K) were also judged in accordance with utilising specific psychological techniques warranted for the control of young persons.

The Problematisation of Classroom Discourse

This second part of the article illustrates elements of classroom discourses to demonstrate ways in which the discourse of control dominated participants’ understandings of classroom situations and their practices.

Foucault (1980) focused on how power/knowledge operated within what he called institutional apparatuses, such as the school and its technologies (techniques). For example, the techniques of punishment included:

- discourses, institutions, architectural arrangements, regulations, laws, administrative measures,
- scientific statements, philosophic propositions, morality, philanthropy, etc. (p. 194)

The apparatus is ... always inscribed in a play of power, but it is also always linked to certain co-ordinates of knowledge ... This is what the apparatus consists in: strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge. (p. 196)

The discourse of the classroom, its architectural plan, regulations and administrative measures, is filled with controlling techniques of power/knowledge. The word ‘school’ itself defines relations within the institution and in the classroom as well by specifying certain individualities, and organises space and time according to a particular discourse. Thus, there were students, children, teachers and assistants in the classroom, and there is an activity area, a rest area and a teachers’ area.

The temporal organisation is similar in that the whole day is scheduled into activity time, rest time, inside time, outside time and cooling off time, and commanded by signals such as the play bell, go inside bell, packing up bell, noisy bell and so on. Each word is filled with particular pre-defined expectations towards power relations and appropriate and timely ways of conduct. In school, learning takes place all the time and everywhere under the constant gaze of the teacher’s eyes:

you’re always ... kind of watching, ... with pre-primary children you know outside time was never recess. It was always a time of activities and there were special activities set up and so on.

So [pause for five seconds] you know it was always considered teaching time not just observation time. (B, p. 37)

The whole classroom area was easily controllable because there was no space for younger human beings’ privacy. Even the height of the doors in the toilets invited supervising adult eyes. The teacher and assistants carefully monitored all areas; even sounds and feelings were scrutinised by them, such as feeling sympathy. Young human beings were paired or separated based on their ‘settling effect’ on each other and without consideration of their preferences. The class assistant (K) stated: ‘if they are together, you know things, things could happen. But if they were separate then that was probably better. Like Jesse and Adrienne get on really well so we put them together and they are quite sensible’ (K, p. 6). Sounds were differentiated as well according to their educational value:

As long as it’s busy noise I don’t have a problem with the noise ... As long as they are busy and they are playing nicely and doing all those things and I don’t, the noise doesn’t bother me really ... I mean you are still listening everywhere. Your eyes are everywhere but yeah. No, I don’t mind the noise. (K, p. 4)
In school the young person becomes a student. The word ‘student’ controls the child by setting a clear boundary of its expected conduct – ‘listen to the teacher’, ‘be quiet’, ‘do as I explained to you’. The student should pay attention to the teacher, should learn, should place herself under the governance of classroom rules. The ‘unruliness’ of childhood is over, the ‘learning child’ steps in (Holland, 1992, p. 63). The ‘learning child’ must be placed in a ‘learning environment’ and she must execute ‘well-structured learning tasks’. The idea of ‘student’ creates expectations towards power relationships and conduct in the classroom. Thus, the idea of ‘student’ also provides a base for instant evaluation of the young human being as ‘good or bad’.

Woodrow (1999) argues that images of childhood have a great impact on an individual’s approaches to young persons. She explores three dominant images of childhood that govern the Australian early childhood education field: ‘child as innocent’, ‘child as threat’ and ‘child as embryo adult’ (Woodrow, 1999). The image of ‘child as threat’ calls for tight control measures. It justifies the ‘disciplinary power’ (Foucault, 1977) of behaviour management and control over young human beings. The image of the ‘child as threat’ conveys the meaning that s/he can be dangerous to others (Silin, 1995). It invokes the teacher’s protection of the others in the class. These ‘dangerous children’ need to be tamed/controlled or, in relentless cases, diagnosed and treated. The relief class assistant’s (T) words demonstrate how she saw particular young persons as ‘little devils’ in the class:

