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Preschool teachers as undercover agents within the figured world of public school

Jamie Huff Sisson

University of South Australia, Australia

Abstract

This article explores the lived and sometimes clandestine professional experiences of early childhood teachers who exist within contexts where dominant discourses of professional are competing with teacher's own understandings of their professional identities. Cultural models theory is used to shed light on the secrete and undercover work of public preschool teachers as they resist the prevailing managerial discourse and assert their understandings of their professional identities behind the closed doors of their classrooms.

Keywords

Cultural models theory, early childhood, narrative inquiry, professional identities

Introduction

The discourse of managerialism, which has been a dominant discourse in education since the Industrial Revolution, has been used to promote high standards and efficiency by positioning teachers as technicians and service providers, making them 'objects which can be manipulated for particular ends' (Casey, 1992: 188) and making schools educational marketplaces where customers (parents) rank school performance and commodify education (Sachs, 2001). Aligning with what Moss (2014: 17) called 'the story of quality and high returns', the dominant discourse of managerialism is challenging for teachers who think of their work as collaborative and value their work as artistry. In light of this challenge, it is important to understand how teachers enact agency to assert their professional identities and contest dominant discourses.

Dominant discourses are powerful, taken for granted as natural and thus difficult to dismantle. In this article, cultural models theory is used to explore (a) the way teachers make sense of their professional identities within a context where the discourse of managerialism is dominant, and (b) the way they negotiate their professional identities through acts of undercover agency to resist positioning as technicians and service providers. Bringing to light the secret and undercover work of public preschool teachers, I illuminate the insidiousness of dominant discourses and the limitations

of undercover agency in providing a counternarrative.

Competing for a professional identity within managerial discourses

Within the field of education, there are multiple and competing discourses. Discourses are shared languages that promote particular values and ways of being, and dominant discourses are those that are taken for granted as truth (Holland et al., 1998). Implicit in dominant discourses is the denial of the existence of alternative discourses. Dominant discourses in any given field are powerful in perpetuating power relationships where particular values and beliefs are privileged over others (Apple, 2006; Clandinin and Connelly, 1996; Parkison, 2008; Sisson and Iverson, 2014). These privileged values and beliefs can become so ingrained in the fabric of institutions through dominant discourses that they limit opportunities to reconceptualize practice.

Dominant discourses inform mandates associated with assessment and curriculum that provide parameters for teachers' work, creating problems for teachers in establishing their professional identities when strict mandates do not align with their own values. The tensions that preschool teachers experience constitute one such example of this issue when preschool teachers working within a public school context must reconcile two competing discourses: managerial discourse and emotionality discourse (Osgood, 2004; Sachs, 2001; Woodrow, 2008).

Managerial discourse in the teaching profession derives from the world of business and industry, where competition, consumerism, efficiency and accountability are privileged. A product of the Industrial Revolution, managerial discourse intertwines with rationality discourse as individuals draw on scientific ways of knowing to inform standardized practice and curriculum models. Decisions are made by experts and handed down to technicians for implementation to ensure standards and efficiency (Dahlberg et al., 2007). Believed essential in improving quality, competition is valued over collaboration in managerial discourse.

Emotionality discourse is recognized as significant in the professional identities of early childhood teachers (Osgood, 2010; Sisson, 2011). The basic premise of an emotionality discourse is that important decisions in early childhood settings require more than standardized responses. Such decisions are often motivated by emotional qualities such as caring and passionate, and are deemed necessary

in the work of early childhood educators (Edwards et al., 1998; Moyles, 2001; Osgood, 2006, 2010, 2012; Vogt, 2002; Woodrow, 2012). Within an emotionality discourse, relationships and teachers' practical knowledge are valued in informing collaborative decisions (Osgood, 2004). Urban and Dalli (2012) likewise described a key characteristic in early childhood teachers' professional identities: relationality – that is, (a) attentiveness to surroundings and occurrences, (b) openness to individuality, diversity and joint meaning-making, (c) curiosity and (d) awareness of the other.

