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Discourses in a Child Caring Agency: A Community of Practice Perspective

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Abstract: This paper reports findings of a case study which is part of a wider project borne out of a two-year ethnographic study of a child caring agency. Specifically, this paper argues that discourses of a child caring agency can be understood in terms of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. Using data from policy documents and participants' interviews, focus group discussions and site visits, data reveals that discourses are established through a set of activities that require participation of all members of the agency, and that discourses regulate different levels of expectations and actions of participants.

Key Words: Child Caring Agency; Community of Practice; Joint Enterprise; Mutual Engagement; Shared Repertoire

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent research on language and globalization have pointed out on the growing disparity between the 'good and bad effects' of globalization its impact on communities. Specifically, while globalization aims to disrupt modernist notions of border/territory, locality and culture, through technology and rapid migration inequality remains (Blommaert, 2010). In the case of the Philippines, the growing incidence of poverty and overpopulation have given rise to different institutional initiatives to address the problems brought about by these harsh realities. One recurring problem borne out of extreme poverty and overpopulation are cases of neglected children. Reports from different sources indicate that the occurrence of neglected children have risen over the years and have yielded different concerns such as safety and security, peace and order and development of these neglected children in the community. As a response, different global and national initiatives have given rise to agencies which

are tasked to care for these youths. While there are policies at different levels, our interest in this investigation is examining how discourses are produced and contribute to the communities of practice in these agencies.

Since the present investigation is anchored on sociolinguistic of globalization and communities of practice, we believe that this undertaking aligns itself on studies of the role of language in mediatizing inequality. That is, since the study of language in an era of globalization is primarily a study of inequality, it is important to examine how discourses that are produced by different stakeholders regulate access to resources to others. In this case, we examine the discursive role of discourse from different stakeholders within the domain of childrearing/childcare as they negotiate mutual engagement, joint enterprise and share repertoire.

As a framework for our investigation, we use the concept of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) to provide an adequate analytical tool in examining the contribution of discourses in creating a community of practice in a child rearing

agency. This paper argues that discourses produced by different participants (CCA residents, administrators and staff) of a child caring agency result in mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study described the operations within a child caring agency (CCA) by examining the dominant discourses and the embedded social processes that comprise the community of practice in a CCA. In order to comprehensively account for these, a qualitative design adopting the case study method was used in describing these discourses and processes. Qualitative research is capable of illuminating the discourses and the social processes in which discourses are embedded to provide a deeper understanding of the inner workings of a child caring agency (Silverman, 2004).

This qualitative study specifically used the descriptive single case study as a method to bare the perspectives of the participants regarding their experiences and roles as members of a child caring agency. The case study method allowed for an intensive investigation of the mechanisms of a child caring agency through an in-depth gathering of information from the participants as it encouraged the use of multiple sources of evidence, which helped explicate the discourses and the social processes embedded in the agency.

In terms of data collection techniques, residents, staff and administrators participated in focus groups discussions and interviews. As part of a wider project which entailed an ethnographic description of the CCA, documents such as life history accounts made by the participants and the policy documents governing CCAs were also used as data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data revealed that the discourses play significant roles in the creation of a community of practice (CoP) within the CCA. The

CCA's joint enterprise of "securing a better life for the residents" was jointly negotiated in the discourses of the residents, practitioners and even in the analyzed policy documents. Though the common endeavor is explicit, residents were found to have varying levels of commitment to the joint enterprise, as observed in their inability to adhere to the norms of the agency—norms that appeared to be very vital in the agency's pursuit of the joint enterprise.

Their constant mutual engagements (e.g. formal and casual interactions) became a venue for a continuous negotiation of the community's joint enterprise. The negotiations allowed the practitioners and the residents to learn from one another by sharing their knowledge, expertise, goals, stories, values and experiences.

In their pursuit of the joint enterprise, shared linguistic and non-linguistic/social practices were produced from their mutual engagements. Both residents and the practitioners appeared to employ certain cognitive frames, e.g. children-as-victims, in dealing with one another and in the problems that they encounter.

The interplay of the dominant discourses that comprise a CoP in a child caring agency is shown in Fig.1

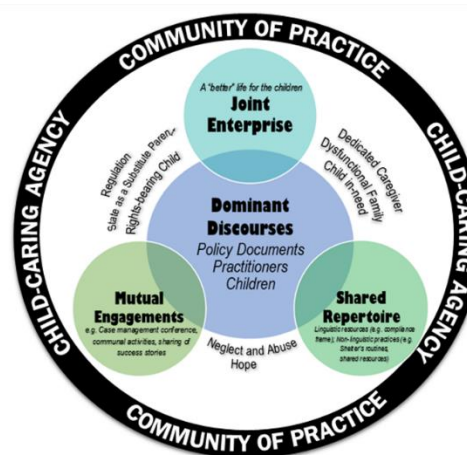


Fig. 1. Role and interaction the dominant discourses in the creation of a CoP within a CCA



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The dominant discourses were constitutive of the joint enterprise, mutual engagements and the shared repertoire of the CoP in a CCA. It is the interaction or overlap between and among the dominant discourses that allowed the creation and maintenance of a Community of Practice.

Emphasized also in this framework is the central role of the discourses, especially by the hegemonic discourses, in shaping social practices, which served as the basis of the joint enterprise, mutual engagements and shared repertoire. The framework is corroborated by existing studies (Chiluwa, 2008; Carpentier & Brussel, 2012) which posits that discourses have the ability to shape social practices and processes.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The discourses analyzed in the present study are constructive of the community of practice with its shared practices, mutual engagements and joint enterprise. Using the Community of Practice as an analytical tool, the child caring agency is presented not just any community, or a group of individuals; it is in fact a community of practice where shared practices are produced as a result of the mutual engagements—engagements that were all directed in pursuit of the joint enterprise of achieving a better life for its residents.

Given the conclusions drawn from the work, several directions can be pursued. First, researchers can pursue enactments of childcare discourse in relation to current policy initiatives in government. That is, since discourse in government enacts actions that trickle down in state agencies, definitions of child care, deliberations and mechanisms of implementation and evaluation can further be analyzed to give a fuller account of discursive strategies in legitimizing policies from a top-down level. Second, from a policy perspective, stakeholders can critically examine the current state of childrearing institutions in different regions in the country. Given that resources in the country are limited, understanding the nuances of communities

of practice within this domain can give policymakers a grassroots perspective in the deployment of discourses of childrearing within the context of institutions with varying institutional support.

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