Some of the children I wouldn’t say they are little treasures. That, no, you can’t say that [she is whispering], I would say they are little devils [she laughs loudly]. (T, p. 9)

The interplay between the image of the ‘child as threat’ with government policy discourses, such as the third value statement of the Western Australian Curriculum Council’s Curriculum Framework, ‘each person has the right to a friendly learning environment free of coercive ... elements’ (Curriculum Council, Western Australia, 1998, Value Three), may result in the use of strong control against these ‘naughty children’. One parent, TB, mentioned that she and a couple of other parents approached the principal (P) to ensure that firmer control is employed in the classroom and their children are learning in a non-coercive environment:

he [child] hit his sister with a clenched fist in the face and I straight away went to the principal the next day and I said, if you were to go to kindy [kindergarten] and talk to his teacher you would know that he was a really quiet, timid boy, and since he’s been to this particular class he is doing things that he’s never done before and I feel that he got to pick some of that up from here. I heard some of the parents say the same thing that their child has changed, you know, so we went there [to the principal (P)] together. (TB, p. 4)

The principal (P) agreed to attend to their request, since he thought that ‘the teacher not necessarily had the skill to cater for that many kids with problems’ (P, p. 4), and that the class teacher (B) did not use adequate methods ‘consistently’:

I think one of the reasons it [controlling techniques] probably didn’t work, because I don’t think it was used consistently enough. If it would have been there probably would be changed ... behaviours. Because it wasn’t used consistently it doesn’t really change the behaviour of the kids, as well as we can do. You can’t give in some days and not on the others. You do yeah, this happens and the kids will learn it. I think B ... must give lots of chances. [He laughs.] (P, pp. 4-5)

The use of words and phrases such as ‘consistently’ and ‘changed the behaviour’ locates the principal’s (P) view of disruption in the area of control, or, more precisely, behaviour management. As a result of the parents’ complaint, the principal’s (P) attitude towards the elimination of the problem and other concurrent events in the class such as the psychological evaluation of misbehaving children, the class teacher (B) attended a behaviour management training session at the principal’s (P) request.

Two images dominate the way individuals see teachers (Ryan et al, 2001). First, the ‘autocratic teacher’, who strikes young persons’ desks with a ruler to get the class’s attention, is definite about what needs to be done and how, and is not tolerant of any violation of rules. She is firm and clear. Second, there is the ‘developmentally appropriate’ (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) teacher, who is always kind and nurturing, no matter how disrespectful the class might be. She is sensitive and politely asks young persons to settle down or gently diverts their attention from
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disrupting others. She is an insightful carer, who is alert and responsive to young persons’ emotional and developmental needs (Ryan et al, 2001). These two dominant images of teachers are based on psychological learning and teaching theories and define different possible frameworks for understanding teachers’ practices.

The next excerpt from the observational notes shows the teacher (B) acting towards young persons in an autocratic manner. As a preparation for mat activity, the teacher (B) asked the children to sit in a circle. Two boys (C and CL) did not want to co-operate and the teacher (B) sent one to the ‘listening chair’ and the other to the relief class assistant (R). The ‘listening chair’ is a yellow chair (the rest of the chairs are grey) in the corner next to the assistant’s (K) table. Sending somebody to the ‘listening chair’ meant ‘time out’ from the activity:

B: Sit on the listening chair.
C: Don’t. [He holds his arms, because previously the teacher (B) grabbed him by them and pushed him towards the chair.]
B: Sit down CL. [She pushes him down. CL screams, gets up and leaves the circle.] Let me see a big circle. Sit, quick, quick [pause for five seconds]. Let me see who is a clever listener. Move out from the circle, please [to CL, who was lying in the middle of the circle]. Move out, see R [the relief class assistant]. (Observation 5, p. 6)

The mat activity was interrupted with similar incidents often. Teacher (B) sometimes disregarded these episodes so she could carry on with the activities, but sometimes she dealt with them and suspended the activity for a period of time.

