

Research Note

Three Examples of Using Discourse Analysis in Early Childhood Research

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Abstract

In our three separate studies we took a discourse approach. Our paper begins with a brief outline of 'discourse' as a useful conceptual tool for interpreting how meaning is negotiated and constructed in contexts involving young children and their caregivers, teachers and parents. The central ideas are based on Michel Foucault's work (1976; 1977; 1980). Lesley's research focused on the talk of early childhood teachers. She sought to identify the discourses that surrounded the work of teachers in community-based childcare centres. Kate was interested in the discourse of 'preparedness' for teaching from teacher educator, institutional and student perspectives. Bernadette explored the experiences of parents who have a young disabled child, how they make sense of that aspect of their lives and how they interact with various 'discourses of disability'. We each introduce the topic of our study; discuss our reasons for using discourse analysis and how 'discourse' was used as a theory and method. Examples of data are included to illustrate and separate the approach we each took in our separate studies.

Key Words: Discourse analysis; methodology; theory; discourses of disability

Introduction to Discourse Theory and Analysis

'Discourse' as a Central Concept of Social Constructionism

Discourse theory and analysis draws on an interpretivist theoretical perspective, which is based on a social constructionist epistemology (Burr, 1995; Crotty, 1998). An interpretivist perspective is interested in social life as it is constructed and experienced by individuals within their lived contexts (Ferguson & Ferguson, 1995). Researchers working within an interpretative paradigm use ethnographic, descriptive and narrative detail of people in their everyday contexts as the basis of their data collection, interpretation and analysis. Ferguson and Ferguson point out that although the emphasis of interpretivist based studies is on the micro level of lived experience, the impacts of social structures and mechanisms are not ignored, nor are they viewed as irrelevant or non-existent.

A social constructionist epistemology is based on the view that knowledge about the self and 'reality' are socially constructed (Crotty, 1998). A social constructionist approach views reality as something to be *interpreted* rather than *discovered* and meanings as multiple and situated, rather than singular and fixed (Crotty, 1998; Ferguson & Ferguson, 1995). A social constructionist epistemology assumes that people participate actively in the social construction and interpretation of their world (Burr, 1995; Crotty, 1998; Ferguson &

Ferguson, 1995; Gergen, 1999). Crotty (1998) suggests that from a social constructionist perspective:

...all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context. (p. 42)

Therefore, social constructionists are interested in how people assign meaning to their world (Crotty, 1998). The focus of social constructionism is on multiple ways of constructing meaning and power within specific historical and cultural contexts (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1999). From this perspective, reality, knowledge, 'truth', and understanding are viewed as relational and situational. Knowledge and social action go together. As Gergen (1999) states: "...what we take to be knowledge of the world grows from relationship, and is embedded not within individual minds but within interpretive or communal traditions." (p. 122)

Burr (1995), in a discussion of the basic assumptions of the social constructionist position, suggests that social constructionists take a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge. The world is not seen as presenting itself objectively to the observer, but is known through human experience, which is largely influenced by language (Burr, 1995). Davies (1991, p. 43) argues that it is difficult to make sense of the world outside of discourse: "...we can only ever speak ourselves or be spoken into existence within the terms of available discourse." Therefore, reality is viewed as being socially constructed by interconnected patterns of communication behaviour (Gergen, 1999). The idea of 'discourse' as: "...a means of both producing and organizing meaning within a social context" (Edgar & Sedgewick, 2002, p. 117) posits discourse analysis as a useful theory and method for conceptualising and understanding the effects of "interpretive or communal traditions" (Gergen, 1999, p. 122).

Discourse Theory

Discourse theory is a useful tool for explaining and exploring social meanings, arrangements and power relations, and how they are socially, culturally and historically negotiated, contested and produced. Gee (1990) defines discourses as more than language, spoken or written. Discourses are both constitutive of and embedded in social, political and cultural practices (Gee, 1990; MacLure, 2003). Discourses are expressed through language, behaviour, institutional arrangements and social practices. They are:

...ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles by specific *groups of people*, whether families of a certain sort, lawyers of a certain sort... They are always and everywhere *social*. Language, as well as literacy, is always and everywhere integrated with and relative to *social practices* constituting particular Discourses. (Gee, 1990, p. 5).

