The sexuality issue

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Challenging the norm

Queer literature for inclusive practices

Children’s understanding of sexuality

The media’s sexualisation of children: A fresh look at the debate

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'My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do.'
Michel Foucault, 1983

DISCUSSION RELATING TO SEXUALITY in early childhood is ‘dangerous business’. Dangerous because conversations about sexuality in early childhood force us to discuss those sexualities that are normalised and celebrated and those that are marginalised and silenced. These conversations are rarely held in our field. We have seen time and again how conversations on sexualities in early childhood are often silenced in the name of childhood innocence and developmental appropriateness, with spaces for discussion and publication made all too often for ‘safe issues’. These critical conversations must be had in order to remedy a long history of silence, oppression and discrimination inflicted on gays and lesbians, queer communities and those who challenge dominant ways of ‘doing’ sexuality and gender.

As editors of this special edition, we come to define sexualities as how individuals, including young children, understand their body and its relationship to others. We believe that researching sexualities in early childhood is an examination of sexualities within a system, as well as an examination of the ways the system informs our understanding of diverse sexualities.

This special themed edition of AJEC brings together authors from Australia, New Zealand and the United States to help highlight the topic of sexuality in early childhood through multiple voices and international understandings. They invite us to explore sexuality through a diverse range of theories including queer theory, poststructuralism and feminism as they focus on such issues as curriculum, identity, gender, literacy, teacher education and working with families. They explore sexualities in early childhood through theoretical examinations, practical application and narrative forms. There is something for everyone within this special edition.

Building on her pioneering work of gender and sexuality, Blaise draws from findings of a qualitative and collaborative study of young children’s understandings of sexuality. The use of a range of collaborative and participatory data collection methods enables children to show their expertise about sexuality discourses. Influenced by Butler’s notions of performativity and the hegemonic heterosexual matrix (1990), children’s knowledge about sexuality shows how they understand (hetero)sexual discourses, including the importance of (hetero)sexual romance and the role it plays constructing gender and sexual norms. This paper addresses the need for the field of early childhood to ‘open up’, rather than ‘close down’ possibilities for engaging with new theoretical understandings about gender, sex and sexualities in order to generate new pedagogies that will support healthy sexuality for all children.

While, for some, sexualities might be seen as an abstract concept, DeJean showcases how they are a reality experienced from the moment one prepares to enter the field of early childhood education. His paper explores the perspective of one lesbian early childhood preservice teacher who must negotiate her identities within the location of university studies and early childhood placement concurrently. This ‘tug of war’ is made visible through narrative form, surfacing the voices of both the researcher and participant. The paper concludes with recommendations on ways to improve queer teacher education in order to support preservice teachers entering the early childhood field.

Lee provides an insightful analysis of legislation in Aotearoa (New Zealand), suggesting a liberal and accepting attitude towards diverse families in that country. Research into families and whānau in early childhood settings in Aotearoa (New Zealand) has largely ignored lesbian-led families. In her article Lee shares findings from a research project and discusses the powerful place of heteronormative expectations on the actions of gay mothers in the early childhood context. The findings from her study of 17 gay women revealed that these women were, for the most part, satisfied with the welcome they and their children received in their early childhood programs. While the mothers appreciated the work of the teachers and reported that their children were happy in the early childhood settings, the nature of these families was mostly invisible in the early childhood setting.

Robinson and Davies argue that childhood is a queer time and space, a period in which children can take up multiple performances of gender, challenging both the boundaries of hegemonic femininity and masculinity, and of childhood itself. Taking a retrospective account, utilising the memories of experiences identified by women, Robinson and Davies examine the complex ways gendered identity is constructed and negotiated in childhood. These experiences, which represent critical points in the process of gender construction in early childhood for each of these women, have practical implications for early childhood professionals working with children today. These experiences provide some insight into the complexities of girls’ relationships with each other, extending understandings of girls’ desires and friendships. Participants’ memories of being gendered
subjects focused on heteronormative regulations to which children were expected to adhere, with each carrying a sense of injustice throughout their lives.

Sapp provides a historical analysis of more than 40 gay and lesbian themed early childhood texts. This literature is analysed through lenses of homophobia and heterosexism, relationships, language, stereotypes and erasure. We are reminded that it is necessary to analyse children’s texts outside of development appropriateness and that a queer equity lens provides a framework for combating injustice which develops in children’s early years. In addition to providing a foundation for understanding the historical development of gay and lesbian themed early childhood texts, Sapp’s work provides educators with an extensive list of literature they can use within their curriculum to ensure inclusive practice for all.

Surtees and Gunn draw from several research studies on sexualities matters in early childhood education to illustrate the ongoing silencing of these in the contexts of initial teacher education and practices with children and families. Using methods informed by ethnography and Foucaultian discourse analysis to explore data, they wonder why, despite an apparent openness to diversity and awareness of theoretical perspectives that help them think about difference, practices in both contexts remain marked by heteronormativity. How does this investment in heteronormativity lead to or diminish possibilities for high-quality teaching and learning? The paper considers this question and resists the status quo while (re)marking possibilities for the future.

Taylor suggests that childhood innocence is a bedrock assumption of contemporary Western thinking which permeates the professional field of early childhood. Axiomatic to this assumption is the widespread belief that sexuality is both antithetical to childhood and a threat to children’s ‘natural’ innocence. Adult concerns over the ‘loss of innocence’ are easily mobilised, and periodically resurface in debates over the controversial relationship between children, sexuality, popular culture and the media. Taylor argues the need for early childhood professionals to interrogate their own investments in childhood innocence before they can begin to respond effectively to children’s sexualities and their vulnerability to exploitation.

In reading the articles in this special edition we reflect on a quote from Foucault who reminds us ‘to do criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy’ (Foucault, 1981). This special edition of AJEC is one small opening to troubling normalised practices in early childhood, enabling often-silenced conversations located on the borders to enter the mainstream. We hope that, through engaging with the articles, early childhood education moves one step closer to becoming a site of inclusion, hope and possibility for all.

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Kiss and tell: Gendered narratives and childhood sexuality

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THIS PAPER IS BASED ON a small-scale qualitative study framed by poststructuralist and queer perspectives that explored how young children talk about gender and sexuality while engaging with activities commonly found in early years settings. Findings show that children are eager to talk about gender and sexuality and do have a considerable amount of sexual knowledge. Questions are raised regarding the role of the early years’ teacher and the responsibility the field has for opening up spaces in the curriculum for children’s gender and sexual knowledge to be heard, valued and considered.

Introduction

THERE IS A WIDESPREAD BELIEF that children either do not or should not know about sexuality, and attempts to engage with young children around issues of sexuality is problematic in the early years (Epstein, 1999; Renold, 2005; Robinson, 2005; Sears, 2009; Tobin, 1997). Cullen and Sandy (2009) argue that dominant and romantic discourses of presumed childhood innocence (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998) construct young children as naïve, with little knowledge about gender and sexuality. This is a common idea that has been supported by some research. For example, in the health sciences, Brilleslijper-Kater and Baartman (2000) investigated the sexual knowledge of 63 Dutch children (two- to six-year-olds) and determined that they only had a basic grasp of sexuality. This project defined sexual knowledge as children’s ability to determine sex differences; name sexual body parts and functions; and describe what they knew about the birth process, reproduction, and adult heterosexual behaviours. Although children in the study showed evidence of talking about adult heterosexual behaviours, such as males and females kissing each other or cuddling, the authors conclude that children’s ability to understand the differences between physical intimacy and heterosexual interactions does not play a significant part in contributing to children’s sexual knowledge. On the other hand, there is gender and sexuality research situated within the sociology of education, drawing from poststructuralist and queer theories, arguing that children’s understandings about gender differences and heterosexual interactions, even ones that might not appear to be about sexuality per se, are significant and do show that young children have sexual knowledge. These perspectives consider gender and sexuality to be socially constructed and have rethought the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality in ways that show how gender and sexuality are deeply interrelated.

Research conducted in education shows how children use their knowledge of gender norms and (hetero)sexuality to regulate and construct what it means to be a girl and boy (Blaise, 2005, 2009; Blaise & Andrew, 2005; Bhana, 2007; Davies, 2003; Francis, 1998; Grieshaber, 2004; Reay, 2001; Renold, 2005; Skattebol, 2006; Taylor & Richardson, 2005; Tobin, 1997). Attempting to resolve these two competing discourses about children’s sexual knowledge and its role in identity construction, a small-scale qualitative study framed by poststructuralist and queer perspectives was conducted over a five-day period. This project set out to explore how young children talk about gender and sexuality while engaging with activities commonly found in early years’ settings.
Researching gender

Since Davies’ work (1989, 2003) 20 years ago, early years education has been generating a body of gender research that draws from conceptualisations of subjectivity associated with poststructuralist theories (i.e. Grieshaber, 2004; MacNaughton, 2000; Yelland, 1998). This research shifts away from understanding gender as biologically fixed, coherent and stable towards situating gender as a social and relational construction. Additionally, this work recognises young children as active agents in their gender identity work. That is, children are not simply ‘learning’ or ‘soaking-up’ the social meanings, values, and expectations of how to be a girl or a boy exclusively from their parents, teachers, peers or the media. Rather, children themselves are producing and regulating gender by taking part in constantly ‘doing’ and ‘redoing’ femininities and masculinities. From this perspective, children’s identity construction is a dynamic and continuous process in a constant state of renegotiation. For instance, while reading feminist stories to preschool children and then discussing with them what they thought, Davies (2003) found children did not simply accept the notion that boys and girls can do or be anything (i.e. boys wearing dresses or girls choosing not to marry a prince). Instead, children’s resistance to these feminist storylines meant that the field needed to rethink their beliefs about how children take up gender. In the second stage of her research, Davies observed children taking up gender in a range of ways, disclosing the strategies they used for maintaining and transgressing the male/female binary. Her research also shows that young children are aware of the difficulties involved in transgressing gender norms. For instance, four-year-old Anika explains how she feels funny: ‘… when the wrong kind of human being does that [transgressing gender norms] I get a (pause) tickle in my brain …’ (Davies, 2003, p. 119). Davies’ work was groundbreaking because not only was it the first qualitative study to use poststructuralist concepts for understanding children’s gender identity, but it also shows clearly that they take an active role in constituting themselves as girls and boys.

Researching gender and sexuality

Scholars have been building on this important gender research by using insights from queer theory (i.e. Blaise, 2005, 2009; Blaise & Andrew, 2005; Boldt, 1997; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Renold, 2005, 2006; Robinson & Davies, 2007; Skattebol, 2006; Taylor & Blaise, 2007; Taylor & Richardson, 2005) to show how children produce and regulate gender within early years settings. These findings tell us that children do have knowledge about gender and sexuality, an idea that challenges conceptions of childhood innocence. The work of Judith Butler (1993, 1999) and Michel Foucault (1978) has been crucial for critiquing heteronormativity and rethinking the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality, proposing a new understanding of gender as performance, and suggesting that heterosexuality is an effect of gender (Richardson, 2008). These ideas have been pivotal for researching gender/sexuality1 in the early years.

Rethinking sex, gender and sexuality

As well as taking up poststructuralist perspectives to understand subjectivity, scholars have used queer theory to reject the idea that gender is simply an expression of sex, or that gender and sex are biological or natural traits that reside inside us. Foucault (1978) argues that sexuality is neither a fact of life nor something that is natural. Instead, sexuality is considered a constructed category of experience, which has historical, social and cultural origins. By re-examining the relationships between sex, gender and sexuality, it becomes possible to explore in different ways children’s knowledge about gender/sexuality.

Gender performativity

Butler (1999) contends that gender is the process through which different human cultures make sense of sexual identity. Her understanding of gender as performative is the idea that a gendered identity is produced only as it is enacted. At first, this conceptualisation of gender performativity might seem similar to a gender socialisation perspective where girls and boys are learning (and doing) certain gendered practices. Gender performativity rethinks the sex-gender-sexuality relationship in two important ways. First, it rejects the assumption that sex is seen as prior to gender or the common sense logic that insists there must be a time when the sexed subject is un-gendered. Second, it contests the idea that there is a ‘doer behind the deed’ (Butler, 1999, p. 34) because gender identity is produced through specific bodily practices, gestures, actions and declarations. Gender identity is an effect of doing gender, rather than a cause. For Butler, gender is not a noun, but a verb, because it is always about doing. Butler believes that ‘gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance of a natural sort of being’ (1999, p. 45). Following Butler’s logic, by acting out or performing gender children are making sense of and producing what it means to be ‘girl’ and/or ‘boy’. ‘Talk’ is one of the key ways that we do gender because it constitutes a powerful set of actions, enacted communally, which functions to create gender.

1 Following Butler, I will be acknowledging the intimate connection between gender and sexuality by using the construct gender/sexuality.
Heterosexual discourses

Queer theory is also concerned with heterosexual discourses and how they influence the social construction of gender (Warner, 1993). Our gender performances take place within a dualistic framework of male/female that Butler (1999) calls the ‘heterosexual matrix’ (p.6). This matrix should be thought of as a specific regulatory structure that produces femininity, masculinity and heterosexuality as intelligible. From this perspective, the concept of femaleness or maleness becomes meaningless in the absence of heterosexuality because intrinsic to this concept is the idea of an opposite or complementary sex (Jackson, 2006). Heterosexuality, as an institutionalised set of power relations, is enforced through rewards for ‘appropriate’ or normative gendered behaviours and non-normative behaviours are marginalised. For instance, Blaise (2005) recounts an incident when a five-year-old boy showed an excited interest in the make-up a girl had brought to school. His classmates let him know the ‘inappropriateness’ of his interest in this highly feminised item by ignoring his questions about the make-up, dismissing him with body language denoting disgust, and laughing at him. These children were not only actively regulating what it means to be a boy in this kindergarten classroom, but they were also shoring up the heterosexual matrix. Because the heterosexual matrix privileges some desires over others, a few children will inevitably be excluded when these actions are left unchallenged. The children’s actions with the boy, Cheng, were reinforcing the heterosexual matrix because wearing make-up is an activity available only to one gender (female) with the explicit purpose of attracting the other gender (male). This is considered problematic because children’s behaviours are limiting the possibilities for all girls and boys.

A queer understanding of gender assumes that heterosexuality functions to produce regulatory notions of femininity and masculinity. Particular forms of femininity are produced in relation to particular, and highly valued, forms of masculinity. It is not that heterosexual practices are a problem in themselves, but they become problematic because they constitute the only powerful and socially approved form of sexual expression within the heterosexual matrix. These are critiques on the discourses of heterosexuality and how they have become embedded into our thoughts and everyday actions (Butler, 1999; Rich, 1980; Sedgwick, 1990). Queer theory makes it possible to understand how the institution of heterosexuality entails more than simply sexual relations; for example, the nuclear family, wedding ceremonies and bridal showers. Many of these are dominant ideas within our culture and thus have become instruments of power, positioning heterosexual relationships as the most valued and acceptable form of sexuality.

There is a growing body of early years research that utilises queer theory for understanding the processes and practices of heterosexuality in children’s play (i.e. Blaise, 2005, 2009; Boldt, 1997; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Renold, 2005; Robinson & Davies, 2007; Skattebol, 2006; Taylor & Richardson, 2005). In particular, these studies have used Butler’s conceptualisation of gender performativity (1993, 1999, 2004) and how hegemonic gender practices are produced through the heterosexual matrix (1999) to understand the ways children are engaging with heterosexual gender norms for the purpose of constituting gender in early childhood. Findings from these studies repeatedly show that young children do know about gender and (hetero) sexuality. For instance, Skattebol (2006) engages with queer and poststructural theory in order to show how young children embody age, race and gender while negotiating identity in an early childhood centre. This research is significant because Skattebol is making a deliberate ‘material turn’ (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 6) in order to highlight that language is not the only way children negotiate and construct their identities. Her practitioner inquiry shows how a four-year-old boy named Zac embodied hegemonic masculinity to exclude others in cross-gender play. Zac’s repeated calls for not playing with girls is an example of how a particular form of masculinity (boys don’t play with girls; boys are different, and better, than girls; boys and girls do different things, etc.) becomes categorically fixed, stabilised, and constructed as ‘normal’.

Since the gendered subject is produced, gender can be seen as neither fixed nor stable. It is gender’s instability, as well as the matrix’s permeability (Butler, 2006), that opens up possibilities to resist gender norms. Several studies use Butler’s theory of gender performativity to explore the fluidity and instability of gender (i.e. Blaise, 2005, 2009; Reay, 2001; Renold, 2005, 2006; Robinson & Davies, 2007; Taylor & Richardson, 2005). For instance, Taylor and Richardson (2005) present a series of narratives they created from observational field notes of children’s home corner play in an Australian early childhood centre to illustrate the ways children regulate and transgress gender norms. Their analysis uses Butler’s (1999) theory of gender performativity and Foucault’s (1986) concept of heterotopia to deconstruct children’s domestic play in the home corner. These narratives show the fluidity of children’s gender-identities, including how positions of power were overturned. Not only were children observed exceeding normative ways of being girl and boy, but they were also transforming what it means to be gendered as they performed hybrid and queer identities.

Collectively, the gender/sexuality research conducted in the early years troubles the myth of childhood innocence by revealing the multiple ways that children draw upon...
Developing a collaborative and generative research approach

Since young children are in the process of working through their theories of sexuality, it is important to remember that these might be difficult for adults to locate or even to recognise how those ideas might be related to sexuality (Britzman, 1998). Therefore, this study explored how children, not adults, knew and talked about these concepts in their everyday worlds. With this goal in mind, this study moved away from siting children's sexual knowledge as simply naming body parts or explaining where babies come from, to generating data that showed how they talked about gender/sexuality in their own terms. If gender is an effect of sex, as Butler's (1993, 1999) work suggests, then children's understandings of gender, especially when situated within heterosexual discourses, might provide access to understanding their sexual knowledge. In short, poststructuralist and queer perspectives mean that children's talk offers one way to document children's understandings about gender/sexuality.

The study took place in a three- and four-year-old's room at an Australian childcare centre and Elaine was the teacher for this group. Over a five-day period, multiple methods were used to generate data with children, including participant observations, field notes, and audiotaped small and large group discussions. As a collaborative and generative study, audiotaped formal interviews and informal daily research de-briefs were conducted with teacher Elaine. These were strategies for strengthening the collaborative researcher–teacher relationship and developing child-centred research activities used throughout the study. Field notes and audiotapes were reviewed and listened to nightly and critical incidents were noted. The following day, these initial findings were presented to Elaine at the morning de-brief. During this time Elaine would add her perspective to the data, findings, and research process. It would then be decided how the original research plan would be modified. Finally, after fieldwork, a daily researcher notebook was left in the room for parents to read. This notebook contained a summary of the research activities and initial findings. Families were encouraged to respond to questions such as 'Do you hear similar kinds of talk about being handsome, cool, pretty or sexy at home?', 'What kinds of dress-up games does your child like to play?' For a thorough discussion of the strategies used to support this research collaboration and the generation of data over a short time see Blaise (in press). Elaine first introduced the project to families. I then attended a parent social night at the centre and discussed the project with families, answered questions and collected the required paperwork.

Although 18 children's parents consented for their child to participate in the project, a total of 12 children were involved in different aspects of the study. Because of the nature and structure of the childcare centre, as well as the design of the study, not every child who had parental consent participated. Some children were either not present for the research activities or they were not interested at that time. Elaine and I decided to conduct the research activities in ways consistent with the room's daily routines and structures. For instance, in this room it was common for some children to participate in a special learning activity the teacher had prepared, such as art, while others might decide to play outside or in another area of the room. By following the room routine, sometimes children would choose not to participate in the research activity and chose other activities instead. At times children 'opted in' or 'opted out' of the research activity, depending on their current interest.

Initial analysis took place when summarising the daily activities in the researcher journal left for parents' response and when de-briefing with Elaine. These initial summaries and questions informed the next day's research activity. In particular, they influenced how the research activities were conducted, including which ideas about gender/sexuality were highlighted and talked about with children. Formal analysis occurred after data was generated and was conducted by reading and rereading the audiotaped transcripts of discussions with children, teacher interviews and de-briefs, field notes, and the researcher journal. The initial codes were influenced by discursive understandings of gender/sexuality, particularly as they are constituted through the heterosexual matrix. Transcripts were first coded by how children talked about gender differences. These codes included gender descriptions used by children and how they talked about and reacted to topics associated with gender/sexuality. These categories were then expanded through queer and poststructural ideas related to relationships and desires in order to explore what children know about femininities, masculinities and (hetero)sexualities. Although children showed knowledge about a range of gender/sexuality discourses, this paper focuses primarily on the topic...
of kissing, and this provides us with an insight into children’s sexual knowledge.

‘Have you ever kissed a boy?’

On the second day of the project, the popular picture book, *Clarice Bean, that's me*, by Lauren Child (2000) was read to a small group of children (four girls and three boys) in order to engage them in a discussion about gender/sexuality. This book was chosen for two reasons. First, as an award-winning author/illustrator, Child has an established international reputation and it has been my experience that girls and boys enjoy these stories about the main character. Clarice Bean is a confident and precocious school-aged girl, who introduces readers to her large extended family (father, mum, older brother and sister, cousin, grandad, plumber, neighbours, pets, etc.) and instigates several adventures. Second, this story includes pictures and text about Marcie, Clarice’s older sister. In particular, one page shows Marcie sitting on her bed, reading a fashion magazine. Several thought bubbles give the reader a sense of the content of Marcie’s magazine. They include: ‘Do boys give you the dreamy eye?’, ‘????’, ‘!!!’, ‘Are you a flirt?’, ‘Have you ever kissed a boy?’, ‘Is your mum your best pal?’, ‘Do you love gossip?’.

In addition, the bedroom wall is covered with pictures of friends, including a teenage girl and boy. These are accompanied with more thought bubbles such as, ‘Fave footie fellas, are you my dream date?’, ‘I know Tara is crazy about me’, ‘I really like Tara but she’s only interested in Damon’, ‘Boys are fab’, and ‘Damon’s crazy about me, but I really like Kevin’. Similarly to how Davies (2003) and Davies and Kasama (2004) used picture books with children to document their understandings of gender, I also used books as a way to engage with children about their understandings of gender/sexuality. However, one difference is that I chose books that were deliberately heterosexual, in order to provoke talk around gender and heterosexual discourses.

The following discussion was audiorecorded, transcribed, and discussed with Elaine. At one point during the discussion, children are so excited that they are talking over each other and it is difficult to determine who is speaking. Therefore, the children in the following transcript are identified as girl or boy. I am sitting on the floor, with a small group of children (four girls, three boys), reading the book, *Clarice Bean, that's me*. I focus on the page where Marcie is sitting on her bed and reading a fashion magazine.

