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Reflexivity as a ground-clearing activity within the context of early years' pedagogy.

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### Abstract

The paper concerns itself with the struggles that are prompted by the question 'what is my position as a teacher who whilst wanting to pursue emancipatory practices nevertheless is fearful of finding herself supporting and perpetuating normalizing structures?' An extract drawn from a journal entry serves as a base on which a series of reflexive readings are rehearsed. These have spanned over a period of time (2000-09) and as a consequence convey the theoretical vantage points that have been used in order to create conceptual openings where there are possibilities for thinking 'differently'. Both practices of deconstruction (Derrida, 1976) and anthropological work on purification rites (Douglas, 1970, Kristeva, 1982) are used to shift the means with which I make sense. Overall the paper depicts an individual's attempts at creating a becoming space (Derrida, 1980), where thinking and doing may be a little less bounded.

What is ‘familiarly known’ is not properly known, just for the reason that it is ‘familiar’. When engaged in the process of knowing it is the commonest form of self-deception, and a deception of other people as well, to assume something to be familiar, and to let it pass on that very account...(Hegel, 1967, p. 92).

## Introduction

Let me start with an example of data that was collected when undertaking fieldwork for my doctorate. Here a central concern was located around the question ‘what is my position as a teacher who whilst wanting to pursue emancipatory practices nevertheless is fearful of finding herself supporting and perpetuating normalizing structures?’

(Journal Entry, November 2000)

Outside rain and litter had reduced the play area to a filthy, uninviting and uninspiring zone. I asked Emma<sup>1</sup>, the nursery nurse, to get out the toys whilst I started to pick up the rubbish. This triggered a regular discussion with Jane, the teacher of the parallel kindergarten class. In brief, her argument is that it is the job of the caretaker to pick up litter and that ‘as teachers we shouldn’t have to or be expected to pick up the litter’. My reply evolved around several points: first, I don’t want to either work amongst such conditions nor do I want the children to have to play in them. Second, that morning Dave, our caretaker, had had to clear away the glass and board up the gaps because during the weekend break fourteen windows had been broken. I feel that Dave has to struggle to keep abreast with his work not only because of such incidents as the broken windows but also because his working hours have been cut. To me, the dismal conditions of the playground, the smashed windows of the school and the

alterations to Dave's working conditions are symptomatic of a political system that appears not to care. Personally, to leave the litter would be to condone it and to consider that it was somehow acceptable for the children to play alongside and sometimes with such waste.

This journal e exampleMy aim is to use this data as a basis The paper concerns itself with the struggles that are prompted by the question 'what is my position as a teacher who whilst wanting to pursue emancipatory practices nevertheless is fearful of finding herself supporting and perpetuating normalizing structures?' An extract drawn from a journal entry serves as a base on which a series of reflexive readings are rehearsed. These have spanned over a period of time (2000-09) and as a consequence convey the theoretical vantage points that have been used in order to create conceptual openings where there are possibilities for thinking 'differently'. Both practices of deconstruction (Derrida, 1976) and anthropological work on purification rites (Douglas, 1970, Kristeva, 1982) are used to shift the means with which I make sense. Overall the paper depicts an individual's attempts at creating a becoming space (Derrida, 1980), where thinking and doing may be a little less bounded.

How might we interrupt our customary ways of seeing and perceiving? In what ways might we materialise a reflective and communicative pedagogy (Dahlberg et al, 1999), where there are possibilities to critique familiar convictions about young children and their social worlds? What is my position as a teacher who whilst wanting

to pursue emancipatory practices nevertheless is fearful of finding herself supporting and perpetuating normalizing structures? These are questions that have been struggled over at various junctures both when undertaking my doctorate and subsequently. In this paper I take an anecdote that was recorded in my research journal - a methodological tool that was greatly favoured when collecting data for the doctorate. When reading such data a core ambition was to move from common-sense understandings of what it means to be a teacher to a problematising about and a careful examination of the tangled complexities which lie between knowing and doing. Incorporating poststructuralist theories in general but particularly the work of Derrida (1980) contributed towards this task.

