Chapter 10
Theories of Discourse (on Quality) and Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract The chapter discusses the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (Hegemony and socialist strategy: towards a radical democratic politics. Verso, 1985) and relates it to conceptualisations of ECEC quality as a process of meaning-making (Dahlberg et al., Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: languages of evaluation. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203371114, 2013) and narrative inquiry that theorises human experience as a story. Such a conceptualisation allows us to look at more-than-parental involvement as a never-ending process of meaning-making that manoeuvres between reproducing and challenging the established hegemonies of meaning and communication channels. The included empirical example comes from a quality development project run by an ECEC setting in a multicultural neighbourhood in Norway.

Keywords Discourse · Hegemony · Narrative · Quality

Discourse Theory

According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), a discourse is a set of meanings pretending to occupy the status of truth by launching their own vision of a phenomenon (or the world) as the only possible one, and thus silently excluding other possibilities of meaning. To explain how such a hegemonising work of discourse takes place, the authors focus on the level of the signifier and signified. Meaning-making happens when a signifier connects with multiple signified. What the discourse does is pick up one of these meanings and present it as the only possible one – as a total one, and as truth. This can be illustrated with the signifier *child*, which can be signified by many different descriptions, including a human becoming, an adult-dependant, an

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egocentric entity, a subject, an investment, an actor in one's own life, an owner of one's own rights, a relative, a friend, and so on. When the powers of discourse enter such a *field of discursivity* (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), they select one of the many possible meanings and "freeze it" as the only possible one – as the absolute and total sense. For example: a child as an adult-dependent human becoming. The work of discourse always aims at a totality of meaning (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), which is why it presents the stabilised/frozen meaning as the one and only truth.

The fact that this "truth" is produced through the exclusion of all other signified possibilities is not articulated by the discourse. The ideal position for a discourse is to never be questioned or discussed, but to exist as the "natural and received shape of the world" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991, p. 23), one that goes without saying, even though it is constructed and historically contingent. What weakens the dominance of discourse is the articulation of the meanings that were excluded when the discourse was stabilised. They constitute a *surplus of meaning* (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) that, from the standpoint of discourse, is dangerous, as it threatens its hegemony; however, from the standpoint of democracy, this surplus is crucial (Mouffe, 2005).

The articulation of neglected and marginalised meanings challenges the taken-for-granted status of one or another (often privileged) discourse. Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) theory of discourse is based on the intention to serve and maintain democracy, and so they search for a concept capable of embracing the continuous motion of meanings, never allowing any of the discourses to reach the status of hegemony. This is why they argue against the concept of consensus. They say consensus hides existing alternatives of meaning and creates a dangerous illusion of agreement (while we are not agreeing). Laclau and Mouffe (1985) propose then *agonism*:

> While antagonism is a we/they relation in which the sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, *agonism* is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. They are "adversaries" not enemies. (Mouffe, 2005, p. 20)

The peaceful presence of conflicting meanings requires a "common symbolic space" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 52) that enables all the different meanings to recognise each other as "legitimate enemies" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 52). As such, rather than excluding each other, these meanings acknowledge each other's constitutive roles in society and the community.

In social and political life, as well as in the social practice of more-than-parental involvement in ECEC, such a "common symbolic space" may be easily "faked" by an illusion of polyvocality. According to Ewick and Silbey (1995), the same set of meanings being repeated in many stories of many human beings (usually originating from very similar social positions) may create an illusion of polyvocality and thus strengthen rather than challenge the dominant narrative. For example, many parental stories on their very diverse experience with ECEC of their children can strengthen the dominant narrative that young children shall attend ECEC services. No matter how different the parental experience is, the other voice – of a parent

whose children do not attend ECEC – is excluded. Furthermore, regardless many parental voices being included, there was only one story ("my child attends ECEC") that was told.

Nevertheless, identifying alternative discourses and the differences between them is not always an easy task. As they remain in complex relations with each other, the discourses may create chains of equivalence and difference (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Conflicting discourses may become equivalent, not because of their own meaning, but because of disagreement about another phenomenon. This means that equivalence (or the illusion of it) is created in relation to a third party, or a "joint enemy" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 50). Such a coalition of meanings based on their joint opposition may create a sense of similarity. For instance, all the above-mentioned possible discourses about the *child* could resemble each other in their joint disagreement with involving children as soldiers in armed conflicts.

