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‘Reading’ the nursery classroom: a Foucauldian perspective.

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines ways in which styles of language usage mediate attempts at describing classroom practice. Our particular focus centres on discursive power and we seek to illustrate some of the effects and consequences of applying certain Foucauldian concepts and analytical procedures within depictions of interactions between children and with the teacher in a nursery classroom. We begin by introducing an example of children’s play. To this we apply analyses which stem from our readings of Foucault. In so doing, we show how power both permeates and defines subjective positionings and where, as a consequence, individuals experience themselves as both powerful and powerless. A second example is offered in which a teacher talks to a child. Our analyses of this can, we believe, be perceived as a reflexive act, where the teacher’s own beliefs, including her feminism, is critiqued and redefined.*

Introduction

All my books...are, if you like, little tool boxes. If people want to open them, or to use this sentence or that idea as a screwdriver or spanner to short-circuit, discredit or smash systems of power, including eventually those from which my books have emerged...so much the better (Foucault, 1975, p. 115).

Insofar as discussion within educational circles has experienced a “post-modern embrace” Foucault has probably attracted most attention (e.g. Ball, Walkerdine, Allan, Pignatelli). However, attempting to summarise Foucault’s intricate and sometimes contrary thinking is a difficult task. In the main, this is because there is not a definitive Foucauldian text which clearly states his theoretical position. Instead, his work is both diffuse and wide ranging. Despite and because of its disparity, Foucault accomplishes a significant shift. That is, he directs attention away from a narrow conception of language and meaning and relocates it to ‘discourses’. There are those that would urge us to resist the seduction of Foucault’s tools arguing that his theories regarding subjectivity and power make it impossible to develop a theory of liberation and where, for example, the oppression of women could be addressed (Moi, 1985, p. 95). By contrast, our view of Foucault is more optimistic and positive. In the main, this is because our readings of his work suggest that the subject can be both subjected *to* and yet develop or find the means to resist subjectification. Such ambiguity arises, we think, from the complexities which

are embedded in any discursive power relations. Our efforts here are directed at trying to illustrate how this ambiguity can be put to work. It is work which necessitates not only challenging dominant social practices but, additionally, it obliges the practitioner-researcher to confront her own complicity in such arrangements. As such, we see our appropriation of some of Foucault's 'tools' as aiding reflexive practice. And as we shall see in this paper, his theory of discourse provides us with an alternative way(s) of looking at the minutiae of the classroom and in so doing makes a space for conceptualising changes within inequitable structural arrangements. Furthermore, using or incorporating Foucault's analysis into the research works at implicating our own complicity within such arrangements.

We shall begin by contextualising our concerns. This is followed by a brief but necessary resume of some of the salient features of Foucault's work. The paper then introduces two examples of classroom interactions. Using a Foucauldian perspective, the examples are analysed and certain implications for practice are made clear. Finally, we postulate how post-structuralism in general but Foucault in particular can assist us further in transgressing self-normalising practices.

Research Perspective

Shortly, we shall offer data which are based on participatory observations that were carried out in a nursery classroom. The nursery is attached to an inner city primary school. The children who feature in the extracts were aged four and all attended school on a full-time basis. The area of the city where the children live is experiencing high levels of unemployment. As in other areas, there is much social diversity and the children of the nursery reflect this. Family patterns within the nursery, for example, include parenting by heterosexual partners some of whom have chosen to marry, as well as parenting by foster parents, single women and same-sex couples.

Originally, the research project from which this paper originates was conceived of as a 'teacher as researcher' enquiry into the ways in which children contribute to their own evolving identity, with particular reference to gendered identity. Here the teacher researcher was seen as, among other things, a) working on being a better teacher, b) developing understanding of classroom practices and c) building awareness of research process through which these can be achieved. Yet each of these enterprises resisted clear definition within any supposed emancipatory agenda supported by rationalist assumptions. The implied subject, engaged as she was in a 'permanent critique' of herself (Foucault, 1984, p. 43) within the research process, found her liberal humanist assumptions sorely tried.

An initial focus of the project was on how children represent through language their understanding of themselves as social subjects within the dualistic gender order (Walkerdine et al, 1989). Thus, observations were made of children's social interactions both with the teacher and with one another. The hope was that by framing relevant aspects of practice in writing the teacher could then move from mere descriptions to an

understanding of such descriptions and an appreciation of the ways social norms and structures work at coercing.