Since completing the doctorate I have moved out of the kindergarten classroom and into a university where one of my roles includes teaching students who are in their final year of study for a degree in Early Childhood Studies. In class I try to generate thoughtful conversations where both students and their teacher alike struggle with how we understand the young child and her social context. In general, the fixing of universal 'truths' and the imposition of categories are practices that have been vigorously undertaken within the field of early years. As a consequence there is in class an imperative to be reflexive so that some of the mechanisms for 'fixing' children including issues around 'identity' might be interrogated.

What follows is an attempt at illustrating some of the ground clearing activities that have been undertaken where I have tried to challenge my own preferred ways of seeing and representing the world (Britzman, 1995; Fine, 1994; Lather, 1993/1995). The question of whether reflexivity does or does not produce better research (Patai, 1994) is

questionable. But I would argue that by interrogating my own position I am more 'vigilant about my practices' (Spivak, 1984, p. 84) a move that I perceive as a necessary precursor to being a 'better' teacher.

The paper begins with an example of data that as previously noted was collected whilst undertaking doctoral studies. This is then subjected to a Derridean reading. Following on further analyses are offered. These have been inspired by my recent and on-going encounters with Mary Douglas' (1970) anthropological work on purification rites and Julia Kristeva's (1982) psychoanalytical approaches to abjection. Such encounters unsettle my psychic attachment to a very particular reading of the child where notions such as what is 'best' or 'suitable' in terms of practice are challenged. In the concluding remarks I address the relationship between reflexivity and my own practice.

### **The data**

#### **A Derridean reading**

The work of Derrida, although deeply complex and highly challenging, has nevertheless worked at destabilising what Spivak (1980) refers to as 'mind set'. That is, where ingrained habits and assumptions work at legitimating authoritarian fictions:

...a certain view of the world, of consciousness, and of language has been accepted as the correct one, and, if the minute particulars of that view are examined, a rather different picture emerges. That examination involves an enquiry into the 'operation' of our most familiar gestures (Spivak in Derrida, 1976, p. xiii).

Derrida's work centres on a sustained attack on what he considers to be the authoritarianism of western thought and in particular its commitment to essentialism. A vivid example of essentialism in Western thought is the practice or phenomenon known as 'logocentricity': the belief that words are representations of meanings already present in the speaker's mind (Sim, 1992, p. 429). For Derrida, the relationship between speech and transparency of meaning is the heritage of logocentrism and phonocentrism which he explains as, 'the absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning' (Derrida, 1976, p. 12). He therefore rejects the conception of meaning as a fixed entity awaiting representation by either a spoken or written word:

...meaning is neither before nor after the act... the notion of an idea or 'interior design' as simply anterior to a work which would supposedly be the expression of it, is a prejudice (Derrida: 1978, p. 11).

Rather than searching within a text for a pre-existence essence or 'interior' design Derrida calls for:

...the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin that is offered to an active interpretation (Derrida, 1978, p. 292).

**An active interpretation:**

But pure perception does not exist: we are written only as we write, by the agency within us which always already

keeps watch over perception, be it internal or external  
(Derrida, 1978, p. 226).

Staging ground clearance: a reflexive exploration of our  
own practices of representation (Woolgar, 1988, p. 98).

Deconstruction, if such a thing exists, should open up  
(Derrida, 1987, p. 261).

Making or producing an ‘active interpretation’ involves I think engaging with practices of deconstruction, where the onus is on me to try to displace the text. Such displacements can potentially unsettle the text so that its body – that is the words, the ordering of the text, the arguments that are used to lend it authority - begin to disentangle. But, as noted, these are strategies of displacement not confrontation. It’s an engagement with a text rather than a battle. It’s an effort at locating the binaries in order to ‘demystify the realities we create’ (Caputo, 1987, p. 236). It’s work aimed at discerning how a text is ‘articulated’. As Maggie MacLure (2003, p. 9) notes, ‘one of the most general and commonplace ways in which this articulation is done is through the setting up of binary oppositions’. A binary opposition is where one side, the positive, draws its strength from its negative ‘other’. MacLure (2003, p. 9) also notes how particular words, can invest individuals with a ‘particular identity – heroic or villainous’.

