

**BEHAVING BADLY: CRITIQUING THE DISCOURSES OF  
“CHILDREN” AND THEIR (MIS)BEHAVIOURS**  
**COMPOTEMENT MALSAIN : CRITIQUER LES DISCOURS DES  
« ENFANTS » ET LEURS (MAUVAIS)COMPOTEMENTS**

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Article abstract

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# BEHAVING BADLY: CRITIQUING THE DISCOURSES OF “CHILDREN” AND THEIR (MIS)BEHAVIOURS

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**ABSTRACT.** Discourses of children as deficient and deviant are common within the education system and shape the ways in which educators interact with and respond to children. To illustrate this, we conducted a critical discourse analysis of a provincial policy document that directs schools in the development of Codes of Conduct. Drawing on poststructural theory, we demonstrate the ways in which the discourses within policy construct and reify particular identities of the *child* and of *misbehaviour* and how these discourses influence conceptions of behaviour “management.” We argue for a reconceptualization of the identity of the child as a contextualized and socially embedded being. In doing so, we articulate an opening for ethical engagements with children that rely on our responsibility for the other.

## COMPOURTEMENT MALSAIN : CRITIQUER LES DISCOURS DES “ENFANTS” ET LEURS (MAUVAIS)COMPOURTEMENTS

**RÉSUMÉ.** Les discours sur les enfants déficients et déviants sont courants dans le système éducatif et façonnent la façon dont les éducateurs interagissent avec les enfants et y réagissent. Pour illustrer cela, nous avons effectué une analyse critique d'un document de politique provinciale qui oriente les écoles dans l'élaboration de codes de conduite. En nous appuyant sur la théorie poststructurale, nous montrons comment les discours au sein des politiques construisent et réifient des identités particulières de l'enfant et des comportements répréhensibles et comment ces discours influencent les conceptions de la “gestion” du comportement. Nous plaçons pour une reconceptualisation de l'identité de l'enfant en tant qu'être contextualisé et socialement intégré. Ce faisant, nous ouvrons la voie à des engagements éthiques avec les enfants qui s'appuient sur notre responsabilité envers l'autre.

“Disrespectful.” “Non-compliant.” “Abusive.” “Bully.” “Threatening.” “Inappropriate.” “Challenging.” “Unacceptable.” These descriptors infuse meaning into the discourse of children and their behaviours in the context of the school system. Descriptors such as these are often part of a larger discourse which, upon examination, can illuminate underlying beliefs, unexamined

assumptions, and the (often) unintended consequences of language use. In this paper, we work from the assumption that discourse has the power to constitute particular meaning, construct identities, and create social order (Foucault, 1978/1997). The discourses of the *child*<sup>1</sup> and of children's (mis)behaviours<sup>2</sup> have the power to pathologize the child (Heydon & Iannacci, 2009), construct the child as deficient and abnormal (Thomas & Loxley, 2007), medicalize (mis)behaviours, and situate the cause and the enactment of (mis)behaviours as a problem within the individual child (Gore & Parkes, 2008; Millei & Petersen, 2014; Thomas & Loxley, 2007). These discourses of deficiency and deviancy in children are common and often unexamined, yet inform policies, practices, and parlance, and ultimately shape the ways in which we identify, interact with, and respond to children.

The words used in this introduction were taken from the document, *Safe and Caring Schools: Provincial Code of Conduct* (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2014), which instructs Manitoba school divisions on determining the contents of their respective Codes of Conduct. To illustrate our theoretical position, we conducted a critical discourse analysis (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) of *Safe and Caring Schools* in order to highlight the pervasive power of the discourses embedded within policy. We sought to illustrate that the ways in which children, their (mis)behaviours, and educators' responses to children's behaviours are described.

As a former teacher and support teacher, I (Janzen), understand the challenges of working with children who demonstrate extreme and violent behaviours. It is not our intention to criticize those who created the document or those responsible for implementing it. However, as critical theorists, we believe that "language use is a social phenomenon" that fixes meaning (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 27) and that it is our responsibility to identify and disrupt meanings that become harmful. The deconstruction of meanings (Derrida, 1990) allows us to critically reflect on meaning and our obligation in making and remaking meaning (Mac Naughton, 2005). Deconstruction is our attempt to become politically and ethically aware of inequities and injustices.

The purpose of our analysis is to provide one example of the ways in which discourses construct understandings and limit possibilities. We will draw attention to the implications of such assumptions on the formation of the identities of children and, subsequently, on the ways in which we come to understand and respond to children's (mis)behaviours. The analysis will elicit the myriad of competing discourses circulating within education, the public, and the media, creating tensions in which educators exist. We will advance an argument for a critical engagement with and a reconceptualization of the discourses used to describe children; a reconsideration of children as contextualized, socially embedded beings; and a re-examination of our engagements with children as a responsibility to understand their lives, experiences, theories, feelings, and hopes (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007).