Mindy: Here she is (pointing to Marcie) looking at the boys and this says (pointing to the thought bubble), ‘Do boys give you the dreamy eye?’

Mindy: (Turning to the group) Do boys give you the dreamy eye?

There is laughter from the group, and two girls are giving each other significant looks.

Girl: Yes (laughing).

Mindy: Why is that silly?

Girl: I don’t know (scrunches up her shoulders and looks around).

Mindy: (Referring back to the book and continuing to read) Do boys give you the dreamy eye?

Group: No.

Mindy: Are you a flirt?

Group: No.

Mindy: Do you love gossip?

Group: No.

Mindy: Is your mum your best pal?

Group: No.

Mindy: Have you ever kissed a boy?

Group: (Slight hesitation) No (A few children are smiling and looking at each other).

Mindy: I guess these are the kinds of things that … (interrupted by a flurry of talk).

Girl: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, I’ve kissed a boy.

Girl: No (a few children say this together and it is hard to determine who is saying no).

Girl: Only when you grow up.

Boy: Older.

Girl: When you get married.

Girl: Yeah, older.

Girl: Only when you get married you can kiss a boy?

Girl: I’ve dated a boy.

Mindy: Okay, okay, wait (refocusing on the page in the book). Marcie (pointing to Marcie) must be … (interrupted).

Girl: I have friends who kiss each other.

Girl: Well, I’ve kissed a boy.

Girl: (Gasp) Only when you’re older.

Girl: No.

Girl: Only when you’re married.

Girl: No, before.

This group is eager to talk about their kissing knowledge, including who has or has not kissed, who gets to kiss, and when it is appropriate to kiss. Although the girls claim they don’t know about boys giving girls the ‘dreamy’ eye, their giggling and body language says otherwise. It is possible that they are unsure
how to proceed because I have intentionally brought a topic into the preschool that adults usually ignore or shut down, rather than encourage (Blaise, 2009). Kelley, Buckingham and Davies (1999) conducted a series of open-ended interviews and structured research activities with two groups of children (aged six-seven and 10-11) regarding how they interpreted and responded to sexual behaviour they encountered on television programs. Similarly to how the children exhibited excitement with laughter while talking about kissing, Kelley et al.’s study showed how children used laughter to reflect recognition of crossing into adult territories, often considered taboo for young children.

Children contributed enthusiastically to the discussion and interrupted each other in order to share what they knew about kissing. Because of the slight hesitation when I read the words, ‘Have you ever kissed a boy?’, the laughter from the group, and the gasp from one of the girls when someone states, ‘Well, I’ve kissed a boy’, it was clear that this is a taboo topic. Kissing itself is not problematic (i.e. some cultures greet each other with a kiss on the cheek, or children are often told, ‘Go and give your mum a kiss goodbye.’). However, in this discussion kissing represents a whole realm of sexuality, including danger and risk. This discussion about kissing is akin to how the group of children in Blaise and Andrew’s (2005) study understood kissing. For instance, when explaining the rules for a kiss-and-chase game they were playing in preschool, the word ‘kissing’ was used to mean having sex. What is of significance is that young children are showing us, via their reactions, that they have an understanding of sexuality.

This discussion also demonstrates the nuanced understandings children have about competing gender/sexuality discourses. On one hand, some girls either have kissed a boy, gone on dates with boys, or know friends who kiss each other, and on the other hand some girls believe that young children, and in this case girls, should not be kissing. It is ironic that four-year-olds are arguing the adult idea of being ‘too young’ to take part in kissing. It is possible that children have learned this from how adults make comments about kissing or quickly shut down topics that make them uncomfortable (Blaise, 2009). The ways children state that kissing is something that happens ‘only when you are older’ may also represent the relief they feel at not having to engage in such a scary and yet exciting activity. Finally, girls’ explanations that kissing happens ‘when you get married’ indicates the pervasiveness of the heterosexual matrix and how heterosexual norms are used to regulate and constitute what is considered ‘appropriate’ behaviour for children.

One could argue that the heterosexual matrix also plays a part in determining how the girls and boys engage with sexuality differently during the discussion. For instance, with the exception of one boy, the discussion was eagerly taken up and supported by the girls. In doing so, the girls are the creators and makers of relationships, while the boys distance themselves from the romance of relationships. This may be an example of children policing the boundaries of gender/sexuality. Children’s talk and the different ways that girls and boys take up the topic of kissing is an instance when we are able to see how gender and (hetero)sexuality are discursively constituted and tightly bound. Finally, while at first glance this discussion may seem irrelevant to gender/sexuality, Jackson (2006) reminds us that the ways children talk about how girls and boys should act, and in this case that girls should not kiss until they are older or married, is how ‘normal’ forms of femininity, masculinity and heterosexuality make their way into the social fabric of early years settings and wider society.

Boys’ desires

Although the boys might not have been actively engaged with the discussion about kissing when reading Clarice Bean, that’s me, their interest in gender/sexuality became increasingly apparent when they were photographing objects in the room. On the third and fifth day of the study, children were given opportunities to photograph the dolls I brought in or objects in the room they thought were ‘cool’, ‘sexy’, or ‘pretty’, or things they thought girls or boys might like. Just as I used the book to provoke discussion with children, the aim of having them take photographs was to provide something to talk about, but on the children’s terms. Although both girls and boys photographed a range of objects, such as backpacks, toys, or people (each other, adults in the room), this paper focuses specifically on two discussions the boys had about a Spiderman backpack and a pair of toy crocodiles they photographed. These discussions provide insight into children’s desires and understandings about gender/sexuality.

Spiderman things

On the final day of the project, three boys (Jack, Ryan and Tim) talked eagerly about the Spiderman and his girlfriend, Mary Jane Watson. Jack initiated this discussion as he showed me on the LCD screen a Spiderman backpack he had photographed. I was seated in a chair, and a small group of children (three boys and two girls) quickly formed a circle around me and the camera, joining in the following discussion:

Mindy: What is this (pointing to the image of a backpack)?
Ryan: Oh, it is so cool.
Jack: I took it. It’s Spiderman.
Mindy: Cool? Why is it cool?
Jack, Ryan and Tim changed the conversation and began talking about Mary Jane Watson, Spiderman’s girlfriend. They described her as pretty, and went into detail explaining why she is pretty. For these boys, her ‘long and sort of yellowy hair’ made her pretty, and Tim explained that she was pretty, rather than beautiful, because she had a ‘lovely dress and she sings’. The boys went on to explain that Mary Jane Watson walks and moves her body in particular ways. Jack moved away from the group in order to show us how. With a sense of serious purpose, he walked by placing one foot slowly in front of the other, while moving his hips back and forth. Both Tim and Ryan agreed that Jack was walking like Mary Jane Watson. Heather joined the group and said, ‘She (Mary Jane Watson) also wore make-up when she is going out and she is beautiful.’ The boys agreed by saying, ‘Yeah’. This conversation with the boys, coupled with Jack showing how Mary Jane Watson moved her body, highlights how children observe and understand gender/sexuality discourses. The ways the boys enthusiastically engaged with their knowledge about Spiderman’s girlfriend implies that talking about gender/sexuality is not just of interest to the girls.

Children’s desires are also made apparent by what they ignore. For instance, when a boy named Reagan drew pictures of rainbows, explaining that they were ‘pretty’ and that he liked ‘pretty rainbowy things’, the children at the table did not tease him for showing an interest in things usually associated with hyper-femininity. Instead, field notes indicate that the children at the table (Jack, Ryan and Claire) deliberately paid no attention to Reagan’s comments.

**Kissing crocodiles**

Another example that illustrates boys’ desires to engage with gender/sexuality discourses occurred during a discussion about photographs taken of two ‘kissing crocodiles’. The photograph showed two yellow toy crocodiles facing each other, with their jaws touching. I showed the photograph to a small group (three girls and two boys):

Mindy: What’s this?
Heather: Kissing crocodiles. That is sexy and cool!
Mindy: Why do you think someone took this picture?
Heather: Because they are getting married.
Mindy: What makes you think they are getting married?
Claire: Because they love each other.

A few moments later, Ryan and Heather are discussing the kissing crocodile photograph further:

Ryan: Crocodiles, look. They are kissing each other.
Heather: Kissing crocodiles. Crocodiles, crocodiles are kissing each other.
Ryan: They are being sexy.
Heather: One is a boy and one is a girl.

The discussion about the kissing crocodiles shows how, for young children, kissing is connected with sex and romance. They are making a link between kissing, marriage and love. The toy crocodiles might be considered un-gendered because neither exhibit characteristics associated with femininity nor masculinity, such as red lips or eyelashes as seen on female Lego action figures. Heather has drawn upon the heterosexual matrix in her naming of the crocodiles as complementary genders. In doing so, the possibility of imagining same-sex desire has been closed off. Similarly to the discussion about Spiderman, the crocodiles opened up space for boys to engage with gender/sexuality.

**Conclusion**

This exploratory study of children’s understandings of gender/sexuality shows that children do have a considerable amount of sexual knowledge. Over a five-day period, children engaged with a range of research activities that encouraged them to talk about gender and, as a result, their attitudes toward issues of sexuality.

Although data presented here from this small study indicates that children are neither ignorant nor naïve about sexuality, it is also clear that several aspects of gender/sexuality were silent. Two silences found were same-gender desire and non-normative gender behaviours. Not once did children talk about the possibility of girls being attractive for other girls, or boys being cool for other boys. Instead, it was always about heterosexuality. Their talk indicates that children know a lot about heterosexuality and romance, and about how femininities and masculinities are constructed through relationships, as well as how desire plays a part in constructing normative understandings of sexuality. When Reagan showed an interest in ‘pretty rainbowy things’, which might be considered an example of non-traditional masculinity, the children sitting at the table seemed to ignore his behaviour. Although it is unclear what this silence means, it is possible that the children’s silence is a way of covertly supporting Reagan’s interests in femininity. If this is the case, it is worth considering how I might have intervened and intentionally inquired about Reagan’s interest in stereotypically feminine items and how his drawing was met with silence.

Documenting children’s understandings of gender/sexuality is significant for contributing to the growing knowledge base of children’s sexual knowledge.
Table 1 Research timetable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 1: Entering the field</th>
<th>Day 2: Reading stories</th>
<th>Day 3: Bratz Dolls &amp; photographs</th>
<th>Day 4: Drawing pictures</th>
<th>Day 5: Photographing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developing rapport with children</td>
<td>Read stories and have small group discussion</td>
<td>Bring Bratz Dolls and have small group discussion</td>
<td>Drawing pictures and having discussions</td>
<td>Children photographing what they like, or what they think boys and girls will like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent social night</td>
<td>Teacher de-brief</td>
<td>Photographs</td>
<td>Teacher de-brief (before and after)</td>
<td>Teacher interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher interview</td>
<td>Leave research notebook</td>
<td>Teacher de-brief (before and after)</td>
<td>Leave research notebook</td>
<td>Teacher de-brief (before and after)</td>
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Recognising the significance of gender and how children talk about gender characteristics reveals what they know about sexuality, and usually heterosexuality. If children are in the process of creating their own theories about sexuality, and if these theories maintain normative understandings of sexual relationships, then should adults find ways to engage with young children in order to challenge this heteronormativity? If so, then we have a responsibility to engage with children differently about their sexual knowledge. Opening up, rather than always closing down, spaces in the curriculum for children’s gender and sexual knowledge to be heard, valued and considered is one definite way to begin this work. Until the early years begins to take young children’s views about gender and sexuality seriously, such work will continue to be regarded with suspicion.

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References


The tug of war: 
When queer and early childhood meet
William DeJean
Macquarie University

SEXUALITIES IN THE FIELD OF early childhood remains an abstract concept for some, yet for others it is a reality experienced from the moment one prepares to enter the field. Using a narrative ethnography, which calls for the voice of the ‘researcher’ and ‘participant’ to be made visible, this paper explores sexualities in early childhood from the perspective of one lesbian early childhood preservice teacher who must negotiate her identity within the location of university studies and early childhood placement. The paper concludes with recommendations on ways for queer teacher education to support preservice teachers entering the early childhood field.

Invisibility is a dangerous and painful condition. When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you … there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing (Rich, 1986, p. 199).

Introduction

DURING MY FIRST SEMESTER as a newly appointed academic in education, a student approached me. We had just completed the weekly night class I taught off-campus at a local high school in the United States. As I approached the parking lot, many of my students were already in their cars while others were driving away. It might have been because of the darkness, or because I was focused on other matters, that I didn’t see him approach.

‘William, can I speak with you?’ Jonathan asked in a lowered, hesitant voice. I had taught at a large suburban high school for the 10 years prior to this new position. As a gay male teacher, whenever a person lowered his or her voice, or became hesitant when he or she approached, I always knew the topic.

‘Yes, I’m gay,’ I said.

My quick response seemed to catch him by surprise. After a short pause, he shared his fears and concerns of being a gay male entering our profession, and asked for support in negotiating this new terrain. He appeared more conscious of his uncertainties than I did during my own teaching credential experience, yet many of his concerns mirrored my own.

As a gay adolescent, reading and writing became vital tools to help me escape the closet I was encased in. During my schooling, I gravitated to teachers who were ‘passionate, caring, alive, present, inspiring, and real’ (Intrator, 2002, p. xxx). These educators indirectly helped me see the possibilities of my own life. While language became the primary way I learned to know about myself (Siin, 1995, p. 138), schooling helped me know that I would find my way. From these experiences, I knew effective teaching was much more than knowing the ‘correct’ content and methodologies, which seemed the only story told in my own education subjects.

As a gay male high school teacher I was unprepared for conflicts with parents, students, or administrators and faculty members who at times were overtly hostile to me because of my sexual orientation (DeJean, 2004, 2007; DeJean & Elsbree, 2008). During each incident, I struggled to find adequate words to name my experience, and quickly understood how ‘oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if [they] frame [their] ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group’ (Collins, 2000, p. vii). Given this, it seems expected that my doctoral dissertation focused on gay and lesbian K-12 teachers who were ‘out’ inside the classrooms they taught in (DeJean, 2008). Research became a path for my own liberation (Greene, 1988; Hooks, 2003; Sapp, 2001).

My own personal and professional background should have prepared me to answer Jonathan’s questions and concerns. However, I stumbled with what to say. Overwhelmed by my new professional responsibilities, I had little time to consider the needs of our queer teaching credential students. With the help of a lesbian colleague, I provided him with articles, websites, and details of organisations I believed would be useful, but I quickly went back to the work I was barely keeping up with.
A few years later I received an email from Jonathan, informing me he’d left teaching. Negotiating his teaching responsibilities, combined with being a gay man in a large high school, was more than he wanted to handle.

**Queer teachers, negotiated identities**

I used to think something was wrong with me. As a young queer teacher, I often internalised the challenges I faced, believing that if I dressed, taught or acted differently, the hostility would go away. I didn’t understand the discourse I was in, nor understood that ‘who I am and how I feel is not just about me in a vacuum. It is about me in relationship to others, and them in relationship to me’ (Evans, 2002, p. 22). It was a complicated process of bringing my queer and teacher identities together (Evans, 2002). Through my doctoral work, I came to see how identities are negotiated within discourses, and how these discourses are social, political and historical in nature (Davies, 2008; Foucault, 1990; MacNaughton, 2005; Robinson & Diaz, 2005). And that ‘those who locate outside this dominant discourse will frequently experience inequities, diminished power and little or no support from the dominate culture for their perspective’ (Davies, 2008; Robinson & Diaz, 2005, p. 35).

Historically, the discourse of schooling has not been kind for queer people (Ferfolja, 1998; Harbeck, 1992). Fear, hiding, harassment, negotiating identities, and the challenges to coming out continue to be common themes in the research on the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender teachers (Crowhurst, 1999; DeJean, 2004; Ferfolja, 1998; Harbeck, 1991; Jennings, 1994; King, 2004; Kissen, 1996; Rofes, 2000; Silin, 1995; Woods & Harbeck, 1991).

Kissen (1996) contends that:

> to be a lesbian or gay teacher, in most schools, is to walk a constant line between safety and honesty. The very qualities of trust and authenticity that lie at the heart of all good teaching are often incompatible with their physical and emotional well-being. [Often] acknowledging a gay identity means rethinking the whole notion of being a teacher (p. 16).

This is especially true within the field of early childhood education, where queer identities must negotiate the dominant discourse of childhood innocence, compulsive heterosexuality, and the belief in naturalised and normalised gender behaviours (Robinson & Diaz, 2005; Robinson, 2002). Research on sexualities in early childhood challenges us to rethink notions of childhood and families, and of the identity and practice of teachers within the field (Andrew et al., 2001; Gunn & Surtees, 2004; Kroeger, 2001; Robinson & Diaz, 2005). However, there is little written on the experiences of queer early childhood teachers, and even less on queer preservice teachers (Downey, 2001; Evans, 2002), who often must negotiate their identities within the world of ‘higher education’ and the K-12 sector concurrently (Evans, 1999). This paper addresses the discursive silence, through a focus on one lesbian preservice teacher’s experience in her study of early childhood education. Such information is not only important in highlighting the experiences of queer preservice teachers, but provides insight into the discourse of early childhood education (Robinson & Diaz, 2005).

**When queer and early childhood meet**

Jeannie¹ is a white, 25-year-old lesbian, fourth-year early childhood degree student at a university in regional New South Wales, Australia. I first met her when she came to my office to discuss a presentation she was considering for an early childhood degree class. She was seeking information on queer matters in early childhood education, and was referred to me by a colleague who thought I could help.

During our brief meeting, I spoke openly about my life as a gay teacher, sensing that she wasn’t meeting with me just to get information on an assignment (McNaron, 1997). This meeting evolved into continuing correspondence through emails, occasional visits, or meetings for coffee with her and her partner. With the frequency of these meetings, and memories of my previous student years ago, I proposed we formalise our discussions and make them visible through a research study.

**Data collection and analysis**

Jeannie and I used a narrative ethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2000) for this research, as both our voices were essential to the design and to analysis of the data. In theory I was the ‘researcher’ and she the ‘participant’; however, [we] used methods aimed at encouraging a more dialogical process or relationship’ (Behar, 1997; Blaise, 2005, p. 47). In addition, the research design offered reciprocity (Behar, 1997; Blaise, 2005): I hoped the data would afford insight into the experience of a lesbian preservice teacher, while providing Jeannie with the support I hadn’t known how to offer Jonathan.

Jeannie and I each came up with a list of questions we wanted to ask each other. During our next meeting, we reviewed both lists and narrowed these questions down to eight (Appendix A). Negotiation of the content of the questions was a fundamental process in ensuring that both researcher and participant were comfortable with the questions.

I knew writing could be a transformative act (Johnson, 2003; Sapp, 2001) and I provided Jeannie with a journal to respond to these eight questions prior to our meeting. I hoped that writing in it would give Jeannie the time to reflect deeply about the questions, while lessening any nervousness she might feel during our upcoming joint interview.

¹ For the purpose of this study, an anonymous name is being used.
At a later date we conducted the interview, which we recorded and I later transcribed. Because some of the questions could be seen as personal or sensitive, Jeannie asked me each question first, which was part of the reciprocity in the process I desired. Once I answered the question she then responded to the same question.

I sent the completed transcript for Jeannie to review, asking her to make any changes she needed to her answers. In addition, Jeannie and I individually recorded the categories or themes we believed emerged from the interview. During our next meeting we reviewed the transcripts and compared the codes we each had established. Next, we mutually agreed on codes for the transcripts. At times this meant changing the wording of the codes we had individually used and then jointly developing an agreed upon word or phrase. A consequent meeting was held to debrief the process. Then I sent a draft of the paper to Jeannie to ensure the accuracy of the data being reported.

The tug of war

Evans (2002) reminds us that 'people do not enter teacher education programs as blank slates. They bring with them tools for negotiating the self that have been developed over time’ (p. 55). For Jeannie, that negotiation began when at 13 or 14 she knew she was a lesbian, but waited to come out seven to eight years later. Between those years, she became highly involved with school, which she loved, especially high school. On reflection she sees that schooling provided a distraction for her or a ‘technique … and a way of saying “I’m too busy for boys sort of thing”.’

During high school, she did have ‘a sense of depression’, which her mother was aware of but thought it had to do with being a teenager. Jeannie now understands it to be a result of being in the closet, her not knowing other lesbians, and feeling alone.

Jeannie went to work after high school but decided she wanted to attend university to have more choices with her life. She chose to study early childhood education because she loved working with children, and had been told on numerous occasions that she would make an excellent teacher.

Experiences in the early childhood degree program

Jeannie is now a fourth-year early childhood student, who describes her overall experience in the program as positive, although she sees herself negotiating her identity within the course work. She is ‘out’ to people she feels safe with, but reports that being a lesbian early childhood student is isolating and lonely at times because the student population, as well as the surrounding community, is relatively homogenous. Outside of our professional relationship she has never met other gay or lesbian students or faculty members, nor were queer matters mentioned in any of her subjects. In classes, she ‘sort of susses out lecturers … to see where their views are’. She explains that ‘if they seem into social justice … then I feel safer with them, and I’m likely to say things. There are others that I don’t feel safe with, but that doesn’t [always] stop me.’

Jeannie told me about a recent negotiation during a meeting between a local student and a faculty member to ensure that the student’s teaching placement be made closer to where she lives, as her partner lives locally. The faculty member assumed the partner was a male and, the student reported that they, ‘kept saying “he, he, he” … and in the end, I couldn’t take it any more. I’m finally like “Oh, just to correct you, it is actually a she”. Do you think I was concentrating on the interview? No, I felt so little.’

This isn’t surprising as Evans (2002) contends:

‘… it takes emotional work to negotiate the self in a realm of historically imbued relationships. It takes emotional work to figure out one’s place in roles that are built on relations to others, and are not fully of one’s own making, roles such as student, teacher, lesbian, heterosexual (p. 32).

Fears about teaching early childhood

As Jeannie continues with her program she is ‘struggling’ … to come to see herself as an out and proud lesbian early childhood teacher because of the fears she has.

My fears relate to parents and community. I think because I’m dealing with younger children, kinder to year two, that’s my aim, so it’s really the parents that I think in some ways, in a lot of ways, to me this is scarier than children. They have more power and more ability to make you lose your standing in society I think and also the community depending on where I work … I think I’d feel safer in a bigger city.

These concerns have her considering moving to a bigger city, where she believes she will feel safer, though she would rather stay in a smaller locale. This doesn’t seem surprising, as Juul (1995) argues:

‘… the more homogenous the community, the more likely any number of social characteristics could be considered non-conformist. Being black, Jewish, foreign born, or a strong female could all be grounds for non-conformist, as could holding divergent social or political views (p. 6).

