Discourses of the Good Early Childhood Educator in Professional Training:
Reproducing Marginality or Working toward Social Change

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Canadian sociologists and educational researchers characterize the Ontario early childhood education workforce as economically, socially, and politically marginalized and part of a secondary labour market. Although a number of reasons for this workforce's marginalization have been explored, the discursive and professional identification of the "good" early childhood educator (ECE) constructed in a college training program is, by and large, taken for granted and, thus, under investigated. Novel and different approaches to examining marginalization is particularly important in Canada as the federal, provincial, and territorial governments are currently negotiating an early learning and child care system. To position themselves differently from marginalization in relation to the state, ECE college graduates and their teacher education professors must learn to understand the discursive professional identity within which they are constituted and controlled.

Researching Early Childhood Educator Discourses

The purpose of my research was to explore connections between the ways in which an early childhood educator identity is discursively formed

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within professional training and the marginalization of the ECE workforce. The underlying premise was that pedagogical discourses of the early childhood educator regarded as 'good' contribute to the formation of a particular kind of worker who is prepared and expected to work in a stratified gendered, educational labour market. Several interrelated critical questions guided the research. I sought to identify both historical and contemporary discursive representations of the good ECE, to explain how working conditions as well as divisions of gender, race, ethnicity and class are represented in the discourses and to examine how the discourses function ideologically. I also wanted to identify crises in the discourses from which new constructions could potentially emerge to initiate social changes in early childhood educator identity formation, social relations and economic arrangements.

Theoretical Perspectives

The approach to critical discourse analysis taken by Lilie Chouliaraki and Norman Fairclough (1999) offered specific theoretical and methodological tools for researching the social practice of early childhood educator identification. Chouliaraki and Fairclough combine structuralist and interactionist perspectives that make possible "a way of seeing and researching social life as both constrained by social structures, and an active process of production which transforms social structures" (1999, p. 1). Critical discourse analysis, thus, offers a way to explore how early childhood educators within a training institution both constitute themselves through and are constituted by historical and collective discourses of the good ECE. In addition, I drew upon the work of Rosemary Hennessy (1993, 2000) and Dorothy Smith (1987, 1999), two key feminist standpoint theorists, who, though they differ on many points of social inquiry, share an interest in the empirical analysis of discourse linked to historical materialism, relations of power and social change in society. Hennessy is explicitly a materialist/ Marxist feminist who calls for close attention to the structures of late capitalism including a new global division of labour and for a detailed, critical reading of discourse for "crises in the narrativity of ideology" (1993, p. 92). These theorists provide the means to first go beyond a mere description of a discursive formation and closely examine what Kenway (2001) refers to as the critical intersections between a modern subject's cultural/discursive and economic resources and second to analyze underlying contradictions in the discourses that would reveal something about early childhood education work from the standpoint of women who experience it on a day-by-day basis.

Data Collection

Using qualitative methods, discourses then were located in triangulated data-sources that make up the key components of an Ontario college training program: (1) a selection of textbooks written by American and Canadian authors spanning the period from 1971 when early childhood education training programs were first established in Ontario to 2003; (2) six in depth interviews with early childhood education instructors from several Ontario colleges; and (3) approximately 270 class assignments in which students describe their views on the good ECE collected three times over the two-year period of the training program.

Findings

The pedagogical discourses of the good ECE graduate were primarily concerned with personal qualities. Five consistent early childhood educator qualities were located in data samples: passion, happiness, inner strength, caring, and alertness (to individual child needs and interests). Drawing upon Foucault's (1972) conceptualization of academic discourse, the discourses of the good ECE represent a corpus of statements whose organization is regular, systematic and rule bound. Three particular rules were required in the production of these discourses: (1) when talking about the good ECE, personal qualities must be invoked; (2) certain personal qualities best describe the good ECE; and (3) when invoking the good ECE, two undesirable qualities, authority (particularly evident in teacher-direction) and neediness, must be absent—two qualities interestingly that later re-emerged in my data analysis as crises in the discourses of the good ECE.

Historical examination of the discourses revealed that they are substantially the same over time and reflect the "preconstructed" or an aspect of discursive and ideological formation "that produces an "always already there" effect (Hennessy, 1993, p. 77). Instructors reinforced the historical continuity of the discourses, one instructor stating, "I think it is what it is to be a good ECE." Student writings illustrated the historical reproduction of a particular pedagogical representation of the good ECE as passionate, happy, patient and attuned to children's needs, similar to the five qualities that were found to be present in the data overall. The students seemed to internally incorporate this particular representation into their understandings over the two-year period of the training program.