## CONCEPTUALISING SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH POSTSTRUCTURAL THEORY

The poststructural theory we draw on is largely informed by Michel Foucault and the ways his theorizing has been advanced by Judith Butler (1999), and enlisted by early childhood scholars, particularly Bronwyn Davies (2003) and Glenda Mac Naughton (2005). Poststructuralism provides a framework for thinking about the limits of language, the power of discourses, the fluidity of the subject and subjectivities, and the circulatory role of power. It is a means through which subjects can come to understand their relations within the social world, and the ways in which these relations are confirmed through discourse with the primary goal of conceptualising social change (Davies, 2003). Poststructural theory aims to identify injustice by critically considering the construction of binaries, the constitutive force of language, and the embedded role of power. Poststructuralism, through its insistence on deconstruction, becomes a “political act” (Davies, 2003).

Central to the project of poststructuralism is an examination of power and its relationship with language, discourses, subjectivity(ies), and social organizations (Weedon, 1987). Poststructural theory is a tool to interrogate the ways in which power oppresses and restricts particular groups to the margins (Davies, 2003). Regimes of truth (Foucault, 1978/1997) normalize narratives and assumptions, serve those in positions of power, and determine the terms of recognition or “what will and will not be recognizable forms of being” (Butler, 2005, p. 22). Drawing attention to the regimes of truth held about children and their (mis) behaviours will highlight normalized assumptions about children and the ways in which these assumptions maintain particular mechanisms of power and control. The regimes of truth that circulate about children, their behaviour, and “managing” their (mis)behaviours are used to maintain the school’s need for order and control. When disorder or lack of control ensues, the problem is placed on the “defectiveness” or problems with the child instead of on the system itself. Thus, schools use disciplinary power to seek conformity and homogeneity and then impose corrective measures to eradicate differences (Thomas & Loxley, 2007).

Schools are increasingly seen as institutions through which societal problems can be alleviated. Through surveillance and measurement against “norms,” schools use power to regulate children and standardize their behaviour, foreclosing alternate ways of being and of understanding the world (Dahlberg et al., 2007). The surveillance and regulation that exists in schools — legitimised through policy and operating as a “truth” — is a technology of power that risks excluding and marginalizing certain children from the public system that is meant to serve them. Regulating, rejecting, or attempting to “remedy” some children’s identities, (mis)behaviours, and ways of being in the world, makes attending to power within schools an ethical issue. We insist on provoking

a reconsideration of assumptions and enlivening a discussion about what it means to foster ethical engagements with children instead.

Rather than presupposing identity as fixed, poststructuralism provides us with the conceptual tools of subjects, subjectivity, and subjection (Davies, 2003) to better understanding the fluid, multiple, and discursively regulated practices that constitute identity (Butler, 1999). Identity is therefore seen as socially constructed; a social process constructed and reconstructed through language by subjects in relation with each other (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). “Childhood does not exist, we create it as a society, as a public subject. It is a social, political and historical construction” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 13). Therefore, to consider the identity of the child as subjectified through discourse requires an examination of the discourses at play and the ways in which they constitute the subject through power and language.

Understanding discourses, which are manifested in language, artefacts, assumptions, and policies, for example, is foundational to this mode of theorization. Discourses are often located in institutions (such as law, medicine, and education), are enlivened through language, and are the means through which understandings are transmitted, circulated, enacted, and re/produced; creating dominant assumptions that become normalized (Foucault, 1971/2010). This means that certain discourses become prevalent and are understood to be normal, objectively true, and a matter of common sense. Discourses are not simply comprised of signs or language that are fully representative but are the “practices that systematically form the objects which they speak” (Foucault, 1971/2010, p. 49). Disrupting these normalized and undisputable assumptions or “truths” reveals the circulation and operation of power and the socially constructed nature of the discourses.

The ways in which poststructural theories help to reveal the workings of power, subjectivities, and discourses provide us with tools to critically analyze normative understandings of the identity of the child and of children’s (mis)behaviours. In critically engaging with the discourses of the identity of children (who they are) and the assumptions around misbehaviour (what they do), poststructural theory helps us to illustrate the ways in which discourses construct and shape (or subjectify) the identity(ies) of the child as natural or real. By attending to language, dichotomies, and word choice used to describe children and their behaviours, a critical consideration of normalized narratives can be uncovered, revealing unexamined assumptions, and potentially creating ruptures for new possibilities of thought.