During the interviews, the relief class assistants (T and R), the principal (P), the deputy principal (DP), parents (PE, TB, S and E) and the class assistant (K) talked about the disruption and remedying of the situation in the classroom. The teacher’s (B) and the assistant’s role regarding disruption was understood only in the context of the ‘autocratic teacher’ image. They saw the teacher as a control person, who had to act immediately on all inappropriate conduct carried out by children in the classroom, and not as performing other tasks such as executing planned learning activities. As the principal (P) exclaimed, ‘You can’t give in some days and not on others’ (P, p. 5). Thus, the class teacher’s (B) role was simplified, being seen only as discrete reactions to individual incidents, in a similar way to operant conditioning. These thoughts are well exemplified with the relief class assistant’s (T) words:

I would prefer, that she [the teacher (B)] is always straight away firm, so that they know. It would take them [the children] a little while to know, to adjust, you can’t go so far, but I think it would have made life easier ... I think they needed a very firm hand, if you like, right from the beginning. They knew that they only go so far and that could be it. But she is so kind and so caring of them and, and just trying to get them to change their behaviour ... through positive praise and rewards. (T, p. 5)

The class teacher (B) expressed similar views to the relief class assistant (T), when she talked about a parent’s (TB) approach to teach her child about appropriate conduct in school: ‘you can’t [pause for two seconds] punish them at home [for] what they do at school. I think you have to pick up on the positives and, you know, give praise for their positives’ (B, p. 26). The relief class assistant (T) was of the view that she needed to be more autocratic in the classroom and extended the class teacher’s (B) standpoint by demanding compliance from young persons. Such compliance, however, should come from the children’s own understanding and ‘decision’:

I have to be in control. I have to let them know not that I am the boss, but they have to know they can’t misbehave ... I try and be always kind but you have to let them know that you are the boss I suppose. You should be firm and I try to do that ... the positive rewards and get them to decide to be good, decide to co-operate rather than getting them to do it because I yelled at them. (T, p. 4)

The assistant (T) wanted young persons to be good and co-operative because they understood that this was the way to avoid punishment in the form of yelling. Thus, T wanted young human beings to ‘co-operate’ in her control over them.

Silin (1995) claims that the image of ‘ignorant children’ in early childhood pedagogy places young persons in opposition to the intellectual and competent nature of the mature world as
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outlined in Piaget’s (Inhelder & Piaget, 1964) constructivist model of child development. Silin (1995) draws on the two definitions of ignorance: the weak sense of ignorance refers to an absence of knowledge, while, in the strong sense, ignorance is a form of confidence and an openness to experiment. Silin (1995) claims that early childhood education uses the weak sense of ignorance, which has numerous consequences for understanding classroom disruption. Seeing young human beings as ignorant can work against young persons’ involvement in their own learning. The class teacher (B) expressed a similar view to the weaker sense of childhood ignorance as she talked about young persons’ participation in their own education. She stated that in another school:

the kids actually choose what they learn. You know [pause for three seconds] you might give them a broad scheme, but I suppose ask them then, what they want to learn. I suppose in some way I could do that. But I think I would probably [be] manipulating a little bit. [She laughs.] I would direct them ... I would so. Because there ... [are] so many things I want kids to know about I would probably find myself encouraging them [she laughs] to let them think of the idea I already thought of. You know that kind of thinking. (B, pp. 36-37)

Positioning young persons as ignorant curbs their contributions to their own learning, because they are considered unable to decide what knowledge is necessary for them to have and about the ways that knowledge needs to be acquired by them. If young persons are unable to engage in decisions about their own learning, ‘disciplined’ activity, which is performed by implicit reasons and intrinsic values, cannot occur in the classroom. Consequently, teachers will have to resort to two controlling techniques: (1) a constant ‘supervising gaze’ over young persons and their conduct and with that the ‘enforcement’ of ‘appropriate conduct’; and (2) an imposition of an interest and responsibility in their own learning, in which interest is meant to serve as an implicit reason and value for the tasks they are requested to perform. The classroom teacher’s (B) words further explain the latter ‘technique’:

and to be responsible for their own learning [pause for three seconds]. I think the actual being responsible for their own learning is a more recent push too. Being an independent learner and making it your responsibility to do the learning [and] not somebody else’s, not your parent, not your teachers, we are all facilitators, but you are the one who actually has to take control. You are the person learning alone. (B, p. 11)