I was particularly interested in how this discursive embodiment of the good ECE functions interdiscursively and historically in relation to other elements that make up the social practice of teacher identification: social relations (gender, race and ethnicity), material practices and power

(Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). First, although participants seemed to recognize that the field is structurally gendered, their explanations for its devaluation did not question at a deep level the valuing of only particular stereotypically feminine qualities in the good ECE. Other qualities like knowledge, authority and autonomy, were treated ambivalently. To work around this ambivalence, participants discursively transformed these qualities into "softer" versions whereby, for example, knowledge becomes self-reflection and authority becomes self-confidence.

Drawing upon Walkerdine's (1985) critical analysis of child-centred pedagogy, I then examined the emergent discourses of the good ECE internalized in another social relation—the teacher-child relationship. In the data, text-mediated discourses similar to those identified by Walkerdine appear to work in combination as a hybrid text and has acquired relative permanency over the years (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Within the individual adult-child relationship, the good and female ECE must be viewed as marginally social, active and competent in contrast to the child's central social activities and competencies. Moreover, when analyzed historically, these discourses reveal a concern that the early childhood educator has become increasingly less competent in implementing child-centred pedagogy and developmentally appropriate practice because they have strayed into the dangerous territory of expertise, teacher direction and authority. Students, in general, seemed to feel most competent during one-to-one interactions, unable to manage working with larger groups of children, particularly during routines and transitions and during conflicts among children.

I then wondered: What happens to the discourses of the good ECE when a graduate is both female and from a racial and/or ethnic background "other than" white and European? Participants simultaneously recognized, managed, and denied differences among students and reconciled these strategies with the discourses of the good ECE. One of the consequences of these discursive strategies is that ECE graduate who is different culturally, linguistically, racially and ethnicity appears to be viewed as less competent (and thus is more marginalized) because first she must learn discourses that are assumed to be commonsense, and second she must shed cultural and material practices (such as teacher-direction) incompatible with those of the good ECE. Thus, the construction of the good ECE denies the intersection between various social identities (e.g., gender, race, culture, language) and maintains a gendered professional identity as an essential production rule.

I also wondered: What happens when the discourses of the good ECE come up against the material conditions of ECE work? I will discuss one finding. Overall, textbook authors and instructors expected students (and

students expected it also) to intensify their goodness, their passion and caring, to manage material realities, make a difference in children's lives, indeed to change the world. Data findings suggest that this discourse of intensification along with current discourses of the science of early childhood education has increased historically serving to reproduce and stabilize women's essentialized caring role within the modern welfare state.

In sum, extensive data samples indicate that the elements of a social practice (e.g., gender, social relations, values and beliefs, the material) have worked their way historically through or in practices, and over social context to build an ideological cultural narrative of the good ECE. I suggest that this narrative works most effectively as ideology within a wider ideological code (Smith, 1999) or system of thought that valorizes individualism and the free and self-determining individual subject acting in the modern state. For example, the code is evident in text that reifies the personal qualities embodied in the individual good ECE and which can be enhanced through self-reflection, self-knowledge and self-development. Furthermore, a denial of deeper cultural, racial, and class differences among good ECEs decontextualizes the educator and maintains this ideological code.

Discussion: Rethinking Teacher Education

The ideological discourses of the good ECE seek to prepare graduates for marginalization in two major ways. First, as Smith (1999) states, the ECE graduate enters into marginalized practices and social relations that have been ordered, and unconsciously predetermined in their professional training program. Second, discursive practices that potentially position the student differently in relation to others are devalued so that graduates seem to remain preoccupied with their individual qualities and the individual teacher-child relationship, rather than focusing on broader social and political relations. The discourses thus seek to prepare graduates for marginalized participation in the state and for assuming social and moral responsibilities within the private (read as domestic, not corporate) sphere, a role historically consistent with women's roles as caretakers or midwives of public welfare within a neo-liberal economy (Dillabough & Acker, 2002).

Contextual Contradictions and Crises

However, a split between the virtual consciousness of the pedagogical discourses of the good ECE (Smith, 1999) and a consciousness of material circumstances that arise out of the early educator's everyday experiences

may exist. Hennessy maintains that this split opens up the possibility of critique and can cause "crises" in a cultural narrative or ideological construction through "de-fetishizing" a taken for granted understanding (p. 92). After a delineation of textual crises, an alternative narrative is available.

