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Talking Tolerance Inside the "Inclusive" Early Childhood Classroom

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Tolerance and being tolerant are narratives that circulate and are taken up by the children in the "inclusive" classroom. Being tolerant is viewed positively as a shared and beneficial story line for inclusiveness in the classroom. However, when examined more closely and critically, tolerance can, and does, function in many other ways. Tolerance is often typically conceived of as an individual virtue, producing a degree of integrity for the tolerator and, in contrast, a position of deviance for the tolerated (Brown, 2006). Although tolerance has multiple and fluid definitions, in this paper the term implies a magnanimous act or capacity for enduring something or someone. The practice of tolerance blends goodness and generosity with judgment and aversion. It can articulate one's identity and one's difference as well as one's belonging and marginality (Brown, 2006).

Tolerance emerged as significant in the words, silences, actions, and practices taken up by the children and educators in the classrooms I researched for my doctoral degree. The study was conducted over a six-month period in three Australian inclusive early childhood classrooms. The collected data include conversations and observations of the children in their everyday encounters with each other. Participants in this ethnographic study included 75 children, ages two to six years old, as well as 12 educators. As part of the study, this paper employs a poststructural methodology and problematizes understandings that are taken for granted as well as practices of inclusive education that for the most part remain firmly embedded in special education discourses, where disability continues to be viewed via the medical model (Slee, 2011). Moving away from this more traditional standpoint, this work takes an alternative look inside the early childhood classroom in order to investigate more closely those who are deemed to be already included—those who might be referred to as the Normal and therefore not in need of being included.

Assuming "Inclusion"

"Inclusion" in early childhood education in Australia, as in other parts of the world, is a relatively recent phenomenon (Nutbrown & Clough, 2006). The Australian Government's *Belonging, Being, & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (Department of Education, Employment and

Workplace Relations, 2009) supports the idea of "inclusive learning communities" (p. 15) where ability and disability are viewed as aspects of diversity. Inclusion, for the most part, is taken for granted as appropriate practice in early childhood education today. While inclusive education policy and practice has been described as "far from ideal" (Grace, Llewellyn, Wedgwood, Fenech, & McConnell, 2008, p. 18) in early childhood classrooms, research continues to typically focus on how to better include the child with special needs.

The concept of inclusive education raises many complex questions, as the knowledge that informs it and the practices that sustain it continue to be grounded in many unchallenged assumptions. As Graham and Slee (2008) argue, there is a need to interrogate the normative assumptions that exist in the "including" group, to look more closely at the "center," and to find out *what it is* that we are including others into. Who is included? Who is not? Who needs to *be* included? Who or what decides? What is the role of the Normal? What are its effects on the developing identities of children and inclusion?

Conceptualizing the Normal

Understandings of the Normal in the early childhood classroom are governed by and created within medical and scientific knowledges. These understandings are for the most part uncontested in the classroom, as they have become a comfortable, familiar, shared truth (Harwood & Rasmussen, 2004). The construction of the norm is made possible by scientifically informed practices that individualize people and differentiate and categorize them, giving rise to comparisons and a desirable standard that imposes uniformity (Foucault, 1977). These scientific practices promote a homogenous social body, where differences are measured and, as they depart from the Normal, judged to be deviant. The word "Normal" continues to imply "good"—an ideal—across the multiple social disciplines that inform early childhood education (Annamma, Boelė, Moore, & Klinger, 2013)

Shared classroom understandings that produce and uphold the Normal are disseminated within the sanctioned discourses of child development, developmental psychology, special education, and classroom discipline. Children actively participate and negotiate within these acceptable discourses. As some children are positioned, and position themselves, as Normal, they take up the more "naturally" privileged position. As they encounter difference, they perform and defend their position because difference is positioned as needy and deficient when compared to the Normal. As they come to learn about themselves and understand others, the Normal negotiate to maintain their position and the

social order of the classroom.