For Jeannie, these sorts of decisions are like a ‘tug-of-war of what I want in life’. Jeannie is also mindful of her future early childhood colleagues. In her studies, she has learned about horizontal violence in early childhood (Hard, 2006), which frames early childhood within ‘a culture that is constrained by expectations of niceness’ (Hard, 2006, p. 6), yet often translates into anything that is different within this homogenous community often being criticised, excluded, denied access, or discouraged. ‘So we hear a lot about [horizontal violence] and we are trying to work out ways to
stop it, but ... that makes [me think] is all of this worth it?’ She concludes:

I’m really thinking about is the whole ‘where am I going to be next year’ and where am I going to take my poor [partner]. It’s not just me, it’s both of us. It puts a lot of strain on a relationship ... I don’t know, sometimes I think ... maybe I should just work in a supermarket or stay at [my current job] and work full time there because the cash register doesn’t care if you are gay ... I think that probably happens a lot. People just give up because it’s hard, it’s really hard.

Needs within the program

Jeannie feels the need for networks with both gay and lesbian education students and teachers. She believes having a strong network would offer a safety net as well as support and guidance when she needs it. She also argues that having an outwardly gay faculty member has been important to her development. ‘I don’t even need to contact you, but knowing that you’re there ... makes me feel safe. I know if anything happened, I could come to you sort of thing.’

Jeannie was in one of the classes I was co-teaching. Based on student discussion, I came out to the class. Jeannie believed that watching me come out offered important support for her within this program. She contends that

... you have shown me how to come out, because you came out in front of me and I have never seen that before, because before I knew no-one who was out. Maybe some I suspected, but no one who was out, and I think everyone’s entitled to having someone to show them the way sort of thing.

What others should know in the early childhood field

Jeannie believes schooling should be inclusive of ‘all types of families’ to counteract the invisibility that many people in education feel. She has seen the resistance of some of her fellow students to be inclusive of ‘cultural diversity and socio-economic diversity’ she argues that small things can make a difference for others in the gay and lesbian community. ‘I know if I walk into a setting, and there were books like that or posters [depicting gay and lesbian families] I would feel a lot better about coming out.’

Leaving before she starts

I just ended a phone conversation with Jeannie. I had called her to confirm accuracy in my understanding of her portion of the transcript I am using to craft this paper. She is close to completing her degree, and I’d heard that she had accepted a job located in a capital city. She told me the job offer was outside of education. Her decision to accept employment elsewhere had many facets, many of which connected to the conversations upon which this research is based.

Conclusions

The story of Jeannie highlights the continued need for more equitable teaching spaces in both early childhood and teacher education. To achieve this, it is the responsibility of teacher educators to break down the isolation that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender preservice teachers face. In some cases this means developing networks and resources to link other queer preservice teachers, especially those studying in regional locations.

Additionally, we must break down the hegemonic nature of teacher education (Ladson-Billing, 2005) so that it mirrors the diversity in both pedagogy and teacher identity we often espouse as important (Banks, 1992; Nieto, 2000). To do this, critical questions must continue to be asked: Who is being represented in our education subjects? Which stories are being told? Which voices are heard and which are silenced? And, as teacher educators, are we working to ensure that our institutions of teacher education are diverse in both faculty and student background, with the same vigour we proclaim to be working for in the early childhood-high school settings (Ladson-Biling, 2005)?

Finally, I would argue that the impetus for change rests not just with queer teacher educators, but also with our heterosexual colleagues whose agency and voice can provide an important role in transforming the current political landscape of teacher education.

References


Appendix A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher questions</th>
<th>Participant questions</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. When did you come out?</td>
<td>1. When did you come out?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What was your experience of K-12 schooling like?</td>
<td>2. What was your experience of K-12 schooling like?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Where was I in terms of my identity as a high school teacher, and where am I today in terms of my identity as a teacher educator?</td>
<td>3. Where are you in terms of your identity and your future as an early childhood educator?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What, if any, fears did I have as a gay man working as a high school teacher? What, if any fears do I have today as a gay man who is a teacher educator?</td>
<td>4. What, if any, fears do you have as a lesbian working as an early childhood teacher?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What was it like being a gay man in a teacher education program?</td>
<td>5. What is it like being a lesbian in a teacher education program?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Did I consider myself out within the program?</td>
<td>6. Do you consider yourself out within the program?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Did I know any out gay or lesbian faculty members? If so, what was my experience with them?</td>
<td>7. What has it been like knowing an out gay faculty member?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. What support did I need? What support did I receive during my teaching credential program?</td>
<td>8. What support do you need from me? How can I support you?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Please note applications are only being accepted in hard copy format.
**Legislation in New Zealand** would suggest there is a liberal and accepting attitude towards diverse families in this country, yet discrimination and heteronormative expectations are strongly evident. In this article I report the findings of a study of the experiences of lesbian-parented families in early childhood centres. Seventeen gay women from 12 lesbian-parented families were asked about their own and their children’s experiences in a variety of early childhood education settings. The findings, which are discussed in terms of a theory of heteronormativity, describe the steps the women reported they needed to take to prepare their children to cope in a heteronormative world. I conclude that, despite seemingly supportive legislation, this group of gay mothers felt it necessary to protect their children from heteronormativity and to prepare them for coping with discrimination.

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**Introduction**

NEW ZEALAND HAS LEGISLATION intended to protect queer people from oppression; however, research shows that gays and lesbians face discrimination in this country. A recent poll by the Human Rights Commission claimed that 54 per cent of New Zealanders had witnessed discrimination against gay and lesbian people (Collins, 2008). The Lavender Island survey in 2004 found that 18.2 per cent of gay and 9.2 per cent of lesbian respondents had been physically attacked, while 66 per cent of lesbians and more than 75 per cent of gay men had been subject to verbal abuse (Henrickson, 2005). Details of a 2007 survey of 1202 New Zealanders revealed that 22.3 per cent would not want to have homosexual people living next door to them (Australian Associated Press, 2007). High school social events, such as school balls, have recently been highlighted as extremely unsafe events for non-heterosexual students. The New Zealand Herald reports that some schools bar entry to gay partners and four Auckland schools insist that gay students who wish to take a partner to a ball sign a contract stating they are homosexual (Rushworth, 2008). Practices that single out gay students for unjust treatment can contribute to, and magnify, the sense of shame and uncertainty young people experience about being perceived as different. It is suspected that high rates of suicide can be attributed to issues relating to homophobia and homosexual bullying in Australia (Ferfolja & Robinson, 2004) and this is likely to be paralleled in New Zealand.

Queer youth are those most at risk from homophobic attitudes. The Non-heterosexual youth—A profile of their health and well-being: Data from youth 2000 report (Le Brun, Robinson, Warren & Watson, 2004) highlights the grim situation for young queers. This comprehensive study was conducted in the year 2000 and included 701 young people who identified as being sexually attracted to the same sex, or to both sexes, or were not sure, or were attracted to neither sex. Of this group, 68 per cent said they had not told people close to them about their sexuality. The study found that 22.8 per cent of the students who identified as non-heterosexual reported a significant number of symptoms aligned to depression and 30.4 per cent had contemplated suicide in the...
past 12 months. A shocking 15.3 per cent said they had attempted suicide in the past 12 months. These figures are of consequence when discussing the lives of lesbian-parent families in early childhood education because children learn about who is valued in society by their early experiences. If lesbian-parent families and queer people are respectfully visible in all educational settings, it is probable that young people will feel more able to disclose their sexualities and live safer and more honest lives.

The recent Families Commission Blue Skies Fund Report (Gunn & Surtees, 2009), which examined the lives of lesbians and gay families, is a major step in addressing visibility for such families. Despite this report, most research projects about families in New Zealand do not specifically acknowledge the existence of lesbian–parent families. Research into families has generally not asked questions about sexual preference (Allen & Demo, 1995). Lesbian-parent families are still not appearing consistently in data gathered about families in New Zealand or in international studies in social work and family studies (Erera, 2002). In Australia, Saggers and Sims (2005) report that, between 1996 and 2001, the number of people stating they were in a same–gender couple doubled to 19,594, with 11 per cent of these bringing up children in the context of the relationship. In New Zealand the 1996 and 2001 census data reported there were 960 female same–gender families with children and the 2006 statistics recorded 3,516 ‘female couples’ (Statistics New Zealand, 2008).

Research is needed into lesbian and gay families to provide data to support equitable social policy.

The study

The purpose of this project was to investigate the experiences of gay women and their families in a range of early childhood settings. The study recognised the early childhood education sector’s commitment to collaboration with families and whānau4 as outlined in the national curriculum document, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996). Te Whāriki was developed in partnership with Māori and is a holistic and bicultural curriculum, the first early childhood curriculum in New Zealand. One of the four guiding ‘Principles’ of this curriculum is Family and Community. The Family and Community ‘Principle’, and many of the learning outcomes and statements throughout Te Whāriki, affirm the place of family as integral to children’s learning and development in the early years. For example, one learning outcome states: ‘Children will develop confidence that their family background is viewed positively in the early childhood education setting’ (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 66). Early childhood is acknowledged in the curriculum as a time when children develop beginning understandings about the social world, equity and fairness. ‘The early childhood curriculum actively contributes towards countering racism and other forms of prejudice’ (Ministry of Education, 1996, p.18). Having an accepting response to difference and diversity is clearly seen as a desirable outcome for early years education in New Zealand.

The research was framed in terms of a theory of heteronormativity (Warner, 1993) and Foucault’s (1972) ideas about power and control. Heteronormativity refers to the powerful and pervasive societal expectation that all people are heterosexual. Understandings of heteronormativity began with Rich (1980), referring to the phrase ‘compulsory heterosexuality’. Heterosexuality is generally seen as the only option for living and partnering in our society. The discursive practices of heteronormativity impose constant pressure for all people to fit a heterosexual persona. Heteronormativity is maintained through silencing the behaviours and practices that do not match the heteronorm. This silencing occurs in many ways, including through a lack of visibility for queer people and through the loss of community that can result from the normalisation of queer lifestyles.

Visibility in this context means whether or not the reality of queer existence is seen, or is noticeable in our society. One facet of visibility is the necessity for queer people to ‘come out’5 if they do not wish to be seen as ‘straight’. The term ‘coming out’ suggests a change in visibility, and queer people have a daily dilemma about to whom they should ‘disclose’ their lifestyle. Visibility is an area of tension in the queer community, and there are two prevalent views. Warner (1999) believes that queers should flaunt and celebrate their differences, and be ‘loud and proud’. Hequembourg (2007) reports that many queer people wish to live ‘quiet lives’ with little reference to their sexualities. One of the risks of opting for a higher level of visibility is the possibility of hypervisibility.

Hypervisibility occurs for queer people when their sexual preference becomes their most publicly acknowledged characteristic. Hypervisibility provides an exaggerated and uncomfortable emphasis on the sexual nature of relationships and can lead to a loss, or diminishing, of safety (Skatterbol & Ferfolja, 2007). Heteronormativity contributes to the atmosphere of ill-ease about difference that allows queer wellbeing to be put at risk by the fear, and the reality, of hypervisibility. Visibility and hypervisibility are closely linked to the construct of normalisation.

3 Used in the plural to recognise the fluid nature of sexual identities (see Surtees, 2006).

4 Whānau is an indigenous Māori term and not a direct translation of the word family; it includes members of an extended family network, with links to revered ancestors.

5 Publicly state sexuality.

6 Heterosexual.
Normalisation, in relation to heteronormativity, describes the process that occurs when aspects of queer lifestyles become accepted as part of the societal norm. Warner (1999) argues that acceptance of queers is conditional and it is only when queers put their point of view across in a manner acceptable to straight people that their voices get heard. He believes that, in striving to attain equity (for example, by campaigning for gay marriage), the flamboyance and strength of the queer community is lost. Warner’s view is that acceptance is normalisation and therefore should no longer be the aim of queer activists. Acceptance requires a ‘watering down’ of queer exuberance. Huffer (2001) disagrees with Warner’s position, claiming that decrying a bid for acceptance runs counter to a human rights argument. The differing positions about visibility and normalisation demonstrate the diversity of opinion in the queer community. Research into the experiences of gay mothers is a step towards a better understanding of this community.

**Methodology**

As a lesbian mother and an early childhood teacher educator I have both a personal and professional interest in this research project. I am aware that my position was both an advantage and a potential disadvantage. It is likely that gay mothers would more readily respond to an advertisement and to questions from a queer researcher.

The 17 women in the study were mostly Pakeha and from middle-class backgrounds. Out of the 12 families there were two single women, two couples who were still living together but planning to separate, one woman who saw herself as ‘a single mother in a relationship’ as her partner did not take a parenting role, and seven couples. All the children involved lived with their biological mothers. In most families the fathers, who were with one exception donor fathers, were involved with the family.

The project was advertised in the gay and lesbian media and participants responded directly to the researcher. Some of the women heard about the research through ‘word of mouth.’ Seventeen mothers from 12 lesbian-parent families agreed to take part in the study and completed consent forms as part of the ethics procedure. Five of the couples were interviewed together. The mothers lived in two major cities in New Zealand and the children attended public kindergartens, early education and care centres, and a Playcentre. Specific information about the types of centres and the location of the cities will not be published, and pseudonyms are used in order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

I used a qualitative approach because of the nature of the research and the suitability of interviews for eliciting meaningful stories (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The women were interviewed using single, semi-structured interviews. Lead questions and prompting questions were used to encourage the sharing of rich data. The interviews addressed issues including choosing an early childhood centre, positive aspects of the chosen centre, children’s and families experiences in the centre, and how visible and valued the families were; and asked for recommendations for ways centres could be inclusive of lesbian families.

The length of the interviews was between half-an-hour and one-and-a-half hours. They took place at a time and location chosen by the participants and were mainly in the women’s homes. Each woman was interviewed once. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by a professional transcriber who signed a confidentiality agreement. The printed transcripts from the interviews were sent to the participants for review. Many of the transcripts were not returned, but two mothers requested that excerpts be removed from transcripts of their interviews, and this was done. Several of the mothers contacted me to confirm that the interview data accurately represented what they wished to say about their experiences in early childhood centres.

**The women’s experiences**

All of the women showed an awareness of the presence of heteronormativity in their lives. For example, they spoke of their own experiences of growing up, official forms and documents that were not inclusive of their families, negative attitudes their family had encountered socially or in their work or in doctor’s rooms, the school experiences of their older children or their friend’s children, and worrying reports in the media. Several of the women spoke of the power of supportive legislation and the positive influence of the Civil Union Act (2004). For the purposes of this article I chose to focus on the steps the women took to ensure the wellbeing of their children in a heteronormative world. First I describe the choices made and the first contact with the early childhood centres. Second, I explain some of the things the mothers did to prepare their children to help them thrive in a heteronormative society.

**Making choices**

For the mothers in this study, choosing an early childhood education centre for their children was made complex because of the composition of their families.

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7 White New Zealanders, of European descent.
8 State-funded and qualified teacher-led early childhood education centres.
9 Refers to and includes community and privately run crèches.
10 A parent-led, early childhood education cooperative.
Most of the mothers said they saw themselves as a family and wanted to be treated like other families. All of the mothers were careful in their choice, and used strategies to help them to identify a suitable centre. Some of these strategies demonstrate the tension between being visible and being seen as ‘normal’ in the context of the early childhood setting. The strategies included listening to the recommendations of others, being assertive and/or open and positive about their families with teachers, using a low-key approach, and judging the quality of the interactions between teachers and children.

Several of the women had heard about the reputation of the centre or had relatives or friends already attending. It was important for these women that the centre they had used had been recommended to them. This practice is common for families choosing early childhood centres generally (Grace & O’Cass, 2003; Vincent & Ball, 2001); however, the desire to know about the centre was likely to be heightened for these gay mothers because of the potential for a negative response to the nature of their family. Sophie had to wait two years before her daughter could attend a centre reputed to provide good-quality early childhood education. Knowing the centre’s positive reputation, Sophie simply assumed they would be accepted. She was completely open with the teachers from the very beginning:

I am very ‘out’. There [are] no lies or moving around pronouns. This is our family, and if you are not happy with it, well there are heaps of other people that are. There is no way I want to have any lies or secrets surrounding my children, and it’s not fair on them and it’s not fair on us, and it’s much, much too hard work. Just right from the start I said: ‘This is the kind of family we’ve got. Happy with that? Good!’

Sophie’s attitude from the onset was to expect no less than absolute acceptance of her family. Gunn and Surtees (2009) posit that an open and positive portrayal of their families by lesbians and gay men will result in improved outcomes and greater acceptance of diverse families.

All but two of the families were open with the teachers at the centres at the initial meeting; and some of the mothers were particularly assertive. For gay women with children ‘coming out’ is problematic, as heterosexuality is generally assumed (Rich, 1980). It is often necessary for gay mothers to emphasise their difference in order that they not be overlooked (Hequembourg, 2007; McCann & Delmonte, 2005). Three of the mothers described asking teachers how they felt about same–gender families, and demanded visibility for their families. Robyn reported: ‘I just basically asked them … if they were okay with same-sex families; I just basically asked them to make sure they were not going to be biased.’ The juxtaposition between insisting on visibility yet fearing discrimination is an example of the tensions identified in the literature. A fear of bias or prejudice was mentioned by several of the women. For these gay mothers, the fear was an added dimension to the already complex task of choosing an early childhood centre.

Kerry spoke of herself and her partner visiting several centres before their first child was born. ‘[My partner] and I went together to visit, and at all of them we talked about the fact that we were going to be a lesbian family, and [asked] were there other lesbian families in the centre.’ Kerry was one of several mothers to mention that she would have liked there to be other gay-parented families in the centre, which mirrors Bernstein and Reimann’s (2001) findings that many gay and lesbian people wish to be part of a community. Kerry and her partner were also pleased that the teacher they spoke to had been able to say the word ‘lesbian’ without awkwardness. Kerry and her partner’s honest introduction of their family is similar to the manner in which most of the families began their relationships with the teachers at the centres.

Amy’s view was that it was essential for the teachers to know about her family: ‘For the children’s sake I felt that that needed to be out there, open and honest at the start so that there was no miscommunication.’

Pat and Rose let the teachers know about their family early in the relationship. Pat pointed out: ‘We were very keen that they understood that we were a lesbian couple with a child.’ The importance of teachers having knowledge of the families of the children they teach is well documented (Mitchell, 2006; Duncan et al., 2006) and aligns with Te Whāriki values. Issues such as how the teachers would manage Mothers’ Day and Fathers’ Day events for the children were mentioned by several mothers as a cause for concern. Anne and Louise were very open and well known in their community as a gay couple. Louise was adamant that not being open would be useless anyway, as their child was constantly telling people about his family: ‘It just wouldn’t work for [our child]. I mean he couldn’t get through a day without mentioning one of our names or the fact that he’s got two mums.’

Many of the women told stories that showed their children’s sense of comfort with being open about their family. Litovich and Langhout (2004) discovered that very young children of gay families readily shared their family composition with others; however, older children were less likely to. The children’s developing understanding of heteronormativity may explain their later reticence.

For Fern it was important that the teachers knew about the nature of her family, and she wanted them to
feel comfortable about asking questions. ‘[Our daughter] has two mummies [and] she has a daddy … Ask me any questions you need to know and I can give those answers.’ Fern drew attention to her daughter having a father who was active in her life. She was aware that many heterosexual people assume that gay women avoid contact with males (Bree, 2003; Pihama, 1998); however, Bree’s (2003) research into queer families in New Zealand discovered that the involvement of donor fathers was common. This involvement contrasts with the findings of research into queer families in the United States of America, where the family was seen to comprise two mothers and their children (Meezan & Rauch, 2005). Fern also mentioned that she was upfront when introducing herself to other families: ‘You kind of go in assertively, or on the front foot, when you are introducing yourself with other parents … so it’s not a sort of weirdo freak thing about being gay.’

Skatterbol and Ferfolja (2007) found that, even in a setting they describe as a ‘lesbian ghetto’ in central Sydney, the gay-parented families experienced negative reactions from the heterosexual families in the centre.

Fern’s attitude towards openness extended beyond the teachers in the centre, whereas one of the other families took a more low-key approach. Sue and Laura began the search for a suitable centre before their baby was born. Having made a decision about the centre, they visited several times. Sue did not see being lesbian as something she needed to emphasise: ‘We approached them and said, “We are [child’s name] parents and we would like to sign her up.” And that’s how we did it rather than “We are two lesbians wanting to have our child there”.’ This strategy was in sharp contrast to most of the mothers who tended to emphasise the difference in family type initially. Many of the mothers described themselves as Sue and Laura did: ‘just like any other family’. Sue and Laura’s strategy for managing the tension of visibility/hypervisibility was to carefully negotiate conversations about their difference rather than to emphasise it. Warner (1999) would perhaps describe this practice as normalising behaviour. Explicitly defining the composition of the queer family, in what Robinson and Jones-Diaz (2006) see as the traditionally safe and innocence perpetuating world of the early childhood centre, requires a profound degree of openness.

Although Gabrielle was open about being a gay mother, it was the sense of welcome she and her family experienced when they first visited the centre that was significant in their choice. She later discovered there were lesbian teachers employed at the time but she did not believe that this would have influenced her. Gabrielle was impressed by the warmth and responsiveness of the teachers:

I picked it basically because I walked in for a visit and they were just really welcoming and I liked the way they were with the kids, they talked to the kids and responded to them.

Research into what families value in early childhood education found that one of the things they appreciate is a high degree of interaction between teachers and children (Duncan et al., 2006). Interaction within the families themselves was also key to this study, particularly in relation to interaction about difference.

**Standing tall**

Heteronormativity influenced how the women engaged with their children about the composition of their families. Many of the mothers spoke specifically about how they had thought about their children experiencing negative reactions to their family composition, either now or in the future. This finding is consistent with other research that suggests that gay mothers are extremely concerned about the welfare of their children in the school system (Ray & Gregory, 2001). Three children from families in the study had not been allowed to continue friendships with children they had met at the centres because they were from a lesbian–parent family. A few mothers spoke of other families being horrified or shocked when they ‘came out’ to them. There was a general acceptance that the children would encounter discrimination, or at least teasing. The families worked to counteract possible negative responses to their families and to prepare their children to manage difficult situations. The strategies they used to help their children manage possible heteronormative reactions from others included modelling pride in the family, affirming their families, socialising with other queer families, and engaging in discussions about diverse families.

Fern saw modelling as a strong and positive self-concept as a vital way to empower her daughter:

> [We] thought quite carefully about how to do this … how to empower [her] to be the best that she can be. There will be inevitable teasing somewhere along the way. Everyone gets teased at some phase in their schooling years so you may as well equip your kid with the best way that they can, kind of, rebuff that. And you know she will get teased about having two mummies and so we figured that we needed to put the best foot forward to role-model to her how she can handle that kind of situation.