Our contention, however, is that such an approach has the potential to lead not to the unlocking of complexity but to the elucidation of rigid preconceptions which serve only to confirm injustices of the 'found' world. Engaging with Foucault, and with post-structuralist theories in general, has obliged a reappraisal of such perceptions. In this paper, our interactions with Foucault are for two main reasons. First, he has, we believe, given us productive insights into the manifestations, developments and realisations of power relations. Such an appreciation can, we think, impact upon classroom practices. Second, his work challenges the notion of the stable and knowing subject. It is this particular version of subjectivity that is located at the heart of 'consciousness raising' practices (Fay, 1987). As such, Foucault's work obliges us to critique our own interests and investments in emancipatory work. We shall discuss these two aspects of Foucault's work in more detail before examining some classroom data.

Discursive power

Foucault (1981, p. 92) suggests that the word 'power' has led to a number of misunderstandings with respect to its nature, its form and its unity. A conventional view of power, for example, is where it is conceived as operating in a direct and brutally repressive fashion (Hall, 1997, p.48). By contrast, Foucault asserts that power must be understood:

...in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies (1981, p. 93).

Within this analysis power is neither an institution, nor a structure or an endowed strength. Rather, 'it is a name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society' (Foucault, 1981, p. 93). In other words, debates or skirmishes within society are not intrinsically about who has power, but rather about the contested terms of the deployment of power (Ransom, 1993, p. 128). Foucault's argument is that power is both limitless and productive and it is inextricably enmeshed with knowledge; there cannot be one without the other:

There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations (Foucault, 1977, p. 27).

For Foucault, power is conceptualised as being a 'capillary form of existence' and where it reaches 'into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into the action and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives' (Foucault, 1980, p. 39). In practice, what this means is that what we think we 'know' in a particular period about, for example, 'crime' or 'homosexuality' impacts upon how we regulate and control. For as Hall notes:

Knowledge does not operate in a void. It is put to work, through certain technologies and strategies of application, in specific situations, historical contexts and institutional regimes. To study punishment, you must study how the combination of discourse and power - power\knowledge - has produced a certain conception of crime and the criminal, has had certain real effects both for the criminal and for the punisher, and how these have been set into practice in certain historically specific regimes (Hall, 1997, p. 49).

Foucault's conception of power is radically different to liberal humanist's understandings of how power functions. In this instance, power is perceived as being contestable and where particular interests groups strive in order to secure power. What Foucault asserts, however, is that there is no point outside power from which a 'fair' decision about who should 'have' it can be made (Ransom, 1993, p.129). As noted above, power for Foucault is conceptualised as a capillary, spreading notion and where rather than being a repressive force it is 'productive' (Foucault, 1988, p.118). The power\knowledge nexus does not operate along a single route or path. At one point in time there are or can be multiple arrangements. For Foucault, it is the struggle of these power\knowledge appellations which constitutes political struggle.

Foucault's gaze was not directed at contemporary social arrangements. Rather, he chose to conduct a historical, or more specifically, a genealogical analysis of particular practices. As such, his aim was not to establish the causes or origins of discourses. Rather, he seeks to explore the internal relationships between the 'elements' such as subjects, objects, concepts and so on, relationships which make any specific discourse into what it is. The job of genealogical analysis is to look to the explicit particulars or details of a 'discursive field' such as one that constitutes 'insanity', 'sexuality' or 'order'. In this way, he suggests, there are then possibilities to uncover forms or regimes of power and knowledge that work at constituting power relations. Foucault's theory of discourse disputes that there are universal or fixed notions. The meaning and form of what constitutes, for example, 'madness', is defined within historically specific discourses. For as Foucault explains:

in discourse something is formed according to clearly definable rules; alongside everything a society can produce (alongside: that is to say, in a determinate relationship with) there is the formation and transformation of "things said" (Foucault, 1991, p. 63).

Weedon (1987, p. 108) elaborates further. She writes that discourses are:

ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and the relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects which they seek to govern...the ways in which discourse constitutes the minds and bodies of individuals is always part of a wider network of power relations, often with institutional bases.