Edgar and Sedgewick (2002) note that a key function of any discourse is not only what it includes but also what it *excludes*: "Discursive formulations provide rules of justification for what counts as knowledge within a particular context, and at the same time stipulate what does not count as knowledge in that context." (p. 117) Rather than only seeking to understand the meaning of the social world for participants as it exists: "discourse analysis endeavours to uncover the way in which it is produced...It examines how language constructs phenomena, not how it reflects and reveals it" (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 6).

Discourse and Power

Foucault (1977, p. 49) states that discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.” According to Foucault (1980), there exists an interdependency between the production of systems of knowledge(s) and ‘truth’, and how power is accrued and exercised (Yates, 2005). In regards to dominant discourses and their relationship to ‘truth’ and power Foucault (1980) says:

Truth is a thing of this world. It is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the type of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (p. 131)

It is at the level of lived experience that the workings and effects of various discourses are visible, felt and played out. For example, through discursive relations, individuals develop and become tied to particular socially ascribed or ‘acceptable’ identities (Drinkwater, 2005; Foucault, 1980; Gee, 1990; Graham, 2005; Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Yates, 2005). These identities pre-scribe the expected characteristics and behaviour of particular types or ‘kinds’ of people such as teachers, student teachers, children and disabled people (Yates, 2005).

While we (Lesley, Kate and Bernadette) have each taken an approach to discourse that is consistent with the explanation above, our choices of topic and the data we have collected have led to different methods of analysis, conclusions and insights into the social construction of meanings around our particular focus of interest. Below we each outline and discuss what we did in our separate studies and our use of discourse as a theory and as a method.

Lesley’s Research

My research question was concerned with the identification of the dominant discourses that constructed the work of teachers in community-based childcare settings. I wanted to find out which discourses were significant in shaping and influencing their work. I believed that identification of the discourses would illuminate how teachers made sense of their work and explain why teachers enacted their work on an everyday level, in the ways that they did. I was also interested to explore how teachers took up particular positions within discourses and how these positions in turn impacted on their relationships with children, with colleagues and with parents and families.

Exploration of discourse was appealing to me as it I felt it facilitated an examination of teaching from a fundamental point of view. It explains why particular ways of teaching are open to teachers and why particular ways of enacting the work are closed to them. Furthermore the dynamics of power are made explicit through discourse. Analyses of the discourses that teachers invest in can illuminate how power is played out in local settings and at the same time explain how the local dynamics are shaped and fashioned by the wider, discursive society.

I interviewed six teachers who worked on full-time at community-based childcare centres. I carried out semi-structured interviews; the questions were designed to elicit talk about teachers’ everyday work and concrete experiences. When teachers expressed a view or

opinion about an aspect of their work, I would frequently respond by asking teachers to recount an actual event from their work that best illustrated their view. In this way, I was able to collect a lot of stories which were embedded with the teachers' meaning making. This method of data collection produced a large amount of unstructured data, which I then had to analyse.

Analysis of Interview Transcripts

As each qualitative study is unique and distinctive, there is no singular path for analysis. Janesick (2003) explains the process of inquiry as a creative and imaginative one and she likens the various stages, including the analysis stage to choreographing a dance. The researcher, as does the dancer, makes a series of decisions, adapting and changing as the analysis unfolds. I found this metaphor apt as I became familiar with the interview transcripts and found myself moving through the various stages of acting and thinking.

