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## Editorial

### IJIEC SPECIAL QUEER ISSUE

#### *Editors*

**Affrica Taylor (University of Canberra)  
and Mindy Blaise (Monash University)**

This Special Queer Issue contains the work of scholars from South Africa, Australia, the UK and the USA. It is the first international collection to showcase how Queer Theory is being used to understand, question, and challenge various aspects of heteronormativity in the field of early childhood education.

#### WHAT IS QUEER THEORY?

Queer Theory was first coined in the early 1990s to describe a new body of thought emerging from feminist theory. Continuing the poststructural feminist tradition of theorising gender and challenging its binary framings, queer theory then located these gender binaries within the field of sexuality. In so doing it drew attention to the mutually constitutive nature of gender and sexuality. Judith Butler's *Gender trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, both published in 1990, are generally regarded as the seminal works of queer theory, although neither of these

theorists named their own works in these terms at the time.

Within the social sciences, Butler's work in particular has had an enormous impact. However, until quite recently, education has been less influenced by her ideas. To mark the surge of interest that had occurred by 2006, the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* (Volume 27, Issue 4) was an issue dedicated to reviewing the impact that Butler's work has had upon thinking about gender within the discipline. The take up within early childhood education is also relatively recent, and a number of the contributors to this edition have been the first in the sub-discipline to do so.

For those readers who are not familiar with Queer Theory, we provide a short glossary of key terms and a brief indication of some of the ways in which authors in this collection have used them.

**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. In her paper,

Skattebol explains heteronormativity as a 'term that describes belief systems where heterosexuality is presumed to be the only possible sexual orientation'.

Robinson and Davies point out that children's standard heterosexualised play - such as mothers and fathers, chase and kiss, and mock weddings – are regarded as so natural and normal that they are seldom even considered to be forms of sexualised play.

Heteronormativity relies upon **normative gender binaries**. In order for heterosexuality to be seen as the only 'natural' and 'normal' sexuality and form of sexual desire, girls and women have to behave as 'normal' or 'real' girls and women, and men and boys have to behave as 'normal' or 'real' boys. Bhana's article describes many of the ways in which children use gender norms to regulate each other's behaviours within the heteronormative school playground environment. DePalma and Atkinson's paper shows how adults and young children experience and express systematic heteronormativity by conflating gender conformity and sexuality.

### **Heterosexual matrix**

When gender is viewed as a social activity and performed normatively as we know it, then gender can only be understood through what Butler (1990) calls the **heterosexual matrix**. It is through the heterosexual matrix that gender is systematically, socially, and relationally constructed. According to Butler, the concept of gender becomes meaningless in the absence of heterosexuality as an institution, which is compulsory and enforced both through rewards for appropriate gendered and heterosexual behaviours and through punishments from deviations from the

conventional or 'normal' ways of being either a girl or a boy. This understanding of gender assumes that heterosexuality functions to produce regulatory or normative notions of femininity and masculinity. Heterosexuality is thus seen as the matrix ordering gender power relations. According to Skattebol, 'any gender performances or sexual orientations that fall outside of this matrix of power are rendered abject and violently excluded from the domain of intelligibility'.

**Performativity** is one of the concepts that Butler popularised in 1990. She used it to refute the commonsense understanding that gender is just something that we already 'are'. Instead she proposed that gender is something that we are constantly performing, through language and embodied acts (1993). Moreover, gender performativity is more than a pre-scripted 'act'. As we perform ourselves, we also 'make' ourselves. In other words, gender performativity is generative or productive. We are continually making meaning about our gender as we perform ourselves, we are continually gendering and regendering ourselves.

Robinson and Davies quote from an interview with Butler (1994:33) in which she explains the generative or productive nature of performativity as 'that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names' and as 'the vehicle through which ontological effects are established'. They illustrate the ways in which gender performativity is simultaneously limited by the discourses about gender that we have available to us, and at the same time is continually shaping and changing those discourses. In other words, although performativity

often reiterates dominant meanings of gender, it can also transform them.

### **Deploying Queer Theory across A Variety Of Contexts**

The six articles in this collection give us a sense of the wide range of contexts in which queer theory can be deployed.

#### **Queering early childhood curriculum**

In 'Queering early childhood practices: Opening up possibilities with common children's literature', Hermann-Wilmarth and Souto-Manning use Queer Theory to interrupt traditional approaches to early childhood curriculum choices and pedagogical methods. Through queering the traditional narrative of the Three Little Pigs, they expand the repertoire of the texts themselves as well as the ways in which they can be read. They provide practical examples for early childhood teachers who might be interested in queering their own curriculum and teaching methods.

#### **Queering childhood**

Robinson and Davies explore some of the more unstable gender categories that operate in childhood in 'Tom Boys and Sissy Girls'. They suggest that childhood itself is a queer kind of time and queer kind of space in which gender can be quite fluid. They argue that there are opportunities here for masculinity and femininity to be unbounded from male and female bodies respectively. Tomboys and sissy girls provide examples of these queer kinds of fluid moments and performative spaces within childhood. Within the conversation about 'Making Trouble' between Taylor, Blaise and Robinson, Taylor also makes similar claims about the 'inherent queerness of childhood' by referring to children's imaginative transformative play as an

example of their desires to exceed their prescribed identities and to become other.

#### **Queering the family and early childhood services**

Skattebol reports on the range of experiences that gay and lesbian families have had in dealing with the heteronormativity of early childhood services in her article 'Through their mother's eyes'. She describes some of the issues that arise within these contexts in relation to same sex families being perceived within 'hierarchies of normality'; and some of the strategies that families use when interfacing with services, such as 'disclosure', 'passing' (as straight), or staying 'in the closet'. She also discusses the ways in which heteronormativity, already present in young children's thinking, made it hard for them to make sense of and accept the existence of same sex families.

#### **Queering early childhood research relationships**

By reflecting on previous qualitative studies she has done with children, in the Taylor, Blaise and Robinson conversation piece 'Making Trouble', Blaise raises provocative questions about her role as an active participant observer. She wonders how her subjectivity constitutes research relationships with children and how it is performed within and through the hegemonic heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990). Blaise also raises our awareness of gender politics as she troubles her identity as a queer straight researcher and how this might influence the work she does with children and teachers.

#### **Queering classrooms**

In their queer analysis of classroom practices, entitled 'Exploring gender

identity: queering heteronormativity', DePalma and Atkinson examine how children and teachers experience and express heteronormativity within school activities. They also look at how the cultural resources available to children and adults reinforce heteronormative belief systems. Drawing from their government funded project, *No Outsiders*, they show how teachers are applying queer theory in their everyday work with children.

### **Queering childhood innocence**

In the 'Making trouble' conversation between Taylor, Blaise and Robinson, Taylor and Robinson discuss how they have found Queer Theory useful for troubling the dominant image of the innocent and vulnerable child. Robinson argues that one of the more ironic effects of the childhood innocence discourse, is that it can render children even more powerless and hence vulnerable.