Clearly discourses are powerful but they can, nevertheless, be subjected to change and reversals. In Foucault's terms, discourses must be conceived as a 'series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform or stable' (Foucault, 1981, p. 100). He goes on to assert that:

we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies...Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (Foucault, 1981, p. 101).

Moreover:

Discourses are tactical elements or blocks in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy (1981, p. 102).

Numerous discourses with varying degrees of power can be in circulation. However, in order to have an effect, albeit minimal, a discourse has to be in circulation. In this way, there is then the discursive space in which individuals themselves can formulate a resistance to the dominant structure. For, as Weedon points out:

Resistance to the dominant at the level of the individual subject is the first stage in the production of alternative forms of knowledge or where such alternatives already exist, of winning individuals over to these discourses and gradually increasing their social power (1987, p. 111).

Subjectivity

The 'problem of the subject' (Rabinow, 1984, p. 12) is a pivotal concern for Foucault. In particular, he rails against the notion that 'man' is an autonomous and self-determining

agent. For Foucault, individuals do not have essential, stable or 'true' identities; rather, techniques of power\knowledge work at producing particular ways or forms of being. Thus, there is not, for example, a unitary notion of what constitutes 'the child'. Instead subjectivity is:

...produced as a nexus of subjectivities, in relations of power which are constantly shifting, rendering them at one moment powerful and at another powerless (Walkerdine, 1981, p. 14).

Some would argue, including for example certain feminists, that defining a politics of self demands that there is a 'subject' (Eisenstein, 1981). However, for Foucault the development of a political ethos does not depend on the liberal humanist notion of the rational self. As such, Foucault divorces liberal humanism from the Enlightenment project. Humanism itself is:

parasitical to conceptions of what it means to be human borrowed from religion, science, or politics. It operates as a justification not as a critique. Hence it is opposed to Enlightenment (Dunn, 1997, p. 142).

That said, Foucault then goes on to suggest ways to connect with the Enlightenment through:

the permanent reactivation of an attitude - that is, of a philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era (Foucault, 1984, p. 47).

Somewhat incongruously, Foucault advocates that the adoption of the critical ethos attentive to Enlightenment thinking should be a mix of both positive and negative commitments (Foucault, 1984, pp. 42-45):

Negatively, one must refuse "the 'blackmail' of Enlightenment", which for Foucault means that one must ignore those who insist that criticising Enlightenment rationality is simply irrational and that one must be either for or against Enlightenment. The task of problematizing Enlightenment must, instead, entail an analysis of ourselves as beings who are historically determined, to a certain extent, by the Enlightenment but who eschew an essential orientation toward some 'rational kernel' at the heart of the experience of the Enlightenment. We must instead orient ourselves toward the 'contemporary limits of the necessary' (Dunn, 1997, p.142; Foucault, 1984, p. 42).

Positively, the critical ethos Foucault endorses is a critical ontology of ourselves characterised as a limit attitude. Here:

...we are not talking about a gesture of rejection. We have to move beyond the outside-inside alternative; we have to be at the frontiers. Criticism indeed consists of analysing and reflecting upon limits...it seems to me that the critical question today has to be turned back into a positive one: in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singularity, contingent, and the product of arbitrary

constraints. The point, in brief is to transform the critique that takes the form of possible transgression (Foucault, 1984, p. 45).

Discursive power at play in the home base

The first example of data was based on children's play that occurred within the 'home base'. Here there are child-sized models of various domestic appliances and furniture, including a cooker, washing machine, kitchen utensils, cutlery, plastic table sets as well as a selection of armchairs and a settee. Whilst there are probably as many reasons as there are nursery teachers as to why such 'homes' are a feature of nursery classrooms there is general agreement that by providing such environments young children can both draw upon their own experiences of home life to inform their play and additionally, act out their stories within a familiar location.

We meet Nathan and Dean, who were playing together in the 'home', when they were joined by two girls, Shelby and Melissa.

Journal entry:

25.9.95.

Nathan: *I'm the baby.*

Dean: *I'll be the Dad. I'll help the baby.*

Nathan: *We're making some pies aren't we Daddy?*

Nathan and Dean put some of the salt dough into two of the mixing bowls and using spoons, begin to stir vigorously.

Melissa and Shelby enter the Home and make it clear that they would like to join in the play.