The example of the signifier *child* is, however, also quite special in our historical context. As a signifier, it seems to be a floating over very different chains of meaning, and it may therefore mean something else entirely in different social, cultural, and political settings. However, in the (con)text of one particular document, which is the Convention of the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), the child floats over two chains of meaning: one in which the child is dependent on adult care, advocacy, and representation, and the other where he or she is an independent subject, rights owner, and social actor with his or her own voice. Such a presentation of the child blurs the opposition and tension between the opposite set of meanings and thus does not allow for any discussion or authentic confrontation with the other meaning (Biesta, 2004).

Narrative Inquiry: A Theory and Method Preventing a One-Story Monopoly

Narrative scholarship as a research tradition has always been aware of the danger of one (and only one) story. The approach of giving others a voice and "allowing the silenced to speak" is itself a way of "rewriting social life in ways that are, or can be, liberatory" (Ewick & Silbey, 1995, p. 199). Seeing the story as inseparable from the experience, constituted at the particular intersection of social, cultural, institutional, and geographical circumstances, makes stories and listening to them a unique portal into other people's worlds. The inseparable dynamics of the individual and the context can lead to the recollection of diverse elements while the stories are told and re-told across different settings, places, or groups. The story's relation to its own context is dialectical, which means that the stories are both constituted by and constitutive of the social, spatial, or institutional contexts within which they emerge, including their power relations. While individual experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted by their contexts (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 42), it is simultaneously the individual experience/story itself that can challenge the

context and unmask the power relations underpinning it. In particular, the stories of experienced discrimination have the potential to unmask the unjust power relations and biases underpinning certain institutions and practices.

However, in the case of narrative inquiry, the story also has an intrinsic value that is not necessarily connected to the process of challenging the power relations underlying our existence; instead, this value encourages our understanding and sharing of our very (un)like experiences of the world. Narrative inquiry thus understands the human experience as a "storied phenomenon" (Clandinin et al., 2016, p. 11). As Connelly and Clandinin (2006) put it,

> People shape their daily lives through stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story … is the portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. (p. 477)

Experience, then, is "a conscious interaction of human thought with our personal, social, and material environment" (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 39), which is "lived in the midst, as always unfolding over time, in diverse social contexts and in place, and as co-composed in relation" (Caine et al., 2013, p. 575). Again, the inseparable dynamics of the individual and the context can facilitate the recollection of diverse elements while the stories are told and re-told across different settings, places, or groups.

Telling and re-telling one's own story and one's own experience also prevents the hegemony of such a perspective. This hegemony can be challenged by any of the three dimensions that constitute narrative inquiry: temporality, place, and sociality (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Temporality permits the re-telling of a story at different times in one's own life or others' lives. Those "others" who are somehow involved in our story constitute the dimension of sociality. The people to whom we and our stories are related can make their own stories, through which our stories are re-told, or which inspire us to reshape and/or re-tell our stories. As people and experiences are not only created within a culture and society but also have a spatial and material anchoring, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to a place as a constative aspect of narrative inquiry. Places inspire and influence relationships between people (sociality), and these relationships shape places over time (temporality). The dynamics between these three dimensions create the basis for narrative inquiry's sensitivity to and respect for all the (sometimes contradictory) stories of all the individuals (and places) involved in a particular experience.