The literature suggests that a paradox exists for early childhood teachers who draw from an emotionality discourse in contexts where managerialism is the dominant discourse. In Australia, Sachs (2001) and Woodrow (2008) wrote about the dominance of an entrepreneurial view of the professional within education policies. Sachs (2001) asserted that the entrepreneurial professional identity promoted in managerial discourse competes with teachers' identities as activists. Woodrow (2008: 275) similarly stated that the increase in corporate childcare has been 'shaping the production of limited and limiting professional identities'. In the UK, Osgood (2004) drew from two large qualitative studies to understand how early childhood teachers respond to the entrepreneurial approach to professionalism promoted by educational policies, suggesting that although early childhood teachers disagreed about their roles as entrepreneurs, they were only passively resistant because they did not believe that they had the power to effect change.

Teachers' relationships with others and the systems that regulate their work have an impact on how teachers see themselves as professionals (Urban and Dalli, 2012). Parkison (2008) stated that contexts can create either systems of empowerment or systems of accountability and control through prescriptive mandates – the former fostering positive authentic identities and well-being, and the latter developing a sense of alienation and determinism.

Osgood (2010) argued that emotionality cannot be taught, measured or demonstrated; yet policymakers using managerial discourse have defined the teacher's work as a technical role in which quality can be achieved and maintained through mandated standardized assessments, curriculum and professional development. Dall'Alba and Barnacle (2015: 1456) argued as follows: 'It takes considerable effort and commitment to unsettle the status quo, regardless of whose interests are being served. Instead, surrendering to the "they" can delude us into believing we are at home

among what is familiar'. They warned that surrendering to the dominant discourse can create discordant

practice that is at odds with what is accepted in the field – signifying the importance of exploring how preschool teachers understand and negotiate their professional identities within primary school contexts where a managerial discourse is used.

Parkison (2008) found that teachers respond to the competing constructs of the professional either by withdrawing and resisting rules and regulations or by accepting one or more of the role scripts prescribed by the institution. Pennington (2007) and Clandinin and Connelly (1996) provided examples of how teachers found space to negotiate their identities. Pennington (2007) described examples of a teacher's curriculum improvisation to bring the mandated curriculum closer to her own beliefs about what was important in literacy learning. Clandinin and Connelly (1996) found that teachers often told cover stories to provide the illusion that they were following mandates, while behind the closed doors of their classrooms they carried on the practices that most aligned with their professional beliefs.

While Pennington (2007) and Clandinin and Connelly (1996) provided examples of primary and secondary teachers enacting agency in secret places, little attention has been paid to understanding the experiences of preschool teachers and their responses to competing discourses. The research presented here adds to this literature by providing insight into how public preschool teachers individually asserted their professional identities through undercover acts of agency as a response to dominant managerial discourse. Moss (2016) argued that although dominant discourses are extremely powerful, acts of resistance can challenge dominant discourses by providing alternative discourses. The findings presented here provide insights into the complexities in resistance towards dominant discourses through an exploration of teachers' undercover acts of agency.

Research methodology

The analysis presented here focuses on understanding how five public preschool teachers negotiated their professional identities in a major metropolitan school district in the USA. In narrative inquiry, the story is the source of data; specifically, semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 1998) were used as the primary method of data collection. Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) threedimensional space – including forward–backward, inward–outward and situated in place – was

used to understand the influence of temporality and relations of power on the development of preschool

teachers' identities. The forward–backward dimensions of space were explored during a two-hour individual life-history interview, in which each participant (all female) shared stories about her childhood, becoming a teacher and future aspirations. During one-hour individual context interviews, the participants described the challenges and supports they experienced in the situated place of the Midwestern Metropolitan School District. The inward–outward dimensions were explored during follow-up interviews after participant observations, in which the participants described how they reflected on and responded to the challenges they experienced as preschool

teachers. The emerging themes were shared with the participants throughout the data collection phase in the form of a personal narrative for commentary.1

Conceptual framework

Cultural models theory complemented the narrative inquiry, providing a lens through which to examine developing identities and acts of agency informed by and situated within multiple historically contingent, socially constructed and culturally informed contexts (Holland et al., 1998). In describing the significance of culture, Holland et al. (1998: 41) wrote that social contexts or 'figured worlds, like activities, are not so much things or objects to be apprehended, as processes or traditions of apprehension which gather us up and give us form as our lives intersect them'.