## MODE OF INQUIRY: CRITICAL DISCOURSE THEORY

In order to move beyond pure theorization, we will illustrate the ways in which discourse is used to create / affirm / re-affirm student identity in a particular context by conducting an analysis of the *Safe and Caring Schools*

policy document. Specifically, we use discourse theory as conceptualized by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) as both our methodology and method. Using this approach, we explore patterns across texts seeking “the social consequences of different discursive representations” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 21). This methodology is based on the poststructural assumptions that discourses construct our social reality; that is, language, texts, and social symbols work to constitute “truth.” It was not our intention to undertake a comprehensive review of all policies or to undertake a key theme analysis across multiple documents. Rather, we chose *Safe and Caring Schools* as an exemplar. It is a guiding provincial document, reflecting “present legislation and regulation regarding student behavioural expectations and disciplinary consequences” (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2014, p. 1), and provides directives to school administrators (superintendents and principals) as to what must be included in their schools’ codes of conduct. Therefore, this document is the foremost determinant in shaping behavioural policies in all Manitoba schools.

According to its introduction, the document is “a ministerial directive intended to expand upon existing legislation and regulation for the purpose of strengthening school-wide approaches to preventing, intervening in, and responding to violence and bullying, cyberbullying, and other unacceptable student behaviour” (p. 1). The 14-page document includes a summary of the current legislation, discusses approaches to discipline, details unacceptable behaviours, provides a list of interventions and consequences, and explains the appeal process. The document also has two appendices: the first provides a list of definitions, and the second delineates the rights and responsibilities of the various stakeholders involved in school discipline.

In conducting the analysis, we began by identifying the key signifiers within the document. Signifiers are individual words, which in isolation have little meaning, but when used in a particular context and in relation to other terms, work to establish meaning. For this analysis, we chose to focus on two key signifiers: *children* and *behaviour*. We were interested in examining how children’s identities are created / understood / reinforced within the discourse, how children’s behaviours are conceptualized or viewed in the context of *Safe and Caring Schools*, and subsequently, how these assumptions influence approaches to discipline and behaviour management. Once we identified the key signifiers, we conducted a close reading of the document, pulling out those descriptors that infuse the key signifiers with meaning. In doing so, we created a list of descriptors for each signifier. These lists of words were then analyzed to illustrate who the children are, how their identities are described, and what their misbehaviours mean in this discourse. In the following section, we provide a brief context describing children’s identities over time, and then explore the major themes in the identity analysis: ages and stages, the bully, and exceptional learning needs.

### *Social construction of the child*

The identity of the child is a social construction informed by particular moments in time, contexts, and cultures (e.g., Baker, 1998; Bloch, 1992; Cannella, 2002; Cleverley & Phillips, 1986; Dahlberg et al., 2007; Davies, 2003). For example, in the Middle Ages (500-1500 AD) the identity of the child was non-existent. Children were treated as miniature adults and they participated in social activities alongside adults. It was not until the 17<sup>th</sup> century that John Locke conceptualized childhood as a specific stage of life worthy of attention (Hogan, 2005). Locke developed the concept of the *tabula rasa* or blank slate on which, he believed, it was the adult's responsibility to inscribe the essential knowledge, identity, and culture necessary for children to grow into adults. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau shifted the narrative of the child as innately pure and innocent, always at risk of corruption through exposure to the world (Hogan, 2005). These discourses are examples of Western narratives of the identity of the child that have circulated over time, often becoming pervasive and naturalized in our thoughts and attitudes.

In the current moment, we see ongoing efforts to conceptualize children as active agents of their worlds. Shifts in social and critical theories (within, for example, feminism, anthropology, sociology) and in learning theories (for example, social constructivism) have meant a rejection of natural and/or biological claims to identity. Thus, there has been a reconceptualization of children and of childhood as historically, socially, and culturally contingent (Christensen & Prout, 2005). These shifting theoretical perspectives have also influenced the ways in which children are now perceived within research (Janzen, 2008), challenging the historical position of children as "Other" and rejecting their recolonization (Lahman, 2010). These shifts have led to advocacy for greater attention to ethical approaches to research with children (Greene & Hogan, 2005) and better defined methods of children's participation in research (for example, Greene & Hogan, 2005; Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010; Horgan, 2017).