### **Queering friendship in school playgrounds**

Bhana's study, 'Emma and Dave sitting on a tree, K I S S I N G: Boys, girls and the 'heterosexual matrix' shows how (hetero)sexuality influences friendships in school playgrounds. Her paper documents the gender and sexual cultures of children in South African school playgrounds. Observations of the playground show how children's rhymes and clapping games are both gendered and sexualised. Also, children's discussions about 'kiss-kiss chase' games reveal how they provide opportunities for girls and boys to perform heterosexuality. The games that children take part in on the playground show how they are actively constructing (hetero)sexual relationships and 'doing' femininity and masculinity.

Collectively these papers demonstrate that Queer Theory can be taken up in a variety of ways and across a diverse range of gender/sexuality related contexts in early childhood. They showcase the flexibility and mobility of Queer Theory. Most importantly, they provide examples to early childhood education professionals that there are many ways of doing teaching and researching 'otherwise'.

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## Research

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### **Queering early childhood practices: Opening up possibilities with common children’s literature**

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#### **Abstract**

The field of early childhood education has historically recommended best practices (Gomby, Larner, Stevenson, & Lewit, 1995; McDonnell & Hardman, 1988), while more transformative approaches suggest deconstructing such models (Cannella, 1997; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995) through the exploration of culturally-relevant perspectives. While these perspectives allow us to address some multicultural issues, we propose that by queering such practices, we can develop more fluid understandings that can open up possibilities for practice in the field of early childhood education. In this paper, we use the folktale *The Three Little Pigs* to expose ways in which generalized identity categories can be shifted and destabilized—queered. We suggest that an analysis of three very different retellings of these stories through the lens of queer theory can be extrapolated to an analysis of three different approaches to early childhood education.

Through the study of three children’s literature texts, we explore the possibilities of queering early childhood practices and draw implications for opening up possibilities and embracing social justice in the early childhood context. Congruent with the best practices model of early childhood education, Walt Disney’s *Three Little Pigs* (Disney, 1933/1948) follows the traditional tale with the wolf eating the first two pigs after he blows down their houses, and the third pig surviving because he used the best home building materials. *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* (Scieszka, 1989) and *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001) bring a variety of perspectives to the tale—first through the eyes of the wolf who claims that he was “framed”, and second, through the eyes of empowered

pigs who exit the traditional tale and create a new story with the wolf watching the dragon-protected three pigs from a safe distance—inviting the creation of new stories and altered realities. Through the use of queer theory to analyse these children’s books we seek to illuminate new possibilities for approaches to early childhood education.

## Introduction

As teacher educators who are keenly concerned with social justice practices in education, we have encountered various levels of acceptance and resistance to our suggestions / recommendations / requirements that our students—pre- and in-service elementary school teachers in the Midwest and Southeastern United States respectively—read about and integrate a wide variety of multicultural issues into their teaching practices. Students may feel more accustomed to discussions of the usual race/class/gender trinity of multicultural education, but when we move into discussions of more traditionally tabooed topics—like gay and lesbian issues—resistance has often turned to outright hostility. Not all of our students are so resistant: while we have received requests for lists of children’s and young adult literature with gay and lesbian themes (and, subsequently, provided them), some of our students have expressed concern that, in their particular school setting, bringing a text containing so much as the word “gay” or “lesbian” could be a job-threatening act, particularly in early childhood classrooms. And, while we believe that it is important for all children to see concrete depictions of themselves in schools, literature, and curriculum, we also know that this is not a political possibility in all schools.

We argue that, while all teachers may not be able to include specific gay and

lesbian issues into their curricula, they can challenge normative identity practices and perceptions that play into homophobia. Queer theory helps us to challenge the concept of a fixed identity. Butler’s (1990) notions about identity as performance—that subjects act out the identities that have been placed upon them—challenge us to reject these identity characteristics as real, required, or true. When subjects do accept and, thus act out, the identities that they claim in a fixed way, it is often within a similarly fixed binary.

For instance, the idea that boy is opposite of and cannot be similar to girl, heterosexual is opposite of homosexual, or good is opposite of bad. One side of the binary configuration reifies the other by being what the other is not. We find Luhmann’s (1998) definition of queer pedagogy helpful in thinking about how queer theory can be used in an elementary setting: “a queer pedagogy [is one] that draws on pedagogy’s curiosity toward the social relations made possible in the process of learning and on queer critiques of identity-based knowledges” (p. 141) . In other words, how do the actions and relationships of people (rather than their identity categories) mediate their learning and understandings? How does the power that is wrapped up in particular identities usually determine the actions of those who claim those identities, and how can that power be challenged? As Pinar (1998) claims,



“queer pedagogy displaces and decenters” (p. 3).

In this paper, we use the folktale *The Three Little Pigs* to expose ways in which generalized identity categories can be shifted and destabilized, or queered. We suggest that a queer analysis of three very different retellings of these stories can be extrapolated to an analysis of different approaches to early childhood education. We compare three approaches to early childhood education by using select stories of the three pigs. *Walt Disney's Three Little Pigs* (Disney, 1933/1948), *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* (Scieszka, 1989) and *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001) show how, when identities are queered as they are in the third book, accepted practices can also be queered.

Like Luhmann (1998), we do not believe that homophobia is merely a problem of under representation, but also of particular beliefs that put people into boxes based on how they express sexual desire and perform gender. While we do believe that it is important to provide selections of books that represent the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender (GLBT) population, matching books with readers (Hade, 1997) does not necessarily equal social change. We posit that teachers can bring a queer lens to classrooms and books in ways that help children debunk the idea of what are normalized identity categories. We believe that, by using a queer perspective to examine identity and expectations of identity, early childhood educators can open possibilities for students to explore who they are and the identities they claim in ways that help them see multiple ways of performing these identities (Butler, 1990). While these may include GLBT

identities, they might also include more commonly recognized or discussed identities, including, but not limited to categories of race, class and gender, and identity categories present but less often discussed in a public school forum such as religion or disability.

### **Approaches to Early Childhood Education**

The field of early childhood education has historically recommended best practices (Gomby, Lerner, Stevenson, Lewit, & Behrman, 1995; McDonnell & Hardman, 1988). Such practices are developmental and often built on culturally-specific information and assumptions. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1996), developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) is based on knowledge about how children develop and learn. For developmentally appropriate practices to be culturally relevant, we need to challenge our assumptions of how and at what age children learn as learning and development vary across cultural contexts.

According to Lillian Katz (1995), "[i]n a developmental approach to curriculum design...what should be learned and how it would best be learned depend on what we know of the learner's developmental status and our understanding of the relationships between early experience and subsequent development" (p. 109). In order to honor a diversity of backgrounds and contexts, early educators must understand that variations in development occur not only across individuals, but in larger patterns, across cultural contexts. In this article, we posit that by understanding and employing such a stance, early educators are well-

positioned to support and promote young children's development and learning.