Response-Able S*haring* of Stories

Sharing different stories of the experiences that constitute us as human beings is related to Biesta's (2004, 2006) *other community*, consisting of "those who have nothing in common", but who become a community through a genuine openness for the other's story and by confronting the otherness through authentic questions. The

other community provides space for individual, unique, and authentic voices, as this community, in opposition to the rational community, does not expect any common logic, language, or representative voice:

> This further implies that the voice with which you speak to the one with whom you have nothing in common is not a borrowed or representative voice, but has to be your own voice and no one else's. (Biesta, 2004, p. 316)

Even discourse theories deny the possibility of one's "own voice", instead suggesting that subjectivities are constructed upon the accidental intersections of diverse discourses (Foucault, 1988) that are not "our voices"; these constructions are still unique and locked into a continuous becoming through the process of responding to others:

> What constitutes our subjectivity, what constitutes us in our subjectivity, is the way in which we - you and I as singular beings - respond. We may want to call this our response-ability. (Biesta, 2004, p. 322)

Biesta imposes the notion of response-ability, which is understood as facilitating the other community of unique voices and respectful answers, on educators and educational systems. This response-ability is then about answering (as it can never be taken for granted that an answer will come). Response-ability is also "not about what we already know. Respons-ability excludes and opposes calculation" (Biesta, 2004, p. 322). It is about being genuinely open to the uncertainty that comes when we "expose ourselves to what is other and different" (Biesta, 2004, p. 322), even if it can be difficult and painful.

Such an understanding of good, responsive education is in line with Dahlberg et al.'s (2013) conceptualisations of quality as meaning-making, which involves very diverse perspectives of all the more-than-parental actors who have their *part* in ECEC.

Quality as Meaning-Making

In their deconstruction of quality, Dahlberg et al. (2013) unmask the concept as "not a neutral word" (p. 92), but a discourse – a hegemony of meaning based on the exclusion of other alternatives (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Founded on the groundwork of positivistic assumptions about objective truth, this idea of quality is intended to discover and provide universally good standards for all human lives. With such origins, the concept of quality, even though socially constructed, is often presented as neutral or independent of the local context or individual judgement and capable of being identified by specific measures.

To resist the discourse on quality as an objective phenomenon, Dahlberg et al. (2013) build on postmodern ontology "with knowledge of the world understood to be 'socially constituted, historically embedded and valuationally based'" (Lather, 1991, p. 53 in Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 24), what again creates a base for acknowledgement of 'perspectival realities' (Gergen, 1990). When transposing the

postmodern ontology onto work with quality, Dahlberg et al. highlight also the importance of creating an arena for sharing the perspectives (perceptions, values, and views) on good education and good lives for our children; and thus exposing each other to an *other* meaning. Similar to Biesta (2004), they argue for authentic questions and answers about issues that we truly care about, like, for example, "What do we want for our children? What is a good childhood?" (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 114). They relate such practices to situated meaning-making, where, from shared perspectives, new ones can be created, sensitive and relevant for the local context. They also, however, encourage reflexive thinking and the process of asking about the conditions for the appearance of diverse meanings, deconstruction, and problematisation. Including the perspectives of more-than-parents, ECEC staff, children, and owners is seen as constitutive for meaning-making and an invitation for the participation of more "wise people, drawn from a range of backgrounds and experience, including pedagogical work and philosophy" (p. 114). Including so diverse actors and stakeholders – with potentially very different perspectives and experiences – shall protect from an illusion of polyvocality (Ewick and Silbey, 1995) and open up for diverse logics and modes of communication.

The creation of such dialogues also requires respect and "sensitivity to hear others' voices, the ability to see the Other as equal but different and the capacity to reverse perspectives" (Benhabib, 1992 in Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 114). In relation to more-than-parental involvement, this process requires not only the ethics of professionals, but also openness and respect among the parents. This perspective is anchored in the Western concept of dialogue as "the right" setting and way of sharing diverse meanings, but at the same time creates a spaces where not only representative voices of rational community members can be articulated (Biesta, 2004). The example presented below shows, however, how easily the western understanding of (rational) dialogue as the best strategy to let the parents articulate their meanings, can unintentionally exclude a wide range of voices and expressions.