Other labels

In the inclusive classroom, the child with a diagnosis is produced as Other, just as the Normal is produced as a comparison to the "not normal" (Rose, 1999). The term "child with a diagnosis" is used here to emphasize the child's marked position, as the diagnosis is considered to do the marking. Other labels used in special/inclusive education locate the "problems" associated with inclusion *in* the child, in *their* characteristics, and in *their* behaviors. There is no commentary on a child's diagnostic label in this paper, as the characteristics of the diagnosis do not alter the child's marked position. Making no mention of the diagnosis is one way of disrupting acknowledgment of it. The knowledge associated with a diagnosis confers a certain "truth" about the child and the inclusive process. Disrupting this truth and the idea of diagnosis-as-usual is one of the many challenges for inclusive education.

Tolerance as an effect

In the classrooms where I conducted research, tolerance came into view as an effect of the work done by the Normal in producing, reproducing, and maintaining themselves within the available classroom discourses. Tolerance is omnipresent in the inclusive early childhood classroom, with the promotion of tolerance in the classroom and elsewhere prominent in particular forms of integration and assimilation (Brown, 2006). Practicing and talking tolerance—"giving" sympathy and showing concern for the Other—is deemed virtuous and moral. However, in giving sympathy and showing concern for the Other, power is exercised. This power is discernible in the way the Normal, in their everyday interactions, tolerate the child with a diagnosis. Tolerance is a political, moral, and social discourse; however, it has other often unrecognized effects, as "almost all objects of tolerance are marked as deviant, marginal, or undesirable by virtue of being tolerated, and the action of tolerance inevitably affords some access to superiority" (Brown, 2006, p. 14).

Nuanced tolerances in the classroom

There are many ways of being tolerant and performing tolerance in the classroom. Helping is just one of the nuanced ways that tolerance is visible there. It is performed by the unmarked children out of concern for the Other. At times, the act of helping is quite direct and teacher-like, remediating the marked child's difficulties, telling or showing her or him what to do or how to do things better.

Sometimes the helping is mother-like, more gentle and nurturing, where the unmarked children tread carefully around the marked child. Conversely, there are children who do not "help" and do not want to help but nevertheless enact tolerance as they stand back and say nothing, give in, give up, or move on as performance of resignation. There are also those who need to be taught to help and tolerate as they have not readily taken up this discursive practice. These nuanced performances of tolerance maintain social order and the Normal.

In the classroom, the children's reiterated performances of tolerance are unmistakable. I am not proposing that the act of helping or being tolerant has no public value in producing a caring society. But I do wish to problematize the power of tolerance as a practice and the way it creates a narrative about the marked child as Other, as lacking or deviant. The naturalized innocence of the discourses that circulate around helping normalize it as an act of virtue, without any questioning of the power and the effects that has on all the children. Helping and tolerance are relational; they occur in the interactions that the children have with each other, and it is in the performance of these acts that power is exercised.

A community of tolerance

The children gradually get settled onto the mat after pack away [cleanup] time. Michael (a child with a diagnosis) is seated at the back of the group, holding some trucks in his hands.[1] A teacher, Chris, seated next to Michael, tries to take the trucks away, as there is a "no toys at story time" rule. Michael protests loudly. Without warning, the director, Sue, moves quickly from inside her office where she has been watching through a window, calling, "Chris, Chris, let him have them, it soothes him." The director hands the trucks back to Michael. Chris remains silent. The director then apologizes to Chris for her abrupt entry but reinforces that she did not want to "set Michael off." The whole group watches on.

Anne, the teacher at the front of the group, asks the children to sit in a circle and asks Michael individually to join them, to which he replies "No."

When they are settled, Anne asks them to clap their names in turn around the circle. When Michael's name is called he starts to join in the group, clapping on his knees. When Anne calls Michael's name, the other children joined with the teacher calling "Michael, Michael." This was the only time they called other children's names. (Field Notes, 4/5/12, S1, p. 17)

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1   All names are pseudonyms.