NAEYC (1996) states that "[k]nowledge of typical development of children within the age span served by the program provides a general framework to guide how teachers prepare the learning environment and plan realistic curriculum goals and objectives and appropriate experiences" (p. 9). While this is a desirable goal, it is indeed an impossible one, as development varies considerably across cultural contexts (Rogoff, 2003). Examples of this include wide variation of the age when children learn to distinguish right from left and the age at which children can handle a cutting tool without hurting themselves—representations not of individual variation, but of how cultural contexts are intrinsic and integral to early development (Rogoff, 2003). Such differences may span years, yet while the NAEYC statement (1996) accounts for individual variation, it fails to undertake cultural patterns, not fully explaining how growing up in different cultural contexts shape a child's learning, development and values.

Wanting to move away from the belief that at certain points in the life span some kinds of learning and development occur most efficiently (Kuhl, 1994), many researchers have challenged and deconstructed best practices as a set of guidelines to be imposed onto children (Cannella, 1997; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995) through the exploration of culturally-relevant perspectives (Ladson-Billings, 1992).

A decade ago, Gaile Cannella (1997) proposed the theoretical base that underlines the concept of best practices and developmentally appropriate

practices as normative. She suggested that by employing such guidelines, children who do not fit the theory are in some way not normal (Cannella, 1997). This does not only happen to children who are cognitively diverse, but those who live in cultural contexts that are not sponsored by educational agencies such as preschools and early education settings. Therefore, by employing such concepts, we are creating and upholding a norm by which all children should abide. Those whose cultural contexts vary from the norm are often viewed as neither belonging nor not developing properly. As a result, early intervention often occurs, to mediate and "fix" the children who do not fit the norm.

To depart from such a deficit-oriented perspective, culturally responsive teachers develop intellectual, social, emotional, and political learning by "using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 382). Education designed specifically for children from minority backgrounds is comprised of "culturally mediated cognition, culturally appropriate social situations for learning, and culturally valued knowledge in curriculum content" (Hollins, 1996, p. 13). Culturally responsive teachers address not only the importance of cognitive development, but also the maintenance of cultural identity and heritage.

In this article, we recognize the value of such transformative perspectives (Cannella, 1997; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995) that can move early educators towards understanding and offering responsive education to young children. We pose that while such perspectives allow us to address multicultural issues, we propose that by queering early educational theories and practices, we

can develop more fluid understandings which may open up possibilities for practice and research in the field of early childhood education.

### **Queer Theory in Education**

Using queer theory to interpret pedagogy and determine curriculum requires that educators move beyond a multicultural approach that asks merely for inclusion and constant addition of multiple identities. According to Sumara and Davis (1999), “queer theory asks that the forms of curriculum and the relations of pedagogy be appropriated as sites to interpret the particularities of the perceived differences among persons, not merely among categories of persons” (p. 192). By using queer theory to think through curriculum and pedagogy, educators can focus on more closely on the individual diversities in their classrooms—even when, demographically, the students might look similar. Rather than merely including multiple identities and expecting students to adhere to common notions of those identities, queer theory requires that educators think “about what discourses of difference, choice, and visibility mean in classrooms, in pedagogy, and in how education can be thought about” (Britzman, 1995, p. 152). By being both culturally responsive (Ladson-Billings, 1992) and attentive to power, difference and choice within various cultures, teachers can help their youngest students explore identities in less restrictive ways.

Bringing queer theory to approaches to early childhood education can help educators teach in transformative ways, rather than focusing on the boxes that children should fit in based on their various cultural markers. As Britzman (1995) writes, “the queer and the theory in

Queer Theory signify *actions*, not actors” (p. 153, emphasis in original). Queer theory invites us to challenge notions of best and developmentally appropriate practices that require students to fill those boxes. Queer theory also discourages teachers from making generalizing moves, such as worrying if a boy is too feminine, or accepting particular actions from boys and not from girls because, as the adage tells us, “boys will be boys.” Queer theory allows educators to help students explore how they culturally and intellectually respond to expectations of identity.

### **Text as a Model: Queering The Three Pigs**

Using the texts of three different versions of the common fairy tale, *The Three Little Pigs*, as our data, we bring a queer lens to books that are easily accessible in early childhood classrooms. We posit that this analysis can be extrapolated to ways of looking at early childhood curriculum and pedagogy. The first book, Disney’s (1933/1948) *Walt Disney’s The Three Little Pigs* creates the normalized character with both illustration and text. The other two books, *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs* (Scieszka, 1989) and *The Three Pigs* (Wiesner, 2001), offer alternate perspectives on the characterizations established in the Disney (1933/1948) version.

### The traditional tale: A best practice model

We use the Disney (1933/1948) version of the traditional three pigs fairy tale as an allegory for the best practices model. Like best practices, this traditional version is told over and over, serves as the base from which other stories are told, and relies on ideas (bad and good in the story, developmental milestones in best

practices) that are generally accepted without much challenge.

The archetypal story of the *Three Little Pigs*, repeated with some variation in Disney's (1933/1948) version, has three pig brothers who are setting off to seek their fortune. The first two are lazy and do not want to work too hard to build their houses, so they build them out of straw and sticks, respectively. The third pig, the hard working model brother, builds his house out of bricks. In the Disney book, the first two pigs just want to play and subsequently taunt the third pig as he labors to slowly build his brick house. He does not back down when his brothers tease him. He retorts, instead, that he will be safe when the wolf comes.

The wolf, meanwhile, lurks about, watching the pigs converse and build. While the pigs in this book are drawn in pink with big round eyes and made to appear carefree as they skip about, the wolf is drawn in opposite colors—black with slanted yellow eyes, and appears to slink behind trees as he plots the pigs' demise. The wolf's red tongue hangs hungrily between his sharp teeth as he luridly knocks at the three doors of the pigs' homes. He certainly looks the part of the "Big Bad Wolf". Like in the traditional tale, the pigs in the Disney (1933/1948) version tell the wolf that they will not let him in, not "by the hair of my chinny-chin-chin!" (unpaginated). The wolf, following tradition, asserts that he will huff and puff and blow the pigs' houses in. The first two pigs eventually seek refuge with their smarter, non-lazy brother in his brick house.

This traditional telling of *The Three Pigs* fairy tale corresponds, in our argument, to the best practice (Gomby, Lerner,

Stevenson, Lewit, & Behrman, 1995; McDonnell & Hardman, 1988) approaches that rely on assumptions about particular groups. The wolf fits into an archetype of evil and fills the role as expected. The smart and hard working pig saves the day by his industry and shows the other two that if you work hard at the onset, the fun can come later. On the final page of the Disney (1933/1948) book, the pigs are all singing around the piano after the wolf has disappeared forever. In this traditional version of the tale, good is good, evil is evil, and happily ever after comes, as long as you do the expected right thing.

