

Making Exclusionary Processes in Schools Visible

Gro Emmertsen Lund

MAKING EXCLUSIONARY PROCESSES IN SCHOOLS VISIBLE

DISSERTATION

to obtain
the degree of doctor at the University of Twente,
on the authority of the rector magnificus,
prof. dr. T. T. M. Palstra,
on account of the decision of the graduation committee,
to be publicly defended
on Friday, the 10th of November, 2017 at 16.45 hrs.

by

Gro Emmertsen Lund

born on the 5th of August 1975
in Esbjerg, Denmark

de momenten te observeren, maar om de daaropvolgende reflecties van deelnemers aan die momenten over wat die voor hen creëerden.

De analyse van gegevens vermijdt het construeren van mensen binnen een gegeven debat; in plaats daarvan ondersteunt het een concept van persoonlijk 'agency' dat is bereikt via een reactie op de wijze waarop een student of familie is gepositioneerd. Deze studie benadrukt de superioriteit van een zogenaamde relationele, ondersteunende en probleemoplossende denkwijze voor praktijken die interactieve problemen oplost in plaats van individuele personen de schuld geeft. De analyse van wat anders zou kunnen zijn maakt de problemen van de overheersende huidige benadering zichtbaar en faciliteert een theoretisch robuuste weergave van alternatieve handelwijzen.

Abstract

This dissertation questions whether or not our traditions of dealing with interactive troubles in schools are continuing to serve us well. It is a study of how exclusionary processes evolve as a result of dealing with interactive troubles, such as turmoil, conflicts, and bullying, whereby all kinds of families may be eventually excluded from schools. The study begins by outlining the problem of inclusion in general and providing an overview of the Danish school context specifically, going into details about school policies and referring to statistics from national measurements around school problems, student wellbeing and learning. It explores the kinds of thinking and communication micro-processes that school professionals use with students and parents, and focuses on how certain kinds of interactions produce and reproduce deficit-positions. Thus, it aims to go beyond traditional reproduction theory and make visible the micro-processes in interactions that marginalize, stigmatize and mute voices otherwise entitled to speak.

The methodology employed is one of voiced research blended with social constructionist thinking, coordinated management of meaning and critical inquiry into narrative and discursive positioning. The data consists of eight short stories that were collected through research conversations with parents that had experienced being excluded from a school and forced to find another school for their child. The participating parents were recruited through a snowball sampling method. Through the process of story-telling the parents' positioning changed from being 'marginalized or silenced voices' to being competent and knowledgeable contributors to an important research study. What this

study is about is listening to these subjugated voices, because they have important things to tell that we need to learn from.

Through analyzing the eight short stories of exclusionary processes, six steps in an exclusionary spiral are identified. The steps are: 1. contextualizing the student as the problem; 2. substantiating the problem story with further “evidence”; 3. positioning the parents as problematic; 4. silencing student and family voices and devaluing their perspectives; 5. exporting the problem from the school into the family and passing the responsibility to the family to solve it at home; 6. giving the family an ultimatum - either accept the deficit positioning and the responsibility for solving the problem at home, or find another school.

Findings suggest that problem-, individual- and deficit- based conversations create exclusionary processes from interactive troubles. These conversations can lead to middle class families being excluded from schools. Familiar practices for responding to interactive troubles in schools have developed within the general philosophical framework of modernist thought and especially within deficit discourse. Several basic assumptions of the problem-solving method can be identified: a) the idea of the school professional as a neutral observer; b) the idea of students as problematic persons if they are found to be involved in interactive troubles; c) the idea of parents who do not deliver “the learning-ready” student as problematic parents, d) and the idea that interactive troubles in school should be dealt with by families and are not the province of the school. In this study, these foundational concepts are critiqued by pointing to the negative constitutive effects they have on relationships and options for action. Further, through the lens of social constructionist thought they are found inadequate and even counterproductive. They fail to take account of the moral purpose of schooling, if we think of this purpose as creating the conditions for the becoming somebody of students.

The theory of coordinated management of meaning focuses on the creation of social worlds through interactions. This theory is outlined and used to explain how what people do and say structures relational positions and subsequent events and assigns or limits the possibility of agency. Social constructionist ideas are used in this study as a theoretical tool, a practical tool and a research tool. For the research purpose, coordinated management of meaning, critical narrative theory and positioning theory are adapted to include attention to the unfolding of processes with a focus on ‘what is created’ in the moment. Not by observing these moments, but as hearing participants’ subsequent reflections on these moments and what it created for them.

The analysis of the data avoids constructing people as determined within discourse and supports a conceptualization of personal agency as achieved through response to how a student or a family is positioned. The study establishes claims for relational, resource and resolution thinking as practices that address the problems of interactive troubles instead of blaming individuals. The analysis of what could be different makes further visible the problems found in current practice and enables a theoretically robust account to be given of an alternative practice.