"When We Wanted to Talk, They Kept Quiet. When We Organised a Dinner Party, They Sang and Danced"

This empirical example is based on a story written by one ECEC teacher, who led a developmental project on collaboration with parents and caregivers. The focus of the quality development project was to increase the experienced quality of the daily meetings between the children and the staff during the dropping-off and picking-up of the children. The ECEC setting was located in the centre of a Norwegian city and was attended by children from diverse cultural and lingual backgrounds. Over 75% of the families were of im/migrant and refugee backgrounds. Aware of the different meanings associated with a good drop-off of pick-up, the ECEC decided to ask the parents about their perspectives:

In advance of the meeting, we arranged for translators of all the languages represented by the families. We also asked parents who spoke Norwegian well to translate during the meeting. Having made sure that every family would understand and be able to articulate their own meanings, we asked them how they perceived the picking-up and dropping-off situations. They were supposed to work in groups (52 parents made 7 groups), and one of the parents or one of us would write down the answers on a big piece of paper. We should have got 7 papers filled with parental meanings but we got 5 empty papers back; on one, "it's fine" was written, and the third, written by Norwegian parents, was full of positive feedback and suggestions for improvements, both in terms of the organisation of the interior and the attitudes and activities of the staff.

When we asked the groups about their conclusions, the ethnic Norwegian parents told us about the process of discussion and meaning exchange, while the other 6 groups said that it was nice to meet others, but that they do not have any other opinion about picking-up at dropping-off, than "it's fine".

How did it happen that, with the best intentions of having a dialogue, we excluded the majority of "our parents"? This was the question we kept sitting with. We couldn't understand what was wrong. We did everything so perfectly and professionally.

Two weeks later, we celebrated United Nations Day and invited all the parents to dinner. "Bring food that you like to eat for dinner" was on the invitation. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw all the families coming from all over the neighbourhood to our kindergarten. Many had traditional clothes on them. They brought all family members, even if we assumed only the parents and kindergarten children would come. There was so much food being brought that we needed to bring extra tables. The families were talking, singing, and even dancing. The inside and outside of the kindergarten were filled with singing and laughter. We learned several African dances and tried over 100 dishes of different origins. The children were playing inside and outside, and we stayed two hours longer than we had expected. "It was the best day", said one father to me the next morning. None of the parental suggestions for improving picking-up and dropping-off situations were written down. None even mentioned it. It was the best day.

ECEC teacher

This story from practice shows how the discourse on ECEC collaboration with families, which assumed that dialogue and group work would be the best communication channels, narrowed down the possible ways of being and articulating one's own meanings. The meeting during which parental opinions were supposed to be articulated, discussed, and written down turned out to be structured as a *rational community* operating with a particular code, who perceived and valued discussions of such details of ECEC institutional practice like picking-up and dropping-off the children. The group work and process of writing things down probably even strengthened the Western framework of the meeting. It functioned well for parents who were socialised within such culture of dialogue and shared the same assumptions about collaboration and meaning exchange (as systematic, rational, and summed up with notes).

The less formal setting of the dinner party, with the only written rule being to "bring the food you like to eat for dinner", allowed the families to interpret the activity on their own cultural terms and contribute with their own premises and understandings. The dinner as a social setting was open to interpretation as an event for all family members (even though the ECEC staff thought only about the parents); the word *party* was associated with music, dressing up, and dancing. The combination of words *dinner – party*, allowed the families to come with their

vibrancies of lingual, artistic, emotional, cultural, spiritual, and ethic resources (McKee et al., 2022) and *flourish* (Ejuu & Opiyo, 2022) – as all the resources were valued by everyone who was there.

It was a community of those who had nothing in common. One thing that some families had in common was the war between their countries of origin (which was the reason for both being war refugees in Norway). The food, music, and traditional clothing created an entanglement in which the expression of one's own voice was possible and felt safe. The children saw their parents talking and dancing together, and they could all try the food, dances, and music of all the other cultures that were there. *None of the parental suggestions for improving picking-up and dropping-off situations were written down. None even mentioned it. It was the best day.*

This story from practice challenges the pre-assumptions of narratives as word-based and offers an agonistic understanding of the process as not strictly verbal but organic. The example from the ECEC teacher's story extends the situated meaning-making suggested by Dahlberg et al. (2013) to more than words and fills the "common symbolic space" (Mouffe, 2005) with non-verbal signs and signifiers. It also once more confirms that "allowing the silenced to speak" is a process of "rewriting social life in ways that are, or can be, liberatory" (Ewick & Silbey, 1995, p. 199); it is just essential to remember that "speaking" may signify very different ways of communication and expression.

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