If early childhood educators read this story through a queer lens with students, they can help them challenge notions of good versus evil identities. Teachers and students can also compare these stories by raising questions such as, Is the wolf always bad? Why is the wolf always depicted in this way? What qualities about the wolf do you admire? Questions that trouble such a simplistic and flat notion of bad or good can help children think about stereotypes that they have made about others based on appearances or group membership. Likewise, a queer lens can help students and teachers think about the wolf's desire. In the description of the wolf above, his tongue is hanging greedily out of his mouth. Clearly, through both text and image, he desires the pigs, and this desire is depicted as evil. Teachers who are thinking queerly can trouble the notion of desire as bad, as something to be punished, as it was for the wolf.

#### A new perspective: A culturally integrative approach

In Scieszka's (1989) *The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs!*, the tale is told from the wolf's perspective. He suggests that

readers call him Al and wants to debunk the notion of the “Big Bad Wolf” by telling, what he calls, “the real story”. He explains how he was just going to his neighbour’s house to ask for a cup of sugar for the cake he is making for his granny. The neighbour just happened to be the pig who built his house out of straw. Rather than blowing the pig’s house down, Al claims that he sneezed, causing the straw house to fall down and killing the pig in the process. Of course, being a wolf, he would not leave a “perfectly good ham dinner lying there in the straw”. The same general happenings occur at the next pig’s house made of sticks. By the time he gets to the brick house, Al has almost decided to just make his granny a birthday card instead of a cake when the third pig insults his granny. Al then goes crazy, by huffing and puffing. The police show up and haul him off to jail. The book ends with Al claiming that he was framed and “just for asking for a cup of sugar”.

Cleverly told, Scieszka’s (1989) text, and Smith’s illustrations, illuminates the ideas of multicultural education that integrates often marginalized cultural perspectives. Butler’s (1990) concept of binary identities is also evident in this story. The wolf, for example, states that his naturally chosen food preference is for animals that those who typically tell the story find cute. This, naturally, is what has cast him in the “Big Bad Wolf” light. However, while the wolf challenges the evil identity that is set for him, he still accepts that there is an evil/innocent binary, and, by the end of the book reifies this binary as he goes crazy at the third pig’s house. The wolf also tries to recast the pigs as rude when he claims how the pigs won’t even give him a cup of sugar for his granny’s cake. Again, these actions are reifying the concept in the first book that identities are

based on binary constructions of either being good or bad. While the wolf is adding an additional perspective to the story; he is not challenging the notion of categorical identities. Britzman (1995) notes that “the problem is that this liberal desire for recovery and authenticity, when it takes the form of inclusion in the curriculum (perhaps as an add-on, certainly in the form of a special event) attempts two contradictory manoeuvres” (p. 159). The wolf fails to challenge the certainty of identities by assuming that the pig is always positioned as good and he is always evil. The wolf does bring forth Rogoff’s (2003) notion that development is culturally biological, but does not make a further move that would allow for variances within cultural development. For example, how might the story change if the wolf was vegetarian or if the pigs lived together in the brick house they built together? At the end of the story, each identity fulfils cultural expectations.

This delightfully written book offers much for early childhood educators and their students to inquire when approached from a queer perspective. Students and teachers can compare it to the Disney (1933/1948) text to see how differently the wolf performs his identity. Teachers might challenge students to consider how the wolf’s desire is drawn and told in ways that make him seem more or less bad? Or, is desire represented similarly in both texts? Teachers can also ask children to imagine other possibilities for the characters if they were not cast within the good/bad binary, and to think about what happens when people are cast in one particular way. There can also be discussions that highlight how reading from non-traditional perspectives might be valuable, but at the same time they can also reinforce stereotypes.

### A queered perspective: Fluid expressions of identity

The final book that we will discuss is Wiesner's (2001) *The Three Pigs*. Although this is a nonlinear text, it is probably the most easily accessed by early childhood teachers because it won the 2002 Caldecott Medal. While the book begins with the traditional line, "Once upon a time," the story is destabilized by the first turn of a page. For example, the pictures are presented in panels, and it is as though the reader is looking at the pages of a storybook lined-up next to each other on the page. However, as soon as the wolf huffs and puffs and blows the first pig's straw house down, the pig is blown out of the panels and onto the white borders of the page. As the pig leaves the original story, the style of the illustrations change. While the pig's back two hooves remain in the original panel, they are drawn in the original style. As he leaves the original story, the first pig says, in a cartoon bubble, "Hey! He blew me right out of the story!". The wolf, still in the original story, is shown looking for the pig under the destroyed house in the next panel. Weisner uses this illustrative style throughout the book, showing the wolf attempting to maintain the traditional story arch, while the pigs destabilize that arc.

Having escaped the wolf, the three brother pigs meet up and explore parallel worlds which Weisner (2001) conveys through his innovative illustrations. The format of the story and text continue to change. Moving in and out of the nursery rhyme "Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle", the pigs continue to wander a white space filled with story possibilities. Travelling with them is the cat from the nursery rhyme. They come upon a dragon

and a prince. Again, the illustrative style changes, and with it, the pigs. The pigs usher the dragon into the white space, and all of the characters seem to be looking for the story that they want to enter. When the cat points to a page while asking, "What is this?" in a cartoon bubble, the pigs, the cat and the dragon find their way back to the original three pigs story. The story resumes with the wolf peeking in the window while the pigs, the cat, and now the dragon mill around the panels, still in the white border space. Finally, the dragon opens the door to the knocking wolf, who subsequently falls to the ground in surprise. Meanwhile the letters of the text on this page appear to be falling apart. Some are on the ground and some are flying up. Because the first parts of the sentences remain intact, the reader can see that the traditional text of the three pigs story is still on the page, even as it is being blown away. On the next page, a pig is catching letters with his hooves in one panel, and the dragon is catching letters in a basket in the next. The brick house building pig is still in the white border space and, in a cartoon bubble, invites everyone in to his house for soup. On the final page of the book, the pigs, the cat and the dragon are enjoying soup at a big kitchen table that has a center piece of the golden rose. The wolf can be seen watching the whole scene from a distance, and the words, "And they all lived happily ever aft" (unpaginated) float in the space above them.

Not only does this book take on the notion of how stories are told, combining nonlinear text with moving picture panels and changing illustrative styles, it also challenges the very notion of a fixed and absolute identity. Rather than accepting a story where the pigs are categorized as

victims, the pigs in this tale change the very nature of the story by creating a new adventure for themselves. Likewise, while the wolf follows the expected storyline, he never becomes the “Big Bad Wolf” of versions past. Instead, at the end of the book, he looks on with interest and does not disappear forever.

The addition of characters from other familiar nursery rhymes also adds dimension to the story. In particular, the dragon who is cast as a frightening creature to be slayed, is invited into the home of pigs who are usually on the run from the wolf. In this story, the pigs do not live in isolation and also open up their home to others who may be, in one turn, a ferocious creature, and in another, the victim of one who sees him as a threat. None of these characters live out their identities as expected, and all seems well in the final scene, the possibilities are open as suggested by the destabilized and incomplete final text, “And they all lived happily ever aft”.