Tensions can focus on the positionality of power when individuals must engage in multiple figured worlds where cultural values and beliefs conflict. Particular values, beliefs and ways of knowing and being are often privileged, while others are marginalized through dominant discourses, creating relationships that are competing for power. Pennington (2007) demonstrated the marginalization of teachers and their practical knowledge in the figured world of policy and teaching, suggesting that the dominant discourse of standardized practice placed teachers in a low position of power and required them to implement scripted curriculum models.

Cultural models theory (Holland et al., 1998) builds on the work of Vygotsky, Bakhtin and Bourdieu to illuminate identity and agency. In drawing on Bourdieu, Holland et al. (1998: 270) suggested that individuals are 'repositories of a complex set of associations … sedimented from

experiencing concrete instances of their combination'. They furthermore suggested that individuals are not just products or respondents to culture and circumstances, but are also critical appropriators who bring with them diverse experiences from multiple figured worlds. In building on Bakhtin, Holland et al. suggested that diverse discourses from multiple figured worlds come together in a dialogic form at the site of individuals. Agency, according to Bakhtin, is born as a matter of orchestrating multiple and competing discourses through acts of improvisation (Holland et al., 1998; Holquist, 2001). Enacting such improvisations can be liberating to those with little power. Because individuals are always in a state of being addressed and in the process of answering, these acts of improvisation thus become identity claims (Holquist, 2001).

Vygotsky's (1978) notion of play is used within cultural models theory to understand how individuals enact agency to improvise existing figured worlds or create new ones. According to Holland et al.:

> Vygotsky's formulations, in short, direct us to attend to people's collective ability to imagine themselves in worlds that may yet be scarcely realized, and to the modest ability of humans to manage their own behaviour through signs directed at themselves. (Holland et al., 1998: 281)

Context and participants

This study took place in the Midwestern Metropolitan School District, a large urban school district in the USA with 52 preschool classrooms across 45 schools. This school district was organized under a business model with a chief executive officer in place of a superintendent. The preschool classrooms were organized in collaboration with the district's Department of Early Childhood in collaboration with Head Start. Two classrooms were also a part of the Universal Pre-Kindergarten pilot project. Preschool teachers from the Watson and Blake Montessori (pseudonyms) school sites also participated in this research. Both sites were situated in urban neighbourhoods, where 99% and 76% of the population of preschoolers were African American, respectively.

In the Midwestern Metropolitan School District, managerial discourse was used to enforce the mandated curriculum, pedagogy and practice – for example, an emphasis on children's academic readiness for school led to mandated 'effective curriculum' models district-wide to prepare children academically for school. The teachers were not only held accountable to use these mandated curriculum models, but were also held accountable for students' academic knowledge through

standardized assessments. These curricular mandates not only determined what and how the teachers were to teach, but were also an attempt to create continuity for students who regularly moved throughout the district; furthermore, in emphasizing the importance of developmentally appropriate practices for preschool children, the district administrators from the Department of Early Childhood also mandated play-based pedagogies. The teachers were held accountable to these mandates through regular classroom inspection for play-based learning environments.

Five female preschool teachers, ranging in age from 29–58 with 3–17 years of experience, answered the call for participants. All of the participants held a Masters' degree in education. Two teachers (Jill and CeCe) were certified Montessori teachers, one teacher (Sophia) came with extensive experience in a university laboratory school where play-based pedagogies were practised, and two (Sophia and Sam) came from a special education background. Four (Pseudonyms-Nanci, Jill, CeCe and Sophia) had previous experiences in childcare.

Identity and agency undercover

The dominant managerial discourse circulating in the Midwestern Metropolitan School District was enforced by official entities such as district- and school-level leaders, and served to position teachers as technicians and service providers. The participants struggled with these roles as they competed with their own understandings of their roles as informed by their professional identities (Sisson, 2011). As such, many responded by resisting mandates in subversive and undercover ways. In particular, the teachers described how they improvised curriculum and pedagogy, rules and relationships.