Fern’s approach was representative of many of the mothers who saw it as vital that they demonstrate pride in their families in front of their children. The gay mothers in Skatterbol and Ferfolja’s (2007) study also saw modelling self-acceptance and positivity about their families as important for their children.

Kym and Claire made a point of telling their son he was lucky to have two mummies. ‘We keep saying to him: “You are lucky you’ve got two mummies.”’ And I have noticed he is starting to say now, “I have two mummies”.'
Describing their family as having ‘two mummies’ was the most common way the families referred to themselves, although not all of the families in the study were of this type. This description avoids the use of any term relating to sexuality and privileges motherhood discourse, therefore normalising the queer family (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2006). Reinforcing the composition of the family in a positive manner, however, acts to pre-empt negative comments and build resilience. The women spoke about making a conscious effort to be honest with their children, and most of them facilitated opportunities for them to socialise with other queer families.

Many of the families in the study belonged to a Rainbow Families group in their area. These groups provide support for queer families and were seen to be important for both the women and their children. The groups were seen as a forum for discussion and the sharing of experiences. Amy showed how much she valued the involvement of her family in the group:

> Although we are a part of society, we also are a little bit of a sub-culture in that we tend to associate with one another a lot, because that’s where we feel comfortable and less discriminated against.

The sense that it is important to be part of a larger queer community is likely to be highlighted when children are involved (Allen & Demo, 1998). Membership of a supportive and family-friendly queer network would also precipitate more possibilities for discussion about diverse families.

Sue and Laura’s daughter was only 10 months old at the time of the interview but they had already considered how they were going to be open with her about their family. Sue said: ‘We will be talking to her about that at her own level from as soon as we need to. I am not interested in hiding anything from her.’

Laura agreed, saying: ‘No, me neither. But you know she is going to probably encounter situations where she is just going to have to be strong enough, and to know that she has got our support in dealing with these issues. Because she is going to have to deal with them on her own sometimes.’

The commitment to openness in discussing families, evident in so many of these stories, acts to contradict the prevalent belief in society that difference is not all right (Huffer, 2001).

Rose spoke of receiving newsletters from the centre that were addressed to families generically. She said that she would talk to her son about how it could have been addressed to ‘two mummies’. Rose was not being critical of the centre, rather she used the opportunity of the newsletter to engage her son in discussion. She believed that being open about their family in a casual and safe way in the home would help her son to feel positive and comfortable about his family:

> Even getting a notice and it would say ‘Hello we are having a BBQ, please come along’ we would go, ‘Oh look at this! It says “Hello”, and you would say ‘Why doesn’t it put “Hello mummies”? … You would say something funny like that … just sort of making it light-hearted. And it’s good for [our son] to hear that because it’s hidden, but it’s still okay to talk about. I think it’s really important to be okay to talk about if you want to talk about it, and not make a big deal about it.

Other women also said they discussed various types of families with their children. Sophie spoke to her children about family composition in order to support their learning about difference. ‘[My daughter] is very aware of the whole mummy and daddy configuration … and of her own through other friends and family that we know.’ Gay mothers in other studies have been found to be more likely than heterosexual mothers to discuss sexualities issues with their children (Golombok & Tasker, 1996).

Alex was concerned that children in early childhood and primary school are thought of as incapable of dealing with information about gay and lesbian issues. She considered that young children can manage concepts about difference and that it was vital to address these concepts in order to counter negative attitudes. She spoke with her daughter about differences as one way of building understandings about diverse families.

> They don’t cover that sort of stuff in primary school I suppose because the kids are seen to be too young. But you can still discuss differences with people and how differences are valued and important. So even with [my child] she understands all that stuff … I would think that education is the most important in the lower ages.

The point Alex makes about the discussion of difference with children is an insightful one. The children of gay parents are likely to be more accepting of diversity generally than are the children of heterosexual parents (Casper & Shultz, 1999; Clarke, 2002). It is likely that these accepting attitudes come about from the experience of negotiating difference in family composition with the support of knowledgeable adults. These findings have implications for teachers as they provide a challenge to the prevailing view, recognised by Blaise (2005) and Robinson and Jones-Diaz (2006), that children in early childhood are ‘too young’ to deal with understandings about diverse families and that early childhood centres are therefore not suitable places to confront heteronormativity.

Conclusion

Heteronormativity permeates every aspect of our lives. The gay mothers in this study were very aware that they
did not fit the ‘norm’ and they worked carefully to pre-empt difficulties that could arise for their children. Most of the mothers were open about their family composition from the outset of the relationships with the teachers. The mothers felt they had to present a consistently positive face to the early childhood centre and to the world to prepare their children for the discrimination they were likely to face. The mothers were concerned about the wellbeing of their children in the future, especially in school. Significantly, the mothers worked to instil in their children the knowledge that, although they might come from a different type of family, difference is all right. The early childhood centres showed a willingness to welcome and accept families that did not fit the ‘norm’, although proactive measures were not common (see Lee & Duncan, 2008).

It is possible for teachers to successfully facilitate discussion about diverse families in an early childhood setting. The efforts made by gay mothers to support learning about diversity have proved to be successful in other research (see Casper & Shultz, 1999; Clarke, 2002), and these types of discussions can emerge from children’s interests and conversation. What is required is perhaps willingness and a conscious recognition by teachers of family diversity as a valid area of learning. Robinson and Jones-Diaz (2006) consider that many teachers are unaware of the presence of heteronormativity in their centres. A first step towards countering a lack of recognition of queer families would certainly necessitate an acknowledgement of the way heteronormative practices are privileged in most early childhood settings. The intent of Te Whāriki to promote an openness to difference and to dispel prejudice in early childhood could be more fully realised. Talking about difference, giving examples, and openly demonstrating that we can happily live alongside people who are not the same as us can have an impact on children’s values. Resources such as inclusive children’s literature and the We’re here (n.d.) booklet can provide assistance. New Zealand’s frightening statistics for non-heterosexual youth clearly show that secrecy and invisibility lead to fear and shame. Speaking up for the children of queer families could provide a conduit for more openness about diversity.

The voices of the gay women in my research challenge the heteronorm in their own way by contributing to the breaking of silences. I recognise that the findings from this small piece of research cannot be generalised to represent the views or experiences of members of other gay or lesbian-parent families. I nevertheless anticipate that the findings could draw teachers’ attention to some of the issues faced by members of minority groups in early childhood settings and provide a framework for discussion and reflection. Continued dialogue and further research in this area will be vital to build on the understandings gained from this study and to promote the welfare of children from all families.

References


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SINCE THE EARLY 1990s, feminist scholars have theorised the gendered experiences of being a girl, or of girlhood (Aapola, Gonik & Harris, 2005; Driscoll, 2002; Griffin, 2004; Harris, 2004a, 2004b; Johnson, 1993; McRobbie, 1991; Reay, 2001; Renold, 2005; Renold & Ringrose, 2008, in press; Thorne,1993; Walkerdine,1990; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001). The gendered experiences of younger girls in early childhood have also gained prominence during this time (Blaise, 2005; Davies, 1993; Jones, 1993; MacNaughton, 2000; Yelland, 1998). Griffin (2004 p. 29) reminds us that ‘there is nothing “essential” about girlhood’ but it is constituted and negotiated within socio-cultural, political and historical discourses. Feminist poststructuralists have highlighted how girls (and boys) can take up different subject positions within competing discourses of gender that are available to them (Davies, 1993; Walkerdine, 1997). Girls’ location in discourses of gender can depend on a range of issues such as one’s age, class, sexuality, ethnicity, peer group influences and geographical location. In terms of sexuality, children are often presumed to be heterosexual and expected to modify their gender performances accordingly. Girls and women are expected to embody femininity, and boys and men are expected to embody masculinity.

This discussion is primarily focused on the experiences of four women whose stories provide a glimpse of how they negotiated discourses of gender in childhood. Through their transgressions from gender norms and the taking up of different ways of doing gender, we can understand childhood as a potentially queer time and space—a space in which children can subvert dominant discourses of childhood through taking up alternative ways of performing gender and relating with each other (Robinson & Davies, 2007). Becoming a gendered subject is complex and involves the negotiation of a range of gendered performances through which the child is often read as either the conforming subject or actor of resistance. Gender is performative and is a dynamic, relational and a fluid component of subjectivity (Butler, 1990, 2004). It is this process of gender formation, referring to the cultural inscription of bodies into masculine and feminine characteristics within a heterosexual matrix that these women have tried to subvert in some ways in their early years of life.

Transgressions from normalised performances of gender in young children often evoke emotive responses from parents and other adults, educators, and other children (Davies, 2008a; McInnes, 2008; McInnes & Davies, 2008; Robinson, 2005; Robinson & Davies, 2007, 2008a, 2008b;
Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006; Wallis & VanEvery, 2000). Adults’ understandings of children’s performances of gender as determining a child’s future sexual orientation employ heteronormative understandings of gender to instill a panic about sexuality. Children consider the ‘risks’ associated with taking up different gendered performances, often curtailing their practices in ways that their desires can still be enacted. This may be observed through the practices of friendship that young children pursue, as demonstrated by the dynamics between the sissy girl and tomboy highlighted in this discussion. The women’s childhood experiences highlight multiple ways of doing masculinity and femininity. However, their gender identities were strictly regulated through disciplinary practices within the family, schooling, and other institutions that work to manage individuals’ behaviours and desires (Butler, 1990, 2004). As children, the participants in this research departed from the heteronormative social scripts they were expected to follow, thus opening up alternative embodiments of gender within the limitations of their social worlds.

The research in context

This discussion stems from a broader qualitative pilot research study titled ‘Negotiating gendered embodiment and experiences in childhood and adulthood’. The project involved interviews and/or focus groups with women (a total of 10 participants) aged in their late 20s through to their 50s, from urban and regional New South Wales, Australia. The women were from a range of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, with most identifying as lesbian or queer and a few considering themselves heterosexual. One participant is transgendered, and identified as a different sex and gender in childhood. Women who took up alternative performances of gender in adulthood were the targeted participants. The research aims were:

- to examine the way girls embodied and negotiated masculinity and femininity in childhood and the impact of these experiences on adult embodiment of gender;
- to investigate understandings and experiences of the ‘tomboy’;
- to explore the relationship between gender and sexuality taken up in childhood;
- to explore the cause/effect narrative between gendered and sexual subjectivity in childhood and adulthood.

The women worked in a range of roles across the following sectors: Academia, media, the law, the corporate sector and the education sector. The women chose to participate in the research, responding to an expression-of-interest research information sheet, which was initially distributed through acquaintances in sporting groups and queer communities and provided on request at other events. This process is referred to as snowball sampling (or rhizomatic convergence) and is a technique employed in social science research for developing a sample where existing study subjects recruit future subjects from among acquaintances of the researchers and the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Goodman, 1961).

The focus groups ran for approximately 60–80 minutes and covered a broad range of topics including:

- one’s first awareness of being a gendered subject
- experiences of gender in childhood and adolescence
- whether one felt restricted by their gender
- understandings of and relationships with the concepts tomboy and sissy girl
- perceptions of whether experiences of gender in their early years influenced their embodiment of gender and sexuality as adults
- whether their childhood and adolescent experiences of gender impacted on career choices and desires to have children or be a parent.

A Foucaultian discourse analysis was conducted on the focus group transcripts, identifying discourses and power relationships emerging from the narratives. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper in order to maintain the confidentiality of participants. Ethics approval was granted from the authors’ tertiary institution to undertake this research.

We acknowledge the debates and the problems that can be associated with the use of memory as ‘truths’ about childhood experiences (Davies & Davies, 2007; Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003, 2005). It is generally acknowledged that the past is not necessarily directly accessed through personal memories, which are always mediated through the social, including myths and fantasies (Fentress & Wickham, 1992; Halbwachs, 1992). Memory comprises present and past experiences, which also intersect with what Paul Antze (2003) has called the ‘scenes’ or fantasies that shape our inner worlds. However, what is important in the process is to understand how experience is lived and remembered ‘and how that remembering contributes to the formation of senses of self, or of identity, which in turn gives shape to the broader contours of influential narratives of events, of nations, and so on’ (Radstone, 2005, p. 138).

The complexities of performing tomboy

There has been less of a focus on young girls’ transgressions from normative gender discourses in early childhood than on adolescent girls, with discussions often centering on tomboyism (Blaise, 2005; Carr, 1998; Halberstam, 1998; Paechter & Clark, 2007; Reay, 2001; Renold, 2005, 2006; Robinson & Davies, 2007). Much of the scholarship around tomboys has been undertaken through the discipline of psychology (see Bailey, Bechtold & Berenbaum, 2002; Carr, 1998; Gottschalk, 2003; Hugenkamp & Livingston, 2002; Morgan, 1998). Research indicates that tomboyism...
is not a homogeneous subject position, but rather can be a fluid category (Paechter & Clark, 2007; Renold, in press). Our research on tomboys is located in the performance of tomboyism as a discursive socio-cultural manifestation of gender and sexuality, highlighting the different ways individuals take these discourses up as their own. While some theorists situate tomboyism within the realm of masculinity taken up by girls and women (Halberstam, 1998), other theorists have argued that tomboyism can exist within the realms of femininity (Renold, in press). Tomboyism is a heterogeneous, unstable and complex phenomenon, where girls’ desires and interests are located in performances of gender that incorporate more traditional masculine behaviours and a negotiation of femininity that challenges heteronormativity. Within the binary gender system, masculinity is rigidly associated with the male body, not a performance of gender that is also produced and sustained across female bodies.

Judith Halberstam’s work is concerned with revealing as fictional the essential relation between male bodies and masculinity (Halberstam, 1998). That is, masculinity and femininity have traditionally been mapped on to male and female bodies respectively. Halberstam’s aim is to denaturalise the discourse of masculinity, demonstrating its performative dimension, and to create a discursive space in which masculinity can be read in relation to the female body (Davies, 2008a). While some girls position themselves in this category all the time, others mobilise tomboy behaviour in various sets of circumstances, while others identify as tomboy and mobilise femininity to their advantage on occasions.

From this study we have found that perceptions of tomboyism change across generations and shift according to socio-cultural background and geographical location. Current discourses of gender provide more opportunities for flexibility in performances of gender than were available to some of the participants during their childhood. What is important to acknowledge is that each participant, regardless of their generation, was performing their gender within a ‘scene of constraint’ (Butler, 2004; Davies, 2008a, 2008b). That is, participants were operating within the prevailing socio-cultural norms. The definitions and perceptions of the term tomboy varied across the participants and were most noticeable across generations, with younger women viewing the term more positively. This is partly because of the term being re-signified through gender discourses, and also through capitalist consumerism in which young girls can produce themselves as tomboy subjects by wearing ‘tomboy’ clothing which is considered being ‘cool’.

**Resisting gender norms: Challenging gender binaries in early childhood**

Children (and adults) most often view gender within a binary system. That is, femininity and masculinity are rigidly aligned with female and male bodies respectively (Davies, 2008a, 2008b). However, experiences of gender in early childhood can demonstrate the complexity, precariousness, contradiction and fluidity of gender performativity. Those women involved in this study all highlighted feeling frustrated and/or disappointed in how they felt ‘restricted’ by being girls and how adults (some complete strangers) often strictly regulated their behaviour to conform to gender norms. To various degrees many of the women resisted the socio-cultural pressures to do ‘femininity’ appropriately, taking up masculinity as a more ‘authentic’, ‘comfortable’ and ‘exciting’ expression of gender in their early years. Melissa and Alex, who both identified as tomboys in their early childhoods, raised the following issues about resisting and negotiating gender norms.

Melissa is a 47-year-old high school teacher, from a middle-class, rural, Anglo-Celtic background, who identified as a tomboy in childhood. She was (and still is) a very active sporty person who particularly enjoyed non-traditional female activities and sports. Melissa identified as a tomboy in early childhood, but learned to mobilise the advantages associated with traditional femininity, shifting her behaviour accordingly. Getting free treats in the local lolly shop once a week was one of those occasions when performing femininity had its advantages: ‘I was always treated like this little girl. I would go to this lolly shop and I would just sort of smile up at the woman at the counter and she would give me all these things’. Melissa had to negotiate the policing of her performance of gender in childhood, primarily regulated through her schooling experiences and through the broader community. Melissa spoke about a particular incident as a young child when her desire for what was considered to be the ‘wrong’ toy for a ‘cute little girl’ met with adult disapproval. This disapproval was not from her mother, but from a complete stranger working in a store:

> I can remember Mum and I going to Melbourne and I was about four or five, and we went into some shop, Myers or something like that. And I wanted this plastic gun, a little plastic pistol that took my fancy, so I picked it up and Mum was going to let me buy it … Mum was up at the counter and I took it up to her and the woman on the counter said, ‘That’s not a toy for a little girl.’ I can remember I was absolutely crushed.

Performances of gender are strictly regulated through socio-cultural norms inherent in the discourses of what it means to be a girl and appropriate forms of desire. Melissa was not allowed to have the toy she desired, not because of its symbolic violence, but because she was a girl. Not only was her desire for the ‘wrong’ toy regulated but she also felt that she had lost her social status as the ‘good girl’. As a result of this regulation Melissa learned to hide her desire for what was perceived to be masculine behaviours and activities. This indicates a level of self-surveillance, echoing the ‘closeting’ of transgressive behaviours in which one manages taking up non-normative discourses of sexuality.
in a world of compulsory heterosexuality (Sedgwick, 1990). Melissa learned early on that transgressing traditional heteronormative femininity could be highly problematic, and she often performed what others perceived as masculine behaviours in secret. Melissa comments:

I lived in a very windy place and I didn’t get given any balls, like a soccer ball or a football. I used to get this plastic White King bottle, which had this really hard edge and then this softish plastic part. I used to go and kick that into the wind so that it would come back and I would leap up and catch it. I always hid that. I wouldn’t do it when people were around, but Mum probably knew. I was just so embarrassed, I used to run into the trees and hide if people came by. I shouldn’t be doing that because it is more like a boy.

Melissa raises a critical point around the shame that can be experienced by the young child associated with transcending the boundaries of traditional gender norms, in this case femininity. The shame leads to hiding her play from others, perceiving a need for secrecy about her behaviour. Melissa regulates her own behaviours in public in order to produce herself as an appropriate gendered subject (Foucault, 1977, 1978).

Alex, a 26-year-old office worker from a working-class background, thought being a girl ‘sucked’:

I thought it sucked. I played with Barbies. I was obsessed with Barbie. I had everything, girly toys and stuff but I think the reason I thought it sucked was because when I was doing something good, or wanted to do something that was good, that was when somebody would say, ‘Oh no, you are a girl!’

Consequently, during her early childhood, Alex did not want to be a girl. She developed a sense of her gendered self in terms of masculinity and identified more with being a boy. Alex’s masculine performativity went beyond the notion of being a tomboy, to one of understanding herself as a boy. In fact, Alex found the term tomboy offensive:

As a child I don’t think I identified as one [tomboy] because I thought I was a boy. So when someone called me a tomboy it was offensive because it was like an impostor or something. I remember being upset being called a tomboy because it highlighted the fact that I wasn’t a boy, and then I felt weird.

Alex’s performance of masculinity was central to her identity, pointing out that she was aware of being a girl biologically but that in her ‘head’ she identified as male: ‘I was really conflicted by that; I knew I was a girl, but I actually didn’t think I was a girl.’ The only reading Alex had of her transgression from traditional performances of femininity was for her to identify and understand herself as a boy. Her understanding of being a boy was aligned with her performance of masculinity, not with her sexed body. Alex’s resistance to being called a tomboy is linked to the way the term acts as a reminder that her performance of masculinity is always read as ‘inauthentic’ as a result of her female body. Butler, like Halberstam, reminds us that gender cannot be thought of as having some essential basis; there is no ‘authentic’ masculinity or femininity located in male and female bodies (Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 1998).

Similar to Melissa’s experiences, attempts at regulating Alex’s gender did not come from her family, who actually supported Alex’s desire to perform masculinity, but rather from schooling cultures and others in the broader community. As a young child, Alex continually screamed when her mother put her in a dress (she has not worn another dress to this day). Her mother learned early on that her child had a different desire for embodying gender and supported her in this process, despite her concerns about transgressing gender norms. Alex’s experience highlights the importance of providing children with the possibilities of more flexible and fluid performances of gender than are fixed in binarised understandings of masculinity and femininity. Providing children with the knowledge of a broad range of discourses about gender, beyond hegemonic understandings, allows children a more diverse and inclusive context in which to become confident and competent gendered citizens.

**Sissy girls: The performance of the feminine in early childhood**

The term ‘sissy’ is most frequently associated with boys (Corbett, 1996; Davies, 2008a; McInnes & Davies, 2008; McInnes, 2008) who express what are perceived to be feminine characteristics: Emotionally fragile, sensitive, expressing weakness, crying, compliant, non-sporty, and a preference for female friends. Julia Grant (2004) says the term ‘sissy’ emerged out of the boy culture of nineteenth-century America and increasingly became not just an epithet hurled by schoolyard bullies but also a clinical term suggestive of pathology and sexual inversion. Grant points out that ‘conforming to the code of boyhood became increasingly central to establishing the normalcy of boys’ personalities and behaviours’ (2004, p. 829). Grant also acknowledges the critical link between the rise of urbanisation and industrialisation, with the construction and production of particular and productive human subjects, resulting in an obsession with the need for men to be real men—that is, those conforming to heteronormative masculinity. Panic in adults’ readings of young boys’ performances of gender (particularly ‘sissy’ boys and boys who cross-dress) has led to disproportionate attention to boys’ future sexual orientation (Davies, 2008a; Halberstam, 2005; Robinson & Davies, 2007; Wallis & VanEvery, 2000).

However, as Davies (2008a) has argued, the term ‘sissy’ has also been used as a pejorative term to describe girls who are perceived as displaying similar characteristics to the ‘sissy’ boy. The term amplifies some characteristics
that are perceived to be feminine and negative in both boys and girls. When the term is used pejoratively to describe a boy’s disposition, it also carries the connotation of potential homosexuality in the child. In the young girl, the term does not carry the same kind of significance in relation to future sexual orientation. Rather, it is associated with undesirable femininity, resulting in a different kind of marginalisation, social exclusion and vulnerability than that experienced by the sissy boy. This kind of subject position is very different from other forms of dominant performances of femininity wherein heteronormative behaviours are used as empowerment and even celebrated.

Some young girls are highly invested in performances of femininity, in being polite and ‘doing the right thing’, but, unlike Connell’s (1987) category of emphasised femininity, these girls are not subservient to boys and men, nor are their desires and interests located with them. Rather, their desires and interests are in relationships with other girls and women, most often with those who transgress traditional performances of femininity, such as the tomboy. We discuss this point further through an examination of the relationships between tomboys and sissy girls. The girl child perceived to be highly gender-conformist is often ignored in research as uninteresting, yet they can trouble many taken-for-granted assumptions about children’s heteronormative subjectivities, practices and futures.

