Practitioner Researcher

Diverse sexualities in the early childhood setting in New Zealand: Theories, research, and beyond

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The discussion concerning gender and sexual diversity in the early childhood education field is multifold. It encompasses many principles and strands addressed in Te Whaariki including inclusion, relationship, empowerment, multiculturalism, and equity. However, in the academic discourses concerning this topic, there is a general consensus that this has been a much-neglected area (Gunn, 2011; Hogan, 2013; MacNaughton, 2005; Robinson, 2002; Taylor & Blaise, 2007). On top of that, sexuality is probably one of the most controversial topics in the early childhood education field (Gordon, Browne, & Cruz, 2008), shunned by many practitioners with the remarks of being irrelevant or an adult issue, despite the fact that a growing number of our children have parents who have diverse sexuality, let alone the substantial proportion of children who will grow up to be non heterosexual (Gordon, Browne, & Cruz, 2008). This paper provides a glance at existing literature both addressing the issue in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand and elsewhere in the world. It approaches the topic through the: construction of gender and sexual identity and its relevance to early childhood education; the important role of the teacher in the construction of children's values and identities; gender and sexual equity in New Zealand education sectors; and research undertaken in other parts of the world.

Introduction

In daily practice, sexuality is often an invisible issue in early childhood care centres (Gunn, 2011; Robinson, 2002), even though teachers are likely to come up against sexual diversity through the most common daily interactions with colleagues, children and families who are sexual minorities (Gordon et al., 2008). Denial of the presence of homosexuality and transexuality or biased understanding of individuals who have different sexualities can lead to shame and harm to the children who are directly involved (Frieman, Hara, & Settel, 1996) and can have long lasting effects psychologically (Dempsey, 2013). However, researchers have found such denial commonplace in early childhood centres around the developed world (Beren, 2013; Duke & McCarthy, 2009; Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2008), not to mention the near absence of such studies in other parts of the world where the civil rights of same-sex couples are still being fought for.

The attempts to marginalise sexual minorities in early childhood education can find roots in, amongst other things, the normative tradition of developmentalism. The constructivist discourse following Piaget's developmental theories

perpetuate the belief that children follow a unified trajectory of development (Fleer, 2005). Developmentalism sees children's learning in a monolithic way and prioritise cognitive development over other vital areas such as emotional well-being, social skills, physical development and sexuality (Cleverley & Phillips, 1986).

Scholars in the early childhood field have long found the idea of normative development problematic (Cannella, 1997; MacNaughton, 2005). Critiques against this restrictive tradition have introduced social-constructivist theories, such as Vygovsky and Bronfenbrenner, to illustrate how social environments can shape the way children learn, and help them form their identities and contribute to their well-being (Claiborne & Drewery, 2010). In light of social constructivist theories, children's development is no longer merely regarded as an evolutionary process without social interference, and thus pinpoints the significant roles parents, teachers, and cultures play in this process. While Cannella (1997) suggests that social and cultural factors are crucial to understanding positive development, others gradually have come to the understanding that the perception of gender is also an important social element that can affect, amongst other things, children's conception of society, development of social skills and emotional well-being later in life (Dempsey, 2013). One of the most persistent and prevalent means of normalisation is the normalisation of gender and sexuality, and this is particularly evident in early childhood education as images of hetereosexual families are still taken for granted in the daily context (Gunn, 2011).

A particular theoretical approach that has helped transform the conception of gender/sexuality and related equity issues in education is the poststructuralist dialogue (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Where sexuality is concerned, the term 'queer' is usually applied instead of the binary of heterosexual and homosexual in order to, firstly, be inclusive of many other gender identities and sexualities (Burford, Lucassen, Penniket, & Hamilton, 2013); as well as to deconstruct the normative narrative of gender and sexuality binaries (Blaise, 2005). Post-structuralists usually refer to the phenomenon of regarding heterosexuality as normality, as 'heteronormativity'. The summary provided by Blaise and Taylor (2012) has captured the essence of the concept of heteronormativity:

> Heteronormativity is a term that refers to the processes and practices through which heterosexuality is normalised and manages to maintain an exclusive hold on what is regarded to be 'natural' sexuality. Within heteronormative contexts (such as schools and most other social institutions) heterosexuality is such a powerful universalising norm, that all regular forms of social discourse are founded upon the presumption that everyone is always and already heterosexual (p. 1).