What, then, are the crises in the ideological discourses of the good ECE revealed in this study? First, although the teacher-child relationship is reified, instructors and students consistently reported that the material and empirical reality of early childhood education practice is that it is a highly complex social activity, involving many individuals; I refer to this reality as the crisis of sociability . Second, instructors and students reported that early childhood educators want and desire authority, most often expressed in the practice of teacher-direction. This reality can be described as a crisis of authority . Perhaps this is so because the activity of teacher-direction has discursive and material power in social relations.. Third, a crisis of difference is apparent. Gestwicki and Bertrand state, "in urban centers, immigrants, newcomers and visible minorities make up a large proportion" of the Canadian ECE workforce (2003, 105). This reality requires an understanding of the " new diverse ECE graduate subject" and new discourses that avoid merely a rearrangement of "the prevailing paradigm without really challenging its terms" of universality (Hennesey, 1993, 110).

Finally, the pedagogical discourses of the good ECE do not seem to be effective discursive resources for sustaining a stable workforce and indicate a crisis of career retention. As reported by all participants, a significant number of Ontario ECE graduates are not entering the workforce and if they do they exit the workforce within three years. The power of the welfare state's modernist project in which the good ECE prepares children to be workers in a global economy dissolves in the material reality of frequent staff turnover and occupational drop out. I suggest that many graduates are not prepared to call upon their goodness to work with young children unless their material realities change.

New Teacher Education Discourses: Constructing Criticality

These crises point the way to alternative discourses that require an overall practice of criticality. Nevertheless, taking on alternatives can be quite difficult because discourses of the good ECE as a cultural narrative are historically quite tenacious. Are new ECEs really the same as the old ones, just dressed up in new discourses that seem fresh but upon close examination show the remains of the old? Therefore, I propose that new teacher education discourses highlight the teacher actions evident in the

crises and subtexts in the discourses: sociability, authority, difference, and an overall criticality. I employ new discourses that describe modes of social actions within multiple sites of experience and, thus, cannot be confined to essentials or particular categories. Furthermore, cognizant of Smith's (1999) concern that, in sociological thinking, action verbs are often nominalized to create abstractions, decontextualized from social relations, I have focused on teacher actions or practices.

These discourses represent the experience of early childhood education from the standpoint of its practitioners. They focus on engagement in social and public spheres and, most effectively, maintain a critical relationship between the discursive and non-discursive, between professional training and women's work in a profession that requires caring for others. These discourses focus on capacities that are not viewed as instinctive or innate in women (Miller, 1996). These discursive changes go beyond simplistic gendered discourses and consider interdependent forces, which condition the formation of teachers' professional identities in practice.

Sociability. The action of sociability (Gewirtz, 1997) refers to the capacity of the ECE to attend and respond to a range of contradictory social processes involved in caring for and educating groups of young children. The early childhood institution then can be viewed as a "socially organized activity among people" (Smith, 1999, p. 121). Sociability brings to the foreground the practice of worldliness valued to a certain extent by textbook authors and instructors in my study. The action of sociability also acknowledges the value of individual adult-child relationships in group care and education but does not valorize it. Rather, the adult-child dyad is understood in dynamic relation to a focus on group structure, culture, and ethos.

In experiencing fieldwork, ECE students gain knowledge of the social life of a child care centre and develop skills to manage its social complexities. The action of sociability enables students to see that a group of children occupy the same space and that individual and group needs must be constantly addressed and balanced. It underscores the complexity of qualities such as caring, respect, and patience viewed as easy for female students, because in a range of social environments, they require considerably more reflexivity. When sociability is exercised across different ECE settings, the processes of teacher identification become more unstable yet more dynamic and responsive to social context.

A discourse of sociability not only rearranges the meaning of becoming and being an early childhood educator but it also rearranges the social relations it supports. The function of a representation of the ECE imbued with sociability is to unsettle the status quo in social relations. Sociability

brings the ECE graduate into the public sphere because the practice of it requires social engagement in different forms of individual and collective action inside and outside of the early childhood institution. Through the early childhood educator's social agency and causal efficacy, her visibility and significance is recognized and promoted. The ECE emerges from the margins of her work to its centre with the children; her social position, status, and power may be asserted and greater access to symbolic and material resources are possible.

Difference. ECE graduates who bring with them different worldviews about caring for and educating young children may enter a workforce in which a division of labour situates these graduates in positions accorded less value and status. In formulating a new ECE graduate, then, recognition of the value and consequences of difference needs to be integral and central to its construction so that new social relations of difference and dominance are restructured. Dillabough comments that "difference [must] sit[s] at the centre of identity rather than lurking on the margins" (1999, p. 389). The new ECE, then, is aware that the concept of an early childhood educator is a cultural representation that arises out of the historical, particular, and gendered, cultural, racial, and social class practices. As a result, she is able to locate herself in relation to this representation and to critically evaluate the consequences of this social relation and how the rules for participation in a profession are different for different groups. However, a focus on the action or practice of difference for the new ECE and on the multiplicity of ECE identities should not preclude opportunities for individuals to work collectively for social change. New ECE graduates can find meaning and knowledge in common experiences of caring for and educating young children. At the same time, they can critically evaluate differences in experiences and social positioning and "dialogue across a problematic" as Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) propose.

