Diverse disability identities: The accomplishment of 'Child with a disability' in everyday interaction between parents and teachers

Peter Renshaw [a,*], Juliet Choo [b], elke emerald [c]

[a] School of Education, The University of Queensland, Australia
[b] School of Humanities, Ngee Ann Polytechnic, Singapore
[c] School of Education and Professional Studies, Griffith University, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

In this paper we analyse how specific 'disability identities' were accomplished for students in special education facilities by their teachers and parents as they communicated about the ordinary events of daily schooling. We employ membership categorisation analysis (MCA), an analytic within the theoretical frame of ethnomethodology, to investigate in fine detail the communication between the parents and teachers of two primary-school aged children, Roger and Becky. Our analysis highlights the complexity and subtlety of how diverse disability identities are actually achieved in everyday schooling contexts, and demonstrates possibilities for reconstituting the 'Child with a disability' as more agentic and self-aware.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Disabled children continue to be identified predominantly through the deployment of the medical model, where disability is conceived as the outcome of impairment, as explicable by reference to the interaction between biological and environmental factors, and as requiring the implementation of ameliorating interventions (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Shakespeare, 1996). One effect of the pervasive influence of the medical model is that the disabled tend to be recognised and treated only in the pathological and deficient terms associated with the label. Their identities are constructed in medical discourse as deviant from the norm (Davis, 1997) as *other* (Kliewer & Biklen, 1996), and their everyday lives are construed through narratives of concern, care and specialised treatment, as well as around problematic issues of confinement versus inclusion in mainstream society (Priestley, 1999). In such well-meaning accounts, however, the child with a disability is typically constructed as acted upon, rather than acting. The focus on disability, as the defining identity category, can mask the complexity of individual identities and capabilities among children with a disability (Albrecht, 1992; Priestley, 1999; Watson, 1998; Watson et al., 1999). In this paper, we suggest another way in which the specific disability identities of children are constructed in discourse, namely, though the categorisation work of the communicative practices of their teachers and parents.

Using ethnomethodology (EM) and the analytic of membership categorisation analysis (MCA) we frame disability as an accomplished social and situated phenomenon that is actively constituted through the communicative practices of people in everyday contexts. Specifically, we are concerned with children in special education settings and how their specific identities are achieved in the communication that occurs between their parents at home and their teachers at school. We avoid

presuppositions about disability, and examine in fine detail how particular versions of the 'Child with a disability' are accomplished moment by moment through the communicative practices of their carers.

We draw on EM's solid track record of examining identity as constructed 'live' in the exchange of talk (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998) and especially in interrogating aspects of disability identities (Antaki, 2007a, 2007b). Indeed, disability-related studies deploying EM have provided novel and multiple perspectives on people with disabilities. Wareing and Newell (2005) analysed the moment-by-moment naturally occurring talk between six support workers and an allied health professional as they designed a behavioural plan for a woman with a severe intellectual and communication disability. This study revealed markedly different understandings of intellectual disability being contested in the talk. Maynard's (2005) study of the pattern of standard (commonsensical) and non-standard (autistic) answering of two children with autism in testing situations revealed the quite different logics required to describe both commonsense and autistic intelligence. Also, Hester's (1998) study demonstrated how children with a disability are marked out as different by reference to special educational programming, and by their failure to display the kinds of capacities and attributes routinely associated with the non-disabled student. Austin and Fitzgerald (Austin & Fitzgerald, 2007; Fitzgerald & Austin, 2008) examined the way the mother of a child with a disability accounted for her mothering during an interview in order to resist the possible categorisation as 'bad mother' and instead posited her mothering as ordinary.

Similarly, firsthand accounts and certain studies have constructed competing discourses that challenge the representation of disabled people as little more than their disabled-category attributes. Davis and Watson (2002) reported on the agency and fluid identity of children with a disability. They found that these children can oppress each other, and can oppress and be oppressed by non-disabled children. The likelihood of that occurring was found to depend on the child's role within the local social structure. Davis and Watson also found that the children revealed diverse patterns of resistance to stereotypical identities of disability foisted onto them by others. Sometimes, they used resistance in a very strategic way. For example, if benefits could be gained from not challenging the disabled identity ascribed to them (e.g. going to canteen earlier for break; or less homework) then the children allowed the perpetrators their patronising behaviours. Several researchers have argued that since the definitions of disabilities themselves are in flux and contested, disabled peoples' identities are constantly being redefined or modified within public discourses (Kliewer & Biklen, 1996), and the person with a disability can, like any other, avow or disavow the disability identity according to the demands of the local situation (Rapley, Kiernan, & Antaki, 1998).

These studies suggest that fine-grained research efforts can bring into public awareness the everyday practices through which we constitute the notion of disability and the identities of disabled people. What is required is a research methodology that can capture the shifting and situated enactments of disability in schools and homes. Ethnomethodology and the analytic of MCA are well suited to this purpose. Coincidently, we were particularly fortunate for the purposes of such a research agenda, to gain access to an existing set of communication books that had been used by parents and teachers to inform each other of relevant events regarding the education of children in various special educational settings. The messages and notes written by the parents and the teachers to each other provide the 'everyday talk' that we analyse in the paper. By using the research tool of MCA on this everyday data set, we are well positioned to interrogate specific disability identities by providing a novel account of how ordinary people, in their everyday interactions, accomplished the category 'Child with a disability'. A MCA approach respects the local and indigenous; it precludes typical characterisations of the 'Child with a disability' as deficient, incompetent or pathological, and examines such characterisations only when they unfold in the setting. Further, as its focus on the accomplishments of members in settings often leads to a concern with the displayed competences of members, this emphasis is consistent with the current stance in research to foreground the competencies and learning potential of disabled children (Goode, 2003).

2. Method

Membership categorisation analysis (MCA) directs attention to the sense making procedures of the participants themselves. Hence for our purposes, the category 'Child with a disability' is an 'accomplished' phenomenon that is jointly constructed and actively constituted by parents and teachers in their written texts. In reporting the MCA analysis below we use the accepted convention of a capital letter and single quotation marks ('Child with a disability') to denote the specific category under investigation. This paper, however, does not seek to identify the definitive attributes of the category 'Child with a disability'. Rather, it seeks to understand what parents and teachers construct to be the 'Child with a disability' in the situated, here-and-now of their interaction about issues of learning and behaviour at school and home.

MCA takes categorisation to be 'an object in the technology of social structures' (Lepper, 2000, p. 2). Categorisation analysis explicates the categories, classifications or social types that members use for describing and accounting in their talk (Freebody, 2003). Membership categories are classifications that we may use to describe persons, for example, Parent, Sister, Teacher, Lawyer, Nurse, Baby, or Teenager. Certain activities, rights, obligations, knowledge, attributes and competencies are commonsensically associated with certain membership categories (Silverman, 1998, p. 83). For example, if we know someone's activity is 'teaching', we can conclude that his/her category, or social identity is likely to be Teacher; diagnostic symptoms of childhood disability, is hearable as a Psychologist's knowledge.

Categorisations are indexical expressions that are locally and temporally contingent (Hester & Eglin, 1997). So, what a category means will depend on the occasion in which it is used. It cannot be assumed that the category 'disabled' has the same meaning on every occasion of its deployment, even by the same speakers. For example, 'disabled' may be accomplished