Improvising curriculum and pedagogy

Jill, CeCe, Sam and Nanci each spoke about how they asserted agency by improvising curriculum and pedagogy in covert ways. These participants had two important reasons for doing so: (1) the mandated curriculum and pedagogy did not align with their own beliefs, and (2) they experienced time constraints.

When describing mandates unaligned with their professional values, these four participants spoke at length about being required to provide a play-based environment for preschool children. Jill, CeCe, Sam and Nanci rejected play as a useful pedagogy for learning, and therefore did not identify with it as a part of their understanding of their role as professionals. In asserting their

identities as autonomous professionals instead of technicians, these participants resisted practices they did not value and improvised the curriculum to include those that they did. Coming from a Montessori background, Jill said: 'I make the executive decision that it's not going to be in here because it's not the Montessori classroom. So we just … get marked down and say we're trying to stay as true to Montessori as we can'.

The participants similarly spoke about time constraints as an issue requiring them to assert their identities as autonomous professionals by enacting undercover agency. CeCe said: 'I think with anything, you take what you need out of it and then add what you can and delete what you have to'. CeCe referred to the mandated packaged curriculum that all preschools were required to follow. Although the participants were firm about their beliefs, they exercised agency behind the closed doors of their classrooms. These hidden forms of agency or resistance included limiting children's opportunities to play and omitting parts of the mandated curriculum while providing an illusion of compliance.

Jill and CeCe described how they allowed their Montessori block area to be interpreted as a flexible space that included block play during inspections. During a tour of her classroom, Jill pointed out that they did not correct inspectors who assumed that the block area was a play area. She described how the Montessori blocks were to be used only for teaching mathematical concepts and that the inspectors were unaware of this use. Observations of Jill's and CeCe's classrooms consistently showed 'work' stations where children worked independently with Montessori materials, and confirmed the absence of the play-based approaches required by the district.

While Sam's and Nanci's classrooms had dramatic play and block areas, they covered these areas with sheets to signify to children that they were prohibited from playing in those areas. Sam said: 'You see our fun little centres. They only get in those maybe once a week, if that, because we have so much. I mean … a lot of it's academic'. Nanci also spoke about how she prohibited her students from using the dramatic play and block areas, and maintained those areas only for inspections. Nanci said: 'We can all play the game. You know, like, Head Start is coming. Okay, I can put on a show if I need to'. Sam and Nanci felt that limiting children's time for play provided them with more time to spend in areas they believed were important to children's learning – teaching lessons through direct instruction.

Jill and CeCe suggested that part of their role as autonomous professionals was to make important decisions about how to balance competing demands from district mandates and their own professional values. CeCe said: 'We have to balance it so we have to find a way, like, to incorporate both things – all things, like, what the district wants you to do and how to support it with the Montessori materials'. Jill spoke about how the mandated curriculum took so much time that implementing it would leave little room for her to incorporate practices she valued:

I only do part of the calendar because I can't do it all. It's hard to do the lessons all the time because you have to do the calendar, which is the curriculum. 'Every day counts', which I am not doing exactly the way it's prescribed because it's so much. It would take forever for me to count how many days of the year there are. It's really hard to do it all.

Jill and CeCe believed that in improvising the mandated curriculum by drawing on their own expertise, they provided their students with an education that extended above and beyond what was required in the mandated curriculum. Jill said: 'I use the district's curriculum as supplemental to my Montessori. I've got all those better, to me, Montessori materials that teach the same and more'. CeCe explained:

When they leave preschool, they're only supposed to know some of the alphabet, and they're only supposed to recognize numbers 1 through 10. Our children – we want them to recognize numbers 1 through 100. You know, be able to count to 100 when they leave preschool. I want all of them to know every letter of the alphabet and every sound of the alphabet when they leave me. Not just some.