I began by reading and re-reading the transcripts in order to get a sense of the teachers' talk. I looked for instances of teachers' talking routinely and in assumptive ways about their work. I was interested in how participants seemed to position themselves in their work and in relation to others. I began tentatively by writing labels on the transcripts, for the discourses that teachers appeared to be drawing on, in the left-hand column. This process resulted in the identification of a set of dominant discourses that constituted the work. I then reviewed each identified discourse for internal consistency, that is, for common ways in which the teachers positioned themselves. This process illuminated the distinctive strands of each discourse. Lastly, I sought to tease out the implications of the teachers' positions within the identified discourses by making reference to similar empirical studies, to a body of social constructionist literature and to the material conditions within which teachers worked.

The Discourse of Parent Support

I found that the teachers talked about parents and families in similar ways. Teachers saw themselves as providing advice and support for parents and families. One example of this was in relation to supporting parents to leave their children.

They go away to their office or wherever they're going to work and they're thinking, my child was crying – I was leaving my child and you know - will they take care of them? ...Well yeah you've always got to be reassuring them.

Teachers saw that it was important to be open and friendly to parents. They felt it was important to make efforts to get on well with them. Chatting about the weekend was seen as an appropriate way to make parents and families feel comfortable as they arrived.

...communicating with them and making them feel that they can always hear everything about what is going on for them and how they feel in the morning ...feeling that they can confide in you really.

Giving feedback to parents was something that all teachers made efforts to do. This feedback to parents ranged from feedback on the child's day at the centre to specific feedback on developmental progress that they may have noticed or become aware of.

Sometimes if they suddenly say something you know, two words together or three words that you haven't heard them say before...you like to tell the parent these sorts of things as well.

The above threads of teachers talk indicate that teachers drew on a 'reforming' discourse in their work with parents. Within this discourse, teachers are positioned strongly to be supportive and responsive to parents. Teachers are also positioned as the 'experts' who hold specific knowledge and understandings about children's development. MacNaughton (2003) explains that a 'reforming' discourse has its roots in modernity and within this discourse teachers and parents collaborate together to produce the self-governing child that is the product of a child-centred approach.

The positions that teachers take up within the discourse lead teachers to see their role as listening and responding to parents wishes and concerns, giving feedback on the child's day, supporting the child's transitions in and out of the centre, offering advice and guidance and generally being there for the parents when they experience difficult times. It was clear that teachers were caring and empathetic to parents. This was evident in the study as teachers made significant efforts to be responsive to parents even though the constraints of their working reality frequently worked against them. Meeting parental expectations could create tension for teachers and at times led them to experience personal stress.

On the other hand, teachers are also positioned within this discourse as the 'experts' as they have knowledge and understandings about child development and curriculum. Teachers view themselves as having the requisite knowledge and understandings for the curriculum and teachers view parents as having knowledge about their own child. In accordance with this discourse there was little evidence in the teachers' talk of parent contribution to curriculum. Parents did not appear to be seen as being able to contribute to curriculum. It seemed that parents were not positioned by teachers to influence or make decisions about curriculum.

Kate's Research

My study explored the phenomenon of 'preparedness' as it is employed in relation to early childhood initial teacher education (ITE) by statutory and regulatory bodies, teacher education institutions, and as experienced by teacher education students. Preparedness is a key construct that legitimates teacher education at the societal and policy levels and is one of the most prevalent discourses that permeates structural and procedural facets of teacher education. The intended 'subject' of the discourse of preparedness within ITE is the (well or adequately) prepared teacher. Through my study I have raised questions such as:

- Why has the word 'prepared' been so widely used in relation to initial teacher education?
- What constructions of teacher education, and of graduate teachers, are possible (or not possible) when learning to teach is framed as preparation?
- How do official definitions of preparedness align with the meanings that early childhood ITE graduates attach to their experiences of learning to teach?

