

Article

Immigrant Children’s Connections to People and the World Around Them: A Critical Discourse Review of Academic Literature

Anita Borch

Consumption Research Norway (SIFO), Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway; anitab@oslomet.no

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Abstract

A primary goal of the welfare state is to ensure that children and young people have a good upbringing and that families feel secure. However, several studies indicate that the risk of marginalisation and social exclusion increases, especially among children of low-income and immigrant families. Why some children seem to be more loosely connected to people and the world around them is poorly understood. Based on a Foucauldian critical discourse review, this article aims to explore the most cited academic discourses on children’s connections to the social and material environment—typically referred to by terms such as “social inclusion,” “social participation,” “social integration,” and “social exclusion.” The main research questions are: What has been addressed in this literature, by whom, and what are the knowledge gaps? Some of the most important observations are that the most influential literature on children’s connections is typically written by psychologists, address children settled in the US, and tends to neglect important explanation factors, such as the material conditions of children’s everyday life. Implications for the (re)production of knowledge and knowledge gaps are discussed.

Keywords

academic discourse; belonging; children; migration; social inclusion; social integration; social participation

Issue

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1. Introduction

In 2020, 24.2% of children in the EU were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Most at risk are children in vulnerable situations, such as children from low-income families with immigrant backgrounds (Eurostat, 2022). It is poorly understood why children in vulnerable situations seem to be more loosely connected to people and the world around them. This article explores how children’s experiences of attachment to people and the world around them have been examined in highly cited articles published in international peer-reviewed journals. The aim is to obtain an overview of the most influential literature on children’s connections and the discussions within this literature. The main research questions are: What is typically addressed in the highly cited literature, and what are the research gaps? The analysis is based on a quantitative Foucauldian critical discourse review. Critical discourse

reviews typically pay more attention to structures of interest and power in fields of knowledge than other forms of review (Wall et al., 2015). An underlying assumption is that researchers of different scientific disciplines (psychologists, sociologists, etc.) have different perceptions of “good” and “important” knowledge. If one or a few disciplines dominate fields of knowledge, the knowledge that is (re)produced within these fields is at risk of becoming biased in highlighting some knowledge and ignoring others (Borch, 2019; Borch & Kjærnes, 2016). If these biases are not revealed, structures of interest and power that have made their mark in fields of knowledge will tend to stabilise or reduce (Borch, 2012) at the expense of scientific novelty and progress. The article starts with a section that provides an overview of the previous literature on children’s connections. The next section describes the methodology on which the analysis is based, followed by a report and discussion of the main results.