Nathan: *We can have two grandmas*

Melissa tries to take some of Nathan's dough. In a loud and firm voice he says:

Nathan: *No, they're not cooked.*

Shelby: *Do you want me to be Mum?*

Nathan and Dean agree.

Shelby puts on a jacket from the dressing up cupboard and a battered hat.

Shelby: *Baby, baby I'm going down to the movie.*

Nathan still continues with the salt dough mixture. He has now begun to shape the dough into balls.

Shelby: (in a firm voice) *Baby, you said you wanted to go down to the movie.*

There is a pause then:

Shelby: *Baby, why aren't you coming down?*

Shelby moves out of the house but turns round to call once again and this time she cups her hands round her mouth to help increase the volume of her voice:

Baby, the movie.

Melissa: (calling to Nathan) *Nathan.*

Nathan: *No, I'm the baby.*

Shelby returns to the house and takes Nathan by the hand:

Shelby: *Say goodbye to everyone.*

Nathan waves at everyone as he is led out of the house.

Shelby: *Shall I take that for you?*

(she points to the wooden spoon that Nathan has been using).

Nathan nods. As he is led to the book corner I observe Melissa pick up the things that Nathan had been using and she begins to play. Dean wanders out of the house to join Nathan. Shelby gently pushes both boys onto the easy chairs and gives them each a book to read. She then returns to the House. She tells the boys:

I'll just check the cakes.

Analysis:

Our focus, when reading the above extract, is to discern how the power\knowledge appellation is brought into play and how, as a consequence, this then shapes, coerces and potentiates individual action (Davies, 1989, p.xi). Thus, when reading the above extract, we are working from the premise that when playing the children themselves are *playing with* notions of identity which in turn *plays* with concepts of power and power relations. It is our view that the children have used particular regimes of power in order to both produce and maintain power relations. Within these, particular subjective positions have been fashioned. This is not simply a matter of identifying which role is being played by which child; rather, it involves us trying to assess how the children both invest in and are invested by particular discourses. Such shifts are brought about through intricate manoeuvrings and where some of the players seek to constrain in order to control or become the owner\author of the game. It is this constitution of multiple subjective positionings that we wish to explore.

The story opens with Nathan taking up the position of 'baby' whilst his friend Dean takes on the role of 'dad'. Having entered into an adult\child discourse, Dean conceptualises his 'adult' power in terms of helping. Thus:

I'll be the Dad. I'll help the baby.

However, this is not to say that Nathan as the 'baby' is without power for it is he who stipulates what should be done and who should do it:

Nathan: We're making some pies aren't we Daddy?

Hence, through asking a rhetorical question the 'baby' positions the dad as a co-pie maker or cook. Such a strategy, we would suggest, works at blurring traditional notions of power which are deemed to lie within the adult \ child dichotomy and where the child is perceived as being the powerless other to the positive adult.

When the two girls enter the 'home' Nathan suggests that they become 'grandmas'. There may be a number of reasons why Nathan makes the 'grandma' suggestion. However, because we are using a Foucauldian gaze, the following proposal centres on discourses and the ways these function.

Thus Nathan, whilst willing to let the girls into the story which he and Dean have been constructing has, we believe, an awareness that if he allows the girls to be 'mother' both his positioning as 'baby' and that of his 'dad' will be altered. What Nathan is concerned about, we think, is that if the girls are designated as 'mothers', which given both the story

and the gender of the girls would be quite logical, they would upset the balance that 'baby' and 'dad' had created together through the intermediary figure of 'cook'. In other words the discourse of mothering and its connected practices would position both boys back on the other, negative side of the adult \ child dichotomy. The suggestion here is that the role of 'grandma' is for Nathan both a compromise and a way out of the dilemma.

However, it seems that the girls are not willing to be passive participants in the play. Melissa, for example, tries to take some of the salt dough that the boys were 'cooking' with. This prompts Nathan to declare; *No, they're not cooked*. Furthermore, he uses a loud and firm voice and in so doing perhaps lends authority to his role as 'cook'. His tone of voice reminds the children, particularly the girls, that as cook it is he who has the knowledge and thus the power to decide when pies are cooked. Again, it is an awareness of the discursive practices when give credence to his words.