Because of my interest in troubling the notion of preparedness and a concern to address the need for more research on the experiences of early childhood teacher education students (Aitken, 2006; Cameron & Baker, 2004), my study focused on the lived experiences and sense-making of 13 newly qualified teachers (NQTs) from two different teacher education institutions. I interviewed each student/teacher at the completion of, or soon after, their teacher education programme and again five-six months into their first year as NQTs. Individual interviews were semi-structured in-depth format. Group interviews were held

with both groups of participants toward the end of their first year of teaching as NQTs and lastly 18 months after graduating

I explored the discourse of teacher education as preparation without assuming that the students themselves viewed it that way. I sought to gain an understanding of how the students described their lived experience of 'being prepared', and how they were positioned and positioned themselves in relation to official discourses of preparation. I drew on the methods and tools of phenomenology to help me access the meanings that participants attached to their experiences of teacher education. I also employed a Foucauldian discourse analysis (Willig, 2001) to apply a socio-political lens to the kinds of descriptions constructed by participants.

Discourse Analysis

The power of discourse analysis lies in the way it exposes actual practices and the subject positions made available for speakers of the discourse to take up and to locate others by (Willig, 2001). Using Willig's (2001) guidelines for the analysis of discourse I began by attending to how teacher education/preparation (the discursive object) was constructed in the interview texts through both direct and indirect instances. As I was doing this I noticed similarities and differences arising between constructions and began intuitively grouping text. This led to identifying and locating the discursive constructions of teacher education/preparedness within wider discourses. At this stage I was identifying and describing the discourses on the premise that the concepts and ways we categorise the world are productive of the way in which we understand and construct our thinking and therefore our reality.

The three questions that guided my analysis of the interview texts were:

- How is 'being prepared' discursively constructed for and by teacher education students?
- How do students speak about themselves as subjects who are (well) prepared/qualified for teaching?
- What subject positions do students draw on in their preparation for teaching?

The preliminary findings presented below are related to one participant, Bonny. As they are based on initial analysis, the findings are tentative.

In the first interview most participants expressed a desire to construct themselves as teachers who were knowledgeable about their work. For example, for Bonny it appears that being knowledgeable was central to constructing her identity as a teacher:

... it became quite scary to know that I was going to, I was getting quite nervous that all of a sudden I wasn't going to be a student any more [...] I was still like 'I don't know, what if someone asks me and I don't know the answer'.

Bonny positioned her teacher-self as knower and dispenser of knowledge. She implied a discursive shift from consumer of knowledge (as a student teacher) to a dispenser of knowledge (as a teacher). When speaking as a newly qualified teacher Bonny worried about how she might appear to new parents at the centre:

...I didn't want to come across as not knowing [...] the last thing they [new parents] want is to be inducted by a new grad who doesn't know the answers.

Through Bonny's desire to be knowledgeable she risks positioning herself as 'expert'. This raises questions about how this subject position might silence others such as parents and children, or even Bonny herself as a relatively new teacher. She has assumed that the parents will want her to be the expert too. Additionally, in what ways does Bonny's use of the term "induct[ion]" align with her views about being knowledgeable? Induction often implies a linear process of knowledge transference, of learning taking place in one way, and in one direction.

At the same time as wanting to position herself as 'expert', Bonny expressed how the ITE course overwhelmed her in terms of the amount of knowledge she was being exposed to:

Yeah, it's quite overwhelming. I think I felt that perhaps I wasn't going to be able to do it. You know like there was just too much knowledge and I think that feeling probably carried on right through to the next year as well and I was obviously capable and competent and able to do the work, but I think inside myself I felt, sort of, quite lost in it all. There were so many different ideas coming at you and you were always being told, you know to develop your own pedagogy [...] by drawing on all the different views to make it your own. But there was no way I could sort of make it my own because I was still grappling with the sort of 'why am I here' ...

In the discourse of preparedness Bonny took up the subject position that 'not understanding' is her private, individual dilemma. She was experiencing the vulnerability of forging out her professional identity in a discourse about teacher learning that appeared to position the individual as the receptacle of learning (knowledge) and the institution as the (knower) provider of knowledge. The paradoxical message that she heard was "make it your own", "develop your own pedagogy". She resisted positioning herself as unknowing ("I was obviously capable and competent") but she was perplexed about why developing her own pedagogy was so difficult, especially given that she was a high achiever. Later in the interview Bonny returned to a recurring experience of "different ideas coming at" her:

... over the three years I always felt there was just so much to know, you know? And then you do a course on dealing with special needs and you do a course on te reo and a course on different theorists and there is just so much [...] I mean, all of a sudden you do an assignment on this and hand it in [...] and then move onto the next thing.