Several of the oppositions that feature in the above example are located around the appearance of the play area. It has, for example been ‘reduced’ by natural phenomenon (rain) and by humankind (litter) and made ‘filthy’. To reduce is to ‘make



or become smaller in size, or to bring into a certain state or condition' (Collins Dictionary, 1992). Within the above text, there is then a suggestion that through a mix of events including acts of God, which in this instance are construed negatively, and unkindly acts of people that the playground has been diminished. In this story, neither the god of rain nor the people have produced *growth* that by implication would be a positive step; rather they have made the ground *filthy*. To point to someone or something as filthy is to go beyond saying they or it are dirty; there is also an inference of viciousness and or obscenity – think here of the *filthy trick* or the *filthy rich*. Moreover, the playground is a *zone*. Shortly afterwards reference is made to a *triggered discussion*. *Zone* – particularly in current times - connotes images of war, perhaps a battlefield or a no-go area. Whilst *triggered* reiterates the war imagery because of its embedded allusion to guns. So, the hero picks up paper. But will anything change? Currently, it would seem that both teachers are locked into habitual positions. They are like two protagonists, intent on both occupying and defending their ideological territories. One holds fast to an area that could perhaps be described as a desire for and a need to articulate the notion of professionalism that is expressed in this instance as, '... as teachers we shouldn't have to or be expected to pick up litter'. Maybe it is also the case that besides being a positional statement the above utterance is also a plea to know. That is, to know what teachers are meant to 'be' or 'expected' to do. The other camp could be described in the following way: this could be the territory of the middle class liberal who, because she occupies the moral high ground alienates herself and as a result she is found picking up litter on her own. It may well be that her intentions and actions stem from a commitment to social justice and additionally, it could be that for her picking up paper is a way of making the 'personal political' but as the situation never changes more creative routes need to be

found to replace the mechanistic and habitual ways. Further, it could be that her marshalled and ordinally presented arguments both maintain and police her boundaries and prevent more relaxed exchanges where uncertainties, ambivalences and contradictory views could be expressed more freely. As it is, her cries of 'it's not good enough' (for whom?) have perhaps worked at muting and suppressing what currently must remain unheard and not-yet-possible.

Stories, such as the one above can be perceived as 'enabling stories' (Bernstein, 1983, p. 128) in that they foreground certain conceptual blind spots (Lather, 1993, p. 91). These blocks the vision that is necessary for diverse and creative thinking so that stagnant and mechanistic ways of being might be interrupted. Let me return to the extract. The playground in my view is both 'uninviting' and 'uninspiring'. Common sense would indicate/dictate that the combined ingredients of mud and litter would work at producing a less than attractive environment. But there is, I believe, more at work here than simply common sense. The view that an area can be both inviting and inspirational to children clearly rests on theories, which in this instance are theories that relate to notions of the child, the teacher and the context in which both operate. So, the grounds in order to invite the children must be signalling a number of messages, including presumably signals of welcome and or messages that are intended to provoke or tempt the children into playing. Such messages, however, seemed to be lost on or are not being read correctly by those who are currently contributing to the littering. So, as the teacher I am investing in the grounds, expending energy so that it is clean and thinking about it so that it is inspirational but nevertheless failing to make this a shared commitment. Currently it would appear that that it is a commitment that is shared with neither colleagues or with the community

that the school is there to serve. Is it that this community does not care? Countless instances of community dedication to the children tell me that to posit the issue within yet another binary of care /not care is fruitless. But what I can do is to question the construction of the child that appears to underpin the vision that I hold with regards to the play area. There are, I believe, strong hints that I am holding on to notions of the child as conceptualised by Rousseau and which were developed further by pioneers of early years pedagogy including for example Froebel. He conceptualised schools as gardens where young children could develop ‘naturally’. This romantic vision stemmed from the belief that because young children were ‘natural’ it followed they were inherently ‘good’:

The idea is that ‘evil’ happens to the child from the outside, in the form of unhealthy environments, poverty, bad upbringing, and so on. Evil is therefore not natural; it is a deviation from the natural state. If man (sic) is inherently anything, then he is inherently good (Hultqvist 1998, p. 101-5).

As Dahlberg et al (1999, p. 45) note, ‘psychology has legitimated this construction of the young child, especially experts of young children who have placed the child’s expression in free play and free creative work at the centre of pedagogical activity’. The ‘natural’ child has therefore become ceded to and embedded in the construction of the ‘normal’ child. In this instance, however, is this ‘fantasy of the normal child’ (cf. Walkerdine, 1990) an image that is being shared by the community? It would seem that because I am attached to a particular construction of the child I have then a need to create a sanctuary that is safe from outside corruptive influences, including

litter, so that the child might develop into perfection. Such a construction achieves two things. First, it ignores the fact that the children are part of the world and not separate to it and second it regulates me and it is a form of regulation that contributes towards my 'mind set'.

The next section of the paper draws upon recent encounters with the work of Mary Douglas (1970) and Julia Kristeva (1982). Their theories have allowed me to take further stock of the data. In particular they have allowed me to consider how my own psychic attachments position me in particular ways so that I both operate and police boundaries where effectively I am culpable in 'othering'.

### **Mindset and its relationship to a discourse of disgust**

MacLure (2003) notes that in order to understand a text including ones that seek to describe the messy state of a playground I need to do two things. First I need to stick close to the details of a particular text, 'worrying away at the word-y fabric out of which arguments are woven.' But secondly analysis is also about a 'matter of moving away from the details of the specific texts – of moving back and forwards through other texts, of other times, to try to glimpse that vastly bigger fabric of intertextual associations within which each particular text is suspended' (MacLure, 2003, p. 23). Hopefully efforts have been materialised in order to do the first of MacLure's suggestions. What follows are my efforts to shift to the second phase where I move away from the text so as to try to grasp at the intertextual associations in which my description lies.

To describe something is to invite the prospective reader to line up beside oneself so as to share or witness what it is that I have found to be of interest. In this instance something has been noted because I have deemed it sufficiently odd, out of place, different and unsatisfactory. Such judgements have been made from the position of being an affluent middleclass white woman. So my marking out activities have been made against what in my view constitutes the normal, the conventional, the familiar and so on. Describing in this way is a kind of “Othering”.

The notion of “other” has been of intense interdisciplinary interest for a sustained period of time. For example, the work of Simone de Beauvoir (1972) was located around a central thesis where woman is always “Other” to man’s “Absolute”. That is man is, ‘the absolute human type...he is both positive and neutral’ (Hekman, 1990, p. 74). Meanwhile, Lacanian psychoanalysis has directed attention at how subjectivity is produced in language where “othering” (inevitably) occurs:

In Lacanian theory the symbolic order is necessarily patriarchal since the difference which makes meaning possible is guaranteed by a transcendental signifier, the Phallus (Weedon, 1999, p. 82).