Michael is the center of everyone's attention. The teachers, the director, and the unmarked children combine as a group to show their concern for Michael. They all help him join the activity by clapping his name. What else was going on here? What shared understandings are drawn on in establishing the need to help Michael?

The strategic positioning of the teacher's body next to Michael initially marks him. Special education discourses inform teachers that a child with a diagnosis can potentially be "disruptive" to a whole-class group. In the narrative of special education, Michael is in need of close supervision at this time. *His* diagnosis produces him as inattentive, easily distracted, impulsive, and hyperactive (Washbrook, Propper, & Sayal, 2013). Sitting quietly is characterized as problematic for anyone with such a diagnosis. When the teacher attempts to take the trucks from Michael, she repositions herself as a "regular," not "special," teacher. In regular teacher discourse, the pedagogical rule of not playing with toys at group time because they are viewed as a possible distraction for children is customary. As the teacher tries to take the trucks from Michael, the director bursts out of her office and into the classroom and vehemently interrupts her.

With this act, Michael is again positioned as Other, and the teacher is repositioned as a nonexpert in special education practice by the director. This authoritative move by the director takes everyone by surprise. She legitimizes Michael's need for the toy as she demonstrates tolerance of him and his actions. In her director capacity as the classroom's special education teacher, she positions herself as "knowing" Michael via the characteristics of his diagnosis. She sees her actions as averting the potential disruption of the class. Michael is diagnostically created as a threat to the group's stability. The intensity of the director's intervention, however, creates a sense of anxiety in the classroom, reinforcing the need for concern.

Special education—concern and tolerance

Special education knowledge in the inclusive classroom seems to trump regular education practices, as it offers particular understandings about the special child which are thought to be important for his inclusion. This knowledge is regarded as invaluable in maintaining the social order and, at the same time, the privilege and power of the Normal. Within special education discourses, it is accepted that improving one's professional knowledge about the special child has the potential to create a better understanding of her. Concern and tolerance are also produced in this understanding of the child. Showing concern for Others via a deeper and more thorough understanding of their diagnosis is

thought to help their assimilation and ultimately their remediation.

Slee (2011), however, argues that "inclusive education needs to be decoupled from special education" (p.155) and that the field needs to be reframed and freed from previous underlying assumptions. Inclusive education is framed by what we think we know (or experts know) about the special child. The use of the word "needs" powerfully fashions a picture based on concern and the need for tolerance of the marked child. Having needs implies that one requires help. Having needs positions one as more dependent, less autonomous, and less rational, which are not values of substance and privilege in a Western liberal "civilized" society (Brown, 2006).

The Normal helping to "include"

The children in the group sit silently, watching the interaction between the director and the teacher, understanding that special concessions are to be made for Michael. The children position themselves as "good students," keeping still, listening intently, performing in a way that is expected within the normative classroom discourses. Michael is asked to join the group, and he replies with a definite and loud "No." The whole group then attempt to "bring him into line," to "normalize" him, showing their shared concern about trying to include him. The group joins with the teacher in trying to remediate Michael's behaviors by calling and clapping his name. They demonstrate their solidarity as members of the Normal and their shared understanding of themselves and Michael. Michael's marked position is reinforced via the children's helping, concern, and tolerance. The "threat" of his disruption is managed by the practice of tolerance, with the social order restored, at least in the short term.

Brown (2006) maintains that tolerance is a "unique way of sustaining the *threatened entity*" (p. 27, emphasis in the original). The marked child, Michael, threatens the social order and the Normal. He is created within the discourses of developmental psychology as disruptive, unruly, dangerous, and different. The director's actions contribute powerfully to the notion that something threatening may occur. However, societal and educational thinking necessitates that a child has the right to be incorporated, and tolerance thus becomes a way of including and managing that child. "Tolerance is a practice concerned with managing a dangerous, foreign, toxic, or threatening difference from an entity that also demands to be incorporated" (Brown, 2006, p. 27), and so the marked child's incorporation via inclusive policy is met with tolerant management. Produced as an effect of the hegemony of the Normal, the practice of tolerance can marginalize or privilege particular ways of being.