Bonny's reflections on her preparation for teaching communicated an experience that had felt overwhelming, partly because of the amount of curriculum content. She also described her learning and teaching experience as being fragmented, disconnected and hard to put together as a whole. Interpreting Bonny's experience in relation to a discourse of 'preparedness', leads to further inquiry and analysis about what the various (implicit and explicit) purposes of the concept of preparedness in ITE serve. It could be that some of the stated purposes may be at odds with their lived effects on student teachers and, perhaps consequently, early childhood education discourse and practices in general.

Bernadette's Research

My interest in research was to try and make some sense of how 'disability' is socially constructed and what the effects these constructions might be on people's lives. Through

analysing family stories and recollections, I wanted to learn about how meanings around disability are negotiated by families and what impacts these understandings of disability had on parents and children's experiences and learning. I wanted to explore the ways in which dominant views of disability are constructed, expressed and maintained and the possibilities for change and resistance.

The central questions of my research were:

- What implicit messages do parents receive about their disabled children?
- What possible impacts do these messages have on how parents might view their child, and experience day-to-day living?
- How are dominant power/knowledge relations expressed and maintained through normalising discourses at the level of lived experience?
- What possibilities are there for parents and teachers to resist or challenge normative discursive practices?

My research was based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with two families who have a young child with disabilities. One of the families was my own family and so I have been the researcher as well as a participant in the research. In addition to interviews conducted by other people, our family's data included written documentation in the form of specialist, early childhood centre and school assessments and planning, and family based recordings over the years.

After exploring various methodologies and theories of how power, experience and knowledge are expressed and constructed, I decided that discourse theory and analysis was the best way to make sense of the experiences and stories of families. One of the things I liked about discourse theory was that it opens up possibilities for resistance and change. The scope for being actively involved in changing our language and understanding of difference and diversity is wide because 'discourses' are expressed and operate at a localised level of social interaction and lived experience. Although dominant discourses are 'slippery', self-perpetuating, easily obscured and resistant to change, it is my contention that we need to begin with an understanding of how they operate in order to challenge them. For me, the concept of discourse provided a starting place for looking underneath what people say, do and experience to the underlying attitudes, assumptions and outcomes of that way of framing experience, 'reality' and 'the truth' about disability.

Discourses of Disability

The idea of 'discourse' is central to developing an understanding of how particular meanings are produced, maintained and enacted through the negotiation and/or acceptance of particular ways of viewing the world. Ideas, assumptions and practices associated with 'disability' or 'impairment' can be illuminated, critiqued and understood through using a discourse analytic approach.

The prevailing or dominant discourse of disability is often referred to as a medical or deficit discourse. The medical discourse is contrasted with 'inclusive' or 'human rights' based discourses. A 'social' or rights based discourse replaces the medical view of disability as an individual(s) problem that requires treatment and fixing. A rights based discourse views 'disability' as an effect of society's lack of respect and acceptance of people who are classified, and subsequently positioned, as different, abnormal or 'other'. Rights based

discourses argue that, rather than being a biological condition, disability is a social and cultural construction that produces particular lived effects.

Below are some excerpts from interviews with Fran, the mother of Clare. Clare was four years old and had just begun using a wheelchair to assist her with her mobility.

All of a sudden we've got a wheelchair and people are looking and saying: "there's something wrong with that child." Whereas before she could happily sit in the buggy and no one would be any the wiser.

The idea that there is something wrong with you if you have a disability is central to a medical, deficit discourse of disability. As well as being seen as a problem, disability is viewed as a personal tragedy for the child and family. In Fran's daily life, she received this message from strangers when she was in public with her child. Having a wheelchair increased Fran's visibility. She felt uncomfortable about people looking at her and resistant to what she experienced as a pitying 'gaze'. After many years of fitting in and not 'rocking the boat', Fran found herself in a situation where she was positioned as an outsider, not normal, 'other'.

