Addressing Complexities of Critical and Creative Thinking: Dialogic Relationships among Policies, Communities, and Young Children

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Abstract

The paper addresses issues of complex relationships among policies, communities, and children's rights to participate in and contribute to educational matters while reiterating on the importance of implementing dialogic pedagogy. Through the scope of critical thinking the paper tackles the questions regarding power-knowledge relationships and leadership in a community. To unveil the issues related to both educational and social constructs the paper utilizes the three stages of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Specifically, it provides the text-as-discourse analysis to better the understandings of government-developed educational policies e.i., Early Learning Framework. This is followed by the discourse-as-discursive practice analysis to provide a critical insight to how communities interpret the effects of policy-documents on their day-to-day practice. At its final stage the paper employs the discourse-as-social practice analysis and provides an empirical evidence on how educators and children work together to improve on community living as well as to inform local educational policies. While the first two levels of CDA are mainly built on theoretical premises and document analysis, the third level of CDA demonstrates an evidence from the field of practice and therefore it utilizes methods of the community-based research approach. The study concludes that the policy-making process should be viewed as a two-way road that allows two actions happen in synchronicity – policy informs practice and practice informs policy. In such a view, it should be pointed out that all parties involved, including children, are engaged in dialogic relationships that allow all voices to be heard, considered and respected for the purposes of generating a common meaning for the future purposes of early childhood education.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Community-based Research, Dialogic Pedagogy, Policies, Communities, Young Children;*

Introduction

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is a field of multidisciplinary studies. According to Urban, in the past two decades, the field of ECEC has undergone significant changes reflective of progress in the philosophical, social, economic, and political understandings of childhood [17]. Hence, this paper contributes to the existing set of ECEC knowledge and practice by addressing complexity of relationships among policy, pedagogy, and children's rights to contribute to educational matters.

Policies

In general, as Bennett explains, ELF texts are different from a standard school curriculum [1]. They demonstrate flexibility by creating rather broad than specific learning goals. In this venue, the ELF texts are not seen as prescribed documents that offer any particular approach/curriculum to educating young children; instead, they are viewed as a set of general guidelines for early childhood educators (ECE) to follow. Early learning Frameworks explain how to apply theoretical knowledge in practice.

By the year of 2014 the majority of Canadian provinces have developed early learning and care guidelines [7]. Although each province created its own ELF, there is no one generic Canadian ELF has been developed yet. To this point it is important to note that despite some minor differences in content, all the provincial ELF documents are reflective of the current educational principles. These principles are mainly shaped by developmental and socio-cultural constructivist theories with some references to postfoundational school of thought. All the ELF documents yield to pedagogical practices that support a concept of the competent child [13].

Communities of Practice

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On the one hand, research studies that employ hermeneutic as well as critical discourse analyses denote that all written texts are a matter of subjective interpretation. On the other hand, "academia is still very suspicious of 'subjectivity', which essentially amounts to the everyday experiences of life" [10, p. xix]. Nonetheless, this study is interested in "subjectivity" as a life phenomenon that inevitably influences pedagogy. Here, it is believed that "subjectivism" occurs when ECE compile their theoretical assumptions with professional and personal life experiences to inform their pedagogy. Therefore, this study includes qualitative analysis of on-line survey and interview results to demonstrate how ECE understand, interpret, and employ in practice the government-established guidelines for the pedagogy of early learning and care.

Young Children's Rights to Participation

Mac Naughton states that the General Comment No. 7 from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which recognizes children as full-fledged citizens and as subjects of rights requires early childhood professionals to revise their outlook towards young children's participation [8, 16]. This can be accomplished by engaging in meaningful discussions regarding adult-children power relationships and young children's right to express their views which can in turn inform policy decisions. In line with these views, an array of research addressing the necessity of consultation with young children emerged in late 1990s and the start of the 21st century [4, 15].

