Dominant discourses of teachers in early childhood education

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This article examines the dominant discourses teachers in early childhood education (ECE) used to produce understandings of children and educational practice for them. Seven teachers from two early childhood centres in urban KwaZulu-Natal participated in this qualitative study. Data were produced through semi-structured interviews and conversations. The shared discourses of biology, development and difference are discussed. The findings show that teachers unproblematically use dominant discourses which narrow possibilities for them to understand children. This in turn limits their capacity for shaping contextually relevant practice. The article concludes with a brief discussion on worthy areas to focus on in order to map a way forward for developing the skills and capacity of teachers in ECE.

Keywords: Early childhood education, teachers, discourses, young children, centre-based provision

Introduction

In South Africa the field of early childhood development (ECD) involving children from 0 to four years has inserted itself into public debates on education. ECD is "an umbrella term which applies to the processes by which children (0 to nine) grow and thrive, physically, mentally, emotionally, morally and socially" (Department of Education, 1995:33). Early childhood education (ECE) traditionally refers to the education processes which aim at effecting developmental changes in young children in early childhood centres (Gordon & Browne, 2004). The shift of early care and education before schooling into public service is creating debate on quality provisioning (Ebrahim, 2010). Achieving the best outcomes for young children is closely linked to the training of teachers. Irvine (2009) and Bloch (2010) both stress the need to begin serious action for teacher development in the early years.

Taking into account the need to work from a South African evidence base for teacher development, the critical position of teachers in making a difference in the lives of young children, and the gap in literature on the education of children from 0 to 4 years, this article examines the dominant discourses teachers used in order to shape ECE.

Broadening the theoretical landscape in ECE

In order to understand the dominant discourses teachers use in ECE it is necessary to briefly review the theoretical shifts as initiated by the reconceptualist movement in the USA and the childhood studies group in Europe.

Reconceptualists for ECE have been in the forefront of troubling the dominant body of knowledge informing teachers' thinking and practice in ECE (Cannella, 1997; Grieshaber & Cannella 2001; Viruru, 2001). In the main, reconceptualists question the overpowering application of ideas of growth and

maturation from biology, mental constructs from developmental psychology and theories about child development in ECE. They argue that these perspectives are based on a positivist world view which subscribe to modernist assumptions of truth and certainty especially in relation to who children are, how they grow, develop and learn (Soto & Swadener, 2002).

Reconceptualists argue that scientific facts which are accepted as universally valid are used to regulate teachers, children and their families. Regulation results from the acceptance of scientific knowledge as a true way to shape practice for ECE. Goffin (1996) argues that this approach to ECE is appealing as it provides credibility to teachers' work and helps them to indicate what matters in their work. However, the dominant theoretical perspectives in ECE downplay the importance of diversity and situated complexities that characterise ECD in the developing world (Penn, 2008).

Childhood studies, which grew out of the sociology of childhood, have challenged the foundations of child development knowledge for child-related professions (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Mayall, 2002; Prout & James 1997). Critiques argue that the dominant knowledge base casts children as weak, needy, incompetent and irrational in relation to adults (Lee, 2001). When teachers use this source of information about children, the focus is on the becoming child. Uprichard (2008) contends that this is a future-oriented view of what children will be rather than what children are in their present state of being.

Through continued critique, use of marginalised theoretical perspectives and qualitative research - both the reconceptualist and the childhood studies group – are broadening knowledge for ECE. MacNaughton (2000) used feminist poststructural tools to explore how biological and child development knowledge held by teachers impacted on practice and worked against gender equity. Viruru (2000) used a postcolonial lens to challenge traditional Western preschool ideas on play-based and child-centred education. In Africa cultural historical ideas are being used to develop indigenous knowledge to shape policy and practice in ECE. Soudee (2009) produced case studies in Gambia, Mali and Senegal to show how indigenous knowledge and practices are used in early childhood to promote whole child development.