Whilst it is unclear why it is that the boys agree to let Shelby be 'mother' what does seem apparent from the above extract is that as 'mother' Shelby seems determined to position Nathan as the negative child to her positive adult. In a variety of ways she works hard at constructing a persona that will convince the group that she is indeed a powerful adult. For example, she dresses as an adult, she marks out the distinction between herself and Nathan by constantly addressing him as 'baby' and her final tactic is to offer him the chance to go to a movie. However, despite the repeated offers of a trip to the movies Nathan retains a silence. Rather than acknowledging Shelby's invites, it seems that Nathan for a while chooses to ignore her. Why does he keep quiet?

Our readings of Walkerdine's work (1988, 1989, 1990), who used post-structuralism in general but Foucault in particular to deconstruct the teaching of mathematics in the primary setting and concepts of 'mothering', has led us to interpret Nathan's silence as a form of resistance. Thus, despite Shelby's repeated acts to position Nathan as the powerless other, he, by maintaining a silence, prevents her from having full control of him. It is only when Melissa calls him by his real name that he is obliged to speak. For at this juncture it appears that Nathan has to make a decision; either be 'Nathan', which might well put him outside of the story or remain within the play as the 'baby'. Having decided to be 'not Nathan' (*No, I'm the baby*) he is obliged to accept the only alternative available at this point and be the 'baby. As 'baby' he is obliged to acquiesce to the power of the mother. Within the story, the handing over of the wooden spoon could be understood as a symbolic relinquishment of his autonomy.

It is, however, important to note that Shelby, as mother, does not have monolithic power. Instead, she is obliged to make certain, almost imperceptible, shifts in so that she can respond to Nathan's resistance. First, as an adult she can offer a 'trip to the movies'. Being 'an adult' she can 'realistically' make such an offer. It is, however, more than a fantasy. It is a ploy to remove the boys from the home. At first, the boys, as we have seen, resist the lure. In response, Shelby alters the offer. Now, it is no longer her idea to take Nathan to the cinema; rather, it is he that has *asked* to go: *Baby, you said you wanted to go down to the movie*. As such, she has contrived to suggest that the idea of a trip to the movies was indeed Nathan's and that she, being both a reasonable and good mother,

is only trying to accommodate Nathan. Where does this leave Nathan? Our suggestion is that Shelby has confused him. Now the story no longer centres on him and his 'dad' making pies. Rather, it has shifted into a new story which is about going to the 'movies'. Moreover, it is a story which in some way he has been made to feel responsible for. Thus, when Shelby asks again, *Baby, why aren't you coming down?* Nathan's response is in part governed because he feels obligated to a suggestion which supposedly stemmed from himself. Our final suggestion, and this too was influenced by Walkerdine, (1990, p. 13) is that at the story's conclusion, Shelby ensures complete obedience from the boys by taking on a 'teacher' role and thereby positioning the boys within the discourse of schooling. Shelby, unable to realise a movie, opts instead to pacify the boys within another discourse, that of schooling, and where children are perceived as being powerless. Thus, through various acts, including kindness, Shelby sets out to coerce Nathan. And in doing so it appears that she has become the 'owner' of the game. For it is she who has control of the plot and she who reallocates the roles so that certain characters, in this case the boys\baby, will be rendered as peripheral.

How can such analyses assist the practitioner-researcher? One important reason, we would suggest, is that stories such as this one disturb the idea that subjectivity is both unitary and fixed. When playing it seems that the children could behave in complex, changing and contradictory ways. Furthermore, it was possible to discern how different discursive practices worked at restricting and inhibiting as well as realising individual action. Similarly, language was exposed as being both a resource and a constraint. Whilst it clearly made social and personal interactions possible it also limited the available forms of being. To expand; the children through language could work out a story together and they could designate roles to one another. However, it also worked at creating categories. Take for example the word 'baby'. In the above story the word 'baby' when used by Shelby works at constraining Nathan's social being. Thus, the use of 'baby' within a specific situation of the 'home' conspires to create a particular social category and where the discursive practices which surround the adult\child couplet constitute the 'baby' as the negative other to the positive adult. As a signifier 'baby' indicates the adult characteristics of the social structure and where for example babies are dependent, needy and without autonomy. By contrast, at the beginning of the example it is possible to see the boys trying to work around the hierarchy which is embedded in 'dad' and 'baby' relationships. Working together and through using the intermediary figure of the 'cook' the boys worked out a way of 'flattening' the status of 'dad' so that 'dad' and 'baby' could remain on equal terms. As such, they had offered a form of resistance to prescribed ways of being.

