This is our life
This is our child

Mothers dancing in the margins of disability

Thesis submitted by
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Statement on the Contribution of Others

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Ethics approval for the research was granted by the Ethics Review Committee of James Cook University.
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ABSTRACT

This study examines the narratives of 15 mothers who each have (or had) a child who is medically, educationally and socio-culturally constituted as having a disability. This research interrogates the mothers’ narratives to consider motherhood from the discursive multiple position/ings of the society in which they live. The central research questions are: What are the lived experiences of these women who have a child who does not fit the dominant socio-cultural expectation of a 'normal' child? What subject positions are available for these women? How do they position themselves and how are they positioned in multiple discursive sites such as medicine and education?

By drawing on multiple methodological frames, the study explores the lived experiences and meanings as these mothers (re)construct the discourse of motherhood. Qualitative methods were used to design the research and gather data. Poststructural and feminist perspectives are added to provide additional methods of data analysis. Poststructuralist theorisings are considered new to the field of disability studies and hence provide an opportunity to re-examine subjectivity, power/knowledge and agency in fresh ways, as various mothers in this study reject, (re)construct and even rupture dominant non-disabled assumptions not only of disability, but also of motherhood.

The women’s narratives transverse multiple discursive sites but particular attention is paid to medical and educational discourses and the complex interplay of relations of power constituted with/in these sites. The outcome of analysis suggests many women with a child with a disability actively take up the subject position of 'good mother' in keeping with the dominant discourse and ideology of motherhood available in Western society and (re)construct their lives as 'normal', while simultaneously encountering societal and attitudinal barriers which continue to marginalise their child named with a disability and by association, their families. Professionals can do much to dismantle barriers encountered by these mothers and work collaboratively to ensure inclusive life experiences are available. This thesis adds to the body of literature in disability studies by adding new forms of analysis of the interaction between the lived experiences of mothers and society, serving to challenge Western socio-cultural ways of ‘knowing’ about the intersection of motherhood and disability.
Table of Contents

Statement on access to thesis ii
Statement of sources declaration iii
Statement on the contribution of others iv
Acknowledgements v
Abstract vi
Table of contents vii

Section One
Raising the curtain: setting the stage

Chapter 1: Setting the stage 2

Providing the backdrop: making the research question visible 2
The language of inclusion: the spaces of exclusion 3
Introducing the dancers: the participants of the study 6
Beginning to choreograph: a layer of qualitative methodology 9
Dancing into disability discourse 12
Movements of education: bringing education into the frame 15
Dancing within feminism: adding a feminist frame 18
Feminism and disability 22
Movements of poststructuralism 24
Valmae’s story: dancing into poststructuralism 28
The uses of language 32
Blending the movements: feminism, poststructuralism and the women’s voices 35
The textual dance: outlining the structure of the thesis 39
# Chapter 2: Words and movement: interviews, narratives and (re)presentation

Steps in the rehearsal studio: collecting the stories 41
The storying of the women: outlining the interview process 44
Choosing the steps: analysis of the narratives 46
Dance and research: theorising the interview process 48
Conversations and storying: interviews as conversation? 51
Everybody has a story to tell (Serena) 56
The women and the interview process 59
Spaces of another world 62
(Re)presenting the ‘Other’: writing about mothers and their ‘voices’ 65
Bringing the movements together 69

## Section Two

**The dance of motherhood: the intersection of motherhood and disability**

# Chapter 3: Images of motherhood

Being a ‘good mother’ 74
Images and expectations of motherhood 78
You live with what’s expected (Patti): taking up subject positions as mother 82
Intensive mothering – good mother/bad mother 87
Spaces and silences: the invisibility of mothering a child named with a disability 89
Serena’s story: It’s something I’m doing 91
    Jason looks so normal 93
    I felt absolute relief 94
Making motherhood visible in the text 95
Chapter 4: Choreographing movements of words and meanings: mothers, language and meaning-making

Given a name: diagnosis and labelling

Words and meaning-making: grieving and acceptance

A loss of your dreams (Liza)

It’s not something that’s a forever (Serena)

I can’t remember grieving (Kathy)

Getting on with it (Elise)