This book, when brought to early childhood classrooms and intentionally read through a queer perspective, can be a touchstone text for helping young children and their teachers think about how to move in and out of cultural and social expectations placed on particular identity categories. Specifically focusing on the expectations and stereotypes placed on particular identities and asking students to think and talk about this text through a queered perspective is different from asking them to consider the different points of view of the characters. When using a queer lens there is a deeper look at *how* characters are performing their identities. Therefore, students and teachers can use these discussions to talk about how people perform the same

claimed identities differently. Further, when comparing Wiesner’s (2001) book with the others analysed in this paper, students and teachers can think about how different approaches to both characters and to people that they know or see can really change what actions are taken in books, or in everyday experiences.

### **Implications**

Through our analysis, we have found that texts read through a queer lens offers insights into identity performance and expectations. We have drawn links between the texts and accepted approaches to early childhood education that helps trouble notions of these accepted practices. By beginning with the three texts we have analysed here, early childhood educators can bring a queered analysis to common classroom texts. The texts can help teachers and students think about the questions Talburt (2000) suggested for queer educational projects: “Where do identities live? In individual subjects? In communities? In practices? In relations?” (p. 7).

Holding these three texts next to each other, children and teachers can examine closely how particular identities are portrayed. Rather than a mere comparison of what is different and what is similar among the stories, educators can encourage students to talk *about* how the wolf in the second story (Scieszka, 1989) or the pigs in the third story (Wiesner, 2001) challenge the norms set for them by the first story (Disney, 1933/1948). This can then move to the identity categories that are present in classrooms. Teachers can then ask about the expectations of the girls and the boys. The discussion can then be broadened to the identities present in the school, the

neighbourhood, or the town. This could help students and teachers discuss an appreciation of how different people perform different identities (and how these diverse performances enhance communities), rather than merely tolerating them. By bringing other common children's stories into the conversation, understandings about identities be furthered and deepened. There could, for example, be a comparison of Cinderella stories across cultures. The teacher could then explore with children the outcomes of these stories, highlighting the gendered expectations across cultural contexts. We find that a queered lens focused on common children's books can help us think differently about how we approach both texts and larger pedagogical approaches with young children. By using queer theory to analyse children's books encouraged us to think about the implications of pedagogical approaches on student identity performances. This might help early childhood educators develop fluid approaches to children that takes into account cultural expectations and experiences as well as the needs, choices and individuality of each student. With the textual example of pigs free to recreate their narratives (Wiesner, 2001) as a guide, teachers and students can re-imagine what identity performances could look like if they afforded themselves and others that same freedom.

We believe that this queer analysis of three versions of the *Three Little Pigs* has implications far beyond the ivory tower. Our analysis draws a line to the limits of best and developmentally appropriate practices (Cannella, 1997) and culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1992) when these approaches to

early childhood education are not done with an eye toward the diverse experiences of individuals. The implications of a queer lens on texts, and subsequently pedagogical approaches, include helping children imagine wider possibilities for themselves and others. Likewise, teachers who are not bound, as the characters are in the Disney (1933/1948) and Scieszka (1989) texts, by cultural expectations and binaries in their approaches to individuals, to teaching, and to themselves can change the ways that children experience learning. Re-imagining school narratives that break free of binary identity expectations could help early childhood students and teachers realize the potential of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1992) for creating more inclusive classrooms for children, regardless of their claimed identities.

### **From text to classrooms: Queering the lens for social justice**

In using these three texts of the *Three Little Pigs* as parallels to early childhood approaches, we see possibilities for action in classrooms. While we do not investigate all possibilities opened up by exploring parallels between multiple versions of a text through a queer lens, we suggest some implications for teachers and children, classrooms and communities. By exploring and deconstructing best practices and using a culturally relevant approach to teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1992) we play with accepted identity roles in ways that empower the claimers of those identities. By doing so, early childhood educators can help children explore ways to escape stereotypes and expectations, and create different narratives for themselves. As proposed in this article, such practices can open up spaces for challenging the



commonplace and embodying a critical stance.

Employing culturally relevant and multicultural perspectives with a queered lens can help educators and students explore how culturally mediated relationships can be opened in unexpected ways, considering various cultural identities and fostering respect for difference. When members of the classroom and wider community begin to problematize and transform their notions of what is expected and unexpected from children, encounters with traditionally marginalized identities can be used as opportunities to grow and learn, rather than as a moment to reify feelings and ideas that maintain the binary privilege of the dominant identity. This is of importance because it opens up spaces for talking about and deconstructing intolerance and fostering respect for diversity within and beyond the classroom.

Our hope is that a queered early childhood curriculum will help young children grow into people who take actions that are both affirming of multiple identities and challenge traditional notions of identity and power. By taking a queer lens to books like these, we aim to encourage early childhood educators to similarly open the door for their young students to queer(y) all kinds of normative identities.

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## Research

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### Tomboys and Sissy Girls: young girls' negotiations of femininity and masculinity

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#### Narrative 1

*She takes the pale blue denim jeans from the plastic bag that contained other discarded clothes. The jeans belonged to her older brother, who could no longer fit into them. Locking her bedroom door, she slipped off her stretchy pink shorts, and slid into her brother's cast-off pants. She zipped up the fly then turned around to see how she looked from behind in the full-length mirror on her closet. The baggy fit, with the dangly silver bit hanging from the zips on the pockets gave her more room to move. And they had a fly—a real one. Girl's jeans were much flimsier, tighter, and zipped up the side, the back, or the front with an imitation fly. The crutch area was loose, but they hung off her body, unlike girl's jeans which clung to her body. Despite her mother's vigorous condemnation about wearing boys' pants, she did it anyway; even in public sometimes, when her mother wasn't looking!*

Transgressions from normalised performances of gender in young children often evoke emotive responses from parents, educators and other children. Using our own childhood experiences this paper explores the performativity of gender and heteronormativity. We are particularly interested in tomboys and sissy girls, and the ways in which these unstable categories operate in childhood. 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. 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 (Renold, 2005, 2006). Our own experiences of performing tomboy or sissy girl (Davies, C., 2008) reveal contradictory narratives that undermine binarised understandings of gender, representing more fluid performances of masculinity and femininity in young girls. Judith Butler's concepts of gender performativity is particularly useful in understanding the construction of gender and how it is heteronormalised and in looking at the ways boys and girls assert their gendered subjectivities. Similarly, we find useful Judith Halberstam's denaturalisation of the discursive construction of masculinity, demonstrating its performative dimension, and thus creating a discursive space in which masculinity can be read in relation to the female body.