Recently, childhood studies have provided child professionals with alternate approaches to thinking about young children and shaping practice with and for them. Young children in ECE are given voice and are accepted as agents. According to Puffall and Unsworth (2004: 8) voice refers to "that cluster of intentions, hopes, grievances, and expectations that children guard as their own" and agency refers to "the fact that children are much more self-determining actors than we generally think". Agency is how children express their voice – verbally, bodily and graphically. There is a small body of research in South Africa which shows young children under five as agents whose competence needs a rethink on how teachers understand children and shape practice with and for them (Ebrahim, 2007; Ebrahim & Francis, 2008).

Theoretical framework

The term "discourse" comes from the ideas of Foucault. Foucault (1974: 49) argues that knowledge is constituted through discourses which he defines as "practices that systematically stand for the objects of which they speak". Discourses are very powerful in creating reality. Foucault (1974) notes that discourses operate through language. In making sense of reality particular discourses which are highly dominant will provide words and conceptual frameworks that are easily accepted. This guides how people think, feel and act in relation to the self, others and social practice (MacNaughton, 2003).

Particular fields such as early childhood have specific discourses that will dominate and point to what is considered to be true or the right way of acting. Foucault (1980: 131) refers to this as "regimes of truth". Earlier on we saw how ideas from child development and developmental psychology promoted the discovery of the scientific child as the true child. This knowledge is frequently used to shape *best* practice.

Discourses are not static. There will always be alternative discourses that coexist and operate at the margins. These types of discourses contest the dominant ones. The socio-cultural and socio-political contexts bring about changes in discourses. For example, in apartheid South Africa, early childhood was a space for engineering separate and unequal childhoods (Ebrahim, 2010). In democratic South Africa, early

childhood is regarded as an ideal space to inculcate democratic principles and human rights values such as anti-racism and anti-sexism (Department of Education, 2001).

This article sets out to examine the shared discourses of teachers in two early childhood centres. My aim is to shed light on the truth regimes used by teachers as participants in this study.

Research design and methodology

A qualitative research approach was deemed suitable for this study. McMillan and Schmacher (2001) state that this approach is valuable to researchers seeking to understand what is real to people and what directs their thoughts, feelings and actions.

Two early childhood centres in urban KwaZulu-Natal in residential areas were selected for the study. Both centres were privately owned and offered half and full day care for children from 0 to five years. They catered for children of working parents who were in need of child care.

The centres were chosen purposively based on the age of the children they catered for, their location, and their multiracial composition. Seven teachers were involved in the study. At Centre 1 four teachers participated in the study. They are referred to as Mrs A, Mrs B, Mrs C and Mrs D. Three teachers from Centre 2 participated in the study, namely, Mrs X, Miss Y and Miss Z.

Semi-structured interviews were used to produce data. Broad themes such as teachers' understanding of children, the nature of practice and the configuration of the centres were developed. In order to stimulate a free flow of data a story starter was used, namely, *a day in the life of* …. These narrations were valuable in identifying how teachers were thinking about young children and shaping appropriate practice for them. Responses were audio-taped. In the natural course of observation there were snatching conversations which focused on children's activities and teachers' understandings. These were captured as field notes.

The ethical clearance for this study was obtained via university procedures before the study commenced. Consent for the study was obtained from the directors of the centres and teachers by means of direct appointments and consent letters. The letters outlined the nature and aims of the study, confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, data collection procedures and dissemination of information. Teachers were given opportunities to clarify their understanding, ask questions related to procedures and research activities.

Various stages of data analysis were followed. Parker (1992, 1994) notes that the first stage in identifying discourses is the transformation of research material into text. The data produced through semi-structured interviews and conversations were transcribed. This was followed by a careful reading of the data to identify particular statements. This reading helped to gain a descriptive understanding of the discourses in which the teachers had been positioned. Parker suggests that the second stage is characterised by free association with the text. This stage allows for a deliberation on the meanings, associations and connotations. During this stage several units of meaning were clustered to make connections to dominant discourses. In the third stage strong units of meaning were clustered in relation to the dominant discourses that were shared by teachers in both centres. Three dominant and shared discourses were identified and are presented in the next section.