### *The identity of the child: Discourses of the "problem student"*

When analyzing the descriptors of children within *Safe and Caring Schools*, we can see the ways in which particular identities of the child are assumed. The child is referred to only as a "student" or a "pupil"; never as a "child," "youth," "person," or even, "citizen." The term "pupil" is an interesting choice in that it is rarely seen within current educational discourses. "Pupil" has etymological roots in the 14<sup>th</sup> century when it was used to refer to an orphan or ward of the state, or later, a disciple ("Pupil", n.d.). Terms such as "pupil" and "student" can have an essentializing effect on how the writers and readers of the document might conceptualize the child, as the terms risk reducing the identity of the child simply to that of a subordinate within the institution. The other terms used in the document in relation to the child were: the "age and stage of the development of the student"; the student as having "excep-

tional learning needs”; and the child as “victim” and its counterpart, “bully.” Elaborating on these descriptors allows us to illustrate the historical, social, and cultural meanings about children and their identities, and the ways in which the document constructs an objectifying and unidimensional identity of the “problem” child.

### *The child: Ages and stages*

Within *Safe and Caring Schools*, teachers and principals are directed to consider a child’s “age and state of development” when considering “interventions” that respond to a child’s “disciplinary violation” (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2014). Reference to a child’s age and development highlights the influence of the field of developmental psychology in constructing the identity of the child within educational contexts. Dating back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, this field emerged in response to a wide-spread interest in positivism and its reliance on objectivity and a single Truth driving efforts to measure, evaluate, and classify children (Burman, 2007). The pervasiveness and normalization of stages of development have been dominant within education (Cannella, 1999; Cannella & Viruru, 2004), and have created a stubbornly persistent and universalized identity of the *child* (Curry & Cannella, 2013). Within this paradigm, the child is considered a fixed object, moving through linear and biologically predetermined stages, from incomplete (child) to complete (adult). There have been some progressive and critical theories emerging from developmental psychology (most notably, Burman, 2007), and robust critique of developmental psychology, most notably by the early childhood reconceptualist movement. The reconceptualists argue that developmental psychology has constructed an inadequate identity of the child as an object, void of a social context, essentialized, dehumanized, and defined by abstract conceptions of maturity or development (Dahlberg et al., 2007). Yet, the persistence of “ages and stages” remains a “dominant discursive regime” (Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. 35), evidenced by its presence within this recently developed policy. When children are constructed in such a decontextualized manner, “we lose sight of children and their lives; their concrete experiences, their actual capabilities, their theories, feelings and hopes” (Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. 36).

### *The child: Bully*

Another way in which children are referred to within *Safe and Caring Schools* is through the bully-victim binary, in that they are identified as either the “victim” or “target” of unacceptable behaviour. Although the term, “bully” is not actually used, the phrase, the “student who committed this behaviour” toward the “victim,” ostensibly refers to the victim’s binaried other: the bully. References are also embedded within the short list of behaviours that are deemed unacceptable, specifically, “bullying” and “cyberbullying.” This dichotomous framing of bully-victim constructs children as either good or bad. The bully-



victim binary essentializes children's identity and forecloses other possibilities of being, failing to take into account the complexity of identity and the political, social, and economic factors involved in creating, maintaining and/or altering identities. The binaried language also detracts from the ways in which these issues "are actually rooted in complex and overlapping constructions of power, language, culture and history" (Walton, 2005, p. 68), which work to segregate, discipline, and control others (Foucault, 1975/1985). The characterization of the child as bully also diminishes the school's responsibility and the greater social, institutional, and societal context of school violence (Horton, 2014; Walton, 2011). This move to individualize a social problem and construct it through behaviourism implies that once identified, the problem (i.e., the child) can be "fixed" through individual interventions / consequences / punishments. Although bullying is indeed problematic and the actions can be attributed to an individual, these behaviours must be considered within greater social and circumstantial contexts. As educators, we must recognize and acknowledge the complicated situations in which children live, understanding the broader implications of inequity, power, and marginalization, and how these factors might contribute to children's behaviours and our responses to them.

### *The child: "Exceptional learning needs"*

The *Safe and Caring Schools* document references "exceptional learning needs," reflecting assumptions underlying both developmental psychology and special education, which hold that children exist within an ability-disability dichotomy. Special education, pervasive within educational discourses, objectifies children by seeking to screen / test / identify children, labelling them as disturbed / disabled / delayed / disordered, and often does so by degrees of deficiency (moderate, severe, or profound). These discursive fictions of children within special education have become normalized narratives, instructing educators in how they should consider and respond to these children. Special education seeks to apply prescriptive, "fix-it" approaches to children's behaviours that are ineffective at best (Thomas & Loxley, 2007), and at worse, unethical in their approach to and regard for children's well-being. When children struggle at learning, they become viewed as "exceptional"; a discourse invoking a child's deficit and need, and constructing the problem of not learning as an effect of the fault and disposition of the child (Thomas & Loxley, 2007, p. 57). When the child is constructed as having "exceptional learning needs," the discourse works to redirect the shortcomings of school personnel, rules, pedagogy, curriculum and/or circumstance to that of being a problem of/with/in the child (Schwartz, 2013).