Nanci described how she completely disregarded the mandated curriculum, stating: 'I don't really [follow the curriculum] because, to me, bugs in the middle of March just didn't make sense to me. So, I didn't do bugs'. Nanci believed that practical knowledge was most important in her professional work and that the mandated curriculum focused too much on content knowledge; she, however, believed that, in preschool, focusing on children's fine motor development was of primary importance. Like CeCe and Jill, Nanci believed that in drawing on her own knowledge, she was also going above and beyond what was required by the mandated curriculum.

In asserting their identities as knowledgeable experts instead of obedient technicians, the participants drew from their own knowledge and experiences to improvise the curriculum in similar

ways.

Improvising the rules

The managerial discourse also served to inform how the teachers' practice was managed beyond teaching. Sam and Nanci spoke about their loss of autonomy during team planning meetings. Sam said:

In the past, our planning time would be just, kind of, plan together, like, what we're going to do [in] lesson

plans, but we've, kind of, had to get away from that because this [holds up the agenda] is what [the principal] wants now. So, sometimes, to me, [planning with the] team is a waste of time.

Sam and Nanci described how they struggled with the standardized rules and regulations derived from the district's managerial discourse. Sam and Nanci spoke about how they improvised rules about following the principal's mandated agenda during team planning meetings, as well as the district's rules about the students' last day of school.

Sam believed that the agenda mandated by the principal was a waste of time because she did not view it as appropriate for their planning needs as a team. As the team leader, Sam thus chose to reject the principal's designated agenda in the absence of the principal during planning meetings. Sam explained: 'Planning meetings turn into gossip time. I'll say something snarky or sarcastic to get a rise out of people. I do it also to make people laugh'. During my observation of Sam's team planning meeting, I observed first-hand how she rejected the principal's designated agenda by making jokes and gossiping about other teachers and students. She resisted being placed in an obedient technical role by deciding not to follow the principal's designated agenda. When the principal was not present, Sam felt that she had more power and autonomy to alter the agenda as she believed fit.

Elaborating on her life experiences, Sam often described herself as needing to be in charge.

Sam's resistance to the principal's designated agenda was in part also making a positional claim that when the principal was not present, the power of the agenda as a regulatory artefact would also not be present. Being in charge in the absence of the principal, Sam chose not to perpetuate the managerial discourse by resisting any rules or regulations associated with that particular discourse.

In further showing her resistance, Sam chose to turn planning time into gossip time as a way to

demonstrate how she believed planning time had become a waste of time.

Sam also talked about how she struggled with district regulations that ignored student and teacher needs:

It's just a matter of, you got to learn to do what you can with what you got, and it's a matter of just surviving. I really think that's what it comes down to. I mean, we are on the front lines every day, all day and, you know, downtown [the district] doesn't always understand.

Sam felt that her practical knowledge was disrespected by district administrators who made district-wide decisions without consulting teachers. For example, during an observation of Watson's team planning meeting, Sam, Nanci and the other teachers in the planning meeting expressed concern about the district administrators' decision for the last day of school to fall on a Tuesday and the last day for teachers to fall on a Wednesday. The teachers felt that having only one day without the children was insufficient to clean and pack away their classrooms. Sam suggested to the group that they have the end-of-year preschool celebration on Friday the week before, implying to parents that that was, indeed, the last day. Sam told the team to just say 'Bye. Have a nice summer' when the families left. Sam then suggested to the team that it was important that they did not put anything in writing to specify the last day of school. Sam said that she was not worried about repercussions if they got caught by the administrators for changing the last day of school because 'I know how to play it'. Sam said that she would tell the principal 'We never said they [students] couldn't [come back Monday and Tuesday]'. Sam, Nanci and the other teachers from their planning team struggled with district-wide decisions that were made without teachers. In drawing from their knowledge and experience of how long it would take for the teachers to pack away their classrooms before Wednesday, the team decided to improvise the district rule to better fit their needs as teachers.

Sam and Nanci's example demonstrated that, for some teachers, asserting agency by improvising rules may only be possible behind closed doors, without the surveillance of the principal or district leaders. The teachers in the planning team all pulled together to collaborate in conspiring to improvise the rules at Sam's urging.