Findings and discussions

Biological discourse

Casting young children as biologically different from older children and adults is a primary means through which teachers make sense of who children are and what they are capable of. When teachers use the biological discourse to shape practice, ideas of growth and maturity are strong (MacNaughton, 2000). The concept of growth affords ideas on physical and related psychological changes that the body experiences with age (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2006). This is supported by the idea of maturity which is tied up with the influence of heredity. Both concepts imply a natural sequence of physical changes and behaviour patterns which is part of the "universal experience of being a child" (James *et al*., 1998: 17). Teachers in

the study related the age of young children to natural tendencies, for example, two-year olds and tantrums; three-year-olds and selfishness. The articulations that follow show how teachers used the biological discourse to construct the children in their care.

Mrs D: They are tiny and don't know anything.

Miss Y: Learning is a bit of a problem because they are small … Small children are like that.

Mrs C: Each child is the limit of their abilities. With the little ones their abilities are limited to start off with.

Mrs X: You can't just tell a child don't do something. Kids are not equipped to think that way.

The danger of working with naturalised assumptions of biological discourses lies in the fact that teachers can easily slip into saying "that's the way children naturally are". Children's behaviour is viewed as something that is inborn and therefore inevitable and inconvertible. However, critiques of the biological perspective on child development argue that whilst children's immaturity is a biological fact, the way in which it is understood and made meaningful is incumbent upon forming relationships with real children in specific contexts (Penn, 2005; Prout & James, 1997). The naturalisation of children shuts down possibilities for this to happen as it creates images of weak, needy and dependent children. In this context it is highly possible that teacher-centred approaches will be dominant, hence the possibilities of relational pedagogies where children and teachers construct learning experiences together are lost.

Developmental discourse

In conversations with teachers in the study it was not surprising that they used common sense understandings of children based on ideas from developmental psychology. They spoke about stages of development as sequential building blocks that guided their understanding of children and practice for them. As expected, chronological age was the officially sanctioned way in which the teachers learnt about children's competence. They used the age categories to compare children. The excerpts below illustrate this.

Mrs B: Adrian and Shaun are the same age. You know, Adrian talks better than Shaun. Shaun is only starting now to name everything. The main thing is that each child is so different. They develop at different rates.

Mrs C: You know Sheria will only be two next month. If you compare her to the rest, she can do more. If you look at her and Butsi there is a one month age gap.

Mrs X: She will be four soon. If you look at other children within her age group, she is more advanced. Even when they play games she feels it is too babyish. She is more like a lady.

From the above it is evident that the teachers were drawing on the data which provided them with standards for normal development. Cannella (1997) is critical of this practice. She notes that often the taken-for-granted standards are used to determine if something is wrong or abnormal. Children's ways of being that are coloured by the historical, political, social, cultural, and economic contexts that bring multiple constructions of child development, run the risk of being categorised as abnormal if they challenge the norms.

Given the fact that teachers in the study relied heavily on the age-related norms, it was not surprising that they scheduled activities for totalising practices. They used the age groups and age-related norms to homogenise practice. This is a common way in which good teachers who know the necessary truths of best practice tend to govern and regulate normal children. The excerpt below shows how children are cast in the image of a universal child as an undifferentiated collective for practical activities.

Mrs B: They all do the same thing. They all sing the same song. They are not going to say that it is too easy for me. You see they don't choose… At this age (two and older) I don't think for them there is much of a difference. So they don't mind what you are actually doing with them as long as you are doing something. You can do some colour stimulation and that's fine.