Tolerating transgressions gently

At packing away time the children are divided into their class groups and sent to separate parts of the yard to put things away. Most of the children seem to do some packing away. However, Hugo (a child with a diagnosis) is observed to resist this activity regularly. On this occasion he has spent the morning playing in a "fire truck" and has been asked repeatedly to pack it away by a teacher. Instead of following these instructions, he takes himself up onto the high fort and lies down there. Leah (a child without a diagnosis) follows Hugo up into the fort, trying to encourage him to come down and do his share of the packing up. She bends down next to him, touching him gently and talking to him softly. "Come on, Hugo, you have to pack up the fire engine that you were playing with." He wriggles away from her touch, saying "no" several times, each time with increasing volume. She repeats similar words several times. One of the teachers calls to her, "Leah, are you going to get out of packing up?" Leah explains that she is trying to get Hugo to help. After a few minutes she gives up, comes down from the fort, and starts to pack away the fire engine. She is told by the teacher to leave some for Hugo to do. Eventually Hugo comes down from the fort, and with the teacher standing over him, he puts one thing away. (Field Notes, 6/11/12, S3, p. 48)

Pack away time begins with the sound of a tambourine being shaken. The responsibilities are shared, and the routine is structured and well understood by the unmarked children. Hugo transgresses from the Normal; he does not help to pack away as expected. One reading of this scene might be that Hugo enjoyed the morning fire engine play so much that he was not happy to put the fire engine away. Hugo's action could be interpreted as resistance to the regulatory discourses that produce timetables and routines that all children have to follow. However, as he skillfully refuses by hiding, his actions are not read this way. As he does not conform to the discipline that works to "civilize" young children (Leavitt & Power, 1997), he is positioned as a transgressor, a special rule breaker, a diagnosed child in need of management.

Leah is frequently observed to "move in" on Hugo to help and encourage him to follow the rules. Leah positions herself as the "concern expresser" (Petersen, 2008, p. 397), as someone who might be able to assist. Concern, Petersen (2008) argues, produces "exclusionary and de-legitimized" (p. 394) positioning. Leah is positioned as the autonomous, rational, Normal, and legitimate subject, while Hugo is positioned as the dependent, unreasonable, Other, and illegitimate subject. Leah's act of concern works to shape and remediate Hugo's actions, Othering him in the process. When read in this way, the "natural" and taken-for-granted discursive practices of helping and concern are troublesome for inclusive processes. As Leah gently tells Hugo that he needs to do his share of the pack away, she

positions him as immature and not knowing, and she tries to negotiate with him in a nurturing way. After a few minutes, she fails to convince him. But she does not continue to try to persuade Hugo to pack away and moves off the fort. She does not tell on him as she might tell on a "naughty" child, but is patient, tolerant, and accepting of his actions. Her attempt to gently normalize Hugo has failed at this time, and the teachers encourage her to move away and tolerate his evasion. Hugo is left on the fort, separate from the other children.

Tolerance exercises power

Leah's enactment of tolerance produces and positions her in a particular way. Her actions produce and position Hugo in a particular way as well. The children's developing identities are affected (Brown, 2006). Drawing on the discourses of psychological, developmental special education, we see that Leah positions herself as the older, rational, and tolerating Normal subject. Brown (2006) contends that tolerance as a discourse circulates between state, civil society, and citizens, producing and organizing subjects as they use it to govern themselves and others. Tolerance is institutionalized in the inclusive classroom, and Leah and the educators use tolerance as a practice to assist in the governance of the Normal and of the "not Normal," Hugo.

Tolerance is an exercise of power and a political practice enacted by the unmarked children. Tolerance does things. Foucault (1982) argues that "the exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome" (p. 342). Leah tries to guide Hugo, to show him the possible ways to behave in the classroom. When this fails, she takes up tolerance, as it still permits the Normal to exercise power. As the dominant group in the classroom, the Normal can offer protection, incorporation, or "help" to the subordinated and by doing so, reveal their virtuousness (Brown, 2006, p. 178).