### **Performativity and shifting subjects**

Feminist poststructuralist and queer theory, through which gender is understood as performative (Butler, 1990; 1993; 1997; 2004), informs our discussion in this article. These theories are invaluable for providing perspectives on

the ways in which individual subjects identify and make sense of themselves as men and women or boys and girls through discourses of gender made historically and socio-culturally available to them. Gender is a dynamic process referring to the cultural inscription of bodies into masculine and feminine characteristics. Within these theoretical frameworks, gender is not fixed but rather is an unstable, contested and relational social category, whose meanings and representations are susceptible to change across and within different cultures over time. Within the narratives we offer in this paper, the ways in which each subject constructs herself as a gendered being, who shifts across traditionally masculine and feminine paradigms, demonstrates the fluidity and performativity of gender. Performativity according to Butler is 'that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names...this production actually always happens through a certain kind of repetition and recitation' (1994:33). Further, she suggests that performativity 'is the vehicle through which ontological effects are established' (1994:33); that is, the ways in which masculinity and femininity are played out, establishing, instituting, circulating, and confirming hegemonic forms of masculinity and femininity. It is the repetition of the performance of masculinity and femininity that constructs and reconstructs the masculine and feminine subject. Foucault (1978) reminds us that performances of self are negotiated around strict regulatory norms. Through performances of gender in front of peers, regulatory norms and gender regimes are reified. Various power relations that are inherent in these discourses regulate the possibilities of identity. There are multiple ways of doing masculinity and femininity, however,

these performances are strictly regulated through disciplinary discourses that not only manage individuals but also actively constitute them (Butler, 1990; 1993; 1997; 2004). Individuals perform their femininity and masculinity, in order to 'do it right' in front of their peers and others (Butler 1990) and it is through this repetitive process that the feminine and masculine subject becomes defined and constructed. Transgressing normative boundaries can lead to isolation and rejection on the one hand, but also make new gender relations and ways of performing gender possible, as demonstrated through the performances of gender acknowledged in the narratives in this paper.

Davies (2008) asks the question: 'What is the fate of boyish girls, of their relationship to tomboys, of their childhood, and their gendered future?' Much of the scholarship around tomboys and sissy boys has been undertaken through the discipline of psychology (see Bailey, Bechtold & Berenbaum, 2002; Carr, 1998; Corbett, 1996; Morgan, 1998). However, there is a growing body of research that focuses more on the performance of tomboyism as a discursive socio-cultural manifestation of gender and sexuality, highlighting the different ways in which individuals take these discourses up as their own (Blaise, 2005; Halberstam, 1998; Paechter & Clark, 2007; Reay, 2001; Renold, 2005, 2006). Our interest in tomboys is located within this later context and Tomboys are usually understood as girls who take-up traditionally masculine behaviours and interests that may be reflected through their more androgynous choice of clothing for example (Paechter & Clark, 2007). In addition, we are also interested in sissy girls (Davies, 2008) where sissy is

understood to amplify girlness (Butler, 2008). Halberstam's work on female masculinity and queer time and space is also of particular significance to our theorizing of the fluidity of gender, gender as performance, and in understanding childhood as a queer time and space (1998, 2005). Halberstam critiques the perpetuation of the binary gender system, "man" and "woman", pointing out that it fails to address the multiple performances of male and female that currently exists. For example, the female born person who is consistently read as not female demonstrates the inadequacy and instability of the category "woman". Within this 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. As pointed out by Cristyn Davies (2008), Halberstam is concerned with revealing as fictional the essential relation between male bodies and masculinity. That is, masculinity and femininity have been traditionally seen to be attached to male and female bodies respectively. Halberstam's aim is to denaturalize 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, C. 2008). Halberstam argues that masculinity is not the sole domain of men. She proposes an alternative to this "compulsory" gender binarism, suggesting a system of "gender preference", which allows for gender neutrality until children and young adults "announce his or her or its gender" (1998, p.27). Consequently, Halberstam points out, that one could "come out" as a gender in a similar fashion to coming out in sexuality. However, as it stands, those who do not fit into the compulsory gender binary, are often pathologised as demonstrated

through medical discourses that label some children as having Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood (Sedgwick, 1990, 1998; Butler, 2004).

We propose in this paper that childhood can be understood as a queer time and space. Much of the research that explores childhood and tomboyism alluded to above, continues to neglect the queer dimensions of childhood and of such gender performances (exceptions being Blaise, 2005; Renold, 2005, 2006; Bruhm & Hurley, 2004). Conceptions of time and space, according to Harvey, are social constructions “forged out of vibrant and volatile social relations” (Harvey 1990 cited in Halberstam, 2005). As Robinson (2002, 2005b) and others (James & Prout, 1990; James, Jenks & Prout 1998; Cannella, 1997; Gittins, 1998; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999) have argued, childhood is a social construction largely based on universalized theories of child development, such as those developed by Piaget, where all children from birth are perceived to proceed through a biologically predetermined set of linear cognitive developments that correlate with chronological age. At the end of this process children reach their destination of ‘adulthood,’ which is identified by the ability to engage in abstract and hypothetical thinking. This dominant discourse of childhood, which perpetuates white, western and middle-class values and fails to adequately acknowledge the importance of socio-cultural factors such as gender, class and ethnicity, as well as historical contexts, defines ‘the child’ in opposition to what it means to be an adult. Within this context, children are perceived to be socially constructed as the dependent, immature and the powerless ‘other’ in relation to the independent, mature, powerful, and

critically thinking adult. Thus, this culturally constructed adult-child binary relationship, perpetuated through what are generally upheld as logical and natural differences between adults and children, operates to exclude children from the ‘adult’s world’ (Gittins, 1998). Consequently, the time and space of childhood arises from a volatile and vibrant relationship between adults and children, defined and regulated by adults. Children (like others in subordinate positions) are regularly put back in their place, which means that their subjectivity and agency is negotiated and regulated according to adults’ perceptions of what a child should be.

We argue that childhood can be understood as a queer time, which refers to a temporality beyond the markers of heterosexual and class privilege (Halberstam, 2005). Based on Harvey’s scholarship, Halberstam points out that we assign value and meaning to different kinds of temporality and this is clear in phrases such as the ‘age of innocence’, ‘family time’, ‘work time’, ‘leisure time’, ‘Christmas time’, and ‘summer time’. Within this reading of time, we can see the temporality of childhood operating in a similar fashion. That is, childhood can be seen as a temporal space, constituted within the adult-child binary, in which meanings of the child and youth are constituted by adults’ perspectives and values. Markers of childhood are inextricably linked to linear trajectories constituted through set time periods defined in developmentalist theory as pointed out above. Examples of these markers are when a child at a particular age is expected to sit up unattended, crawl, walk, talk, and how these actions are regulated through adult practices, and manipulations of children’s daily

landscapes. When the child begins to walk, adults' regulate the landscape in order to make it safer and to protect valuable commodities. When a child begins to talk, adults request that children learn to respect the etiquette associated with interacting with others in social environments. However, there are other critical markers of childhood that are intimately linked with heteronormativity and normalised through the process of heterosexualisation. As Robinson (2005a) argues:

the construction of children's gendered identities cannot be fully understood without acknowledging how the dominant discourses of femininity and masculinity are heteronormalised in children's everyday lives. That is, through the processes of gendering children are constructed as heterosexual beings.