As teachers we are constantly categorising those children that we have a brief to teach. It is one of the ways by which we attempt to instil order and make sense of the world. But, we would argue, the presuming and bestowing of categories both imposes and polices conceptual boundaries. In all, categories render us docile. As an example, consider the mundane expression 'good girl'. Besides establishing the adult\child dichotomy is it not also making a link between gender and particular forms of behaviour (cf. Davies, 1989)? Whilst such an example may seem trivial it demonstrates how certain commonplace habits can work against emancipatory intentions.

It would be possible, we think, to use the above example of play to ask further pressing questions, including ones that would interrogate the teacher's own perspectivity. For example, what prompted her to observe the play? That is, what longings, desires and libidinal investments (Lather, 1991, p. 83) underlie her journal recordings? Was she drawn to notice because the boys' play ran counter to her expectations? Or, conversely did the play grab her attention because it met with her 'approval'. Maybe her noticings were triggered because particular assumptions that are habitually brought to certain forms of play were unsettled? Clearly more could be said. However, rather than work on the above text, our intention here is to turn to the second example. This centres on a boy named Ashley.

Taming the wild

Journal entry 13.5.96.

Ashley had arrived in school this morning wearing a T-shirt which had emblazoned across its front the memorable slogan: 'Ashley - Born to be Wild'.

Later, I watch him as he runs into the Home and takes the tablecloth from the table. He brings the cloth to me and I tuck the ends into the neck of his 'T-shirt'. I ask:

Teacher: Who are you now?

Ashley: Batman. I'm Batman

(Ashley answers me in a low and growly voice).

As soon as the cape is attached Ashley runs off with both arms stuck out straight in front of him. He goes into the construction corner and I move further down the room in order to keep observing him. Carly (a four year old girl) is in the construction corner. She stops building to look at Ashley. He growls at her:

Ashley (to Carly): You're under arrest.

Carly laughs as Ashley approaches her. He still has his arms stuck straight out. She stands up, sticks her arms straight out and both children run out of the construction corner into the centre of the room singing the Batman theme tune ; 'da da da da Batman'.

Carly leaves Ashley to join some of the other children whilst Ashley continues to run around the room. His singing becomes louder and I make a decision to stop him. I take him by the hand, lead him to the book corner and (deliberately) read to him the story of the 'Paper Bag Princess.'*

I then asked Ashley the following questions to see whether I could discover which bits of the story he liked best and what he had gleaned or appreciated from the story:

Teacher What do you think of Ronald then?

What do you think he should have said to Elizabeth after she rescued him from the dragon?

Ashley: (there is a pause) He's like a girl.. he likes ..he just likes dresses

Teacher What do you mean ..he's like a girl

Ashley: Girls like dressing up

Teacher But you like dressing up. You've got a cape on

Ashley: But that's Batman...girls like dresses

Teacher Who do you like best in the story?

Ashley: The dragon

Teacher The dragon. Why the dragon?

Ashley: Because he flies.. and he's a monster

*This is the story about a princess who commits many heroic deeds to save her Prince Ronald. We are told at the beginning of the tale that the two, Ronald and Elizabeth, intend to get married. Despite being saved by Elizabeth from certain death Ronald gives her no thanks; rather, he attacks her with a string of criticisms which centre on how she looks. The scales fall from Elizabeth's eyes and she sees him for what he really is ; a 'bum'. They don't get married after all (abstract derived from Davies, 1989, p. viii).

Analysis:

Whilst we are not in any position to offer reasons as to why Ashley was wearing his T-shirt we can offer some thoughts as to why its slogan was, for the teacher, 'memorable'. As a word, 'wild' is used and can be defined in diverse ways, for examples lions are wild and behaviour that is extremely erratic and out of control can be described as wild. However it seems to us, when retrospectively reading Ashley's story, that first a somewhat narrow meaning was attributed to the word and second this then had the effect of contributing to the way in which the teacher tried subsequently to position Ashley. In other words, the word 'wild' stood in for and was representative of an essentialist notion of Ashley's identity which in turn resulted in a deterministic reading of his behaviour. Thus, in our view, 'wild' was equated with a hegemonic notion of 'power' and that the wearing of the T-shirt and its slogan symbolised or represented a statement or fact about masculinity; men are born to be indomitable and they cannot be restrained. In short, they are born to be wild.