Tolerance, tragedy, and sympathy

The "truth" of Hugo's diagnosis and the strategies set out for his remediation affect his inclusion and exclusion. In the classroom, children's diagnostic characteristics come to represent who they are and who they might become, as this knowledge is thought to explain how they might act and think. The marked child is often described by his or her diagnosis.

Once a diagnostic label is attached there is the risk that all the child's characteristics are filtered

through this diagnosis or explanatory mechanism resulting in a tendency to view the child's behaviour as symptoms, rather than as expressions of his or her unique personality. (Molloy & Vasil, 2002, p. 661)

Billington (2000) refers to the stigma of a diagnosis as a "social disease," which he believes has repercussions for diagnosed children for the rest of their lives. The connection between disability and disease can be traced in historical discourses and is still present today in the tragedy model of disability. The tragedy model assumes that disability is about loss and that disabled people would rather be more like "abled" people (Swain & French, 2008). This model evokes and seeks to arouse sympathy and concern from able-bodied people. The marked child is often created as a subject of pity and in need of sympathy and tolerance. However, if "the ethical bearing of tolerance is high-minded, while the object of such high-mindedness is inevitably figured as something more lowly" (Brown, 2006, p. 178), how does this create an inclusive environment?

Civilizing the uncivilized via tolerance

Routines and timetables discipline all children in the classroom. However, children are not passive recipients of classroom rules and are often observed to actively mediate and resist them (Leavitt & Power, 1997). Children who take up the practice of "civilizing" by performing within the norms, rules, or codes of conduct are positioned as the civilized; from this position, they draw on tolerance to civilize those who remain uncivilized. Brown (2006) refers to tolerance as a civilizational discourse, and as such, "to be uncivilized is to be intolerable is to be barbarian" (p. 182). Certain practices are declared intolerable and are stigmatized as uncivilized. The asymmetry of power between the tolerated and the tolerators can be observed in the inclusive classroom. Tolerance is generally conferred by those who do not require it on those who do; those who deviate from, rather than conform to, the norms are eligible for tolerance (Brown, 2006).

Giving up

> *Spencer (a child without a diagnosis) is up in the climbing tree. The rule is that only one child is allowed in the tree at any one time. Michael (a child with a diagnosis) starts to climb up the tree. Spencer tells Michael to get down, reminding him several times of the rule. Michael does not listen and moves further up the tree. Spencer then gets down out of the tree, walking away shaking his head and looking back at the tree as he goes. Spencer: "He always do's that!" he says with a sigh and a degree of resignation. He walks away looking unhappy, his*

face wrinkled up and eyes narrowed and looking back at Michael as he moves away. (Field Notes, 18/5/12, S1, p. 52)

The climbing tree is very popular, and conflicts over it are observed on many occasions (Field Notes, 25/5/12, S1, p. 68). Spencer moves away from the climbing tree and 'gives it up' to Michael. This could be read as Spencer enacting the Normal in following the rules or as expressing his annoyance of Michael's behaviors. He knows the rules and, maintaining his Normal status, moves away. But his actions could also be read as an act of tolerance and resignation. Spencer performs a different version of tolerance from Leah's as he unhappily abides Michael. Drawing on shared and sanctioned understandings of Michael as the diagnosed child, Spencer understands that he cannot challenge Michael over being in the tree. He is aware that Michael does not follow these rules. As Michael starts to climb the tree, Spencer reminds him about the "rational" one person rule that protects climbers and avoids accidents. Children regularly use safety discourses as their justification for others to keep the rules about playing in the classroom and on the playground. However, these same rules of play produce authorized exclusionary practices, as they enforce who can play, who cannot play, how many can play, and how play can happen. The unmarked children often discuss the rules and how it is not safe if more than one person climbs the tree at one time. Spencer tells Michael several times to get down, but Michael does not respond, staying in the tree and climbing even higher.

