

## Entanglement of Subjects: A View from Early Childhood Education

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### Abstract

*Inspired by our studies of pedagogy and the role of pedagogista we looked to Michael Foucault and how power is enacted in education. Thinking alongside Foucault, and Gert Biesta's interpretation of subjectivity we problematize the way education is concerned with socialization and normalization. In this paper we attempt to understand the entanglement of subjectivities in relation to the Other. We suggest it is critical for educators to recognize the subjectivity of the 'Other' (children, in our field) through attentive listening and engaging in the process of becoming together in order to live well and gain new knowledge. A continual practice of critical reflection in dialogue with others is necessary to support educators in disrupting practices that govern children to fit particular social norms. We inquire together about the ways we view children and how practices of power in education, influenced by normalizing standards, deny children a deeper emergence of themselves.*

**Keywords:** *critical reflection, mission of education, normalization, power relations, socialization, subjectivity.*

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*"To understand the composition of a wave, you have to consider these opposing thrusts, which are to some extent counterbalanced and to some extent added together"*

*(Italo Calvino, 1983)*

Just as a wave cannot be nailed down, our ways of thinking with children cannot be fixed, and must be seen as fluid. In order to live well with others, we must see how our subjectivities become entangled with educational practices that value normalization and deny possibilities. Because our early childhood education practice produces particular understandings of children we want to acknowledge that each child has a capacity to learn and has the potential to become something unknowable to us. Our particular understandings about children and education make it possible for educators to be fluid and emergent, but also positions the educator's use of power to produce a particular child. For the purpose of this paper we understand subjectivity as the intentions of our inner

thoughts and how shared subjectivities partnered with the mission of education become the site of entanglements. These entanglements create a place from which to question what we do with children and the motivation for our actions. Glenda Mac Naughton (2005) offers us Michael Foucault's understanding of how relations of disciplinary power exist in our relationships, "power is a battle to authorize the truth...power is a relationship of struggle over how we use truths to build discourses about normality...especially our production of normality" (p. 27). Our practice is better served when we are aware of the impositions being made by subjectivity or particular truths and their contribution to the mission of education. Questions about our views and beliefs, otherwise known as our subjectivity in relation to others, must be problematized in order to honour and value the learner. Zhao (2012) offers Biesta's argument that human subjectivity contributes to a mission of education that becomes about normalization/socialization rather than placing value a learner's independent emergence (p. 660). To recognize entanglements within our subjectivities educators, need to commit themselves to critical reflection and attentive listening in their practice and living with children. It is through attentive listening and reflection that educators may hear children's voices beyond expectation and empower their agentic forces. A continual practice of critical reflection helps us problematize educational practices of socialization, conformity and particular ways of thinking.

Through questioning practices of disciplinary power such as normalization/socialization, we may become aware of how children are governed rather than being free and independent in their educational journey. We are often left with more questions than answers but it is our uncertainty that leaves us open to understanding our subjectivity in more equitable ways. It is imperative that educators attune to the multiple ways children solve problems and come to understand something new. We must listen with our entire selves in order to honour children's becoming that may not fit into the narrow categories of our normalization. Strongly held assumptions and biases impair our ability to listen, to hear, and to be affected by the other. Therefore, our assumptions, biases, and beliefs need to be continually considered and questioned. When expectations are concrete, little room for seeing alternative points of view are left. With sensitivity and a willingness to hear and to be heard, educators and learners can equally learn to value the perspective of the other. This process does not happen alone. What if all learners within the process of education were seen as dynamic rather than static?

In a complex world our relationships with others can be problematic. Our practices, in the name of normalization, can result in injustice. This is not to say that educators are unjust, but with the best intention and in the name of conformity, socialization, and normalization we may be silencing the agentic nature of children rather than embracing it. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) speak to modes of thinking that generate, "[r]especting the alterity of the 'Other' in the ethics of an encounter" affecting us by "an exploration of becoming, being shaken up as we encounter something that does not fit with our habitual ways of seeing and understanding" (p. 117). Some educators insist that children sit in particular ways. Children's bodies are governed in the name of socialization. When children sit otherwise their agency is visible, and could be respected. The decisions we make can silence children's subjectivity using a rigid framework to dictate their experiences and their ways of being. Alternatively, looking for new ways of being with others can open the possibility of embracing children's agency. What would

happen if children had the freedom to sit as they wish or not sit at all? What would it mean for educators and the mission of education if conformity was not a priority?