The contested and multifaceted words discussed previously – ‘school’, ‘student’, ‘child’, ‘teacher’, ‘rewards’, ‘control’, ‘supervision’, ‘change behaviour’ – are all intertwined in the discourses the various participants used. These words and the connecting logic created a knowledge system, a kind of classroom ‘episteme’ (Foucault, 1972). ‘Episteme’ is related to a specific historical era (Foucault, 1972), but here I use it on a smaller scale as a configuration of knowledge constructed by codes of classroom culture and discourses, which determines rules and social practices in the classroom. The classroom episteme, which was built primarily on the discourse of educational psychology and control, informed the teacher’s (B) thinking and defined a social context in which certain knowledges and practices were permissible and desirable, while others were unacceptable.

The teacher and assistants in the pre-primary classroom acted ‘in control’ and with that justified one way of seeing disruption and its relevance in the given situations. Seeing disruption in any other ways, for example as a lack of young persons’ interest in activities, was not recognised. In Foucault’s view, knowledge is inextricably connected to power; thus, the particular ‘episteme’ positioned participants in certain power relations, determined the understanding of disruption as a control problem and invoked ‘orderliness’, for example teachers’ focus on tighter control over young persons and pupils’ behaviour, and specific social practices such as giving out rewards or punishments.

Ruptures and Alternative Views

Classroom discourses informed the way participants considered disruption as a control problem, but the discontinuities and multifaceted understandings of words and practices in the discourses provided ruptures in the ‘knowledge system’ as well. The principal’s (P) use of the word ‘kids’, for young human beings, exemplifies a shift in his understanding of young persons’ role in school. The use of the word ‘students’ implies stronger control over the child, who has to act according to this
role; thus, for example, the child has to execute the teachers’ orders, act according to certain school rules or act in specific ways. The word ‘kids’ in this context signals that the child is less controlled, and therefore is free from the constraints of the ‘schooled child’.

The class assistant’s idea about introducing drama in the classroom could bring a shift in classroom practices, since it would perhaps enable participation in activities by those young persons who were the ‘noisier’ ones. Rupture is possible ‘only on the basis of rules that are already in operation’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 17). Rupture is the rearrangement of the ‘episteme’, where new rules of discursive formations co-exist with older ones. Thus, there are significant continuities as well as discontinuities in the classroom discourses and the latter might illuminate alternative ways of naming and handling disruption in this pre-primary classroom. The principal’s (P) views about young persons’ ability to get involved in their own learning, for example what activities they do, might be a discontinuity and provide alternative ways of looking at and possible options for dealing with disruption:

I think if what they are engaged in is meaningful, interesting, exciting, enthusiastic and positive they do well. (P, p. 7)

This is nirvana I suppose ... I don’t see any reason why kids ... can’t negotiate the how, not the what necessarily, we still need to teach them things ... how to read, we need to teach them how to do numeracy skills, we need to teach them how to think. But to get the construction, become involved in negotiating the vehicles, you know, in what activities we are going to do [pause for three seconds]. You know, what do you like in your classroom, why don’t we use pets if they scaffold the learning in the year 7 class; that’s the interest and the teacher scaffolds the learning into that interest area. I think it should be, we need to be teaching children higher thinking skills, keep teaching [young human beings] to be responsible for their learning. If they have no choice to their learning, no practice in negotiating their learning, then you are not teaching those things. [He laughs.] (P, p. 9)

There is an alteration in the use of words, logic and ideas in the above excerpt compared with the previous excerpt from the principal (P) regarding the occurrences and treatment of disruption in the classroom. This shift might reflect that to some extent the principal (P) redefined disruption. He saw ‘kids’ as active participants in the negotiation of their own learning compared with another understanding of ‘kids’, who had to be controlled by behaviour management techniques ‘to do well’. The principal (P) exclaimed that young persons do well if they are interested and what they do is meaningful and exciting for them, and if they are able to negotiate their own learning. Here the principal’s understanding of discipline shifted to the notion of ‘disciplined activity’ (Wilson, 1971), which is performed for implicit reasons such as interest, and is meaningful for the person. However, in the other excerpt, he saw the solution for the elimination of disruption in the classroom to be greater control, which locates him in the dominant classroom discourse of control and provides continuities in the episteme.