Further, as Swadener and Lubeck (1995) explained, by positioning children within medical and health discourses, the problem is legitimized as existing within the child and views children from a deficit perspective. The authors assert that the discourses of "at risk," for example, have the potential to find

additional validation through assumptions that are rooted in racism and classism. They argue that these types of simplistic labels applied to children lock us into roles of oppressor/oppressed, helper/helped, benefactor/beneficiary which operate to “prevent the powerful and privileged from noticing the intrinsic value of those who have been abused by the system” (p. 21). Thus, the agency of “the victims” and the efforts to correct the problem from within also get dismissed — or hidden — in order to make the powerful feel they must rescue the ones “at risk” (Swadener & Lubeck, p. 21).

Discourses have the power to reveal assumptions and construct identities. We argue that through the *Safe and Caring Schools* document, the child is discursively constituted as deficient. The danger of these discourses is that the body does not exist outside of discourse and is produced by these constitutive forces of power (Butler, 1997, p. 91). The discourses of children — the ways in which they are understood and formed — that exist within *Safe and Caring Schools* are even more problematic because the document is intended to inform schools’ policies and practices. From the outset, children are positioned as the problem of the school, and the school (through their policies and practices) as the remedy. Next, we will consider the school system’s responses to children’s (mis) behaviours, illustrating that the schools’ need for order and control requires interventions when children are *disorderly* or *uncontrolled*.

#### RESPONDING TO CHILDREN: “MANAGING” (MIS)BEHAVIOUR

The document states that a school’s approach to discipline is expected to include “preventative practices” and encourages programs that “foster social responsibility and positive behaviours,” “collaborative development,” teaching of “clear behavioural expectations,” and rewarding students for meeting these expectations (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2014, p. 4). Children’s misbehaviours are described as: “inappropriate,” “challenging,” and “unacceptable.” These behaviours are to be measured in terms of their “frequency and severity” and are dealt with through school discipline, interventions, and methods of behaviour management. The following analysis will demonstrate the connection between the language that is used in the policy and the often unconscious ways in which this language works to position the identity of the child as a patient or criminal, while ignoring other possibilities.

##### *Quasi-medical responses to managing (mis)behaviours*

According to *Safe and Caring Schools*, possible responses to student misbehaviours include, “developing a plan for changing attitudes,” “functional behavioural assessment,” “threat assessment,” “remediation of inappropriate student conduct,” “counselling,” and “clinical supports.” These interventions rely on the expertise of the “school counsellor or resource teacher,” “student supports personnel,” and “outside agency” personnel including referrals to physicians,

mental health services, addictions services, or anxiety clinics. The interventions listed rely on experts to intervene, actively exclude parents and teachers in any meaningful capacity, and construct a response to children that is framed in quasi-medical language. Within this discourse, the child is presumed to be ill, deficient or deviant; a diagnosis is to be made; and the expected outcome is that the child will be treated and cured.

This quasi-medical discourse pathologizes the child, as the child's "supposed abnormality is perceived to be in need of correction, usually through medical or 'scientific' intervention" (Heydon & Iannacci, 2009, p. 3). The result is that the adults who are in control (teachers, specialists, doctors, and other related professionals) make determinations about the deficiencies and the needs of the child often without regard for the context of the child's life, including the particularities of the child's life within and outside of the school. This quasi-medical lens is a relic of the history of special education, using a diagnose-and-prescribe approach (Swadner, 1995). Quasi-medical approaches situate a scientific gaze onto the child as an object of study, legitimize the truth-seeking endeavour through norms-based testing, and produce "scientific" diagnoses that are positioned as objective and true — politically and morally neutral (Laws & Davies, 2000). Ultimately, what constitutes "normal" behaviour is an arbitrary standard and creates its binaried opposite: abnormal. Moreover, normal is seen as the goal to which we all must strive (Davis, 2006) and abnormal is seen as something to remediate.

While a child's misbehaviours may be inconvenient for teachers and schools, they are not usually an indicator of a medical disorder and they are "rarely a problem for the child" (Thomas & Loxley, 2007, p. 52). Baker (2002), drawing on Foucault, argued that pathologizing misbehaviours has created a "swarming effect" (p. 679) in which schools, operating from good intentions, engage in a "hunt for and diagnosis of disability," with the purpose of actively seeking, identifying, and remedying a problem.