Desiring the ‘tomboy’: Relations between sissy girls and tomboys

What is particularly interesting about some girls who occupy the subject position of sissy girl are the ways their sense of agency can be framed in relation to the tomboy. We are not concerned to generate categories of femininity in girls; rather, we are interested in the ways girls relate to each other in terms of gendered performances. We are also cautious not to erase the visibility and agency of the feminine girl-child by reading her in relation to the hyper-visibility of the tomboy. Rather, we are interested in examining the relationship between the tomboy and the sissy girl precisely to ascertain the ways in which the frequently subordinated feminine sissy girl establishes power and agency through her association with the tomboy. As pointed out above, Connell’s work frames femininity and gendered relationships within a heterosexual matrix (Connell, 1987). However, we believe that gender performativity in girls can be viewed in more complex ways. Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2005, p. 110) suggest that girls ‘create a multitude of different types of friendships, alternating between various kinds of social ties’. Friendships are sites for the creation of identity and for experimenting with different forms of femininity. Aapola et al. also point out that girls’ friendships are complex relationships in which they get support and have fun. They say these friendships ‘are a powerful cultural force, representing sites of collective meaning-making, and a necessary requirement in the multifaceted process of making gendered identities’ (2005, p.111). In addition they argue that girls’ friendships are also a means to social power.

Two women in this research identified as ‘sissy girls’ in their childhood. Isabella, a 33-year-old postgraduate student from a lower-middle-class urban background, spoke about being fragile, compliant, polite and eager to please as a young girl. Isabella highlighted the difficulties she had negotiating the bullying from other girls. She believes that her sense of self was enhanced through her relationship with a tomboy. In most other contexts, many other girls who derived their power and privilege through heteronormative femininity undermined Isabella’s sense of self through bullying. Isabella comments:

I think I was a sissy girl in school and out of school, but when I hung out with a tomboy I wasn’t. I gained a sense of agency by being with a tomboy. I had a much better time hanging out with the tomboy and that is probably why I liked it because she wasn’t bitchy. She behaved like a boy.

Isabella alludes to the different gendered communication practices perceived to exist between girls and boys and the bullying and harassing behaviours that can occur amongst girls. Of particular interest is how she found support, some security and an enhanced sense of agency in her relationship with a tomboy whose masculine behaviours were much more desirable to her. Isabella also found a sense of adventure in the relationship that she perceived she could not have gained alone or in friendships with girls who took up traditionally feminine behaviours and practices. They were adventures that Isabella aligned more with the interactions she had with her brothers, or with masculinity more generally:

My best friend was a tomboy. She was a bad girl and I really liked her. When we got older my mother forbade me from seeing her, because she was a bad influence. I think I was really self-regulated in terms of being a feminine subject, which I didn’t mind so much. I didn’t notice it in myself but I sought out a friend who was not like that so I would have more adventures. She would ask me my opinion and conversation was easy. We used to hang out in a park together; we would ride our bikes. I wouldn’t necessarily do everything that she did, but I liked what she did and liked to be around it. She flirted with boys, but she gave them attitude, like, you know, whereas I didn’t really interact with them very much. I interacted with my brothers but not with other boys so much. But the way in which she interacted with boys was to get their attention and if they gave … you know, if they didn’t respond the way she wanted, she would tell them to get stuffed or something.

Isabella gains a sense of agency and power by being with a tomboy because her opinion is valued, unlike her school experiences with other traditionally feminine girls. Isabella also reveals her sense of desire to be the bad girl, which
is acted out and realised through her relationship with a tomboy. In her interview, Isabella revealed that her mother forbade her from a continuing association with her tomboy best friend because she was perceived to be a ‘bad girl’ who might corrupt Isabella. Isabella expressed great disappointment at her mother’s severing of this friendship, not only because of the lost friendship, but also because she felt that she had lost some of her own freedom, power and agency.

While the tomboy seeks the attention of boys on her own terms, Isabella, the more feminine subject, is less interested in heterosexual relations, but instead becomes a kind of bystander who is more interested in her interaction with the tomboy. Reflecting on her past childhood experiences, Isabella points out that the stereotype of the tomboy becoming the adult lesbian and the sweet feminine girl becoming heterosexual was disrupted in this instance. Her tomboy friend today lives a heteronormative lifestyle, whereas Isabella, the least likely to fit the stereotypes of the girl that becomes the adult lesbian subject, identifies as a lesbian. Isabella’s desire for the tomboy and what she was perceived to offer, that is ‘adventure’, ‘fun’ and ‘freedom’, was carried through into her adult desire for the ‘masculine woman’:

My mother says to me: ‘You were such a feminine little girl; I don’t know how you could have turned out to be a lesbian.’ That is her stereotype of what she understands a lesbian to look like—the masculine woman.

This narrative highlights the concern that children’s performances of gender determine their adult sexuality. Early childhood educators are often required to address some parents’ concerns about their child’s performances of non-normative gender and links to future sexuality (Davies, 2008a; Robinson & Davies, 2007, 2008b; Robinson, 2002, 2005; Wallis & Van Every, 2000). Girls’ and women’s performances of non-normative gender seem not to be viewed with the same panic as that related to boys and men (Davies, 2008a; Renold, 2005, 2006; Robinson & Davies, 2007). However, adults’ concerns for girls’ non-normative gender performances frequently emerge if girls continue their performances of tomboyism into later adolescence (Halberstam, 2005). Tomboyism is generally constructed as a phase that girls grow out of, before shifting back into heteronormative discourses of femininity in adolescence. As Isabella’s feminine performance in childhood demonstrates, it did not secure a heterosexual future, just as her tomboy friend’s gender performance did not mean that she became an adult lesbian.

Elizabeth is another participant who identified as a sissy girl in her childhood, preferring relations with the tomboy. Elizabeth is a 36-year-old, upper-middle-class postgraduate student, from an Anglo-Celtic background. She echoes many of the points raised by Isabella, including an enhanced sense of power in these relationships and the desire to be like the risk-taking tomboy:

I was an obsessive reader and I read Heidi and ballet school novels in infants school—by far my favourite children’s stories, though, were two books, My Naughty Little Sister and another called Ramona the Pest which was all about the adventures of a girl who constantly got into trouble, who couldn’t help herself from messing things up and causing a stir and making a fuss. She was opinionated and defiant and risk-taking and I loved her. I definitely wanted to be her. She didn’t wear dresses—I suppose she would definitely be labelled a tomboy but that wouldn’t have meant anything to me, I just thought she was cool. I suppose she had a freedom that I didn’t have or, if I had it, I only had it for moments.

The desire for a sense of freedom and adventure associated with the tomboy was a fantasy that was partially fulfilled for Elizabeth through reading. The concept of the tomboy may not have been part of Elizabeth’s vocabulary as a child, but she recognised the significance of the protagonist’s nonconformist gendered behaviour. As a child, Elizabeth read tomboyism as being ‘cool’ and wished to emulate the characteristics that allowed Ramona to have such freedom. It is not coincidental that Ramona is called a pest, given that she is a female protagonist who exhibits traditionally masculine characteristics: Risk-taking, defiant, opinionated and adventurous. While the female characters in traditional children’s literature are frequently fairies, princesses and damsels in distress that require rescuing by male characters, Elizabeth had access to an alternative narrative in which a female occupied the protagonist role. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in her everyday life during childhood, Elizabeth pointed out that she sought out best friends who exhibited similar attributes to Ramona.

Conclusion: Implications for early childhood education

Through the memories of several women, this discussion has highlighted examples of incidents considered critical to the constitution and negotiation of these women’s gendered subjectivities in their childhood. Their experiences of gender and of gendered relationships suggests that they did not identify with hetero-femininity, but were more aligned with female masculinity in terms of their identities, desires, agency and power.

So what do these women’s experiences in childhood have to do with early childhood education today? First, Melissa’s and Alex’s experiences highlight the impact that strictly regulating children’s gender (by rigidly associating femininity with the female body and masculinity with the male body) can have on individuals. The shame and confusion that many of the participants in this study experienced in association with transgressing gender boundaries in their childhood resulted in their ‘closeting’ such behaviours, especially from disapproving adults. Shame is a powerful
tool of regulating behaviours, one in which self-surveillance or self-regulation is integral to the process. Young children often challenge the boundaries of the behaviours perceived appropriate for their gender, but they soon learn that such transgressions may need to be relegated to play; but, even in this context, it can be viewed as inappropriate. Each of the women indicated that the gender regulation they experienced in their schooling was at the forefront of their memories of the injustices they felt in their early years.

Isabella makes some valuable comments associated with the stereotypes around children’s gender transgression and adult fears around children’s future sexuality. The perception that young children who transgress gender norms may turn out gay in the future is a fear that often exists, not just for some parents but also for some educators. This is especially associated with young boys who enjoy cross-dressing, either during play or at other times. Boys’ or girls’ transgressive gender behaviours do not necessarily lead to non-normative sexualities in their adolescence or adult lives. It is not unusual or ‘abnormal’ for children to explore different performances of gender that are not perceived to be associated with their sex. Children are adept at linking adults’ regulation of their gender with the possibility that they have to hide behaviours that are perceived to transgress gendered norms.

Early childhood educators can play a critical role in providing young children with a supportive environment in which they can express and explore different performances of gender, including those that sit outside heteronormative socio-cultural norms. Supportive adults and an inclusive learning environment are highly significant to the health and wellbeing of young children who choose to take up non-normative performances of gender. Such a flexible and supportive environment is also important for all children, including those who conform to gender norms. This sends a strong message to children about appreciating diversity and difference rather than fearing it, and validates children’s choices to do gender differently if they so wish. Being reflective about our practices around children’s gender diversity is also critically aligned with the principles and philosophies put forth in the Early Years Learning Framework (2009). In order to support and enable children’s ‘belonging, being and becoming’, educators are in a privileged position to be able to employ practices that demonstrate respect for equity and diversity—the very principles that underpin our first national framework. Employing practices that are underpinned by equity and diversity is imperative for countering the homophobia, gender discrimination and other inequities that exist.

Finally, the comments made by Isabella and Elizabeth remind us that we are relational; we develop a sense of self, agency and self-esteem through our relations with others. The gender-conforming girl child seems to have much to gain in choosing to build relationships with other girls whose gender performances transgress normative femininity and align more with female masculinity. These relationships are often considered problematic, or potentially so, and as being a ‘bad influence’ on ‘good girls’. Rather than prohibiting these relationships, we need to understand and further explore how these experiences allow young girls to extend their sense of agency, power and desire.

References


A review of gay and lesbian themed early childhood children’s literature

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ON THE THIRD FLOOR OF THE downtown library, my world began to open up. It was in the gay and lesbian literature section that I began to reclaim my life. I would spend nights alone, sitting on the floor reading coming out stories, sections of fiction, gay and lesbian history, and anything else I could find. Those nights on the third floor, alone on the cold cement floor, were where I took my first breaths of life. It was where I discovered that I would survive. It was literature and literacy that helped save my life.

William DeJean (2001)

SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF THE first children’s book sometime around the mid-1600s, there have been hundreds of thousands of them, but early childhood children’s literature containing gay and lesbian themes is in its infancy. In 2000 Frances Ann Day published Lesbian and gay voices: An annotated bibliography and guide to literature for children and young adults. The book is a 268-page resource of 275 titles that portray honest, accurate, gay-friendly characters and themes for young people. It was a revolutionary book for gay and lesbian people who, like DeJean in his quote above, often sought visions of themselves in literature as a way towards wholeness. The lesbian poet Adrienne Rich (Maher & Tetreault, 1994, p. 1) stated:

When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female, or speak with a different accent or dialect than theirs, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.

Day’s (2000) compilation of gay and lesbian themed children’s and young adult literature was an affirmation that a once invisible community was beginning to see itself mirrored more and more in stories for children, and that these mirrors had the capacity to have a great impact on the lives of children who, like DeJean in the opening quote, were feeling alone. Day reviews six categories of books: Picture books, fiction, short stories, nonfiction, biography and autobiography, and books for librarians, educators, parents and other adults. Because it was the first book of its kind, Day gave extensive author profiles, a calendar of gay and lesbian yearly events, and an extensive resource section that included hotline numbers for gay and lesbian youth in crisis. Here was a complete resource for young gays and lesbians as well as for those who care for and nurture them. Of the 275 titles reviewed by Day, only 27 were early childhood books. The earliest publication date of these 27 books is 1989.

Purpose of the study

It has been nearly a decade since Day published her annotated bibliography. The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast the 27 children's picture books that Day reviewed in 2000 with a selection of picture books written within the past nine years to see if their storylines, images and depictions of gays and lesbians have changed, and to critique the evolving quality of these works. This paper refers only to ‘gays and lesbians’ because, as yet, there are no early childhood books that portray bisexual or transgendered people.

Social values, including attitudes towards gays and lesbians, begin at a very young age (Campos, 2005). The dominant attitude among adults in school communities is that topics related to gays and lesbians are not relevant to young children’s lives and that the discussion of such topics is inappropriate for such children (Chung & Courville, 2008). The reality, though, is that ‘All children are dramatically affected by anti-gay prejudice, and most, by a relatively young age, already have had “exposure” to LGBT-related information, unfortunately most of it misleading and harmful’ (Chung & Courville, 2008, p. iii). All guardians of children—parents and teachers alike—can be powerful role models who demonstrate that all people, regardless of their sexual orientation, deserve recognition and respect. It is imperative that schools address these issues at all grade
levels to truly begin to confront and counter prejudice and the violence that stems from it. It is reasonable to assume that when/if schools address these issues at all grade levels, early learning around difference can begin and spaces can open up in the classroom that acknowledge multiple sexualities and diverse family structures. This must begin in early childhood because, if educators wait until children are in the middle and upper grades, the task becomes one of unlearning prejudice instead of preventing it. The selection of early childhood stories offered in this paper, when supported by sound pedagogical practices, can provide children with an early engagement with difference and the principles of social justice.

Method of analysis

The review of the children’s books in this article will follow Day’s (2000) original ‘Suggested guidelines for evaluating books with lesbian and gay content’ (pp. xxiii-xxv), as well as adding other current criteria for reviewing children’s books (Temple, Martinez & Yokota, 2006). Day’s guidelines are:

- **General selection criteria:** These have to do with literary quality and strong social values, and include analysing the books for racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, ageism, ableism, size oppression and lookism.
- **Self-esteem:** Will the book bolster or diminish self-esteem? Does it provide positive images?
- **Homophobia and heterosexism:** Is there an irrational fear or intolerance of lesbian and gay people? Is heterosexuality assumed?
- **Characterisation:** Are lesbian and gay characters portrayed as complex, multidimensional individuals? Do they each have unique interests and personalities? Is their lesbian or gay identity portrayed as only one of a number of significant social groups they identify with?
- **Language:** Does the book use language that is respectful of lesbian and gay people? Examples of offensive descriptors are: Lifestyle, preference, choice and mannish.
- **Stereotypes:** Does the book promote or debunk stereotypes of lesbian and gay people?
- **Erasure:** Are biographers honest about the sexual identity of their subjects?

Temple, Martinez and Yokoto (2006) suggest ‘six qualities of outstanding children’s literature’ and these will also be used to assess the books reviewed in this paper. Believing in the immersion of young children in rich art-based environments, the author of this paper has added the seventh quality.

1. Good books expand awareness and give children names for things in the world and frameworks for their own experiences. Quality books take children inside other people’s perspectives and increase their capacity for empathy.

2. Good books provide an enjoyable read that doesn’t overtly teach or moralise. If a book is too contrived to teach a lesson, children will not tolerate it.

3. Good books tell the truth of human experience. The characters are true to life and the insights are accurate and wise.

4. Good books embody quality. Their words are precisely chosen and poetic in their sound and imagery. The plot is convincing and the characters are believable.

5. Good books have integrity. The genre, plot, language, characters, style, theme and illustrations all come together to form a satisfying whole.

6. Good books show originality and introduce children to unique characters or situations to show the world from a different viewpoint.

7. Good books have a visual aesthetic richness. The pictures, images, and symbols in the artistic expression engage, thrill, and draw children back to them again and again.

Findings

The review of the early childhood children’s books Day mentions, coupled with the review of the books in this paper, allows us to look at the themes in 53 books. The review of these books, based on the criteria mentioned above, breaks down into six themes: Visibility for same-sex parents, celebrations of family diversity, love and marriage, adoption, biography, and gender variance.

Table 1: First decades

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>William’s doll</td>
<td>1972</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oliver Button is a sissy</td>
<td>1979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orca’s song</td>
<td>1987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prince Cinders</td>
<td>1987</td>
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</table>
Comparing the titles and content of early children’s literature that has gay and lesbian themes, there are some distinct differences between the previous decades (Table 1) and more recent decade (Table 2). Many of the books in the first decade are explicit in their messages and don’t seem like stories that might attract child readers. With titles such as "Heather has two mommies" (Newman, 1989), "Daddy’s roommate" (Willhoite, 1990), and "How would you feel if your dad was gay?" (Heron, 1991), these books hardly have a compelling story that children would be drawn to on their own. Gay and lesbian literature for children published between 1989 and 1999 appears to be about visibility, mirroring what is going on in society with regard to increasing the visibility of gay and lesbian people.

Bruhm and Hurley (2004) argue that many of the gay and lesbian early childhood books are about gays and lesbians seeking respectability. Spitz (1999) noted that some children’s books become classics because they tackle important psychological themes with craftsmanship and subtlety. She abhors the spate of psychological self-help books for children that deal didactically with real-life situations and believes they’ll be short lived because they lack the aesthetic qualities necessary to engrave themselves onto children’s hearts. ‘A book may focus directly and pointedly on a specific emotional and/or social problem, but if it cannot tell a good story, provide visual stimulation, and engage its audience in an imaginary world, it will fall by the wayside’ (p. 8). Children prefer stories once removed from their real lives so that they can process the psychological implications for themselves. As a classic example, "Hansel and Gretel" is a story about abandonment and how smart children can save themselves. It wasn’t titled "Daddy dumped me in the forest." Many of the early gay and lesbian themed books certainly deal didactically with gay families.

Here we find a major difference between many of the
books in the two tables. Although most books easily meet Day’s (2000) ‘Suggested Guidelines for Evaluating Books with Lesbian and Gay Content’, fewer books from the first table meet Temple’s ‘Qualities of Outstanding Children’s Literature’. Thus the books from the first table, although their topics and themes are important—even revolutionary—are often not well written and employing engaging language that would attract a child. They aren’t enjoyable for children, as they are too didactic and overly moralising. They do not always form a satisfying whole. The exception to these explicit books that appear to be about increasing the visibility and respectability of gay parents, and more for adults than for children, are the works of Johnny Valentine. Valentine’s books are fairytales with storylines that draw children into them. Bettelheim (1975) believes that fairytales speak to a child’s unconscious fears, give body to their unconscious anxieties, and relieves them without ever letting them come to conscious awareness.

The duke who outlawed jelly beans and other stories (Valentine, 1991), The day they put a tax on rainbows and other stories (Valentine, 1992), and Two moms, the zark, and me (Valentine, 1993) are all wonderful fairytales where gay parents are secondary to the plots that typically involve wise and kind children overcoming some kind of obstacle. Two other titles, The daddy machine (Valentine, 1992) and One dad, two dads, brown dad, blue dads (Valentine, 1994) seem reminiscent of Dr Seuss with their rhyming and humour. One dad, two dads is less explicitly about gay fathers than it is about how fathers come in all shapes, colours and sizes. It is also important to note that this latter title had parents of different colours, black and brown dads specifically, and is the first book in this study that has representations other than white people.

The second table of children’s books that deal with lesbian mothers and gay fathers have gone beyond the concern of visibility. Many of them are still about gay and lesbian parents, but the parents are secondary characters to the children in the stories, and sexual orientation is not featured in the titles as in the books written from 1989 to 1999. Visibility is more nuanced and, in the case of Emma and Meesha my boy, Emma has two mothers but the point of the story is the way she cares for her cat. The learn to include easy-to-read series (harding & harding 2002, 2005) beautifully portrays a lesbian couple and their daughter. This Australian series is becoming a staple in many schools throughout the country and is a perfect example of how same-sex parents play secondary roles in stories in the second table. The four books in the series—going to fair day (2002), my house (2002), Koalas on parade (2005), and the rainbow cubby house (2005)—are about a young schoolgirl and her two moms. The two mothers are mentioned but they don’t speak, and play only a supporting role in the day-to-day life of the little girl. Written in the girl’s voice, the stories are about going to the fair, day-to-day life in her home, a school costume event, and building a clubhouse. The girl’s friend at school is a boy named Jed who just happens to have two dads. This fact is not central to the stories, which involve pets and things that young children face and love daily. The authors of the stories are six-year-old Brenna Harding and her mother, Vicki Harding. Brenna was six when the first two books were written and eight when she wrote the last two. This series is remarkable for having a child author, and nowhere is this repeated in any of the other 53 books. This series easily meets both Day’s and Temple’s criteria, as the simplicity of the stories and art attract children over and over again.

The different dragon is a charming book about a little boy named Noah who happens to have two mothers. The theme, though, is the routine of getting ready for bed. Another excellent addition to this theme is Antonio’s card/La tarjeta de Antonio (Gonzalez, 2005). In this story, a young boy ‘comes out’ at school with regard to his lesbian mothers. What makes this book different is that it is a bilingual story with a Latino boy as the protagonist, something not often seen in children’s books about gay and lesbian families. It’s the first story that shows the child’s anxiety about the sexual orientation of his parents. Gonzalez’s book is to be commended for bringing such anxiety to the mirror and having educators reflect upon it. A recent piece written by the author of this paper (sapp, 2009) spoke of the palpable discomfort that teachers demonstrated when gay and lesbian themed children’s books were introduced as a topic in a graduate education course. During the course, titled ‘literature for children and adolescents’, teachers expressed their great anxiety over using any storyline with gay and lesbian themes. Statements such as ‘having books like these floating around in libraries is not something you want as a hazard for parents who prefer to teach their kids conservatively’ reveal educators’ unease about having gay and lesbian themed books in their classroom. It stands to reason that if educators are anxious then children may pick up on this anxiety as well. Gonzalez’s story also reveals how this genre is maturing by presenting narratives showing a rich depth of emotional responses that range from fear and anxiety to comfort and pride.