Authority. A range of cultural, gendered, and social qualities and practices lies at the centre of a new formulation of the early childhood educator. As a consequence, practices such as teacher direction that have been traditionally excluded from conceptions of the good ECE can now be asserted and included. Interestingly, it is the expression of authority by early childhood educators from different racial, ethnic and class backgrounds that has been most consistently suppressed within the normative construction of the good ECE. It is not surprising, therefore, that both the actions of difference and authority have emerged as integral to my reconception of the new ECE graduate. This assertion is critical for

changing the social perception and position of graduates from a range of social and economic backgrounds, both in a training program and in the workforce. All graduates may now consciously choose to adopt a cultural pedagogy and strategically use this pedagogy to build relationships and to promote learning or they may choose to draw upon a variety of pedagogies.

Authority, in my research findings, is discursively constructed as teacher-direction, regarded as negative and antithetical to child-centred pedagogy. At the same time, participants report the consistent practice of authority in the actuality of early care and education. This suggests that female early childhood educators desire authority in their social interactions and they want others to see and hear their authority and status. The question is then: how can authority be expressed so that it is in the best interests of early childhood educators as well in the best interests of children and their families? First, although the concept of "voice" could be employed to assert the female early educator's experiences of marginality, I suggest that the concept of authority more actively engages educators in social relations and within the public sphere.

Within this social institution, authority is the expression of the ECE graduates' knowledge, judgment, and will. Indeed, these are the properties of all individual and collective subjects and the discourses and actions of authority occur within differentiating and concerting activities with others (Smith, 1999, p. 110). Thus, the ECE graduate provides an authoritative account of her practices in group settings, an understanding developed in response to classroom instruction and fieldwork. The graduate demonstrates knowledge that is unique and particular to her profession—she is an expert in the practical application of social processes within a group setting. The graduate critically evaluates her extensive child development knowledge against the standpoint of practice and experience in diverse social and cultural settings. Knowledge is thus both stable and provisional depending on context. The experience and practice of early childhood education is coordinated with theories so that more than one consciousness is implicated in the acquisition of knowledge (Smith, 1999).

While claims to knowledge can contribute to power imbalances in various social interactions (e.g., teacher-parent), in my view, a graduate's claims to "not knowing" work against the emancipatory aims in a rearticulation of the ECE. When the graduate is inauthentic about her knowledge in social interactions, her behaviour becomes a "performance" which transports her into an objectified consciousness where she is constituted as passive, compliant, and incompetent. Children need to know that their teachers are not "all-knowing" but knowledgeable about their physical, linguistic, and social world. New ECE graduates who

display the actions of sociability and authority will thoughtfully decide when to engage in a dialogue about their own and the children's knowledge.

In the daily social life of an early childhood education setting, the authoritative ECE graduate exercises her judgment individually or in consultation with other staff members. The capacity of graduates to critically evaluate the program as a social and cultural environment will also improve the quality of the judgments they are called on to make in countless ways. The graduate's authority is frequently evident during teacher-led/directed activities in which she must exercise her will to respond to individual and group needs. Daily routines require the graduate to coordinate the event and take the lead so that children can collectively and safely be moved from one event to another. The new ECE graduate's will is not hidden behind objectified artifices such as "the schedule," for children know that authority is lodged in the adult. Thus, the graduate's authority does not exist in the "other-consciousness" of child-centred pedagogy where it is unacknowledged social control but rather it is consciously and critically constructed out of the local and particular social and cultural community in which the teachers, children, and families exist. Maher writes, "the teacher's authority is not set in opposition to the child's 'freedom,' but seen as a set of relations that can be acknowledged, as grounded in teachers' and students' evolving (and various) connections to each other, the curriculum, and the classroom and societal setting" (Maher, 2001, p. 28).

To conclude, I have outlined four social actions that textbook authors, instructors, and students can actively work with in their talking, reading, and writing about the early childhood education graduate for the twenty-first century. Together, these constituents in a professional training program can coordinate and represent these new actions through discourses that will be fluid in relation to others, to material realities, and to history. At its most pragmatic level, these discourses offer a language that potentially will affect the early childhood education graduate's identity, subjectivity, and social position.

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