### ***Quasi-legal responses to managing (mis)behaviours***

While *Safe and Caring Schools* encourages the development of "a positive school climate" (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2014, p. 4), quasi-legal language is employed more often than a language of care. The term "care" only appears in the title and then once in Appendix B. Yet, quasi-legal language litters the document and includes: "investigation," "notification," "agreements," "documentation," "formal conferences," "representing," "reporting," "removal of privileges," "restitution," "contracts," and "appeals." Given this emphasis, one might expect a more fulsome acknowledgement of the legal rights of children. However, during the process of intervening and applying consequences, the child is virtually devoid of rights and parents' rights are limited to the passive role of being "informed," "consulted," and "permitted" (in some instances) to accompany their child to meetings.

The section entitled, *Rights and Responsibilities Regarding Student Discipline* (Appendix B, p. 11), describes the rights of the students, parents, teachers, principals, superintendents, and school boards. The child's rights are restricted to just one item: "the right to be accompanied by a parent or other adult to assist and make representation to the school board before a decision is made to expel." Meanwhile, the child's responsibilities are described as needing to: "attend," "comply," "behave," "complete," "respect," and "be responsible." This language assumes an entirely passive role for the child; a role devoid of rights and power and in which one's identity, behaviour, and way of being is subservient to and decided by those in power. *Safe and Caring Schools* does not acknowledge the rights of children as determined by provincial law, within human rights codes, and the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. If children misbehave, they are conceptualized as less valued and need to be heavily regulated and controlled — more so than most other human beings in our society (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Dahlberg et al., 2007; Greene & Hogan, 2005). Paradoxically, the quasi-legal discourses sanction the abeyance of children's rights while simultaneously detracting attention from and diminishing the school's responsibility to teach, nurture, and care.

An important aspect of the quasi-legal discourses in the context of behavioural consequences and interventions is the ways in which they act as regimes of truth (Foucault, 1972/1980), "that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true...the means by which it is sanctioned" (p. 131). The quasi-legal and quasi-penal discourse positions the child as being on the verge of disorderly, defiant, or deviant, sanctioning an approach to working with children that is premised on power, control, and surveillance (Foucault, 1975/1985). When students' (mis)behaviours are positioned within a paradigm of power and control, the subsequent assumption is that the "good" student is one who is compliant, subordinate, powerless, and passive; and the "good" teacher is one who is in power and maintains control (Gore & Parkes, 2008; Millei & Petersen, 2014).

## RECONCEPTUALIZING CHILDREN AND THEIR (MIS)BEHAVIOURS

Because policies such as *Safe and Caring Schools* are authoritative and the discourses are constitutive, the language used when referring to children and their behaviour is influential in how superintendents, principals, and teachers understand, situate, and engage with children and their behaviours. Davies (2008) asserts that it is dangerous to leave our assumptions unexamined and states, "the ordinary everyday world is sedimented in repeated citations of the way the world is (and, it is believed, ought to be). That unreflected ordinarieness can, however, deprive some of a reasonable or viable existence" (p. 173). There is a movement of reconceptualists that is challenging more traditional understandings of child identities. This movement has been influenced in part by the work of Reggio Emilia in Italy (Edwards, Gandini & Forman,

1998); collaborative theorizing in Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Canada (Dahlberg et al., 2007); Indigenous educational philosophies, for example, those of the Maori in New Zealand (Ritchie, 2008); and critical theorizing within childhood psychology and sociology (Greene & Hogan, 2005; Mac Naughton, 2005). Reconceptualizing the identity of children and their behaviours can have a powerful effect on who we understand children to be, how we respond to their (mis)behaviours, and how we engage with them.

Reconceptualizing understandings of children's identities requires a shift from a traditional reliance on developmental psychology's identity of the child as fixed, insular, and biologically predetermined and towards social constructivist understandings of children's identities as historically, socially, and culturally contingent (Christensen & Prout, 2005; Janzen, 2008). "Rather than seeing monsters, we may once again see ordinary children attempting to navigate a range of power relations in social, institutional, and societal contexts over which they have little control" (Horton, 2014, p. 9). This requires a shift to honouring children's current relationships with others, constructing children as social agents who are not only influenced by others, but can actually be an influence on others and the world around them. In this way, children are considered active participants in the interpretation and creation of cultural knowledge (Christensen & Prout, 2005, p. 48).

Reconceptualist theories require that educators reflexively examining the practices through which they establish and maintain power (Davies, 2008, p. 184). Uncritical enactments of the status quo risk marginalizing those less powerful (Davies, 2008). Therefore, educators have a responsibility to reconsider their relationships with children, to consider the constitutive discourses at play, to reflect on the role of power, and to be willing to change themselves and their practices. Dahlberg and Moss (2005), drawing on Levinas, remind us that the other cannot be entirely known. Thus, to reconceptualize our understandings of children requires humility about our assumptions of who we think children to be; not entirely known or knowable.

