

Public Abstract

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Graduation Term:SP 2015

Department:Sociology

Degree:PhD

Title:Suspicion, Competence, and Coping in Preschool Teachers' Identity Work

As the title of this dissertation suggests, what makes this research special relates to its empirical and conceptual focus – preschool teachers and identity. The preschool is a neglected setting in the sociology of education literature, and focusing on preschool teachers teaching and caring practices is similarly overlooked. The preschool teacher as a social role along with the preschool teacher identity are culturally, institutionally, organizationally, and individually important in relation to young children. That is, identities and performances in the preschool occur within the moral contours of contextual embeddedness. Hence, preschool teachers “work” is empirically and analytically interesting because it has consequences for how we understand taken for granted organizations and occupations, and the individuals within them.

The body of this dissertation is comprised of three articles analyzing the interplay of discourse and preschool teachers’ everyday work. In general, the articles revolve around preschool teacher identity work as it relates to themes of suspicion, competence, and coping in the preschool.

The first article, “Preschool Teachers and the Discourse of Suspicion,” was accepted for publication in *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. In it, I identify a discourse of suspicion relating to men working in preschools. Individuals use the discourse of suspicion to characterize men as threats to the gender order of the preschool. Men working in preschools are broadly construed as pedophiles, homosexuals, violent, and/or effeminate. I then move on to preschool teachers suspicion minimizing strategies. Preschool teachers, and especially men preschool teachers, employ strategies to remain beyond reproach such as by being visible to other employees at all times and setting boundaries for affection with preschool children. This article shifts the focus from the issue of too few men in ECE to interpretations of men in ECE.

The second article, “Gender and Preschool Teacher Competence” also analyzes gender in the preschool. Here, I show how preschool teachers use the gender order to construct competent identities. More specifically, preschool teachers draw on the discourse of mothering and the discourse of the positive male role model to construct three types of competence: de facto competence, token competence, and behavioral competence. De facto competence draws on the discourse of mothering and characterizes men as incompetent because they lack maternal instincts. Token competence draws on the discourse of the positive male role model and characterizes men as competent because they are mostly absent from preschools (making them a commodity). Behavioral competence draws upon and resists the discourse of mothering and the discourse of the positive male role model to construct competence. This article demonstrates how the gender order is not only a broad social structure, but also a complexly organized resource used strategically during talk and interaction.

The final article is titled “Preschool Teachers and the Discourse of Caring.” In it, I first identify a discourse of caring prevalent in early childhood education settings. The discourse of caring broadly characterizes preschools as happy, safe places for children; and preschool teachers as loving, pleasant, compassionate people trustworthy to care for young children. The discourse of caring conceals the work of being a preschool teacher, especially emotional labor. The second half of the article analyzes preschool teachers coping strategies I call “identity preservers.” Identity preservers preserve conceptualizations of Ellis Montessori Preschool and its teachers as safe and caring by allowing preschool teachers to negotiate or even escape stressful situations. In large part, coping strategies are performed because of the discourse of caring and turn on the interplay of cultural and institutional expectations.

I conclude this dissertation with a discussion of my findings and why they are theoretically important for sociological inquiry, the implications of research relating to gender and early childhood education, and then

suggest a way to think about sociological research in early childhood education.