One important component of heteronormativity is the normative gender binaries, which are usually embedded in the discursive construction of the images of the normal boy and normal girl. Social institutions like schools reiterate the expectations of what being a normal boy/girl should be like to reinforce the hegemony of heterosexuality (Butler, 1990). Blaise and Taylor (2012) draw on Butler's (1990) conceptual framework of the heterosexual matrix to analyse their findings from research on primary school children. They argue that the construction of heterosexual normativity does not only derive from the

institutions, but is formed through a complex of learning, actions and communications. Specifically, they noticed in a group of South African school children who participated in their research that heteronormativity was practised through games, friendship, and other daily activities (Blaise and Taylor, 2012). This finding is significant in the early childhood education context, in that it highlights how children can actively project social normativities in their desires, which, in turn, inform their actions. To be real boys and real girls, the desire for the opposite sex is implied as a standard, and other sexuality excluded because they are not 'natural' (Gunn, 2011). It also pinpoints how children can be subjected to certain stereotypes such as the 'dominant boy' and 'subordinate girl', and urges for teacher actions to subvert such biases in practice (Hogan, 2013). Thus the objective of introducing the theoretical framework of heterosexual matrix, according to Blaise (2005), is not to supply homosexuality as an alternative or opposition to heterosexuality, but to deconstruct the hegemony of heterosexuality. Instead of asking for fair treatment of a sexual minority, queer theories intend to subvert the regime of heterosexuality - in other words, to decode the implied and taken for granted narratives and rhetoric in heteronormative discourses, and, in turn, help practitioners find out what they are up against before they take action.

In early childhood education of New Zealand, emotional literacy is considered an integral part of the multiliteracies in children's development together with linguistic literacy, digital literacy, media literacy and others (Education Review Office, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2010). Drawing from Blaise and Taylor's study mentioned above, the link between emotional literacy, cognitive development, and development of sexuality is self-manifest. In my opinion, the latter should be treated as importantly as the other two. In terms of assessment, in New Zealand, teachers are expected to carry a threefold process of noticing, recognising and responding (Ministry of Education, 2004), among which noticing is the first step. If teachers are unable to discern the deeply embedded problematic nature of heteronormativity, even the first step of the assessment will not be achieved.

The issue of sexual minority is rarely raised in official early childhood education documents in New Zealand. As Gunn (2011) points out, the national curriculum *Te Whaariki* and many other official documents draw on both the constructivist and social-constructivist theories (Ministry of Education, 1996a, 1996b, 1998). In practice, teachers and centres have spared no effort in fostering positive partnerships with parents and whanau (Dalli et al., 2011). Through such discourses, the heterosexual image of the family is reinforced through government documents, organisational actions and the teachers' daily work. Although the term inclusion is widely used in the above mentioned documents, most people associate the term exclusively to children with special needs (Stark, Gordon-Burns, Purdue, Rarere-Briggs, & Turnock, 2011; Thorburn & Corby, 2002), while increasingly educationists link the term to ethnicity and class (Macartney, Purdue, & MacArthur, 2013). In recent work concerning inclusion, it is highlighted that inclusive practice is not confined to certain groups of children, but to 'ensure that all children are valued, present, participating and achieving' (Macartney, Purdue, & MacArthur, 2013, p.119). However, as sexual minorities are rarely mentioned in early childhood education documents and literature, the personal interpretation of this umbrella term varies depending on personal experience rather than through teacher education.

In 2013, the peer-reviewed journal *He Kupu* published a whole issue dedicated to gender issues in early childhood (Naughton, 2013). Topics in this issue span the lack of male teachers (Yang, 2013), the role of mother, and gender diversity in early childhood around the world (Askland, 2013; Heikkilä, 2013; Hogan, 2013). This is one of the few collective publications addressing gender and sexuality in early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Other studies include Gunn's research conducted with early childhood teachers in New Zealand. Gunn found that the heteronormative discourse is prevalent with early childhood teachers (Gunn, 2011). She also observed that supervisors in the centre could alter subversive statements about children's sexuality from lower ranked teachers. Like contemporaries in other parts of the world, Gunn laments the lack of adequate recognition of the issue of sexuality in New Zealand's early childhood education sector.

Like many other countries in the world, the scarcity of literature about sexuality in ECE in New Zealand is evident, while quite to the contrary, the country is viewed as one of the most progressive socially progressive countries in the world ("NZ ranked #1 for social progress," 2014) and has legalised same-sex marriages before Australia, where the education authorities have published an in-depth report about same-sex parents and children (Dempsey, 2013). However, media and academic reports about sexuality and education have been reporting on young children's perceptions of gender (Maas, 2014), bullying issues of gay secondary school students (Nairn & Smith, 2003), and school teachers' critiques about the Prime Minister's misuse of terminology linked to sexuality ("Key's 'gay' lapse upsets teachers," 2014). On the other hand, the queer education organisation Rainbow Youth has been actively working with schools to deconstruct gender and sexuality biases (Burford et al., 2013).

Elsewhere in the world, North America sees more concern with parties advocating for greater prominence of literacy materials in the classroom (Beren, 2013), and guidance booklets provided by official organizations like the NAEYC for assistance in preparing ECE classrooms for adequate gender and sexuality education (Burt, Gelnaw, & Lesser, 2010). Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Norway provide some positive models of integrating gender education in early childhood (Askland, 2013).

In conclusion, it has been revealed that although there are some immensely valuable academic work regarding gender and sexuality issues in early childhood education in New Zealand, the materials are far from sufficient. There is also a notable lack of official writing in this area of concern. In light of this understanding, it is doubtful if adequate information about sexuality and early childhood can be provided to teacher trainees. However, conclusive remarks cannot be reached from just studying the literature since education can be delivered through non-written forms, too. To find out if such issues have been properly addressed in teacher education, further empirical research is needed.

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