Pathologizing children and assuming (mis)behaviour is a problem within the child, as a problem of individual defiance, or the child's free will (Millei & Petersen, 2014), perpetuates an "Othering" and subsequent exclusion of the child (Heydon, 2009). However, in shifting perceptions of (mis)behaviour, from that of blaming the child for defiance / deviance / disorder to that of a communicative attempt by the child to identify a need / desire / confusion, greatly alters how we think of children's (mis)behaviours. Millei and Petersen (2015) argued that:

if we understand, then, that children are faced with working out what the limits of intelligibility and acceptability are, in ways both similar and different to adults, then it becomes compelling to shift the focus from behaviour as separate from learning to behaviour-as-learning. (p. 24)

Reconceptualizing a child's (mis)behaviour as a "working out" of who they are in relation to the world around them is an enactment of social processes, an attempt at problem solving, and ultimately, a form of communication. If children's behaviours are to be more accurately understood as a way of communicating, then "misbehaviour" also becomes understood differently. Imagine how powerful this shift in thinking could be: instead of assuming children's misbehaviours are purposefully non-compliant or acts of deviancy, these behaviours might more accurately be considered a demonstration of some other desire, as resistance, or as an exploration of the world around them. This shifts the teacher's role from controlling (mis)behaviours to investigating the child's communicative actions; an attempt to understand the child as "becoming-other" (Millei & Petersen, 2015).

Moreover, pathologizing children and assigning their (mis)behaviours to individual will and deviance detracts attention from the problems of schooling itself (Gore & Parkes, 2008; Thomas & Loxley, 2007). In considering children's (mis)behaviours as communicative, or as a means through which children are conveying a message, we might more wisely consider breaches of conduct as a result of and resistance to the system of schooling itself:

We must recognize the possibility that the origins of misbehaviour lie less in children's emotions or even in their "disadvantage" and lie more in the character of the organization we ask them to inhabit for a large part of their lives. (Thomas & Loxley, 2007, p. 59)

Therefore, it is vital to question the organizations — the schools and classrooms, their policies, and practices — to which students are subjected that overly regulate, control, and monitor them and their (re)actions. As educators within the system, we are obligated to consider our own complicity in children's (mis)behaviours, and to wrestle with the fact that the practices we enact (or fail to enact) may in fact be inducing children's (mis)behaviours.

Sometimes a child's (mis)behaviour might more accurately be considered protest — an effect of uninteresting teaching. Thus, student (mis)behaviours should be considered with an eye towards pedagogy, and "management" must be considered "as an effect of good pedagogy rather than its precondition" (Gore & Parkes, 2008, p. 47). When teachers develop curriculum relevant to children's lives and enliven it with supportive pedagogy, it can foster positive and even enthusiastic engagement of children, leaving misbehaviour and non-compliance as less worrisome. When we engage with children's behaviours as an effect of their learning (Millei & Petersen, 2015), we will require diverse responses and more humane approaches to (mis)behaviours (Thomas & Loxley, 2007). As educators, we must consider our own complicity in children's misbehaviours — through the curriculum we create and the pedagogies we enact — in order to honour the diversity of the children in our classrooms and to make ethical approaches central when engaging with them.

## A CONTEMPLATION OF ETHICAL ENGAGEMENTS

To contemplate engagements with children based on ethics, we enlist, among others, the work of Levinas, who proposes an ethical-particularistic approach, a postmodern ethics, which “offers the possibility to re-personalise ethics and assume the responsibility which comes from facing and making choices, rather than following universal codes or laws” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 70). Levinas argued that ethical decisions are not inscribed in codes of conduct or in universal laws, but rather are necessarily uncertain, rooted in a profound responsibility to the Other, and necessitate a response to the particularities of the Other with acute attention to difference. Therefore, in contemplating ethical engagements with children, educators must recognize the ethical weight of being in relation to the Other (Todd, 2003). It is “in the disruptive, unpredictable time of attentiveness to the Other where ethical possibilities live” (Todd, p. 9). Within this relationality, there is a necessary susceptibility, a vulnerability, and a sincerity, not just to learn about the Other, but to learn *from* the Other. It is within this relationality that we see the responsibility to the Other, requiring both ignorance and humility (Todd, 2003).