Similarly, the class assistant (K) approached disruption from a behaviour management point of view, but there is a turn in her views, which she had difficulty expressing:

And we have failed quite a lot I found this year, quite a lot. [She laughs.] I guess perhaps you can do more ... not fun things but things that [pause for five seconds], how would you put it? I guess more with music and perhaps a little bit of drama and things like that. I think perhaps we could introduce maybe a few more of those things and maybe include children that are often the noisy ones into those things. And maybe we do already give them positives and lots of negatives, I picked that all. [She laughs.] But mainly positives. But if you can include them in different things often they are really [pause for two seconds], they come to sort of, they get to a stage where they think that they are really important. And I mean they are really important. But because they are always misbehaving, they, it gets lost a little bit. (K, p. 10)

K looked for alternative avenues to deal with disruption. She indicated that there are persons who are not interested in the current type of activities or the ways these activities are performed and that this might be the cause of disruption in the classroom. Her view at this point resonates with Wilson’s (1971) understanding of ‘disciplined activity’, which is not possible without implicit reasons and intrinsic values. Thus, while she mentions the possibility of greater involvement of
younger human beings in their own learning, such as the participation in decisions about classroom activities, overall her use of words – ‘give them positives and lots of negatives’ – positions her reasoning in the dominant discourse of the classroom influenced by educational psychology.

**Conclusion**

The episteme of this early childhood classroom draws strongly on the discourse and logic of psychology and, particularly, the discourse of control. Informed by the discourse of control, disruption in the classroom was seen and dealt with as a control problem. The discourses of educational psychology and behaviour management served as unquestioned ‘truths’, and at the same time disciplined participants, positioned them in power relations and formed their notions of ‘appropriate’ or ‘desired’ conduct and practices in the classroom. Thus, on the one hand, the classroom episteme of control prevented young persons from the opportunity to consciously consider their actions and to become engaged in ‘disciplined activity’, where such activity is based on the intrinsic motivations and values of the person. On the other hand, the episteme preserves the power relations in this classroom, that is, the dominant position of the teacher and assistants (K, T and R) over young persons. Consequently, young human beings will be controlled and denied agency in their own learning as long as the current discourses prevail in this classroom: ‘Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or modifying the appropriateness of discourses with the knowledge and power they bring with them’ (Foucault, quoted in Ball, 1990, p. 3). Thus, as long as this particular classroom maintains its dominant discourse, it will remain a ‘political means’ of controlling young persons, which has far-reaching effects on their learning. However, power is not only negative; it is also productive: ‘it traverses and produces things, it induces ... forms of knowledge, produces discourses’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 119). This idea raises possibilities of transforming the classroom episteme to alternative discourses such as the discourse of ‘disciplined activity’, which enables new or submerged understandings and practices to emerge. In this way the causes and elucidation of disruption will not be understood solely as problems with young human beings’ conduct and their control.

There are alternative avenues embedded in the current discourses and practices of this early childhood classroom to view and approach young persons, which are waiting to be explored and might be utilised to empower young human beings and their teacher (B) and assistants (K, T and R). Foucault (1980) claims that knowledge is inextricably linked to power and once it is applied in the real world has real effects and in a sense it becomes ‘true’. Thus, the questioning of the ‘methods, ... the interplay of rules and definitions, of techniques and tools’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 222) of this pre-primary classroom would open up spaces for new understandings to surface and for new practices to be employed. The real effects of these changed practices could begin to empower young human beings in their learning.

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Discourse of Control