Our wellness within the processes of becoming relies on our subjectivities being affected and disrupted by others. If we are not open to being affected we follow the particular outcomes dictated by normalization, and consequently we silence the children's subjectivities. Biesta thinks further with Foucault sharing concerns about how the entanglement of subjectivities and disciplinary power can be disguised and difficult to identify within educational practices. As Dahlberg et, al (2007) quote Foucault, "[w]e have to promote new forms of subjectivity through refusal of this kind of individuation which has been imposed on us" (p. 28). Rigid frameworks under the name of normalization and conformity become another status quo to set and hold standards without question. The momentum of such practices has the potential to become dictatorial. Therefore, in order to live well with others, we must welcome the subjectivity of others; we must be willing to question ourselves and our points of view by listening to those we may be overpowering.

As Biesta (2010) explains, education is not about inserting children into existing rules or orders, but it is about "ways of being in which the individual is not simply 'specimen' of a more encompassing order" (p. 21). Thus, the encompassing order denies the value of children's subjectivities rather than remaining open to children's autonomous and divergent thinking. Educators with the intention of promoting autonomy often ask children to listen to their body. Conversely, a schedule may dictate that children should be hungry at ten o'clock. When a child says, "I'm hungry," and we say, "It's not snack time yet," we deny the child's knowledge of self, contradicting our words with our actions. Who are we to deny children food or water when they are hungry or thirsty? Why allow the clock to dictate children's desire? Davies (2014) illustrates how this defines us as educators: "[l]istening is about being open to being affected. It is about being open to difference and, in particular to difference in all its multiplicity as it emerges in each moment in between oneself and another" (p. 1). When ways of listening are open to having our subjectivities affected we question what we know and the educational missions that influence our actions. We have in many places become open to the child who wishes to eat, we let our norms be disrupted, and we welcome something new. Living well with others does not mean going by the clock or schedule, it means children eat when hungry. Our decisions in these moments define who we are.

When subjectivities become conflicted within the entanglement of normalization and educational practices, possibilities can be explored. When a child says, "I want to climb a tree," I stay near her. In that moment I think of my relationship with the child, her desire to climb a tree, my responsibilities as an educator, and my desire to keep her safe. In acknowledging the child's subjectivity within an encounter, I look beyond normalization seeking to understand our ways of knowing and being together. It is in this moment that we make decisions in relation to the other. When I listen to the child and see her desire to take risks, we are both affected; I stand by her and watch her climb the tree. I come to understand that there is value in taking risks and challenging the status quo. If the child falls, we remain engaged in the process of caring and finding a better way to climb the tree. Trust enters our mutual subjectivities. Todd (2010) suggests that, "[e]ach one of us is engaged in a process of becoming that is relational and on-going" (p. 5). As educators we can take risks in our co-existence with children. In the process of becoming, we are transformed. Our modes of thinking and acting upon an encounter show that we

have a choice, we can decide whether our practice denies experience for normalization's sake or embraces the possibility of something new.

Recognizing the subjectivities of children and educators opens the possibility of being provoked by an encounter, being in between, and being in the midst of complexity, chaos, and multiplicity of thoughts, emotions, and actions: “[L]istening is not about being bound by what you already know. It is life as movement” (Davies, 2014. p. xi). Through listening and being with the other we find our relationship as fluid as the wave. Just as the wave that cannot be held, we can see life and our early childhood practice in constant flux and change. This brings new connections and perhaps new ways of thinking and being in the world with others. In order to live well with others, we need to embrace our differences, our vulnerabilities, and the entanglement within our complex relationships. We need to realize that educational missions may impose on us the danger of silencing children under the name of socialization and normalization. We need to create space for the subjectivities of both educators and children to be honoured, so we may live well together, open to learn something in a new way.

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