However, if this was the case, why did the teacher help Ashley transform himself into a 'superhero'? Such a character, it could be argued, is created from and sustained by a notion of masculinity which closely emulates the reading given above. Surely, as a feminist she should be discouraging Ashley's play rather than giving it some kind of tacit approval?

In part, we believe some of her actions can be understood because of the teacher's own ensnarement within the discourse of liberal humanism. Elsewhere (XXXX, in press) we explore more fully what some of the consequences are when a teacher is situated within a specific set of practices. Moreover, Walkerdine's work (1990) also details what some of the repercussions are when liberal humanism fashions the actions of the teacher. However, here it is the teacher's professed feminism which is the object of our scrutiny. Our suggestion is that is this which is currently blocking - rather than opening up - teacher creativity.

The above text is based on the teacher's observations. Such observations are prompted, we think, because of some kind of acknowledgement of or a lingering belief in certain foundational beliefs about what constitutes 'male' and 'female' subjectivity. As we have inferred, we think this is in part due to a commitment to feminism. To expand: the feminist teacher has needed the category of 'woman' around which to formulate a

politics about what it means to be a woman. However, the imposition of the category, predisposing as it does that there are specific characteristics which are inherently female, has severe consequences. For example, it:

effects a political closure on the kinds of experiences articulable as part of a feminist discourse. When the category is understood as representing a set of values or dispositions, it becomes normative in character and hence, exclusionary in principle (Butler, 1990, p. 325).

Thus the teacher and her perceptions of the boy are bound up in an essentialist notion of what constitutes male and female identity. Put a little differently, she has, we believe, constructed a text which is formulated around some mythology of presence. Ashley, in pretending to be Batman, is constructing a fantasy. The teacher, in reading the fantasy, bases her perceptions as if the play is some kind of manifestation of an 'inner reality'. Effectively, Ashley's play is an illusion and one that is 'discursively maintained for the purpose of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality' (Butler, 1990, p.337). In other words, Ashley when playing, overlays one fantasy on to another. Belief in this inner fantasy has come about through the working of discourses. By contrast, whilst the teacher might perceive herself to be in opposition to Ashley, Carly, the little girl that he tries to 'arrest' appears to find Ashley not a threat, but a joke. For it may be remembered she does two things when he growls 'you're under arrest' at her. First, she laughs. Second, she neither resists him nor is she pacified. Rather, she sticks her arms out, and briefly, not only is she a 'bat man' but Ashley appears to accept her as such. Both children, but particularly Carly, seem able to play with the lines which the teacher seems keen to draw.

In analysing the two examples of data we have tried to foreground how particular discursive practices make certain subjective positionings possible. Additionally, attempts have been made to show the coercive effects of particular categories. Specifically, we have tried to make clear some of the negative effects when the teacher holds on to essentialist notions that are concerned with subjectivity. As a consequence of this, she was, we believe, unable to develop more imaginative routes. Instead, she turned the reading of a feminist tale into an oppressive act. How then may things be different? In part, there is a necessary requisite to make visible those practices which sustain and render teacher and child alike as docile (Pignatelli, 1993, p. 430). These can then be problematised. Additionally, our own attachments to particular beliefs have to be reconsidered. What might then be avoided is mindless or static adherence to self-normalising practices (op cit, p. 412).

As a concluding thought, we perceive the writing of this paper as a practice in transgression. In general terms, much of the research which is centred on early childhood education is premised on and locked into a developmental model of early childhood. Moreover, Tobin suggests that Early Years research has been:

characterised by a belief in the authenticity of first hand experience and knowledge: to understand children we need only careful observation and common sense... most qualitative research in early childhood education reflects the belief that people mean pretty much what they say, that texts have stable meanings, and that the reality of the classroom can be captured by the careful ethnographer (1995, p. 225-226).

Tobin's remarks are, we believe, too sweeping. That said, however, we see writing this paper as being part of a growing number of researchers (e.g. Davies, 1989; Walkerdine, 1990; Rhedding-Jones, 1996) who like us are dissatisfied with both unitary models of 'the child' and the belief that language is transparent. Our paper might be seen as efforts in trying to do educational research otherwise.

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