



Teacher's Voice

## **Issues and trends: Dealing with complexity through the art of questioning**

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On-going, although often sporadic, media interest in early childhood education has a significant effect on early childhood teachers, teacher educators and student teachers. Some very complex issues are often presented to the public in very simple terms, with reference to sources who see the issues in undebatable terms. Yet contemporary social and cultural issues are increasingly complex. This is particularly the case given that the nature of society and culture is arguably increasingly complex – this is generally regarded as a good thing, being that multiculturalism and pluralism are seen by many as a positive feature of late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century society.

Given this complexity, teacher education is an important opportunity for early childhood student teachers to consider not just what are the key topics and/or debates (often articulated in teacher education as 'issues and trends'), but also in what ways teachers can or should engage with these topics so as to inform their teaching practices within a range of community contexts.

The following topics provide just some of the many issues that teachers are confronted with, and some important reflective questions that help in developing skills in careful and informed critique. One of the keys to careful and informed critique is attentive listening and reading around a topic. In other words, teachers are encouraged to ask: What do people have to say about this topic? It might be hard to conceive of ourselves as effective teachers if we are not conscious of the differing perspectives that people have on relevant educational, social, political and economic issues. With this in mind, the following issues are highlighted through acknowledgement of how people with strong opinions perceive an issue, and are then supplemented by questions that help to manage the issue with care. Before reading the 'issue list' please note that this is a very abbreviated list, with just a few thoughts cobbled together to promote reflection, rather than to exhaustively map out all the salient factors of every relevant issue for early childhood education.

### **Issue 1 – working with parents**

For some time now, researchers in New Zealand have noted that many parents have very different expectations of education when compared to teachers (Wylie, 1994). This is unsurprising and is only likely to increase given that since the early 90s many early childhood educators have engaged in some form of study. The demands of professionalisation lead to the development of a knowledge that may be very different to the knowledge parents have regarding education and childhood. While some believe that educators have the responsibility of ensuring parents have the correct attitudes towards education and care (see for instance Wylie, 1996), *Te*



*Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) clearly outlines the role of the educator as a partner with parents.

*Partnership* has become such a commonly used concept in early childhood, yet how often do teachers unpack what it actually means? Moreover, what do the above views about parents and educators say about the way in which a society, or our society, is being organised? How do parents and educators really view each other? And finally, what role should the Government take in responding to the views of parents and educators when such views may be very divergent? The most important consideration, as already noted, is to spend time reflecting on the meaning of partnership. Does partnership require that we all have to agree on educational directions for young children? Perhaps a key aspect of studying to become, and being an early childhood educator, is celebrating partnership as an experience of difference.

## **Issue 2 – men in early childhood**

The issue of mustering more men into early childhood education waxes and wanes in terms of media interest. However, in academic and educational circles there is a steadily growing body of literature advocating for more men in early childhood education. The literature generally suggests that a) there are not enough men working in early childhood education, b) that this is perceived as a problem, and c) that solutions to the problem are required. The first suggestion is often based on evidence that men in early childhood education make a positive difference in many interconnected ways. The following example shows the depth to which one's maleness is seen as a pedagogical value:

Dan, a male teacher in the 2/3 continuum class, sings with his students on a daily basis. The mother of one of his students shares with him that her son has changed his attitude about singing. She states that Dan's enthusiasm for singing helped her boy feel comfortable with it (Bittner & Cooney, 2003, p. 80)

However these assertions are by no means universally accepted:

Many of the asserted potential benefits of more male contact staff have been strongly contested by some commentators, who argue that they are based on naïve assumptions about gender and how it is constructed and enacted, and fail to take account of broader sociocultural, political and economic structures that entrench traditional gender roles ... (Lyons et al., 2005).

The suggestion that there are some bigger issues to understand before reaching conclusions about how to boost numbers of men highlights that any assumption that one makes about the importance of men is just that, an assumption. We might usefully ask why men are not typically interested in working in a centre, and what men might be able to provide children that women cannot. We might also ask whether men can and should be judged as having the quality of being a man, or whether the meaning of 'man' is a culturally situated phenomenon.

However we might also consider that through early childhood education, broader structures that affect the experience of gender can be revealed and if necessary resisted or challenged. In other words, it is important to understand that the meaning of man might be more than what it is now, if the richness of an early childhood setting were more open to men.