Markers of the heterosexualisation of childhood are seen firstly through the numerous ways in which the genders are binarised, such as when girls are given a doll and boys are given a truck or a gun; this process cements the perception that these differences are natural and normal. Play is a significant site of the construction of heterosexuality, with mock weddings, playing games such as mothers, fathers and families, doctors and nurses, chasing and kissing, are all markers of the institutionalisation of heterosexuality in childhood. Such activities are often viewed as a natural part of children's everyday lives and are rarely questioned. Other markers across the progression from childhood to adulthood include the categorisation of particular knowledge as inappropriate to children, and even to adolescents—for example knowledge of sexuality—particularly non-heterosexual sexuality.

Seldom, as Robinson (2005a) argues, are these markers considered part of the 'normalisation' of the construction of heterosexual desire and the inscription of hetero-gendered subjectivities in young children. Such heterosexualised activities are not linked to understandings of sexuality, but are seen as 'children being children', a natural part of growing up that is often linked to biological perceptions of child development. These heterosexual markers continue throughout childhood to adolescence into adulthood (Renold, 2005). However, children and adults can engage in counter discourses that disrupt this process of heterosexualisation of childhood, providing queer spaces in which to do gender differently (Butler, 2004). Childhood becomes a 'queer space' when children subvert dominant discourses of childhood, doing childhood differently. Childhood also becomes a 'queer space' when children take up different and new ways of performing gender. Queer space refers to the place-making practices in which queer identities engage, as well as new spaces constructed by queer counter-publics. Counter-publics are 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser, 1992, p. 123). Renold (2005, 2006), based on her research which explores the promotion and production of compulsory heterosexuality in primary schools, and the importance of queering gender in childhood (Robinson, 2005a), points out that tomboy can be viewed as a queer subject position. Through Butler's (1990, 1997) framework of the heterosexual matrix and the process of subjection, Renold (2006, p. 494) argues that 'the subject position 'tomboy' and the practices of 'tomboyism'

within young girlhood can simultaneously consolidate gender hierarchies and subvert and queer gender / sexual norms'. To be recognizable as a subject one must undergo subjection to a social or political norm, or regulation under the law, but also, this subjection brings with it the potential for agency (Butler, 1997). When viewed in terms of young girls' desires to take up and perform gender differently, the paradoxical process of subjection not just highlights the potential for subversion and queering of gendered and sexual norms, but also the productive and agentic nature of young girls' choices and practices (Robinson & Davies, C., forthcoming). Still, as the narratives in this paper demonstrate, normalising discourses of gender problematise choices that children make in terms of taking up different gendered performances. Bronwyn Davies (1989, p. 235), in relation to children's agency in challenging rigid gender binaries, points out that taking up non-normative performances of gender is not just about choice, 'but involves grappling with both subjective constraints and the constraints of accepted discursive practices'.

### **Vignettes of childhood gendered experiences**

We decided to base this discussion on our recollections of childhood experiences in which we were aware of ourselves as transgressing normative gendered boundaries. In order to convey our personal memories from childhood, we have written vignettes about moments that we now consider pertinent to becoming gendered subjects. We choose not to disclose which one of the authors owns each experience because we are more interested in analyzing the discourses and narratives that run through these recollections and link these

discourses and narratives to gender norms operating in society. We have produced these narratives using strategies of autoethnography to make sense of our memories of gendered childhood experiences. This process allows us to document particular experiences, employing narrative to generate data through which we can analyze relations between subjects and their experiences. This approach allows for different points of entry into an analysis of subjective experiences in relation to becoming gendered at the micro levels of desire and affect than what tends to be possible in larger empirically based research. As Davies and Davies argue "we analyse what we understand experience to be by treating the narratives as archives with which we can study the discursive production itself" (2007, npn, forthcoming). A narrative presents information as a connected sequence of events, and conventionally many narratives are linear in sequence. These sequences are generally not random, but are structured logically and causally so that each event leads to the next. According to Franco-Bulgarian philosopher Tzvetan Todorov, narratives involve the following characteristics: 1. a state of equilibrium at the outset; 2. a disruption of the equilibrium by some action; 3. recognition that there has been a disruption; 4. an attempt to repair the disruption; and 5. a reinstatement of the equilibrium (Todorov cited in Lacey, 2000 p. 29). For example, if we are to apply this theory of narrative to the vignette that opens this article, we might understand the state of equilibrium as being the point in time before the child dresses up in her brother's jeans; the disruption of this equilibrium (or the disruption of normative gender) would be the child's actual dressing up; the recognition of this



disruption might come from an adult (parent, guardian, educator), or the child herself; the attempt to repair this disruption might be adult intervention into the child's dressing up; the re-instatement of equilibrium might be the child removing her brother's jeans and putting back on her own stretchy pink pants (directed by an adult, or by time—such as the end of playtime or leisure-time, or in this case, by the child herself). By employing our understanding of childhood as queer time and space, we disrupt traditional linear narratives in which, through the logic of causation, this child would be stereotypically understood as a proto-gay subject, especially if it was about a boy cross-dressing. In addition, we also disrupt practices of gender normativity that heterosexualise children.

### **Reading common threads across the narratives**

In all the vignettes it is possible to see ourselves as shifting gendered subjects with agency, who negotiate across boundaries of gender norms. As children we were aware of the existence of the gender norms operating in our lives and chose to disrupt them at various points in our daily activities. We did not discuss the narratives before we wrote them, so it is interesting that most of these moments of perceived transgression capture the child alone. This 'secrecy' does not mean that children do not transgress gendered boundaries in contexts with other children or adults, but it does indicate a level of self-surveillance that each child takes on. In these queering spaces we can utilise Sedgwick's (1990) application of the psychoanalytic metaphor of the closet, which refers to the ways in which one manages taking up non-normative discourses of sexuality in a world of compulsory heterosexuality. Of particular

importance are the ways in which each of the narratives acknowledges a sense of the child's agency and the negotiation of power associated with the self. In each of the vignettes, the child engages in the production of a queer counter-public, in that they take up counter discourses that challenge hegemonic ways of doing gender.

### *Narrative 1*

The first vignette that opens this article highlights the ways in which representations of masculinity are negotiated and taken up by the girl child. Other adults and children often called the child in this narrative a tomboy. The child takes up the label of tomboy with some ambivalence, feeling on the one hand that it gave her the freedom and mobility to be more adventurous, play football and climb trees, but on the other, it made the child more aware of the need for self surveillance in terms of her gender performances. Halberstam (1998) argues that tomboyism is often associated with a 'natural' desire for the increased freedom and mobilities enjoyed by boys. Tomboyism is frequently read positively as a 'sign of independence and self-motivation' and may be encouraged 'to the extent that it remains comfortably linked to a stable sense of a girl identity' (Halberstam, 1998, p. 6). However, as Halberstam also points out, tomboyism is viewed as problematic when it becomes the sign of extreme male identification and extends beyond childhood into adolescence. The child in the vignette is aware of the need for secrecy (reminiscent of Sedgwick's theorising of the closet) whilst trying on her brother's jeans, but she is also aware of the need to hide her different performance of gender. Foucault's (1977; 1978) concept of regulatory norms or normalisation can