In my discussion with Miss Y on planning for children from different cultural backgrounds, she had the following to say:

> *They all do the same work. They actually cope quite well at this level.*

Penn (2005, 38) notes that when a developmental discourse is used by professionals, it is sometimes taken to mean that children are "worth less than adults and their views and concerns are of less importance". The notion of development becomes synonymous with being a minor. Hence, children in early childhood are constituted as too young to engage in or understand practices or the workings of adult power. They are commonly viewed as passive recipients of adults' actions.

Discourse of difference

Since teachers in the study focused on the sameness of children in ages and stages, they did not engage with categories of difference such as gender and race. MacNaughton (1995) argues that the invisibility of categories of difference in ECE can be attributed to the way the child development domains are used. Teachers at both centres used the physical, social, cognitive, and emotional domains of development as key to their assessment of children. Within this frame of reference, gender and race are not organisational categories. They are viewed as part of social development rather than something that constitutes children. The excerpt below shows how teachers' reliance on the naturally developing child discounted the focus on boys and girls and children of colour.

> *Mrs A: They don't realise so much at this age… For the other young ones gender doesn't bother them. I mean you see them in the toddler groups especially. I don't think they actually realise it. It's the same with them. Like race it doesn't bother them. Even in this big age, even in the readiness class, it's not a thing. I think that they see everyone as one…*

> *Mrs C: They all play together nicely whether they are boy or girl. See Patsy and Crain… She runs after Crain all the time and calls him. They sitting together now. She calls him to come and sit next to her. It doesn't really matter. Girls just don't play with girls and boys just don't play with boys. They intermingle culturally as well. Yah, so it (gender) doesn't matter at this age.*

> *Miss Y: In my age group (two to four years) boys and girls are the same. The boys worry the girls. The girls worry the boys.*

In normalising boys and girls, teachers accessed categorisations that worked through binary gender divisions. Boys and girls were placed in mutually exclusive categories. When this happens, it becomes natural to stimulate gender learning through modelling and reinforcing behaviours that are viewed as sex-appropriate. Thinking and acting within this limiting frame of reference works against gender equity in the early years. Multiple femininities and masculinities are not taken into account. Furthermore, Connell (1995) notes that the dominant form of being a boy could be naturalised and violence could be seen as part of boy culture. The examples below show how gender categories were essentialised by teachers. Mrs X viewed parents as upholding the gender stereotypes.

> *Mrs C: I find that girls can basically amuse themselves a lot easier. Sometimes boys are a lot more aggressive than girls, you know. They tend to fight and you know a lot more than the girls… Girls do have a better way.*

> *Mrs D: The girls you know will listen. The boys like to fidget and won't sit still.*

> *Mrs X: You notice if the children go to buy something it is always the parents that choose. The child says what he likes. Then the mummy says that's not for a boy. It's for a girl.*

In the study the children who posed the greatest challenge to teachers were those who could not speak English. Robinson and Diaz (2006) note that in ECE the preoccupation with developmental frameworks legtimised narrow monolingual approaches which often resulted in teachers adopting a deficit and dismissive approach to children's linguistic and cognitive capabilities. In both Centre 1 and Centre 2 English was used as the language of learning and teaching. Teachers in Centre 1 used a subtractive

approach to IsiZulu (i.e. English replaced IsiZulu). The excerpt below shows how Centre 1 dealt with home language in an English-only centre.

> *Mrs A: There are more black (African) kids coming in just because they need to learn. A lot of them are in our readiness class and that's when we have problems. I try to say to them (the parents) bring them in this class because they don't talk English. You have got to teach them. It takes three to four months to get them to learn English and by then they are behind with their work. Miss P has a mission trying to get them there. She can't wait because she is with other kids. They are learning with them. They can't get through the programme because the programme is intense…*

Centre 2 developed a broader approach to dealing with the home language issue. Staff were conversant in both English and IsiZulu. They were able to use code-switching to help children learn. The excerpt below shows how Miss Y used IsiZulu as her home language to make connections with the children.