As mentioned, most of the books from 1989 to 1999 are about the visibility of gay and lesbian parents. There are exceptions to this, where books mirror other aspects of what is going on in the GLBTQ community. One, newman’s (1995) too far away to touch, is about a gay uncle explaining to his beloved niece that he is dying of AIDS. Another innovative book is newman’s (1991) belinda’s bouquet. The theme is size bias, and the lesbian mother is a secondary character who is a loving support to the child. These stories take on anxieties about death and size discrimination, making them more about issues children face daily rather than about the visibility of sexual orientation.
Celebrations of family diversity

A second common group of books used in early childhood have to do with introducing the concept of family to young children. Day (2000) identifies Families: A celebration of diversity, commitment, and love (Jenness, 1990) as an example of a family book about how some families have two dads and two moms. In this photo-essay book, two of the 17 families are gay and lesbian. In fairness to Jenness, photo essays can quickly become outdated, and this certainly applies to the flat black and white photographs in Families. This non-aesthetic quality seems typical of books published in the first table. Three other books about the concept of family are All families are different (Gordon, 2000), The family book (Parr, 2003), and All families are special (Simon, 2003). Todd Parr’s work is an example of the qualities of outstanding children’s literature that Temple addresses, and Parr’s books are favourites of children who go back to them again and again.

Two exceptions to the poor quality usually seen in the first table of children’s literature with gay and lesbian themes are ABC a family alphabet book (Combs, 2000) and 123 a family counting book (Combs, 2000). Both are written by Bobbie Combs and are an example of typical books that introduce young children to the alphabet and counting to 10. What makes these two books outstanding is that they illustrate diverse, multiracial, and same-sex families. It is also one of the only books that show people with disabilities. The illustrations in ABC a family alphabet book (Combs, 2000), less portrait and more caricature, show people of different shapes, sizes and abilities, and young children will want to read this book over and over.

In 2005 one of the most controversial and most banned books was published. And Tango makes three (Richardson, 2005) is the real story of Roy and Silo, two male chinstrap penguins who live in the New York City Central Park Zoo. When all the boy and girl penguins began coupling and courting, the zookeeper noticed that the two males were doing what males and females traditionally had always done. Roy and Silo were bowing to each other, singing to each other, and walking and swimming together. They couldn’t lay an egg, but the zookeeper found an egg that was uncared for and put it in their nest, and they cared for it until it hatched. The book, although a favourite of children, became anathema to many people who declared it was teaching children to be homosexual, and the book was banned. It’s quite easy to get a book on the banned book list, as all that needs to be done is for one person to write a formal complaint and file it with a library or school requesting that the material be removed from the library because of content or appropriateness.

Love and marriage

Love and marriage are rarely the theme of gay and lesbian books for young children, although they are often the theme of traditional children’s fairytales. Day (2000) mentions one book about marriage, Daddy’s wedding (Willhoite, 1996), the sequel to Daddy’s roommate (Willhoite, 1990). The book, told through the lens of ten-year-old Nick, is about the marriage of his father and his roommate Frank. The book refers to it as a ‘commitment ceremony’. There is a stunning Canadian book that Day didn’t mention. It is Anne Cameron’s folktale Orca’s song (1987). In this beautiful tale, a female orca falls in love with a female osprey [and the two birth an orca as a child]. Orca’s song is a beautiful narrative of love that contains no overt moralising so often found in books in the first table of gay and lesbian stories.

First published in The Netherlands, where gay marriage is a legal right, King & king (Haan, 2000) is the charming fairytale about a prince whose mother, the Queen, demands that he marry so she can retire. He meets and falls in love with Prince Lee. Hundreds of books have a storyline about a prince and princess getting married, but, because of its same-sex couple, this particular book aroused the fury of those opposed to gay and lesbian themes in children’s literature and it became one of the most banned books of all time.

Also first published in The Netherlands is Hello, Sailor (Sollie, 2000), released in Great Britain and the United States in 2003. In the story Matt operates a lighthouse and keeps watch so that ships will be safe, but mostly he is watching for Sailor to come home. Sailor had gone to sea and had told Matt that one day he’d come back for him and they’d sail around the world together. Although the story doesn’t say that Matt and Sailor are lovers, it is obvious that the two are in love.

Paul Monette’s Sanctuary: A tale of life in the woods (1997) could be considered a piece of children’s literature in the vein of Harry Potter and The chronicles of Narnia. In this beautifully written story, Renarda the fox and Lapine the rabbit are two female characters who fall in love in an enchanted forest sanctuary. Interestingly, the witches and wizards in the story know no true gender, but change from male to female naturally, demonstrating that gender is indeed fluid. This 94-page tale has every element that makes for a quality piece of literature. Sanctuary has the capacity to be the single most important work to educate children and adults on issues surrounding gay and lesbian relationships. Monette’s writing is exquisite. His characters are well developed, multifaceted and endearing. The injustice the two lovers experience is outrageous and sure to engage students’ empathy. The fantasy world of the enchanted forest is believable. The arguments from the animals opposing the relationship of the two protagonists and the strategies they use to keep them apart are eerily similar to those used today to limit the civil rights of gay and lesbian people everywhere. Children and teachers alike would benefit greatly from well framed discussion around the themes of this story.
Adoption

In the books reviewed by Day about families with same-sex parents, they were often about a man and a woman who divorced after having a child and then one of the adults entered a same-sex relationship. Books about same-sex couples adopting didn’t hit the market until around 2002. Leslea Newman, one of the most prolific authors of gay and lesbian stories for children and the author of such classics as *Heather has two mommies* (1989) and *Belinda’s bouquet* (1991), wrote one of the first books to address same-sex adoption. *Felicia’s favorite story* (Newman, 2002) is the story of a little girl adopted from Guatemala by two women. Also published the same year, *The white swan express: A story about adoption* (Okimoto, 2002), tells four couples’ stories about going to China to adopt a child. One of the four is a same-sex couple named Andrea and Charlotte. *How my family came to be—Daddy, papa and me* (Aldrich, 2003), published a year later, is the story of two white men who adopt an Afro-American baby. As a result of the success of *King & king*, Dutch authors Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland published a follow up title, *King & king & family* (Haan, 2004). One thing apparent in the books about adoption is that they all involve multi-racial families.

Biography

Although history is full of gay and lesbian individuals who have made a tremendous impact on society, there is rarely a mention of sexual orientation in biographies for children. Heterosexuality is celebrated or, at least assumed. This does a great disservice to children as it keeps homosexuality invisible. It might help conservatives assume. This does a great disservice to children as it keeps homosexuality invisible. It might help conservatives assuming that ‘we don’t want this gay kids reading such stories. They need to read stories depicting gentle men and strong women. One such charming story is *Cinder Edna* (Jackson, 1994) where Edna, unlike her counterpart Cinderella, doesn’t wait for her fairy godmother to set her up with a gown, but instead uses money she earns to put a dress on layby.

Two of the earliest children’s books to deal specifically with boys who reject their male normative roles are *William’s doll* (Zolotow, 1972) and *Oliver Button is a sissy* (dePaola, 1979). In the first book, William wants a doll to love and is called a sissy, an obvious reference to being gay. His father tries to coerce him into more masculine play, but when his grandmother comes to visit she buys him a doll. The grandmother tells her son that this doll will help William learn how to nurture and love a child and be a good father.

*Oliver Button is a sissy* is about a young boy more interested in jumping rope and playing with paper dolls than he is in sports. His father chides him for being a sissy and his mother urges him to exercise. The parents put Oliver in a dance class, but this just makes things worse for him at school, where bullies tease him about his dancing and write ‘Oliver Button is a sissy’ on the side of the school building. Davies (2003) considers stories such as *Oliver Button is a sissy* to be feminist stories because the subtext, in this case gender, actually becomes the text of the story itself.

These two classic books are some of the best in respect of teaching children about gender variance. It’s important to note that they were published well before any books that specifically named gay and lesbian characters. Because of this, Day (2000) didn’t include either of these titles in her study. Today there are other books that address being a sissy as a way of urging young children to be kind to those of their peers who don’t fit into gender normative categories. One such book is *The sissy duckling* (Fierstein, 2002) and is about Elmer, the duckling who loves to bake cookies and play make-believe instead of playing football and building forts like all of the other boy ducks. Gay and lesbian storylines too often show the characters having to perform some great feat to earn love, but Fierstein saves the story of *The sissy duckling* by having Elmer embrace his ‘sissyhood’. Elmer does perform a great and kind feat,
but tells everyone at the end that he’s still a sissy and he isn’t going to change for them, for anyone.

In Andrea U’Ren’s Pugdog (2001) a man named Mike gets a pugdog, and every day they go to the park where Pugdog chases squirrels and rolls in the dirt. One day Pugdog hurts his foot and Mike takes him to the veterinarian where he finds out that Pugdog is a girl. When they next go to the park, Mike doesn’t let Pugdog play and get dirty because, he tells her, ladies don’t do that kind of thing. Mike points to a fancy French poodle as a model for how Pugdog should behave. Pugdog tries her best to imitate the poodle, but she falls into a deep depression and runs away. Mike finds her and, worried that he’s lost his Pugdog forever, repents of trying to change her and tells her she is perfect just the way she is. At that moment the fancy French poodle comes up and its owner introduces it as Harry. It appears that you can’t judge a book by its cover. The clever gender switch in this book is sure to intrigue young children who so often enjoy taking on both gender roles in their imaginative play.

Lesléa Newman, author of Heather has two mommies, shows her staying power as an author of gay and lesbian children’s books when she publishes The boy who cried fabulous in 2004. When Roger starts out to school one morning his mother has only one rule for him: Go straight to school and don’t be late. But on the way Roger sees ‘a fabulous coat in a fabulous store with a fabulous bell on a fabulous door’. His parents forbid him to use the word ‘fabulous’. Poor Roger is as silent as he can be until finally he explodes with sheer joy at the wonderful world around him. This cleverly written book uses Roger’s use of the word ‘fabulous’ as a code for his being gay.

Although mentioned under the theme of visibility for same-sex parents, The different dragon (Bryan, 2006) also deals beautifully with assuring little boys that they can embrace a range of emotions. In the story, Noah sails in a magical sailboat to Dragon Cove and finds a crying dragon who is tired of always having to be fierce. Noah tells the dragon there are many ways to be, and being fierce is only one of them.

All of these books on gender variance seem to be making one specific point: Fathers have a much more difficult time with gender variance than do mothers. The mothers and grandmothers in the stories, although concerned for their children, love them exactly as they are. It’s the fathers who chide, coerce and disown their sons for not being manly. Fathers are unanimously portrayed as having a difficult time with gender variance, whereas mothers and grandmothers are nearly always open and affirming. Given the prevalence of heteronormativity, it is surprising that so few of the books in this paper address homophobia more explicitly. This is certainly true of the stories in the first decade and of many, but not all, in the second decade. Although well intentioned, stories that position all men as homophobic and all women as accepting actually reinforce heteronormative gender roles, the exact opposite of the intent of many of these books.

### Conclusion

Much has occurred in the area of early childhood children’s literature in the past two decades. The early books were mostly published by alternative presses and sold in alternative gay, lesbian and feminist bookstores. Word of them spread from person to person. The books often mirrored what was going on in the gay and lesbian civil rights movement, and this still holds true today (see Table 3). The early book art was often flat, one dimensional, and unlike the books from larger publishers who could afford well established artists. The topics were at least as much for adults as for children. They were so explicit that one need only to read the title to get the full thrust of what the book was about. They lacked the elements of quality literature that children would want to read over and over again. Like gay and lesbian people themselves, these early published stories seem to be about increasing visibility and respectability, assuring others that same-sex families are like all families, and that gays and lesbians are kind, caring and decent people. The books often lacked images of diversity and were focused on white, middle-class culture. There were no images of people with disabilities.

Although the first decades of books published lack all of these elements, they are nothing less than miracles to gay and lesbian people, especially same-sex families with children. No one had ever published in this genre before, and these early works were the first time that same-sex families saw themselves mirrored in the print and pictures of books. As Adrienne Rich noted, queer families looked into a mirror and saw themselves for the first time (Maher & Tetreault, 1994). The brave men and women who wrote, illustrated and published these first works will always have the gratitude of the gay and lesbian community.

The most recent decade of early childhood children’s literature is growing from these seminal works. With the increased visibility of gays and lesbians in society, books have become more nuanced in their storylines. Same-sex parents have now gone from main characters to supporting characters as our children take the leading role. Mainstream publishers are increasingly taking on stories that involve same-sex couples and queer themes, particularly in the area of gender variance. Books with gay and lesbian people are becoming more diverse, showing people with disabilities, multiracial families, and girls and people of colour in the role of main character.

One aspect that has not changed is the swiftness of conservative groups who ban books with any kind of gay or lesbian theme. Most of the books in this study have been banned; some of them are among the most banned books of all time. An examination of the American Library Association’s list of most challenged books between 1990
and 2000 showed 515 books were challenged because of homosexual themes (Bosman & Bradford, 2008). But, as we enter this latest decade of early children’s literature with gay and lesbian themes, things are getting better. A more recent survey from 2004 showed that 27 per cent of the population thought books with gay and lesbian themes should be banned from libraries, a decrease from 45 per cent in previous surveys (American Library Association, 2009).

Children’s books with gay and lesbian storylines or that deal with gender variance in any way are providing valuable counter narratives to heteronormativity. These counter narratives arise in opposition to dominance of heteronormativeness and provide young children with stories that undermine the dominance of heterosexuality. It’s not only Jack who can be wise enough and strong enough to escape the giant; so can Kate. Not only can children come from a family made up of a mother and father, but also from families made up of one parent, two same-sex parents, grandparents and grandmothers, and many other configurations. One size does not fit all when it comes to the human condition. Counter narratives are important for a diverse society, and especially for children, to not only see themselves in the mirror of literature, but also to look out of the window of literature and beyond the confines of their own world.

Who knows what the third decade of early childhood children’s books will unveil? There will certainly be increased diversity. Educators and activists hope for an end to able-bodiedness as a dominant theme in the same way they have fought to end the dominance of heterosexuality and whiteness (McRuer, 2006; Myers & Bersani, 2009). Although there are images of gays and lesbians in children’s literature, nowhere are there images of other genders such as bisexuals or transgendered people. There have recently been groundbreaking works in adolescent fiction in regards to transgendered storylines (Peters, 2006; Wittlinger, 2007), thus one can only hope that some day images of all genders will be represented in early childhood literature as well. One thing is for sure, though. Somewhere there is a child or young adult still going to a library, like DeJean (2001), and sitting on the cold floor seeking stories and images of herself/himself. Some libraries still self censor books with gay and lesbian themes, but the chances are getting better and better that children of all sexual orientations, family make-ups, abilities, races, ethnicities, and genders are beginning to see reflections of themselves in the early childhood literature mirror.

Table 3: Gay and lesbian civil rights events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Gay and lesbian civil rights events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>The Stonewall riots in New York City spark the modern day gay and lesbian civil rights movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>The American Psychiatric Association removes homosexuality from its official list of mental disorders</td>
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<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Assassination of Harvey Milk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>First AIDS case publicly reported</td>
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<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>First World AIDS Day</td>
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<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Denmark becomes the first country to legalise same-sex partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>The United States military institutes the ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ policy</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>South Africa adds gays to its constitution</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>The USA legalises the Defense of Marriage Act stating the federal government will not recognise same-sex marriage</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Matthew Shepard is murdered</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Vermont, USA becomes the first state to recognise civil unions between gay or lesbian couples</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>The American Medical Association opposes reparative therapy</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Holland legalises gay marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>The US Supreme Court rules that sodomy laws are unconstitutional</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Belgium legalises gay marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Same-sex marriages become legal in Massachusetts, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Spain and Canada legalise gay marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Groups around the globe celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Stonewall riots</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References


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Introduction

In this paper we (re)mark on continued investments in heteronormativity in early childhood education. The term (re)mark is used in two ways. First, despite an already established body of research and scholarship designed to inform policy and practice about the troubling impact of heteronormativity in education settings, heteronormative practices are still prevalent. We think this is (re)markable, given the apparent openness to diversity and difference in early childhood education today. We therefore take this opportunity to re-illustrate how practices are ‘marked’ and to consider possibilities for alternative investments. Second, the investment in heteronormativity continues to mark heterosexual sexuality as the normal and ascendant form of sexuality by repetitively and exclusively constituting it as the dominant and normative standard for all legitimate and close interpersonal socio-sexual relationships. Such investments are discriminatory and oppressive—they work to mask other sexualities and therefore help to silence alternatives to heterosexual sexuality. This silencing is perhaps the most insidious effect of heteronormativity. Fine (2003) writes that silencing ‘…constitutes the practices by which contradictory evidence, ideologies, and experiences find themselves buried, camouflaged, and discredited’ (p. 16). Silence not only obscures the visibility of non-heterosexual sexualities, it also obstructs attempts to recognise how constructions of sexuality marked out deviations to heterosexual sexuality and worked to produce a ‘new specification of individuals’ (1978, pp. 42-43) whose sexuality deviated from the ‘norm’. The homosexual was born and s/he became ‘other’ to the heterosexual. An investment in heteronormativity therefore reflects an investment in constructions that position some knowledge, concepts and people as ‘other’. It is an investment in discriminatory and limiting discourses that mark knowledge, concepts and people outside of the (hetero)norm as troubling. It is an investment in a construction that disrespects the realities of many people’s lives. It is an investment in ‘silence’ because heteronormativity works to defend the normalcy of heterosexual sexuality by obscuring and diminishing the legitimacy of alternatives.

One way this silencing is achieved is through what Epstein and Johnson call the ‘heterosexual presumption’ (1994, p. 198). This is where heterosexual sexuality is assumed for all. This assumption marks other sexualities as ‘pervasive, remarkable or dangerous’ (p. 198) and therefore helps to silence alternatives to heterosexual sexuality. This silence is perhaps the most insidious effect of heteronormativity. Fine (2003) writes that silencing ‘…constitutes the practices by which contradictory evidence, ideologies, and experiences find themselves buried, camouflaged, and discredited’ (p. 16). Silence not only obscures the visibility of non-heterosexual sexualities, it also obstructs attempts to recognise how constructions...
of heterosexual sexuality as normal came to be. This is, in part, how we have come to find ourselves thinking that heterosexual sexuality ‘just is’.

In this paper, we draw from our experiences and respective research projects to (re)mark on the ongoing silencing of sexualities matters in the contexts of initial teacher education and practices with children and their families in early childhood settings. The examples shared illustrate teachers and student teachers actively producing heteronormativity. We show how this occurs through the taking up of dominant discourses that reassert the normalcy of heterosexual sexuality and silence alternatives. We highlight the consequences of silence, suggesting that it serves to mask possibilities for: who and how teacher educators, teachers, children and their families can ‘be’; how we might work effectively together; and how we might come to understand the world beyond the constraints of the (hetero)norm. In concluding, the paper offers some suggestions for how to respond to heteronormativity in ways that seek to invest in a socially-just future.

**Dominant discourses assisting investments in silence**

In our work and the work of others (see, for example, Gunn, 2005, 2008; Robinson, 2000, 2002; Surtees, 2003, 2005, 2008; Taylor & Richardson, 2005) dominant discourses are described for the ways they can preserve, in early childhood education, an investment in silence with regard to sexualities in general and non-heterosexual sexualities in particular. This investment in silence enables understandings of normal and ascendant heterosexual sexuality to lay undisturbed. What are the key discourses that enable this investment to continue? In early childhood education we suggest that they cohere around discourses of the nuclear family form, discourses of sexuality that posit sexualities as dangerous and/or risky, and discourses of childhood innocence and developmentalism.

Family discourses in the Western world tend to privilege a particular family form: those consisting of heterosexual parents who are, or who are assumed to be, children’s biological or legal mothers and fathers. Nuclear family discourses rely on an expectation or an assumption of heterosexual sexuality on the part of opposite-gender parents (Gunn, 2008). In the case of traditional nuclear families, ideas of gender informed by essentialism are also central (Unwin, 1986). The privileging of the nuclear family form, through discourses of the nuclear family, works to constitute this form of family as normal and other forms of family as not. As exceptions to the norm, non-nuclear families—of all kinds—are positioned as ‘other’. Where nuclear family discourses dominate, recognising same-gender parents can become difficult. Such non-recognition can construct barriers to participation that may be hard to overcome.

Discourses of sexualities as dangerous and risky stem from Victorian moral and religious beliefs and continue in the present day (Levine, 2002). Within such discourses, all forms of sexualities are ‘fraught with danger’ and fuelled by risk anxiety. Risk anxiety is the common perception of the world as less constant, secure and reliable (Furedi, 1997; Jackson & Scott, 1999). It refers to both ongoing uneasiness or worry about actual or perceived hazards and the ongoing monitoring of these (Jackson & Scott, 1999; Scott, Jackson & Backett-Milburn, 2001; Tulloch & Lupton, 2003). Persisting as an all-pervasive feature of Western society, risk anxiety is compounded by moral panics—an intensified concern about a particular situation, a high level of consensus that the situation is dangerous, and exaggeration of the danger (Johnson, 2000; Jones, 2001). Both anxiety and panic are particularly to the fore in fears about producing sexualised children, particularly of the non-heterosexual kind. The combination of risk anxiety and moral panic therefore increases teachers’ reading of any sexual knowledge and behaviours in children in circumscribed and diminished terms: ‘Normal’ knowledge/behaviours indicate evidence of a lack of subversion from such things as non-heterosexual sexualities, whereas ‘abnormal’ knowledge/behaviours indicate the possibility of such.

Discourses of sexualities as dangerous and risky connect with discourses of childhood innocence and developmentalism. These reinforce a desire to preserve children’s assumed purity and also foster a belief in children’s innately maturing state. Discourses of childhood innocence have roots in Christian views about the sinless condition of the child (Adams, 1997). Children’s supposed sinlessness generates, in teachers (and other adults), a desire to shelter children from the corrupt surrounding world—violent, oppressive, commercialised and exploitative—by constructing a form of environment in which the young child will be offered protection’ (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999, p. 45). On the other hand, discourses of developmentalism suggest that universal stage-based norms will unfold naturally with continued progress towards a state that is more sophisticated until such point as maturatio is achieved (Burman, 1994; Cannella, 1997, 1998; Robinson, 2002). Maturation, in the case of sexualities, equates with a stable heterosexual sexuality and implies fixed gender identity, norms established during the early part of the 20th century (Freud, 1925) and
reinforced in early childhood and associated fields (see, for example, Honig, 2000; Tait, 2001). Where discourses of childhood innocence and developmentalism converge, protecting children requires adults to deny them knowledge about ‘worldly’ and ‘adult’ concepts such as sexualities while at the same time shaping their development towards a fixed and stable gender identity and heterosexual sexuality.

To consider how these discourses influence practices in early childhood education, we illustrate how they can shape interactions so as to silence knowledge and understandings of alternatives to heterosexual sexualities. We (re)mark how easy it is to invest in silence, and therefore heteronormativity, in the context of routine interactions between teachers and others.