Additionally, Foucault’s (1972) analysis of discourse where the emphasis is on ‘practices that form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1972: 49) has had significant influence on how I understand “othering”. Within a Foucauldian approach, discourses are inextricably linked to social institutions including for example the law, church, education and family as well as to the disciplines that both regularize and normalize the conduct of those who are brought within the compass of those

institutions. As an example a swift backward glance to the 19<sup>th</sup> century identifies how a discourse such as medicine formed the ideological basis and justifications for a range of social policies towards a number of groups – practices that materially affected their lives. These groups included women and people of colour. In the case of race science was used to legitimate both colonialism and slavery. In brief, African people were not only considered biologically suited to slavery additionally like women they were scientifically categorised as irrational and therefore unsuited for the task of self-government (Stanton, 1960; Brah, 1996). As Weedon notes:

...scientific racism and similar work on gender set the terms of the debates about difference well into the twentieth century. Indeed, the negative qualities consistently attributed to sexual and racial difference from a white, middle class male norm by the institutions of science, medicine, philosophy and the law made it very difficult to see questions of difference in positive terms (Weedon, 1999, p. 9).

Judith Butler's (1993) work follows a similar trajectory in examining the relationship between "bodies" and "othering" where there are bodies that "matter" whilst others are "abject". This process of separating out or excluding is a deliberate strategy where it is directed to particular kinds of others and is as a consequence hegemonic or, in other words, '...(it) proclaims the beliefs and indeed, the subjectivity of a dominant group as the only true or valid ones, precisely by excluding certain others as beyond reason or humanity' (MacLure, 2003, p. 41). Gee (1990) emphasises how these practices transcribe into common sense or taken-for-granted notions of 'the right ways

to think, feel and behave' (Gee, 1990, p. xx). Through discursive power, understandings about 'what counts as normal (and deviant) sorts of human beings, as well as what counts as normal (and deviant) relationships between them' (Gee, 1990, p. xi) would be prescribed.

Julia Kristeva's (1982) treatment of abjection is of particular interest to me because it centres very much on defilement and bodily waste. Kristeva's perception of abjection is where one's sense of identity – or as MacLure (2003, p. 40) puts it one's 'proper' subjectivity - is disturbed because familiar systems and ways of ordering are disrupted. For Kristeva abjection is disrespectful of rules, borders and positions. It is in Kristeva's terms a 'demarcating imperative' called into play by our own need to disconnect the uncontaminated from the contaminated in order to safeguard 'the self's clean and proper body' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 68). This line of thinking resonates strongly with the anthropological work of Mary Douglas (1970) who examined amongst other things the means by which systems including religious laws held in place what was taboo and hence how defilement could occur. She notes,

... from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power (Douglas, 1966, p. 94).

By working off both Kristeva and Douglas theories it is possible for me to see how the litter and broken glass encroaches upon and interferes with those symbolic systems that I invoke in order to separate the rational from the irrational, the orderly from the disorderly, the tamed from the lawless and the civilised from the primitive. It is not just the sanctity of the play area that has been tampered with - it is also my own means by which I impose symbolic order. Kristeva also makes the significant point that whilst paternal authority is imposed on us all by language where the master signifier is the phallus, it is nevertheless maternal authority that regulates the body of the child policing it to ensure that it is 'proper'. 'Maternal authority is the trustee of that mapping of the self's clean and proper body' (Kristeva, 1982, p. 72). The child and her body is perceived as 'a *territory* having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation of proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible is impressed and exerted' (original emphasis). From such theorizing I can see how my anger, despair and obvious frustration with the play area necessitated a constant policing so that I could keep at bay all that threatened my notions of what it means to be a 'proper child'. Like Kristeva's mother my vigilant patrolling of the play area, the picking up of litter and the removal of detritus are efforts made to keep a specific territory clean – in both a literal and symbolic sense.