> *Miss Y: You know my nation, that one Mpumi, the first day she did not talk at all. You know in my group, she looks at the children or looks at something… For the black (African) children first I teach them in Zulu because she understands what I said. Most of them I teach it in English. Then I talk it in Zulu. They don't know what I said. They look at my face and me. Then I tell it in Zulu and change it to English. Now it's okay. Not like the first time.*

Centre 1 worked on several strategies to create synergy between the language environments of the home and school. Parents were under pressure to abandon their home language in favour of English. In a study on South African parents' perceptions of African home languages it was noted that parents were well aware of the economic value of English and did not want their children to be disadvantaged by speaking an African home language (De Klerk, 2002). In this context it is easy for the English culture to function as a natural proxy for quality, merit, and advantage. The excerpt illustrates how parents were influenced by the centre to support their children in an English-only centre.

> *Mrs A: We don't allow them to speak Zulu here. We encourage them to speak English. We write letters to the parents to tell them that they must watch English TV at home. They must read English stories… Parents are sending the children to an English centre. Some of them are even changing their languages at home for their kids… Parents are lovely. They make a big effort to try and help their children.*

Concluding remarks and moving forward

Whilst by no means exhausting the complex ways in which the shared dominant discourses function to produce knowledge of young children and shape practice for them, I have shown how the discourses work to mitigate against ECE as a space where teachers work in a dynamic environment with children as social actors who come from diverse circumstances which shape their identities and how they learn. I have tried to show how the discourses privilege particular ways of knowing, thinking and acting in ECE. The dominant discourses construct children as ignorant, needy, passive and as lacking in voice and agency. Teachers positioned in the dominant discourses present themselves as deliverers of natural educational and child outcomes. Early childhood centres are portrayed as neutral places where teachers unproblematically socialise children in the formative years, preparing them for school and adulthood. This may partially explain why research in early childhood centres for 0 to four has been neglected. In moving forward the following are worthy areas to focus on in order to shape new thinking in ECE.

Embracing diversity

The dominance of biological and developmental discourses in ECE needs to be reconsidered in light of embracing diversity. These discourses promote sameness as the goal. ECE programmes are assumed to be effective when children behave, play and act in similar ways. The anti-bias approach which is embedded in the qualification for ECE teachers needs to be reworked to include broader theoretical understandings which celebrate diversity. There needs to be acknowledgement of the fact that there are many ways of

being a young child in the South African context. Teachers need to be developed as reflective practitioners who are able to think about their ways of knowing children and appropriate practice with and for them.

Focusing on children as becomings, beings and having a sense of belonging

Papatheodora's (2008) analysis of world views of children in early childhood curricula is helpful in shaping thinking on how children are thought of and acted upon in ECE. In this study it was obvious that the biological and developmental discourses favoured the view of the child as *becoming*. It must be emphasised that this view is essential when focusing on the future individual, the societal economic prosperity and the well-being of the future citizenry. But we need to move beyond this. Children as *beings* and having a sense of *belonging* need a stronger focus. The former respects young children as people in their own right. ECE programmes need to be designed to harness their participation as constructors and co-constructors of ECE. In order to create cultural pride young children must experience a sense of belonging in the immediate and wider community in which they participate. Teacher training needs to focus on preparing teachers to teach in African languages and in culturally sensitive and responsive ways.

Reflection on pedagogy

This study has provided insight into critical reflection on pedagogy. The latter is not just limited to teaching children in a particular age group. Blatchford *et al*. (2002) present a definition that is pertinent to early childhood. Pedagogy is described as a set of instructional techniques and strategies which help learning to take place. Opportunities are created for knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions to be acquired in particular social and material contexts. How teachers shape their learning environment, construct interactions with children and establish links with families and communities for ECE are partly dependent on the discourses they use to shape pedagogy. It would make sense for teacher training organisations/institutions to create space for teachers to articulate their ways of knowing. Such exercises will allow pedagogies to become a source of challenge and debate. This could assist teachers in developing alternate and more socially just practices for ECE.

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