**Investing in silence: Discourses of the nuclear family**

The first two examples, ‘Hullo, Mrs Duck’ and ‘Girls don’t kiss each other!’, draw attention to how nuclear family discourses can trouble children’s understandings and diminish opportunities to open up awareness of lives beyond the (hetero)norm. In the first, a colleague in teacher education explained that, while on a centre visit, she observed three girls engaged in socio-dramatic family play. One girl was ‘Mum’, the second ‘Mummy’ and the third the ‘daughter’. A teacher close to the play saw a duck fly over the fence and land nearby, and the teacher said: ‘Hullo, Mrs Duck.’

In the second example, which also occurred in a centre, a teacher education student reported that she and a child overheard a teacher’s comment to a group of children: ‘Girls don’t kiss each other!’ Sensitive to the occasion, the child whispered to the student: ‘My mums kiss each other on the lips.’

In both these examples, children bring non-nuclear families to the curriculum. Conversely, their teachers reinforce discourses associated with the nuclear family despite the children in their care having intimate knowledge and experiences of alternatives. In the case of ‘Mrs Duck’, constituted as wife to the absent (yet present) ‘Mr Duck’, the bird is constructed through the teacher’s use of the pronoun as both heterosexual and wife. In the second example, an assumption that ‘heterosexual relationships are proper’ is to the fore. In (re)marking on these interactions we draw attention to the heteronormativity achieved. We ask: How might these teachers’ comments have worked to silence the children’s ongoing explorations and lived experiences of same-gender relationships and parenting? What messages might the children have taken away? Opportunities for teachers to expand family discourses occur regularly. We think it remarkable that opportunities like these are missed or ignored.

**Investing in silence: Discourses of childhood innocence and developmentalism**

Discourses of sexualities as dangerous and risky were evident in the questions from early childhood teacher education students preparing to graduate. Struggling to accept why discussions with children about families should include information about same-gender parents, students asked: ‘If we talk about it, won’t normal parents be scared their children will grow up like that?’ It is possible to read two ‘fears’ in the students’ question that call up discourses of danger and risk. First, non-heterosexual sexuality is to be feared for the way it is constructed as a potential threat to children’s heterosexual sexuality development should children become involved in discussions that include knowledge of same-gender parented families. Second, the constitution of same-gender parents as abnormal, by referring to ‘normal’ parents, establishes same-gender parents as potentially risky and dangerous. The students’ question about ‘talking about it’, coupled with the assumed parents’ fear, provides a useful impetus for silencing opportunities for introducing alternatives to the (hetero)norm.

Another example of discourses of sexualities as dangerous and risky lies in the use of the metaphor ‘Opening cans of worms’ in a study of heteronormative discourses and early childhood education (Gunn, 2008). This metaphor signals both danger and unpleasantness. Several different teachers in a range of interviews used it when asked to consider what it might be like to actively confront heteronormativity in early childhood settings. The ‘can’ suggests two important and potentially negative messages. First, it may be seen to denote a warning against challenging heteronormativity. Representing danger, the ‘can of worms’ reminds us of how easy it is to open up many new problems when trying to respond effectively to one. This line of thinking suggests that responding to heteronormativity is more risky than not. Maintaining silence therefore becomes the preferred response. Further, the unpleasant task of trying to contain the uncontrollable once it is out of ‘the can’ calls up the deviance and pathology assumed of non-heterosexual sexualities. We are reminded of the numerous ways in which sexuality can ‘go wrong’, thus the metaphor helps us to think that it may be better on balance to leave heteronormativity undisturbed.

**Investing in silence: Discourses of childhood innocence and developmentalism**

Discourses of innocence and of developmentalism are reflected in comments from teachers in research conversations about sexualities, parents, and aspects of children’s development. Pat and Rona’s conversation
about discomfort with the topic of sexuality in general (Gunn, 2008) is illustrative of both discourses. Together, these discourses secure an investment in heteronormativity.

Pat: I think it’s something that as a society we aren’t particularly comfortable with. I think a lot of adults like to think that anything to do with sexuality only occurs after 16 years of age ...

Rona: As an adult.

Pat: … and under then it’s, they’re innocent, and they should remain innocent. When you talk to someone, parents, about sexual play or sexual curiosity, I try to find other words because as soon as you say sexual they just …

Rona: It freaks them out.

Pat: They freak out. They’re feeling like something’s going wrong and then you know. We’ve given them, we have the resources that have the little thing that talks about norms and what children may do at certain ages, and you provide them with that, and when you first discuss it with them they are really, like, they’re not hearing you. All they’re hearing is ‘sexual, sexual, sexual’, and then they take those two pieces of paper away and come back and go, ‘Oh wow. It was quite reassuring to know that this and this and this occurs’.

A comment from Donna, a teacher participant in another study (Surtees, 2005), invests similarly:

Sexuality to me is an adult thing … and so I couldn’t see it, you know, like as a focus, as something that, yeah, would come through.’

The heteronormativity is achieved through these comments in two ways:

■ by the teacher’s reassurance to parents as to the proper sequences of normal sexuality development asserted in the ‘ages and stages’ documents provided to them

■ and in Donna’s denial of the relevance of sexualities matters to early childhood.

Discourses of innocence and developmentalism support teachers in making unremarkable the reality of children’s games suggestive of knowledge of relationships and love that are regularly played out in early education (Robinson, 2005b). They help to maintain investments in heteronormativity. Through them children are encouraged to construct themselves as heterosexual subjects, and heterosexual sexuality is reinscribed as normal and ascendant—accepted as part of children’s daily worlds even when sexuality is perceived as irrelevant.

The consequences of silence: ‘Masking possibilities’

Atkinson (2002) states: ‘The manifestations of dominant heterosexual discourses (including discourses of silence) are multiple and powerful. They are a cause for concern, not because heterosexuality is somehow desirable, but because heteronormativity so easily masks the possibility of anything else’ (p. 128). The masking of possibilities is of consequence in initial teacher education and in practices with children and their families.

Silence about sexualities matters masks possibilities for who and how teacher educators, teachers, children and their families can ‘be’ by constraining opportunities for acknowledging and valuing diverse identities and family formations (MacNaughton, 2001). In other words, silence is homogenising in effect (Surtees, 2005, 2006), enabling the presumption of heterosexuality (Epstein & Johnson, 1994) to obscure alternatives. Silence therefore works against liberal discourses that position difference as something to tolerate or accept (Jones Diaz & Robinson, 2000), or social justice discourses that position differences as valuable and a necessary dimension of a vibrant social fabric (Purdue, Gordon-Burns, Gunn, Madden & Surtees, 2009); discourses that preserve heteronormativity seek to maintain an inequitable status quo.

Silence about sexualities matters masks possibilities in terms of how we, as teachers, might work effectively together and with diverse parents and families (Gunn & Surtees, 2004). Where a lack of honesty and openness about sexualities in their diverse forms exists, it can (as Pat and Rona’s exchange reveals) lead to uncomfortable moments that we work hard to avoid. Silence also masks possibilities for understanding the world beyond the constraints of the (hetero)norm, and, from where we stand, that seems a very narrow view because possibilities for high-quality teaching and learning are diminished when some constructions in the world dominate so pervasively over others.

Robinson (2005a) reminds us that ‘processes of prejudice, hatred and discrimination are well under way in the early years of children’s lives’ (p. 177) and that we live in a world where violence and hate crimes targeting non-heterosexuals are commonplace. Given these factors, she asks if we can afford to risk not putting in the necessary work to achieve social justice and inclusion. We ask, therefore, what alternative investments might be made in early childhood education, for and with families and children, towards this end?

Alternative investments: Investing in a socially just future

The work of Nancy Fraser (1997) proves useful when thinking about alternative investments that might
successfully lead to a disruption of the (hetero) norm. She characterises justice, in respect of non-heterosexual sexualities, as quintessentially a matter of recognition, claiming recognition as a primary response that would contribute towards social justice in this domain. This assumes visibility: Resisting silence is therefore essential. Further, actively seeking to confront prejudice, homophobia and discrimination as and when it occurs is another investment that seems likely to engender change.

Investments in recognition require a growing awareness of the multitude of ways heterosexual sexuality is repeatedly constituted as a standard against which all other forms of sexuality are compared. Such a cultural shift opens up possibilities for alternative options to heterosexual sexuality to emerge and for justice to prevail. Nuclear family discourses, discourses of sexualities as dangerous and risky, and discourses of childhood innocence and developmentalism, as this paper has highlighted, all cohere in part around the construction of heterosexual sexuality as normal and ascendant. We must work to show this construction in action so that its normalcy is exposed.

Investments in confronting prejudice, homophobia and discrimination require us, as Blaise and Andrew (2005) put it, to ‘be bad’ or, as Robinson (2005a) says, to ‘risk-take’. We must challenge power relations and deconstruct discourses that contribute to heteronormativity. So how may we begin?

Given that we are using Fraser’s (1997) recognition as a frame for resisting heteronormative practices, an obvious first place to start confronting heteronormativity is to begin talking about it. By examining everyday situations like those discussed in this paper, for the ways in which heterosexual sexuality is quietly reasserted as a norm to which all should aspire, fruitful discussions can emerge, and alternatives can come to the fore.

As well as practices, close readings of policies and the representation of spaces and places in and around early childhood education can reveal evidence of heteronormativity that might work against justice and inclusion. Are centre policies about inclusion and equity explicit about how intolerant teachers will be towards discrimination on the basis of sexuality? Do documents reflect family formations inclusive of and more diverse than the nuclear family? How are teachers encouraged to respond when they come across children saying to each other, ‘You can’t play, because you’re gay?’ Whose kind of ‘home’ does the ‘home corner’ reflect? (Taylor & Richardson, 2005). These are the sort of questions that can be asked to help figure out ways to resist and unsettle the (hetero)norm.

**Conclusion**

Glenda MacNaughton writes, ‘… children cannot develop if they are living in a society where they and their families face oppression, inequality and injustice. It touches and constrains the children as deeply as it touches and constrains their families’ (2001, p. 72). Building from here, we argue that the injustices and inequities of the (hetero)norm constrain teachers too, encouraging and rewarding us when we construct and promote (knowingly or not) versions of the world that seek to marginalise and obscure knowledge, concepts and understandings of alternative options to heterosexual sexuality. In early childhood education, as this paper has shown, we see this occurring in everyday events and interactions shaped by dominant discourses of the nuclear family, of risk and danger, and of innocence and developmentalism. Silencing understandings of diverse forms of sexualities through over-reliance on these dominant discourses leads to continued investments in heteronormativity. ‘Risk-taking’ will be required for investments of a different kind. As Robinson (2005a) states, risk-taking ‘should be a thoughtful process involving individual agency and community responsibility in the pursuit of a different but positive future for ourselves, children, their families and future generations’ (p. 186). It is hoped that this paper’s (re)marks on heteronormativity assist such processes.

**References**


Introduction

THE NEXUS OF YOUNG CHILDREN and sexuality is inflammatory. It usually provokes a conundrum of effects, emotions and understandings and evokes heightened adult anxieties about the loss of childhood innocence and the dangers of child sexual abuse (Jones, 2004; Levine, 2002; Robinson, 2005, 2008; Taylor, 2007). The most recent manifestation of this conundrum can be found in the debate over the sexualisation of children in the media and reframe the arguments by revisiting the feminist critical psychologies of Valerie Walkerdine (1997, 2001) and the poststructural feminist philosophies of Judith Butler (1990, 1997). I argue that the emotionally charged discussions about the sexualisation of children in the media function as performative adult projections, and conclude by encouraging early childhood practitioners to be reflective about the nature and effect of their own adult concerns.

Troubling childhood innocence: Reframing the debate over the media sexualisation of children

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CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE IS A bedrock assumption of contemporary Western thinking which permeates the professional field of early childhood. Axiomatic to this assumption is the widespread belief that sexuality is both antithetical to childhood and a threat to children’s ‘natural’ innocence. In this article I offer an historical context to the cyclical linking of ‘loss of innocence’ with the mass media and popular culture. I review key arguments represented in a high-profile Australian public media debate over the sexualisation of children in the media and reframe the arguments by revisiting the feminist critical psychologies of Valerie Walkerdine (1997, 2001) and the poststructural feminist philosophies of Judith Butler (1990, 1997). I argue that the emotionally charged discussions about the sexualisation of children in the media function as performative adult projections, and conclude by encouraging early childhood practitioners to be reflective about the nature and effect of their own adult concerns.

The Australian debate is largely driven by morally inflected adult concerns about the media’s role in precipitating the premature and inappropriate sexualisation of children (Channel Nine, 2008a, 2008b; Rush & La Nauze, 2006a, 2006b). Many who express these concerns are also lobbying for intervention, calling for stricter media regulation and censorship in order to protect the moral, social, spiritual and emotional wellbeing of young children (Kids Free 2B Kids (KF2bk), 2008). My purpose, however, is not to further an argument on the effects of increasingly explicit sexual media representations upon young children, nor to advocate for stricter media regulation. Rather, I approach this debate as an exemplar of the conundrum that coheres around children and sexuality, which offers us the opportunity to reconsider how the shadow relationships of children’s sexuality, childhood innocence and adults’ desires are entwined, rehearsed and reiterated. My commentary reviews the debate in order to then reframe it—to tease out some of its underlying premises and rehearsals; to comment on its historical context (Buckingham, 2000, 2005) and its performative effects (Butler, 1990, 1997); and to revisit the disturbing psychological underpinnings of adult concerns about children, sexuality and popular culture that Walkerdine (1997, 2001) has raised in the past.

In reconsidering the Australian debate I shift the focus from discussions about how best to protect innocent children from age-inappropriate sexuality to a discussion about adult protectionism and our fraught relationship with children’s sexuality.
A ‘history of concern’

Public anxiety about the effects of media upon young children is neither new nor specific to Australia. To pick up on UK media sociologist David Buckingham’s (2005) expression, there is a ‘history of concern’ (p. 470) associated with new forms of media—including the moral panics generated around the introduction of popular literature, cinema, children’s comics, television and now the internet and associated new media. To illustrate this point, I recall my own early childhood experiences. I was a young child when television first came to Australia in 1956, but I clearly remember feeling frustrated and aggrieved by my father’s refusal to have a TV in our house for another decade. I was very scathing and unconvinced by his reassurances that this decision was ‘for my own good’. Ironically, one of my earliest television memories is of surreptitiously watching the American family sitcom *Father Knows Best* at my next-door neighbour’s place. If only my father knew that his authority was being simultaneously challenged and reconfirmed.

Measured against today’s diverse, sometimes non-normative and sexually explicit mass media content, the resolutely heteronormative narratives and themes of mid-twentieth century television, such as *Father Knows Best*, now seem quaint, naïve and very outdated. It is hard not to wonder what all the fuss was about. Back then, it was certainly not about the corrupting influence of patriarchal values. In retrospect, the concerns of baby-boomer parents, such as mine, to ‘protect’ their children from early television seem quite amusing. However, we rarely have the same humorous perspective on our own concerns about the excesses and dangers of contemporary media. By contrast to those earlier histories of concern, our new concerns seem all the more justified.

The ‘good old days’ of our own childhoods can so easily become an idyllic state against which we compare the stark differences of present-day childhoods. This recurring feature within the ‘histories of concern’ is what Buckingham (2000, 2005) repeatedly refers to as adult nostalgia for a lost ‘Golden Age’ of childhood innocence. By this he means an adult imagination of childhood in an altogether different time and space which predates the latest form of media corruption. Despite historical shifts, the ‘Golden Age’ of childhood continues to be conceived as a past in which children were not exposed to the oppressive and dangerous excesses of adult culture via the media, and were thus free to play in a simple and unburdened children’s world.

Recognising the historicity of concerns about children and the media is the first step in resisting the temptation to uncritically indulge in our own form of ‘Golden Age’ nostalgia. Ever since the introduction of mass communication technologies, there has been apprehension about children’s exposure to age-inappropriate content and agitation about parents’ rights to gate-keep such content. The content may have changed quite significantly, along with the world we now inhabit, but adult anxieties about the perceived threats that popular culture and the media pose to children is not new.

Despite the specificities of the historical moment, this adult anxiety is always about the new incarnations of media that seem to be precipitating the loss of authentic childhood or childhood innocence. For instance, in his 1982 book *The disappearance of childhood*, Neil Postman proclaimed North American children to be ‘an endangered species’ (p. 4). He argued that in the ‘total disclosure medium’ (p. 81) of the 1970s/1980s electronic media age there could no longer be any secrets. Furthermore, in Postman’s opinion: ‘Without secrets … there can be no such thing as childhood’ (p. 80). A quarter of a century later it seems a lot more secrets have been disclosed in the media, especially secrets of a sexual nature. Whilst some might concur that Postman was right, that it is now all over—childhood is extinct—most people have not given up but have rather taken up the baton of concern. They continue to worry about the loss of childhood innocence and hence authentic childhood (as they knew it), and they continue to agitate to reclaim it.

Current debates

In the current Australian debate, the concern is that childhood innocence and therefore authentic childhood is being threatened by the premature sexualisation of children by media and advertising industries. Those who are concerned blame the failure of Australia’s system of media self-regulation to prevent the sexualisation of children and are pressuring the Australian Government to intervene and establish a regulatory body to oversee children’s interests in the media (Gale, 2008).

The Australia Institute was the initial driver of this argument publishing in 2006 the controversially-named discussion paper, *Corporate Paedophilia: The Sexualisation of Australia’s Children*, written by Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze. This was closely followed by a sequel paper, *Let Children Be Children: Stopping the Sexualisation of Australia’s Children* by the same authors. Picking up on many of the key arguments put forward in these discussion papers, Julie Gale, a Melbourne mother and comedy writer, founded an online public lobby campaign called *Kids Free 2B Kids* (KF2BK) in February 2007.

The media itself bought into the debate around this time, after the family department store retailer David Jones sued Clive Hamilton, the then director of the Australia Institute, over claims in the *Corporate Paedophilia* discussion paper that its advertising eroticised and
exploited children (Horin, 2007). Publicity around the court case resulted in the broader issue being publicly debated by panels of experts on high-profile Australian television shows. SBS’s Insight screened ‘Bratz, bras and tweens’ in April 2007, and the ABC’s Difference of opinion screened ‘Sex sells—but at what cost to our kids?’ in September the same year.

In response to the growing public interest stimulated by media debates and the successful campaign mounted by Julie Gale of the Kids Free 2B Kids lobby, a Senate Inquiry into ‘The Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media’ was held in early 2008. The June release of the report, which recommended further research and increased education (Senate Standing Committee, 2008), precipitated another flurry of media response, with Channel Nine running a Sixty Minutes segment called ‘Little women’ and a feature story called ‘Sexualisation of children’ on its Sunday show.

‘New’ concerns

So exactly what are the concerns being raised in these debates? Both the Australia Institute discussion papers and the arguments put forward by Julie Gale of Kids Free 2B Kids stress that, while children’s exposure to sexual material is not entirely new, disturbing new trends and developments are cause for concern and in need of redressing. According to Rush and La Nauze (2006b), young children are being directly sexualised in girls’ magazines and in advertising for the first time:

‘In the past’, they claim, ‘the sexualisation of children occurred indirectly, primarily through exposure to representations of teen and adult sexuality in advertising and popular culture. The very direct sexualisation of children, where children themselves are presented in images or directed to act in advertisements in ways modeled on adult sexual behaviour, is a new development’ (p.1).

Moreover, they stress that this direct sexualisation is occurring because: ‘[c]hildren are now much more heavily targeted by advertisers and marketers than they were in the past’, and that this has a compounding effect, because: ‘… at the same time media are becoming increasingly important in their lives’ (p. vi). Rush and La Nauze (2006b) surmise that: ‘[y]oung children today, particularly girls, face sexualising pressures unlike that faced by any of today’s adults in their childhood’ (2006a, p. vii).

In a similar vein, Gale (2008) argues that, while children have always had some exposure to sexual material, it is now so constant and so pervasive that it is having a dangerous cumulative effect:

'[C]hildren are being bombarded with sexualised imagery in their environment’, she says. This includes: ‘music videos on television on weekend mornings; … sexually explicit “adults only” DVD covers in the local video shop; sexually overt and often degrading lyrics in popular songs; highly sexualised Bratz dolls; sexualised fashion and underwear for children; explicit billboards and much more’. She refers to all of this as: ‘the pornification of our culture’ (p. 2).

As a result of all this premature exposure to sexually explicit material, Gale, Rush and La Nauze all claim that young children are at increased risk of eating disorders, poor body image, and escalated and early sexual behaviour (KF2BK, 2008; Rush & La Nauze, 2006a). Citing the expert opinion of Dr Louise Newman, the Director of the Institute of Psychiatry, they also claim that, through this premature sexualisation, children are being ‘groomed’ for paedophiles (Rush & La Nauze, 2006a, p. ix; KF2BK, 2008).

Rush and La Nauze (2006b) are particularly concerned with the ways tween magazines (such as Barbie Magazine, Total Girl and Disney Girl) encourage younger girls to think and act like teenagers. They claim that magazine publishers are exploiting young children’s desires to be grown-up and that now 20 per cent of six-year-old girls read at least one of these magazines regularly (Rush & La Nauze, 2006b, p. v). They make reference to Bain’s (2001) description of this as ‘the KARGOY phenomenon: Kids Are Getting Older Younger’.

Kids might be getting older younger but they do not necessary want to get too old. Today’s trend is for young girls to emulate celebrity teenagers, not their mothers. As Rush (2007) puts it on her opinion blog: ‘Looking “hot” is what is cool … not “dressing up” to play at being adult’. Not only is this desire fostered in the girl magazines, but it is also reflected in the pace at which the voluptuous adult-bodied Barbies have become rapidly outmoded and superseded by the much funkier and decidedly teenage Bratz dolls. Despite the widespread apprehensions of many parents and the concerned adult commentators about Bratz dolls resembling prostitutes (Channel Nine, 2008a), Bratz hold a huge appeal for young children. The introduction of the Bratz Big Babies, targeting increasingly younger children within the desiring-to-be-teenage market, is also discussed by Rush and La Nauze (2006b). To exemplify the trend, they relay a young girl’s comment, taken from a UK study: ‘... everyone likes Bratz. We’re sick of fat, plastic Barbies. Didn’t you know? One reason I don’t like Barbie is that her head comes off. And Bratz are teenagers. I want to be a teenager, too’ (Lawrence, 2003 cited by Rush & La Nauze, 2006b, p. 9).

Performative effects

Throughout the debate, explicit links to pornography, prostitution and paedophilia have underscores concerns
that an unregulated media constitutes a grave danger to children (Channel Nine, 2008a). It is also at the point of making such connections that those driving the debate have been challenged for ‘going too far’. The original claim of ‘corporate paedophilia’, expounded in the Australia Institute’s discussion paper (Rush & La Nauze, 2006a) and defended in the media by director Clive Hamilton, not only prompted a legal action from David Jones but also prompted Professor Catherine Lumby, a Sydney journalism and media academic and a member of the Advertising Standards Committee, to enter the debate. She claimed that this was an ‘irresponsible’ term to use and called it a ‘‘huge stretch’’ to link child sexual assault to marketing or advertising’ (cited by Horin, 2007, pp. 1–2).