Resignation as tolerance

Spencer accepts Michael's position as Other in the classroom. By keeping the peace and tolerating Michael's invasion of the tree, he shows this acceptance. His practice of tolerance is enacted differently from the other examples, as he does not act to help, guide, or remediate Michael. Instead, he shows a resignation, accepting that he must move on and demonstrating a rational self-control by keeping the peace and maintaining the social order. Tolerance sometimes involves the "withholding of speech or action in response to contingent individual dislikes or violations of taste" (Brown, 2006, p. 13). This withholding of speech and action by Spencer is a less visible form of tolerance than the helping work performed by other children. Nonetheless, the work it does in delegitimizing and excluding is powerful. The effect of this action is to maintain Spencer's membership in the Normal and Michael's membership in the not Normal. Even though Spencer is not particularly happy about performing this tolerant act and his exasperation is evident, he maintains his positioning.

Spencer's action could alternatively be read as a moral act. Moral education contributes to classroom

understandings of the right way to be with others. To be a moral being, one must be socially conscientious and ethically upright. Taking up this moral stance, Spencer moves away, leaving the tree to Michael. Tolerance makes a contribution to moral education. To be tolerant of the marked child, who is positioned as a *"threatened entity"* (Brown, 2006, p. 27, emphasis in the original) displays a level of moral, ethical, and civic understanding. Spencer takes up this discourse, albeit reluctantly, as he wishes to be seen in this positive light. In contrast, the same discourses position the marked child, Michael, as uncivilized, deviant, and in need of tolerance.

Discussion

In the classroom, tolerance is enacted on a regular basis. Being tolerant and performing tolerance are expected and shared practices that circulate. Sometimes the unmarked children reject this discursive practice but are urged by other children and educators to "learn" to tolerate. Tolerance is a sanctioned narrative in classrooms and beyond. It is dominant in both popular and state discourses (Brown, 2006), with toleration now considered as the substantive heart of liberalism (Cohen, 2004). Tolerance has been framed as a sign of steady progress toward a more civilized society. However, tolerance is not neutral; it conceals power relations, the power of authority, and the power associated with discourses of the Normal.

Inequalities are suppressed by tolerance discourses (Brown, 2006), and toleration provides "no recipe for better understanding and does little to challenge the prejudice on which tolerance feeds" (Phillips, 1999, p. 129). Those who agree to tolerate see themselves absolved from the need to make any further moves toward better understanding (Phillips, 1999). As the early childhood setting is a place where young children often encounter difference for the first time, they learn to actively negotiate race, gender, and class as well as ability and disability. Tolerance, when critiqued in this way, offers little for enhancing inclusive classroom practices or developing understandings of diversity. Instead, tolerance reproduces and maintains the dichotomy of the Normal and the Other and limits possibilities for inclusion. It does not address difference or classroom inequities, as it reinforces the position of the privileged Normal, confirming their uniformity and power. In contrast to the notion of inclusion, tolerance can be seen to produce separation and exclusion in the early childhood classroom. Tolerance separates the not Normal, keeping the Normal secure and the social order preserved. The uninterrupted discourse of tolerance makes no attempt to rethink the Normal or to counteract the disapproval of the Other. It acknowledges no obligation to rethink the basis of the disapproval that warrants the toleration (Phillips, 1999).

As long as children and educators in the classroom continue to draw on discourses that produce and maintain the Normal, and understandings of the marked child continue to be developed within the medical model of disability, exclusionary practices will continue and alternatives will remain limited. In rethinking inclusive practice, further interrogation of the power of the Normal and of its role in inclusive and exclusive processes is necessary. As a significant effect of the Normal, the unquestioned practice of tolerance similarly plays a critical role in exclusionary processes. As tolerance makes a contribution to the way children come to know themselves and others, acknowledging the work it does, and attempting to interrupt it, could potentially alter the way that difference is constructed and addressed in the inclusive early childhood classroom.

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