Responsiveness to the Other also requires attention to the particulars. Particular behaviours by particular children mean different things. Ethical engagements with children occur in the moments of rupture or disruption – when things go wrong. This is what Derrida (1990) terms an *aporia* or impasse. It is in these moments – when a child’s behaviour disrupts the routine – that responsibility to the Other and recognition of the uniqueness of the Other is required. Within the *aporia* is the moment when one must make a decision about how to proceed, and, in doing so, must consider the importance of the particulars (of the child and of the situation) over the universalities (of rules or policies). For Derrida (1990), these aporetic moments are “the condition of all possible justice,” (p. 949). It is in this space that the teaching subject becomes “ethically exposed” (Edgoose, 2001, p. 130), where the teacher’s responsibility for the Other becomes visible. Moreover, it is in this moment where we see the failings of the universalities of prescribed interventions (such as codes of conduct) to respond to the particularities of the child. Within these aporetic moments, educators are faced with the uniqueness of the child, a responsibility for subsequent decision making, and an understanding that whatever the teacher’s response, the outcome is uncertain. There are “no guarantees, only judgments to be made, always in relationship with the Other, for which each one of us must take responsibility” (Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. 110). These complicated and un-scriptable engagements – wrought with responsibility, uncertainty, and unforeseeable outcomes – illustrate what it means to consider ethical engagements with children.

Todd (2003) makes the distinction between an implied ethics and an application of ethics. Applying rules or protocols to situations does not automatically ensure ethical engagement. Educators must be concerned with the particulars,



the differences, and be committed to non-violence. The field must make space and allow for everyone, even for the arrival of someone we may not know or understand. Derrida's (2000) notion of hospitality is useful here. Instead of thinking of the child as fitting into the school, its curriculum, and its policies, education might be better conceptualized as a host to the child — the child who is a guest. In this sense, the ethic of hospitality “does not seek to fit the guest into the space of the host, but accepts that the arrival of the guest may change the space into which he or she is received” (Ruitenberg, 2011, p. 32), regardless of the comfort or tolerance of the host. This means that schools — especially public schools — do not get to decide who is allowed to attend, who will be accepted, and who will be excluded. Within this ethic, Ruitenberg reminds us that “the spaces of education are not their [the teachers'] spaces, spaces they own or should consider under their control, but rather spaces into which they have been received and whose purpose is to give place to students” (p. 34). Thus, an ethical relation with children privileges the child and the presence of the child within the educational space, while those who work there are hosts to the child charged with demonstrating an ethic of hospitality towards the Other.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The language we use and the discourses that become normalized can be dangerous when left unquestioned and unexplored. The objectifying descriptors of children can reinforce a reliance on deficit-orientations and privilege the authority of diagnoses and individual remediation. These discourses can create a fixed sense of the child and position that child as a de-contextualized object whose behaviours are ultimately and solely their own fault. Discourses that privilege the language of need and deficit are often normalized in the ways in which educators think / speak about children — so naturalized that these conversations go unquestioned. This is not only essentializing and dehumanizing, it is constitutive. That is, discourses become part of the social processes through which the child and others make sense and/or construct identities. This process socializes and subjectifies the child into being in particular ways (Butler, 1997) that exclude other ways of being. Seeking reconceptualized understandings of children fosters a powerful shift toward an understanding of children as dynamic and complex beings, as socially situated and constituted. In turn, this requires the system of education — its policies, practices, and people — to respond from positions of responsibility and meaning-making rather than judgment void of particularities, foregrounding the ethics of working with and caring for children in schools (Dahlberg et al., 2007).

Our analysis and discussion bear implications for all educators, including policy makers, educational leaders, and teachers. The power of discourses — enlivened in legislation, policies, and practices — constructs identities of children and influences the ways in which educators work with and respond to them. A



reconceptualized understanding of the child allows for greater attention to the particularities of each child. As educators, we must consider the range of policies and practices in which we are situated, and recognize the often competing discourses in which we are situated. We must be conscious of the constitutive effects of these discourses, be critical of their intentions and consequences, and recognize the ways in which they influence our own complicity. In doing so, we can begin to consider our own responsibilities to others. An ethical engagement with children recognizes the great diversity of children and their needs, the particularity of their lives and contexts, and the responsibility we bear in our relationships with them.

## NOTES

1. The term "children" will be used interchangeable with "students" and, as per the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC), refers to people under the age of 18 (United Nations, n.d.).
2. We use the term (mis)behaviour, bracketing the "mis," in an attempt to signal the binaried and subjective nature of children's behaviours, and importantly, the socially constructed nature of these ideas.
3. The document does reference *The Human Rights Code* (Manitoba Government) but does so only noting that discriminatory behaviour is unacceptable behaviour (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2014, p. 2).

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