While sharing societal concerns about child sexual abuse, Lumby believes it is counterproductive to equate such abuse with media advertising. Her concerns are that: ‘by having this conversation all the time we’ll end up looking for sexual images of children where there aren’t [any]’ (ABC, 2006). Two years further into the debate, she argues that: ‘we have reached a juncture where we are starting to see children through the eyes of a paedophile at times’ (Channel Nine, 2008b). In reference to a spate of complaints to the Advertising Standards Committee that nappy ads are sexualising babies (Maher, 2008), Lumby (in an interview on Channel Nine, 2008b) expresses her alarm at the fact that: ‘we’re now talking about banning nappy ads …’ She goes on to suggest that we may be creating a new kind of risk by continually anticipating and reading the potential paedophilic gaze onto children’s bodies. In so doing, she argues, we are effectively casting children’s bodies as dangerous in and of themselves, and implying ‘… that they can somehow provoke sexual abuse by what they wear or what they don’t wear’.

The notion of ‘performativity’, popularised by feminist philosopher Judith Butler (1990, 1993, 1997), is helpful in further articulating the kinds of risks that Lumby has begun to identify here. Originating in linguistic theory, performativity describes the process whereby repetitive utterances, or speech acts, have self-fulfilling effects. In her landmark thesis on the performativity of gender, Butler (1990) elaborates on the ways repetitive speech acts, or reiterations about what it means to be a man or a woman, bring into being that which they name. Rather than being intrinsic or predetermined, Butler argues that gender is performatively constituted through being thought about, spoken about and enacted in certain ways. In other words, it is something we do, actively produce and come to embody (Butler, 1993), rather than something we (already) and self-evidently just are. Although her original focus was upon the performativity of gender, Butler’s elucidations of performatve effects are usefully mobilised in other contexts.

Performativity functions as a useful critical tool for rethinking the debate about the sexualisation of children in the media. In particular, an understanding of performatve effects gives theoretical support to Lumby’s apprehensions. When she raises concerns about the risky unintended consequences of repeatedly referring to more and more images of children as pornographic, of continually interpreting them ‘through the eyes of a paedophile’ and of speaking about them as a-priori sexual images, we can see that the performatve effect of all of these repetitive speech acts is to actively produce, enact and embody a sexualised way of looking at children. For instance, talking about babies’ bottoms in nappy advertisements as potentially attracting paedophiles not only draws paedophiles’ attentions to such images but also requires us all to reconsider these images from the perspective of the paedophile. If we partake in such talk, or even witness it, we ultimately and paradoxically are bound to constitute ourselves as the potential paedophilic viewers we fear, abhor and wish to protect children from.

The paradox of performativity is compounded in the context of censorship debates, as Butler (1997, pp.129–133) points out in Excitable speech, her extended account of the politics of performativity. This is because enraged protestations which name, detail and elaborate on the threats and dangers of material deemed unfit for public consumption not only draw attention to this material but also generate heated public debates which prolong and proliferate the reiteration of the unspeakable. In other words, performatve effects are accentuated by censorship advocates’ repeated and heated public denunciation of the very thing they seek to prohibit. It is therefore ironic that the crescendoing ‘excitable speech’ that seeks to ban nappy advertisements lest they attract paedophiles, must confine the concerned adult gaze with the paedophilic gaze in order to identify the ways those assumed-to-be-innocent babies’ bottoms can become the objects of adult sexual desire.

Having overviewed the various concerns that have been expressed within the current Australian debate and begun to explore their performatve effects, I now turn my attention to unraveling some of the premises of childhood innocence that underpin these concerns. I stress that it is adult concerns I am examining here. The few children whose opinions were sought in the course of this debate, such as those interviewed on the ‘Bratz, bras and tweens’ Insight forum (SBS, 2007) seemed to be rather nonplussed by all the fuss over their attachments to their Bratz dolls, their girl magazines and their predilections for teenage fashion. For, just as it is adults who create particular media representations of children, adults who imagine a ‘Golden Age’ of authentic childhood uncorrupted by the media, and adults who performatvey reiterate the sexual nature...
of children’s representations in the media, it is also adults who are preoccupied with the perceived threats that adult sexuality poses to childhood innocence. It is the adults who are ‘troubled’ (to again borrow a Judith Butler term) about innocence.

The premise of childhood innocence

Throughout the debate there have been many references to childhood innocence as an a-priori given. For instance, in laying out the ‘issue’ on the Kids Free 2B Kids website, an early declaration about childhood innocence is made: ‘Children is recognised as a time of innocence, playfulness, fun and spontaneity.’ This assumption is the starting point for the list of concerns that follows, for loss of innocence is the fundamental concern. But where do our assumptions about childhood innocence come from? Do all cultures have this same premise? Have we, in the West, always thought about children this way? The answer to all of these questions is ‘no’.

In contemporary Western societies, the compulsion to essentialise, de-historicise and universalise childhood as a natural state of innocence is incredibly powerful. So powerful that it has hegemonic effects—in other words, it just seems like commonsense. However, this commonsense presumption of childhood innocence has been thoroughly critiqued by scholars seeking to reconceptualise childhood (see for e.g. Blaise, 2005; Buckingham, 2000; Canella, 2002; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Jenkins, 1998; Kincaid, 1998; Kincheloe, 2002; Renold, 2006; Robinson, 2005, 2008; Taylor, 2007; Taylor & Richardson, 2005; Tobin, 1997; Walkerdine, 1997). As Kehily and Montgomery (2004) point out in their study of historical and anthropological data, childhood innocence is far from an absolute given. Instead, it is a radically unstable concept which is entirely dependent on historical, social and cultural contexts. They argue that cross-cultural childhood studies reveal that there are multiple cultures of childhood, not all of them are innocent, and it is contemporary Western cultures that tend to regulate and repress children’s sexuality (Kehily & Montgomery, 2004, pp. 63-67). Moreover, any understanding of childhood innocence rests on a concept of childhood as a radically different state from adulthood and as Aries (1962) observed nearly 50 years ago in his ground-breaking history of European childhood, Centuries of childhood, the separation of adults and children is a relatively recent phenomenon.

One easy way of gaining historical perspective on our assumptions about childhood is to look at art from pre-modern times. The 16th century Flemish village scenes depicted by Bruegel, for instance, are often cited as evidence of a very different world in which children are not distinguished as separate and different from adults. In these paintings, smaller and larger people intermix—they wear the same clothes, play the same games and undertake the same activities. They are distinguishable only by size. Such images remind us that, even in Western societies, the notion of childhood we now take as a given is a decidedly modern concept. It is only a few centuries old.

The Western notion of innocence, on the other hand, can be traced back to early Judeo-Christian narratives about the Garden of Eden as a pure, natural, idyllic and asexual pre-Lapsarian space (Kline, 1995). Ideas of innocence and loss of innocence, through association with Adam and Eve and that tempting apple, have been inextricably bound up for at least 2000 years with ideas about sexuality and sin.

It was not until the 18th century European Romantic era that the relatively new concept of childhood was overlaid with the much older religious notion of a pure space of innocence, defined in contradistinction to sin and sexuality. This shift occurred when the French Romance philosopher Rousseau declared children to be pure and perfect, like nature, and thus innocent. This was a radical new idea, completely at odds with the prevailing Lockean notion of children as wild and savage and desperately in need of discipline and civilising (James et al., 1998; Jenks, 2005; Postman, 1982). Rousseau’s notion, which romanticised children as natural innocents, was itself measured against a notion of corrupt adult society. In a reversal of the nature/culture binary, Rousseau regarded adult society (the exemplar of ‘culture’) as debased and corrupt, while upholding children (the exemplar of ‘nature’) as pure and innocent. ‘God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil’, he states in the opening lines of Emile, his treatise on the education of children (Rousseau, 1762 cited by James et al., 1998, p. 13).

With a large measure of ambiguity evident in his perception of adults’ roles in children’s lives, Rousseau (1762 cited by James et al., 1998) argued that it was incumbent upon responsible adults to preserve children’s innocence by educating them according to nature and well away from the contaminating influence of (adult) society (Jenks, 2005). Despite often being referred to as the first advocate for the education of young children, Rousseau’s romantic notion of Emile’s perfect education within the rural idyll does not correlate with contemporary notions of mass primary education in industrial/post-industrial societies, nor with their primary focus upon literacy. In accordance with his mistrust of the contaminating influence of adult society, Rousseau declared that ‘reading is the scourge of childhood … for books teach us to talk about things we know nothing about’ (cited by Postman, 1982, p. 130). If we substitute ‘reading’ for ‘media advertising and marketing’, Rousseau’s words resonate with the current debates in Australia. Both can be framed
within Buckingham’s (2005) ‘history of concerns’. Indeed, Rousseau might well have been the first in a long line of concerned adults to link the preservation of childhood innocence with the need to shield children from corrupting adult texts.

Childhood innocence is thus a relatively modern Western concept, which is pitted against its constitutive ‘other’—sexual, and therefore corrupting, adulthood. Moreover, the work of separation, of keeping assumed-to-be innocent children away from assumed-to-be sexually corrupting adults, demands ongoing maintenance. Viewed in this way, periodic moral panics and public media debates have simultaneously maintained and reproduced the idea of childhood innocence as an a-priori given, predicted its loss via the latest popular medium incarnation, and called for the radical separation of adults’ and children’s worlds (Robinson, 2008; Taylor, 2007).

The premise of ‘normal’ sexual development

In the current media debate, the premise of childhood innocence sits comfortably alongside the premise of ‘normal’ sexual development. Despite the fact that childhood innocence continues to evoke a prelapsarian and thus asexual association, key players in the current debate do not completely deny children’s sexuality. To do so would be to risk being called ‘prudes’, a position they do not identify with and strongly deny (see Gale’s comments in Channel Nine, 2008a). Instead, they implicitly construct the notion of ‘normal’ sexual development in order to build a case against its (abnormally) premature escalation. For instance, Rush and La Nauze (2006b) preface their initial commentary on the sexualisation of children by saying: ‘Childhood development includes a distinct sexual dimension prior to puberty’ (p.1). They then go on to say: ‘However, the sexualisation of children refers to the process whereby the slowly developing sexuality of children is prematurely advanced and moulded into stereotypical forms of adult sexuality as a result of inappropriate advertising and marketing’ (Rush & La Nauze, 2006b, p.1).

It is significant that children’s sexuality is only ever referred to in measured (and non-Freudian) developmentalist terms and as ‘slowly developing’. This allows it to be reduced to something that is intrinsic, biological, nascent, tempered and benign. Child developmental theory is thus used to reinforce the reassuring premise that, if children do have some form of sexuality, it must be very limited, simple and natural. In the process of acknowledging and validating a natural and normal nascent form of childhood sexuality, such perspectives simultaneously secure the innocent nature of childhood sexuality.

The emphasis on children’s unfolding sexuality, rather than on their sexual presence (or being), makes it difficult to conceive of children’s sexual agency in the here and now and to acknowledge that they might have desires of their own. When childhood innocence remains axiomatic to the discussion of normal sexual development, children’s desire and sexual agency is rendered unintelligible. Moreover, in a debate framed by the spectre of sexual abuse, in which there is frequent reference to precocious and age-inappropriate sexual behaviour as symptomatic evidence of media sexual abuse (KF2BK, 2008; Rush & La Nauze, 2006a), it is virtually impossible to conceive of a uncompromised image of an agentic sexual child1. Through continuous cross-referencing, the discourses of child development, childhood innocence and child protection form a powerful regulatory alliance within the media debate. Together they foreclose on the ways children’s sexuality can be spoken about—only ever in cloistered terms as a naïve and nascent form of sexuality under threat and in need of protection. This inhibits any serious discussions about the broader significance of children’s sexuality.

This inhibiting effect is neither new nor limited to this particular debate. A number of scholars have registered concern that, within the primary and early childhood educational contexts, the discourse of childhood innocence silences any discussion of young children’s sexuality and denies them sexual agency (Epstein, O’Flynn & Telford, 2003; Jones, 2006; Renold, 2006; Robinson, 2005). Moreover, in the early childhood environment, which is hyper-vigilant to the possibilities of child sexual abuse, it is particularly difficult for early childhood educators to discuss children’s sexuality in a positive and affirming way (Jones, 2004, 2006; Tobin, 1997). This has led Tobin (1997) to conclude that it is at least partly due to the suspicion and anxiety produced by child protection discourses, that children’s sexuality, desire and pleasure has become a ‘missing discourse’ (pp. 4–19) in the field of early childhood education.

Through keeping a tight lid on the ways ‘normal’ children’s sexuality can be spoken about in media debates and early childhood education contexts, the hegemony of developmentalist, childhood innocence and child protection discourses precludes engagement with a number of relevant and interesting questions that poststructural theorists have been exploring for some time now. Particularly pertinent to both educational and media contexts is poststructural research into the ways desires are interpolated through multiple and competing discourses (Davies, 1990) and which explores

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1 The disturbing popular culture figure of the ‘seductive’ Lolita child has usurped the image of the sexually agentic child. Built upon Freud’s now widely discredited theory of the ‘seductive’ Oedipal child (Walby et al., 1989), the Lolita figure reinforces popular conceptions that a sexual child must be a dangerous child.
how children’s aspirations, identifications, desires and fantasies are being repositioned within popular culture (Walkerdine, 1997, 2001) in the consumer-media ‘age of desire’ (Kenway & Bullen, 2001). Such perspectives do not share the limiting and essentialist underpinnings of natural sexual development theories, nor do they insist on the separation of children’s and adults’ worlds. Instead, they offer much needed nuanced attention to the complex and codeterminant production of both children’s and adults’ desires and sexual subjectivities.

**Desire and projection**

Not surprisingly, it is psychoanalytic poststructural scholars that pay the most attention to desire and sexual subjectivity. Bringing a critical feminist perspective to Freud’s work on infant sexuality, coupled with an appreciation of the interplay between the unconscious workings of our desires and our intersubjectivities, scholars such as Rose (1986), Britzman (1998) and Walkerdine (1997) have undertaken pioneering analyses of the cultural and pedagogical contexts in which adults’ and children’s fantasies and desires are produced, repressed, projected and denied.

Valerie Walkerdine has persistently addressed issues relating to desire and children’s sexuality across the fields of popular culture, critical psychology and pedagogy. She raises one particularly confronting question that I wish to revisit in order to complete my reframing of the sexualisation of children in the media debate. In her book, *Daddy’s girl: Young girls and popular culture* (1997), and again in her article ‘Safety and danger: Childhood, sexuality, and space at the end of the millennium’ (2001), Walkerdine challenges us to face up to the psychology of adults’ denial of children’s sexuality and insistence on the protection of childhood innocence. She asks us to reconsider exactly who is being protected within the intense focus upon childhood innocence and calls for protection.

For Walkerdine (1997, 2001), it is clearly not the children. She claims that adults’ obsession with childhood innocence is ubiquitous and deeply psychological. Walkerdine (1997) associates this obsession with adult anxieties and links it to the suppression of adult desires. Quoting Jacqueline Rose (1986), Walkentin (2001) provocatively insists that it is the ‘desire of adults for children’ (p.15) that underpins commonly held adult anxieties and drives calls for child protection.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, she suggests that the discourse of protectionism, just like the discourse of childhood innocence, is more about adult fantasies and desires than it is about children, for protectionism does not just spring from a benign, benevolent and altruistic concern for children’s wellbeing. According to Walkerdine (2001), it is an anxious form of adult projection. In shifting the focus from children to adults, Walkerdine (2001) is suggesting that it is these commonplace anxious adult projections onto children that really need addressing:

*The idea of a sanitised natural childhood in which such things are kept at bay, having no place in childhood, becomes not the guarantor of the safety of children from the perversities of adult desires for them but a huge defense against the acknowledgement of dangerous desires on the part of adults. In this analysis ‘child protection’ begins to look more like ‘adult protection’* (p. 29).

Walkerdine (2001) shows us how protectionism is a highly complex process which pivots on adults’ psychological defences. For instance, through the construction of the externalised, shadowy and ever-lurking paedophile figure, the threat to childhood innocence always appears to be located somewhere else. Through externalising the threat, widespread internalised adult anxieties and projections manage to escape attention. Walkerdine (2001) makes it clear that, when she speaks of the perverse and dangerous desires of adults, she is not talking about the odd paedophile or pervert. She is referring to how all adults are implicated in desiring innocence—both desiring to protect it and/or being lured by it, and most often both. It is her generalisation of the problem of adult protectionism which offers the greatest challenge.

In beginning to unpack some of the complex gender contradictions and intersubjectivities located in the seductive Lolita figure of popular culture—the figure that triggers so much anxiety in the media sexualisation of children debate—Walkerdine (1997, 2001) flags the extensive work we still need to do in order to really appreciate the full effects of adults’ desires for young children. We are responsible not only for acknowledging our own desires for childhood innocence but also for continuing to reproduce this contradictory subject position which young children, and particularly young girls, must then occupy:

*This is not about a few perverts but about the complex construction of the highly contradictory gaze at little girls … little virgins that might be whores, to be protected yet to be constantly alluring. The complexity of this phenomenon, in terms of both the cultural production of little girls as these ambivalent objects and the way in which little girls themselves as well as adults live this complexity, how it produces their subjectivity, has not begun to be explored* (Walkerdine, 2001, p. 25).

Walkerdine is not the only scholar to note that adults’ desires for childhood innocence are fraught. In his elaborations on *Erotic innocence*, Kincaid (1998) also argues that the (adult) construction of the pure, innocent and asexual child is an erotic fantasy, as it is always shadowed by the lurking possibility of
this same child as sexually knowing and potentially seductive. In other words, the very insistence upon innocence always suggests otherwise, and this is what makes it so desirable. Archard (1993) identifies the most worrying aspects of perpetuating notions of childhood innocence in a world in which this same innocence constitutes adults’ desire. He points out that: ‘innocence … connotes a purity, virginity, freshness and immaculateness which excites by the possibilities of possession and defilement’ (p. 40). Moreover, it is children’s innocence that also renders them vulnerable to these same adult desires. In Archer’s (1993) words: ‘innocence is debilitating’ (p. 40).

According to Kincheloe (2002), and in line with Walkerdine’s observations, adult obsessions with childhood innocence exemplify the crisis of adult/child relations in the new millennium. In reference to the US political context, he notes the pervasive effects of this phenomenon: ‘In [the] twenty-first century … no one steps outside the discursive universe of innocence ideology and the fetishisation of children’ (Kincheloe, 2002, p.110). It is no different in Australia. It seems that everyone is involved—either in producing, consuming, commenting on, or protesting childhood innocence. In the most recent Australian chapter of the media sexualisation of children debate, this fraught relationship was broached by Lumbly, when she expressed her disquiet at how we are all being encouraged to look at children ‘through the eyes of paedophiles’ (Channel Nine, 2008b).

Addressing the challenges

The first step in addressing some of these challenges is to acknowledge that we are all somehow implicated in this conundrum of relations between adults and children, innocence and sexuality that fuel the debate over the media’s sexualisation of children. Then we might begin to unravel this conundrum through a productive engagement with some new conceptual frameworks.

In this article, I have offered a couple of new frameworks for thinking about these relations. I have suggested that Butler’s (1990, 1993, 1997) explication of the politics of performativity and Walkerdine’s (1997, 2001) theorising of anxious adult projections offer us alternative perspectives on the media debate. In addition, they provide us with some useful critical tools to begin to unpack the complexities of adult concerns about the loss of childhood innocence. Combined, their work helps us to reframe recurring adult concerns and particularly the more shrill calls for censorship as performative and thus self-fulfilling anxious adult projections.

An engagement with the critical tools of performativity and projection also shifts the focus away from simplistic assumptions about children’s nascent sexuality towards a recognition of the complex web of relations within which children’s and adults’ desires and sexualities are inter-subjectively constituted (Watkins, 2008; Walkerdine, 2009). The recognition of such complexity and of the mutual enmeshment of adults’ and children’s desires and sexualities represents a significant step in constructive engagement.

For early childhood educators, the over-arching challenge is to resist the temptation to bubble-wrap ourselves, along with the children, in a time/space warp in relation to these complex relations. Even though the advertising and marketing media have long been actively ‘troubling childhood innocence’ and exploiting the complex sets of adult/child relations that produce consumer desires (Kenway & Bullen, 2001), many working in the field of early childhood still adhere to uncomplicated Romantic notions of childhood innocence. Working at the coalface of adult/child relations, in the face of the powerful twin discourses of developmentalism and protectionism, it is understandable why so many early childhood educators prefer to distance themselves from the thorny question of ambivalent desires and to reconfirm children’s sexuality as something nascent, vulnerable and innocent. The safe option is to uphold rather than trouble childhood innocence. However, if Walkerdine (2001) is correct in asserting that protectionism serves adults’ interests rather than children’s interests, it is not necessarily the most ethical option. It is particularly incumbent upon educators of young children to burst the bubble-wrap shield by joining in the efforts of many childhood studies and scholars to trouble innocence.

One very practical way for early childhood educators to begin to make such trouble is to engage head-on with the very medium that is actively reproducing these complex relations of desire and sexuality. Within the protectionist framings of early childhood education, popular culture is widely regarded as a potentially harmful conduit of age-inappropriate concepts and content. It is often banned from the preschool and infant school environments because it threatens to herald: ‘the intrusion of adult sexuality into this sanitized space of childhood’ (Walkerdine, 2001, p. 24). Equipped with some new critical conceptual tools, early childhood educators can use children’s popular culture as resource for building young children’s critical social literacy.

It is important to realise, as Kincheloe (2002) points out, that it is no longer feasible to imagine that: ‘we can simply plug up the holes through which adult secrets reach children …’ (p. 83). The ultimate irony of such attempts to protect children from ‘inappropriate’ outside influences is that, while we are busily excluding such material, many educators do not seem to be noticing that: ‘schooling plays a decreasing role in the education of children’ and it is ‘corporate-produced kinderculture
[that] is [the] primary source of knowledge in the new childhood” (Kincheloe, 2002, p.116).

Early childhood education can and should play an important role in helping young children to reflect on and interpret the sexual knowledge embedded in the ‘sexy’ and ‘fashionable’ popular culture they are increasingly identifying with. This means that we must first confront our own anxieties which often prevent us from helping children (or for that matter ourselves) to understand and negotiate these paradoxical and ambivalent representations and positionings. Honest reflection upon our own investments in childhood innocence, our implication in performative adult projections around children’s sexuality, and some open conversations with children would be a good start.

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