I don't want everybody looking at her and feeling sorry for her because she's happy. She doesn't need anybody to be feeling sorry for her. But anyway, that's that, isn't it? That's life. I've got the wheelchair and we're stuck with it. Although we're not, though, because when I've got two (children) I've got them in the double (pushchair).

Fran did not wholly share the view that there was something wrong with her child, and she rejected the idea that Clare or her family were in need of sympathy or pity. Her reaction was sometimes to hide Clare's differences by putting both children in the buggy. It could be argued that this compulsion to hide, which is a recurrent theme within the data, helps to maintain deficit views, deny diversity and difference and privilege normalcy. At the same time, it is a strategy that Fran used to protect herself and her child from the judgement and surveillance of others.

We had a thing at preschool – a picnic at preschool the other night, and I was talking to a lady whose wee girl is very friendly with Clare, and she said to me, "Well, what is wrong with Clare?" And I said "Nothing." And she looked at me as if to say "What?!" And I said "Nothing. She's had muscle biopsies; she's had MRI scans. There's nothing wrong with her." She went "Ohh." So, yeah, that was a – so I guess my "nothing's wrong with my girl" is actually out there when she's in a wheelchair.

Fran draws from a medical discourse (scans and biopsies) to support her 'claim' that there is nothing 'wrong' with Clare. The reaction of the other parent indicates that - although medical specialists may not have been able to 'discover' a physical cause for Clare's differences/'deficits' – she just can't be seen as having nothing wrong with her.

When interpreting these pieces of data, the questions I asked using discourse analysis included: 'Why?' Why can't Clare be seen as having nothing wrong with her? What assumptions, beliefs and knowledge about disability make it impossible to view a 'disabled' child as the 'same' more than 'other'? What makes it an absurdity to 'claim' that a disabled child has nothing wrong with them? What are the consequences for the child of being viewed as damaged or deficient? What are the implications of this assumption for

educational practice, children's learning and life opportunities? What subject does this view of disability create and what limitations does it impose on the subject?

Conclusion

Discourse theory and analysis have been used in these three studies to identify and interrogate the culturally situated, taken for granted knowledge and understandings that influence student teachers, teachers and parents, and to question the ideas and assumptions underlying particular perspectives by looking to their lived effects. A common alternative to taking a critical stance towards knowledge is to believe that what is happening is morally, culturally and theoretically 'neutral' (Moss & Petrie, 2002). This leaves us in a 'default position' where we are unaware of or unconcerned about the lived effects of the values, ideas and assumptions beneath our talk and teaching. Using methods that create an opportunity to reflect on the deeper social, cultural meanings and conditions we are active in producing, will contribute towards opening up different possibilities for children's, parents and teacher's lives and work (Moss & Petrie, 2002). In this way we can celebrate our work at the same time as creating new and different possibilities.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Bernadette Macartney has studied and worked in early childhood education in New Zealand since 1982. She became interested in disability studies and advocacy after experiencing life and education alongside her daughter Maggie Rose. Bernadette is nearing completion of her PhD through the University of Canterbury in Christchurch. She intends to continue writing, teaching and researching in the area of inclusive education once her Doctorate is complete.

Kate Ord has been a teacher educator since 1990. Kate is interested in understanding how the processes of initial teacher education and continuing teacher professional learning can support early childhood teachers to situate themselves, and their teaching, in the complexity (and excitement) of competing discourses and calls for the ‘good teacher’. She is currently completing a PhD focusing on the experiences of early childhood teacher education students in preservice and centre-based pathways and their first year of teaching.

Lesley Robison is a lecturer with Te Tari Puna Ora o Aotearoa. Lesley is interested in learning and development theory and how this changes over time and across contexts. In particular, she’s presently interested in the way that shifts in thinking from a child-centred curriculum to a sociocultural one are played out in early childhood education and in teacher education.