### **Issue 3 – technology in early childhood**

Computers cannot provide [important] ... sensory experiences, nor can they cultivate the emotional and intellectual bonds that develop between children and those who help them learn (Armstrong & Casement, 2001, p. 12).

Computer play seems to be particularly effective in promoting developments which teachers might not have expected or anticipated (Cook & Finlayson, 1999, p. 41).

There are many views on whether young children should play with computers in the early childhood centre. How often, however, do teachers actually consider why there are such different beliefs about the interaction between the natural world of the child and the artificial world of the computer? In fact, how often do teachers consider the meaning of words like natural and artificial, and how these words impact upon the teaching and learning environment? What do we count as natural, and what does it mean to be counted as natural? One argument that seems to be prevalent is that early childhood teachers need to develop confidence with new technologies. Perhaps these teachers, for good reason, are not naturally fond of or confident with new technologies. It seems silly to make such a claim. However, like the issue of men in early childhood, there are some broader issues, and a lot of history, at work. Some good quality analysis of the influence of World War II on the feminist movement could be a good starting point for engaging teachers in the nature of their relationship to technology.

### **Issue 4 – smacking children**

Susan Devoy did it. So too, Graham Capill. Likewise, Lucy Lawless and Joanna Paul. Roger McClay also. What did they all do? Like so many other parents, they have smacked their children in order to discipline them ... as they are legally entitled to. But are they morally justified in doing so?

If parents, like teachers, are to be denied the right to use corporal punishment to discipline their children, and it is to be mainly younger children who tend to be treated in this manner, then there may well be an important role for early childhood and primary school teachers to help educate parents about discipline, and the alternatives to corporal punishment (Clark, 2001, p. 177).

The great smacking debate that has polarised New Zealanders for the last few years is significant not only because there is here a moment in time in which our society will evolve into something more or better, but also because it is revealing that early childhood education and early childhood educators are encroaching into the private world of the family. Rather than consider why society might be changing its views on smacking, teachers might be interested in how it is that they, as professionals, have a role to play in the lives of families, and what this might mean socially and politically. There are quite strong views on this topic, in terms of civil liberties, in terms of the right to live in a safe rather than a free society, and so on. However, what does not often get asked is, how historically have families acted as public and private institution? Often student teachers will be encouraged to develop an



awareness that there are many different types of families, and that each has its value, but what exactly is that value, and for who?

### **Issue 5 – regulating early childhood educators**

Over the past several decades, there has been a growing recognition of the benefits of high-quality early care and education, particularly in terms of improved academic and developmental outcomes for lower-income children ... Quality in early childhood education is related to how a program is structured and what type of experiences children have within those programs, but one of the most crucial variables is teacher education and training ... In short, teachers with a bachelor's degree (BA) in early childhood education or a related field tend to have higher-quality classrooms ... (Ackerman, 2005).

Ackerman's summary reveals some of the foundational justifications for regulated early childhood teacher education. In the face of these claims, it is difficult to suggest any benefit to unqualified teachers being in an early childhood learning environment – perhaps better stated in terms of 'why would we not want the best for children?' However, other perspectives suggest some problems with the quality discourse. In particular they indicate that teacher education programmes turn teachers into boring and mindless clones of theory (Novinger & O'Brien, 2003) and that regulation may prevent many people from contributing meaningfully to the early education and care experiences of young children (MacFarlane & Lewis, 2004).

The need to get qualified has more than just quality education as its source. There are significant economic justifications for requiring early childhood teaching qualifications, both for child outcomes, and for the economy of tertiary education. This last issue is one which has a very personal relevance through which I will wrap up this brief questioning of early childhood issues and trends.

In my second year as a student teacher studying for a diploma of teaching in early childhood education, another student in my behavioural psychology class, who was clearly not studying the same program as me, loudly and publically questioned why on earth I needed to study to work in an early childhood setting. This question was a gift, despite the dubious pedagogical value of insulting my life choices. I ask it constantly in the following ways:

- Why did I start a career in early education?
- Why did I start a diploma in early education?
- What did I learn from the program?
- What didn't I learn? and
- What do I feel about the regulating of qualifications for early childhood educators?

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