Literature Review

Clark, Kjørholt and Moss posit that consultation with young children starts from employing a pedagogy of listening and care in everyday practices [4]. Radical dialogue requires educators to listen and respond to children openly and with sensitivity and to perceive listening as a process that stimulates not only language development and communication skills but emotions such as doubt, happiness, sadness, curiosity, desire, and interest [6]. In addition, critical pedagogues argue that for active listening and dialogization to occur, educators need to develop the ability to critically reflect on social and educational issues. Critical reflection allows ECE to engage with different aspects of reality and deconstruct the underlying conditions that give rise to iniquities in society [8]. Strongly associated with praxis, the act of critical reflection seeks to disrupt conformist practices in the struggle against the reproduction of the status quo while fostering learning environments that inspire the process of self-transformation and self-actualization [6, 9].

Methodology

The study utilized CDA as a methodological framework to analyse written and oral texts. As applied in this study, the text is understood as an "operative semiological (linguistic) mechanism" that affects a group's thinking [3, p. 19]. A group's thinking represents a complex, multi-layered thinking that encompasses the government's vision on ECEC, educators' interpretations of the texts, and practical applications of the texts in day-to-day pedagogy. The three stages of CDA analysis enabled this study to examine complexity of relationships among the parties involved in educational processes so to better understand their theoretical insights as well as practical applications that attain to the children's participatory rights.

Findings and Discussion

The text-as-discourse analysis of the ELF documents demonstrated that children are generally understood as participants who are recognized members of a group of peers, family, and community. They are perceived as competent learners who are granted a right to learn through play. To ensure this right, educators have to create developmentally age-appropriate learning environments to sustain young children's learning. Every ELF document uses aspects of the UN Convention, however only a few use those aspects of the Convention that center on participation [13]. Therefore, taking UNCRC articles cited in the ELF documents as general guidelines that assure young children's rights to appropriate education, it becomes apparent that the delivery of education that is mainly sustained through pedagogical practices heavily depends on the context in which educators and children find themselves. Given these points, the study employed the discourse-as-discursive practice analysis and tasked educators to explore their views on young children's participation in and contributions to the ECEC curriculum and policy decision-making. Generally, the findings demonstrated that ECE are aware of the importance of children's rights to express

their ideas, to which they often refer to as "following the child's lead and interests". In this vein, the educators asserted that young children's education, particularly under the age of five, is mainly understood through the process of observation and documentation [13]. To this point, Burman argues that observation represents an adult view of the child through the lens of developmental psychology [2]. This perspective focuses on assessment and the evaluation of young children, and positions educators as powerful experts who know what is better for a child. In such situations, the child's voice is acknowledged and respected but still perceived as weak, unreasonable, and uninformative [8, 12, 11]. Next, the study applied the discourse-as-social practice analysis and encouraged ECE to use of a variety of observation methods in their work with children. Educators along with children worked on documentation to inform the local community child care centre's policies while utilizing such methods as taking pictures, storytelling, video recordings, collecting art work and artifacts. These methods well informed the local community about children's desire to create open indoor and outdoor spaces for communal gatherings. These spaces, according to children, allow them to meet, play and communicate with other children as well as to help them to develop a better sense of belonging. The other theme that emerged from the analysis demonstrated children's desire to improve their outdoor playground. This improvement allows them to explore natural environment, to plant flowers and vegetables, and to take care of birds and other animals [14].

Conclusion

The study demonstrated that in their majority educators perceive and understand the ELF documents as strict guidelines to their pedagogical actions. However, with an additional aid provided to educators in the form of professional learning that focuses on dialogic pedagogy and reflections on practice they become capable of transforming their views on young children's participation. Here, if to take Morin's philosophizing on complexity and apply it to ECEC, then policy is viewed as a system that provides unity and therefore simplifies the field by imposing clear guidelines and establishing learning goals; whereas pedagogy is understood as a system of multiple views and practices and therefore, it diversifies the field by embracing complexity of relationships [10]. Based on these premises, the tandem in between policy and pedagogy is inevitable so to avoid conflicting and at time contradictory educational matters that attain to ethics of childhood and children's rights to participate in educational decision-making processes.

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