Improvising relationships

In response to low parent satisfaction, the district launched a campaign that was focused on improving

'customer service'. The participants disagreed with the conception of parents as customers. Instead, many of the participants spoke about the importance of a collaborative relationship with parents. In particular, Jill, Sophia, CeCe and Sam chose to deconstruct and reconceptualize what customer service meant to them. In doing so, they improvised the service provider–customer relationship with parents to reflect their own beliefs about the role of relationships with parents in their professional work.

Jill and Sophia spoke about how they reconceptualized the role as a more collaborative role – a role more congruent with their beliefs about relationships with parents. Jill said:

> I think of [the relationship with parents] more as a partnership. I think everybody needs to be professional, an adult, and talk to each other in a nice way. Being caring, I think, fits into customer service. Not talking nasty or ignoring them.

Jill brought her beliefs about the importance of being caring and respectful to her interpretation of her role in customer service. Jill thus resisted the role of service provider, which failed to coincide with this belief.

Sophia similarly drew on her ideas about her relationships with parents as partnerships to interpret what she believed was important in the district message about customer service:

> I'm not interpreting it that way [I must serve the parents and students like they are customers]; I don't know how [the district administrators] are [interpreting it]. I don't think that that's true in this instance. I mean, I don't want to think of my students as my customers. That seems a little odd. I think I'm, kind of, just doing what I always did, you know, regardless of who's saying it just because it's the right thing to do.

Like Jill, Sophia used her interpretation of what was important in customer service to assert her professional identity as a collaborative partner with parents.

CeCe also believed that close collaborative relationships with parents were important to her professional work. Speaking about how her classroom was a safe place where she could make these autonomous interpretations as she wished, CeCe said:

> The district is what the district is, and they don't come into my classroom; so I handle my room, you know.

They want customer service. Okay. I'll do that. I'll call back people. I'll do those things, but as far as my connection with parents and children, it's a caring community, and I'll do what I do when I close my door.

You know, I don't have to act like they are customers. When we close our doors at the end of the day, they are children that we have to be responsible for, to help them grow and become educated and disciplined individuals.

For CeCe, behind the closed door of her classroom was a space where she had the autonomy to enact her professional identity as a collaborative community member with parents.

Sam's struggle with the customer service model differed from that of the other participants. Sam did not want close relationships with parents, but instead their confidence and trust in her decisions and abilities as a teacher. She felt that showing parents that she was knowledgeable and had their children's best interests at heart was important in building this trust. In improvising her relationships with parents, Sam particularly struggled with the district's open-door policy. She said: 'You can't yell at a kid or get that kid the way you want. They're parents, not our customers!' I observed first-hand how Sam moved away from the customer–service provider relationship with parents by limiting opportunities for them to participate. During an observation of a planning meeting, Sam asked the team to lie to parents by telling them that the bus had no more room for parents to accompany their children on a field trip. Believing that she already knew what was best for the students, she disagreed with the discourse of customer service because it interfered with her ability to show parents that she was knowledgeable and had the students' best interests at heart by being tough and strict.

The district's administrative leaders as well as the participants believed that relationships with parents were important; their interpretations of these relationships differed, however. The district administration believed that having a service provider–customer relationship with parents was important to teachers' professional work. Jill, Sophia and CeCe believed that collaborative partnerships were most important, but Sam believed that having parents trust her knowledge was most important. Thus, these four teachers found ways to improvise the customer–service provider role promoted by the managerial discourse and enact their own beliefs about relationships with parents,

staying true to their commitments as professionals.

Discussion

According to cultural models theory, agency is the orchestration of multiple and competing discourses through improvisations (Holland et al., 1998). Parkison (2008) stated that a loss of agency to inform education change has contributed to an identity crisis for teachers in public schools. Lasky (2005) asserted that the change in the field from collegialism to managerialism has contributed to low teacher retention. The findings presented here not only provide a window onto some of the struggles that public preschool teachers face in the USA, but also shed light on the complexities of resistance to the dominant discourse. The participants' stories of undercover agency demonstrate the power that teachers have in the private spaces of their classrooms to create new figured worlds where their identities as knowledgeable and collaborative experts can be realized. Although enacting improvisations can be liberating for those with little power, this research demonstrates how they can also perpetuate the dominant discourse and the power structures it imposes. It highlights not only the complexities faced by teachers wishing to resist within the very systems that govern them, but also the importance of careful orchestration to ensure that improvisations are not just the same tune played by a different horn.