Mothers and stress: speaking the word into existence

Serena’s story: I was numb to stress

Stress: It’s a part of life (Kathy)

Stress: An overwhelming feeling of concern (Susan)

Stress: Let’s not say they’re because the child has a disability (Elise)

Meanings outside a discourse of tragedy

Chapter 5: Resistance and transformations

Resisting a discourse of disability as tragedy

Reconstructing being mother and personal transformations

It’s changed me for the better (Susan)

Now I look for the little goods (Therese)

Just one of these things (Melissa)

I love her to pieces (Susan)

We’re all different aren’t we? (Kathy): Questioning what is ‘normal’

Dancing a new dance: reconstituting mother/hood
Chapter 6: You just focus on the now (Julia): the uncertainty of the future
Liza’s story: I had very high hopes and ideals 138
You’ve got not idea of what’s ahead (Kathy) 140
I try to enjoy each day (Susan) 142
Therese’s story: My dream is that she’s happy 145
Planning and education 147
Planning for the future 148
Norah’s story: I’d be lost without her now 149

Section Three
Stepping onto the stage, standing in the spotlight: mothers’ narratives on medical spaces

Chapter 7: Stories of the mothers: dancing in the margins of a dis/placed motherhood
Coming out the other side: narratives of medical interventions 154
Melissa’s story: I knew there was something wrong straight away 157
Sandra’s story: An average situation that went sadly wrong 164
She wasn’t conducive with life 168
Defying all the odds 170
Therese’s story: We had this gorgeous baby 171
This is really major problem stuff 173
Knowing my child 176
Susan’s story: Just one of those things 179
That’s when the saga started 180
The decision of parents 183
Medical spaces and the mothers’ storying 187
**Chapter 8: It's a whole new world to the parents too**

**Sandra**: mothering and public spaces

- Medical spaces and the place of mother 190
- She’s still alive (Therese): ‘coping’ in NICU and ICU spaces 193
- You don’t have as much control as you think you do (Liza): a discourse of professionalism 196
- It’s a massive support network (Susan)/ It’s not a friendly place (Melissa): differing perspectives on support 200
- Blurring the boundaries – home care 204
- What does that really mean? (Melissa): The need for information 206
- I don’t think people thought you had any knowledge (Kathy): professional/lay knowledge 209
- Positioning within medical spaces 214

**Chapter 9: Put into a category (Sandra): adding a therapy discourse**

- Slotted in there (Sandra): finding the label to inscribe the body 215
- You’ve been knocked off your block (Julia): attempting to celebrate the positives 219
- You just get the exceptional ones along the way (Kathy) 222
- It’s part of our lives (Liza): normalising therapy 223
- You have to love the child first (Liza) 225
Section Four
Education spaces and mothers’ desires

Chapter 10: The (discordant) dance of education

The language(s) of education: special, regular and inclusive
Positioning education and its social role
The spaces of education
Bringing in the soloists: voices and the mothers’ stories of education
Norah’s story: They had schools for, like, backward kids
A special school for ‘subnormals’
Patti’s story: My child is not like those children
Nobody wanted her
Disrupting (special) education boundaries
Elise’s story: Among normal kids
A forward-thinking teacher
The kinds of doors that get open
Michelle’s story: They allowed him into the classroom
What you thought best for your child
The agency of parents

Chapter 11: Changing educational spaces: towards inclusive schooling

Seeking inclusive education: disrupting boundaries of ‘special’ and ‘regular’ education
Mothers’ narrative on education
Liza’s story: You have to pick your fights
Sandra’s story: Like one of the kids
Therese’s story: She needs to live in the real world
Serena’s story: To be amongst a normal environment
Section Five
Lowering the curtain

Chapter 12: The (temporary) end of the textual performance: concluding thoughts

Taking up familiar story lines of mother/hood: revisiting the framework
Adding the body: continuing the call for an evolved theory of disability
The discourse of professionalism and the women’s experiences
The (in)visibility of special education
This is where it all starts (Elise): the possibility for education
What a memory (Serena): women speak to the interview process

References

Appendix A – A Profile of the women participants
Appendix B – Ethics approval