### **Concluding discussion**

So far my efforts have been located around the ambition of trying to share some of the perambulations that have been undertaken where I have attempted to open up my own mind set so as to think differently – about young people and their social worlds. My collisions with Derrida, Douglas and Kristeva have been aimed at making me critically conscious where my own position as a white middle class woman has had to be



accounted for (Pillow, 2003). That said whilst I might have gone some way in making my own position transparent this still does not render it unproblematic (Spivak, 1988). Similarly in terms of practice am I any clearer how I might have been a 'better' teacher when in the kindergarten? Likewise in my current role as a teacher to students who will themselves become early years pedagogues of what help are my own reflexive turns to them? I am both conscious of and fearful of practising what Butler (1993) refers to as a 'gesture of humility' (p. 6) where little change occurs because the colonial relationship is still maintained albeit slightly modified by 'tolerance' (Britzman, 1995/1999). In some ways these sentiments characterise my subsequent actions when teaching at the kindergarten. In my doctoral thesis I wrote the following:

Actions included trying to find ways whereby the school became part of the community rather than an adjunct of it. One small step included getting the children themselves to clean up the play area. The phenomenon of three and four year olds suitably clad in Wellington boots and gloves tidying away detritus prompted passer-by's to stop, talk and report back to friends and neighbours. One parent complained but again the ensuing conversation became another avenue for action resulting in help to plant shrubs. The vandalism didn't stop but there was a shift from it being simply an individual's problem (Jones, 1999, p. 84).

Effectively what seems to be happening here mirrors the victory narrative as found embedded in and played out within action research initiatives whereby the practitioner-researcher having first identified the problem is then able to take steps to ameliorate it before finally putting in place a solution. This in summary is reflective practice that is driven by and embodies the liberal meliorist sense of the infinite

perfectibility – through the application of reason – of humans and their institutions (cf. Gray, 1995). Thus during the phase of writing the doctoral thesis whilst my incursions into poststructuralist theory was having the effect of putting subjectivity under erasure (St Pierre, 2008, p. 328) nevertheless the urge to fall back onto customary ways still persisted. ‘Top-down’ practices were clearly favoured where young children are picking up rubbish because of my convictions of what is ‘best’ for them in terms of a ‘civilised’ play area. In turning to post colonialism I am forced to rethink the profound limitations of a consensual and collusive liberal sense of cultural community. As Homi Bhabha notes, ‘The time for ‘assimilating’ minorities to holistic and organic notions of cultural value has dramatically passed’. (Bhabha, 1993: 193).

Perhaps however, there are possibilities within a ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ (Boler, 1999: 176) whilst simultaneously practising a ‘reflexivity of discomfort’ (Pillow, 2003: 192). In the latter there would continue to be a relentless critique of my research activities including those ways I represent reality whether that be of a play area or the university classroom. Here reflexivity would ‘continue to challenge the representations we come to while at the same time acknowledging the political need to represent and find meaning’ (Pillow, 2003: 193). So ‘uncomfortable reflexivity’ is not about better methods where we might represent people more convincingly or more realistically. Rather it is a matter of ‘whether we can be accountable to people’s struggles for self-representation and self-determination’ (Visweswaran, 1994: 32).

Similarly, ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ requires a constant and critical engagement where values and cherished beliefs are subjected to critical thinking. Deborah Britzman succinctly captures some of the embedded difficulties within such a task.

She notes:

Simply telling students the facts of oppression is insufficient. They need opportunities with what Ann Berlack describes as ‘the social-psychological connections between experience and consciousness’ (Berlack, 1989, p. 79). Without an inquiry into how significance is made and broken, the perceived distance between academic knowledge and social experiences will remain undisturbed and students will continue to have difficulties understanding how the political becomes personal (Britzman, 2003, p. 211).

So back in the kindergarten what forms of questioning practices could I have engaged with that might have resisted sterile binaries including those located around a proper/improper play area? What opportunities could have been created where the children themselves could have articulated some of their own beliefs and hopes about playing in general as well as types of play environments? In what ways could they have become critical both of their own beliefs and mine which whilst not comfortable practice might have opened a chink for voices and views that are usually subjugated? Similarly a university classroom that permits pedagogy of discomfort and a reflexivity of discomfort might prove highly potent where students and their teacher alike can develop critical consciousness where as a consequence we can see the effects of certain discursive practices where we are predisposed to read the world including the young child in particular ways.

#### Notes

1. All names that have been used are pseudonyms.

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