Undercover agency: perpetuating the dominant discourse

Although the participants were successful in improvising the curriculum and the rules, doing so as undercover agents perpetuated managerial discourse by silencing their own voices in public spaces and by silencing the voices of others in their new figured worlds. According to cultural models theory, individuals are perpetually in a state of being addressed and in the process of answering (authoring) identity claims through improvisations (Holland et al., 1998; Holquist, 2001). The teachers' use of improvisations through covert forms of agency, however, silenced their own voices. The covertness of their actions cloaked their true identities while, on the outside, leaving them to appear as if their identities aligned with those promoted within the dominant discourse. According to Moss (2014, 2016), in order to disrupt dominant stories, we must make visible alternative stories. The act of keeping these alternative stories hidden or telling 'cover stories', as Clandinin and Connelly (1996) have called them, may have protected the teachers' private space of their classrooms. The ultimate cost, however, was their ability to author their own constructs of

their professional identities in public spaces, where impacting broad systemic change is possible. Although each teacher asserted undercover agency to resist hierarchical structures that positioned them as technicians and service providers, they demonstrated instances of creating their own hierarchical structures. This was evident in the participants' covert acts of agency to improvise the curriculum and pedagogy. Jill, CeCe, Sam and Nanci believed that their own views, informed by their previous experiences about curriculum and pedagogy, were superior to those that were mandated. Their use of covert forms of agency thus restricted opportunities for other voices (i.e. those of families, inspectors or colleagues) to be heard.

This was also demonstrated by Sam, who subscribed to values of the dominant discourse in her own classroom by improvising relationships with parents. Although Sam resisted hierarchical structures that positioned the knowledge of policymakers and educational leaders above her own practical knowledge, she created her own hierarchical structure, positioning her knowledge of children above that of their parents.

This analysis illuminates the insidiousness of managerialism by demonstrating how dominant discourses can become so powerful that they can surface in instances of resistance against them if we are not critically reflective. Moss (2016: 14) raised concerns about dominant discourses 'taking away our capacity to question and offer alternatives'. He called for new narratives in which democratic experimentalism is sought. The research presented here illuminates how acts of agency to resist, when enacted in undercover ways, can exclude the possibility of engaging in dialogue with those holding other perspectives and act as a barrier to a transformative approach.

Looking forward

The emotionality discourse has been recognized as an alternative discourse which early childhood teachers draw on to counter the dominant discourse of managerialism. The teachers in this study certainly drew on aspects of the emotionality discourse, such as using emotional qualities to make decisions, and valuing practical knowledge and collegiality (within a small trusted group) to improvise their practice and identities. Their orchestration of competing discourses, however, raises concerns about undercover acts of agency in perpetuating the dominant discourse. How do teachers successfully push the boundaries and go against the grain of the dominant discourse while also maintaining their positions within the very contexts governed by it? As this research shows,

continued existence in a context with such tensions can tax teachers' professional identities. Sachs (2001) argued that individual and collective critical reflection within communities of practice is significant in fostering an activist professional identity. This research confirms the importance of promoting the activist professional identities of people who value individual and collective critical reflection. Such practice will require support in contexts where teachers and their knowledge in making important educational decisions are valued instead of positioning teachers as technicians and service providers through a discourse of managerialism. Counternarratives will be important in disrupting taken-for-granted dominant discourses (Moss, 2014); doing so can create a shared vision to which teachers feel connected and for which they feel responsible. Further research is needed on the development of safe spaces where diverse voices can contest the dominant discourse and engage in critical dialogue about policy and practice.

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Author biography

Jamie Huff Sisson is a senior lecturer at University of South Australia, Adelaide. Her work across the United States and Australia as teacher and teacher educator has influenced her research on teacher identity and agency, and democratic pedagogies. She is interested in engaging in collaborative relationships with educators, policymakers, children and families to re-imagine learning communities.