be seen to be operating in terms of the child's secretive behaviour. Foucault argues that normalising discourses operate at both the micro and macro levels in society, constituting and impacting on individual subjectivities, and the ways that individuals negotiate power relations. The child in this vignette challenges normalising gender discourses through enacting her desire to wear her brother's jeans. However, the young child is aware of the restrictions that these regulatory norms impose on her practices. The child gains some sense of confidence in privately experimenting with her gendered performance before 'coming out' of the gender closet and striding around in her brother's jeans with a newfound confidence. Although her mother is disapproving of her daughter dressing in her brother's jeans, there seems to be a far greater sense of acceptance of the performance of female masculinity, than of male femininity, articulated if her brother was to dress up in her feminine jeans. However, as the young girl grows older this perspective shifts and her behaviour becomes as problematic as the effeminate boy. It appears that childhood for young girls, in this respect, is much more a queer time and space that allows girls a greater time for experimenting with counter discourses of gender without the same policing that is experienced by many young boys. Why isn't there a similar kind of panic in relation to girls? Are girls and women 'allowed' to be more fluid in their representations of gender? Boys dressing up in girls clothing is often read as a major threat to dominant forms of masculinity, which are linked to heterosexuality. That is, not only are these boys read as transgressing the boundaries of acceptable masculine behaviours, but they are often viewed as

proto-gay subjects, which elicits the greatest fears in some adults. Boys dressing in female clothing tend to sully the social value of masculinity, taking up the subordinate position of femininity. Girls who choose to dress up in male clothing do not tend to elicit the same vehement and fearful reactions that are associated with young boys; that is, there is not the same fear that she will grow up to be a proto-gay subject. When girls and women dress up in masculine clothing they take up some of the authority and social value that is inherent in masculine subjects. However, Halberstam (1998) points out that women who take up female masculine performances, do not pose a problem if they are read as heterosexual; it is when female masculinity is taken up in the context of queer identities that they meet with greater disapproval. As Davies has argued, sexuality operates as the discursive tool used to regulate gender (2008). Young girls do not tend to be read with the same fears associated with their 'becoming gay' that young boys' tend to be, especially through the process of dressing up. Historically, homosexuality has been defined publicly as the domain of men and the legal regulation of homosexuality has reinforced this by targeting male same sex practices, and these discourses have invisibilised the lesbian until more recent times. This has been further intensified through increasing fears associated with paedophilia, which tended to incorporate the discourse of the homosexual abuse of innocent young boys, which was linked to societal anxieties constituted through the figure of the predatory homosexual (Robinson, forthcoming).

It is interesting that in two of the three vignettes cars and trucks—often symbols

of masculinity—play a significant role in realising the female child's agency. As narrative 2 reveals, the child borrows her brother's Tonka truck and uses this traditional symbol of masculine power within a typically feminine narrative—doing the week's grocery shopping.

#### *Narrative 2*

*Sitting cross-legged on the patterned green carpet, she clutches She-Ra, Princess of Power, and prepares to play. Today She-Ra is going to leave behind her sword of power and drive a canary yellow Tonka truck—a front-end loader—to Jewels to do the shopping. Gripping the Mattel character tightly, the child carefully lifts her brother's heavy truck, pushing the Princess of Power through the small opening at the truck's bottom and into the driver's seat. She-Ra's taunt legs hang down, but the princess is nevertheless, firmly lodged behind the steering wheel. She-Ra drives off at a cautious speed raising the front-end loader's shovel in preparation for the grocery shopping. This time She-Ra knows she'll definitely get a park.*

She-Ra, Princess of Power, is a heroic female fictional character created by Mattel in the mid-eighties (and is the twin sister of He-Man). She also appeared in a cartoon with the same title as her name, which was designed to get young girls to consume a narrative similar to the then popular He-Man and the Masters of the Universe cartoon series. She-Ra possessed superhuman strength, speed and agility, is highly resistant to damage, and has a healing touch. In addition she is able to speak with animals telepathically. In the child's narrative, it is perhaps no accident that She-Ra leaves behind her *Sword of protection*, with its super-powers that are no doubt

associated with its operation as a phallic signifier. Unlike He-Man who has a sword of power, as well as an axe and a shield, She-Ra's *sword of protection* suggests a subordination of femininity in which the female is in need of protection (sexual and otherwise) in a male universe. In the child's narrative, the *sword of protection* is cast aside, and instead the Tonka truck front-end loader is adopted as a mechanism through which the female character can assert her agency and power within a relatively banal narrative that involves doing the grocery shopping. The child abandons fantastical narratives and She-Ra's superhuman powers, and instead has the female character use her commonsense—not only does the front-end loader have a greater capacity to carry more shopping than the average sedan, but it is likely that the vehicle will operate to intimidate other drivers out of the way of a good car-park. The need to secure a car space in a busy urban shopping centre is a narrative that is familiar to the child, often experiencing her mother's frustration on occasions when car parks were rare.

In this vignette, the child challenges the fantastical narratives of the Masters' of the Universe, taking She-Ra out of this construction and places her in the everyday. The child perceives that the everyday context of shopping requires something more than superhuman powers to actually survive the experience. The child, resignifying the Tonka truck in terms of taking it out of its usual earth-moving context into a domestic shopping scene, queers traditional understandings of gender relations by disrupting both masculine and feminine power. If we are to apply Todorov's theory to demonstrate the child's queering of gender in this narrative, the state of equilibrium at the

outset is the child playing in a typical domestic scene; the disruption of the equilibrium is the child's taking her brother's Tonka truck and placing it in a typically feminine scenario, as well as taking She-Ra out of the fantastical and inserting her in to the battles of the everyday; the only recognition that there has been a disruption is encountered as the child struggles to insert a Mattel character, who has not been designed to fit into the truck, and forces the character into the vehicle; the child refuses to repair this disruption, leaving She-Ra's taught legs hanging out of the bottom of the vehicle; and the reinstatement of the equilibrium is a return to the domestic shopping scene in which She-Ra drives away cautiously. Although this is a rather conventional narrative, the child can be seen to be queering this space and time in several ways: firstly, she queers the traditional feminine role of shopping by utilising the masculine Tonka truck to make shopping easier – and to get what she wants; secondly, the child queers She-Ra's feminine superpowers by inserting the masculine Tonka truck to get the job done rather than the feminine powers associated with the *sword of protection*, She-Ra's usual weapon of choice; and finally, she queers traditional femininity through She-Ra's competency in handling the Tonka truck outside its usual domain.

Taking up the subjectivity of the tomboy, the child in the following vignette demonstrates the fluidity of gender, showing that masculinity and femininity is not fixed, but is a performance taken up by girls and boys, and women and men.

### *Narrative 3*

*She jumped out of bed and ran into the lounge room, where the tall brightly*

*decorated pine tree had given birth to hundreds of presents. She quickly ran to each room waking up family members instructing them to see what Santa had put under the Christmas tree. Pouring through the presents, she could see a large colourfully wrapped box at the back of the tree. Her name was on it. Ripping off the wrapping, and opening the box, she saw a big shiny yellow station wagon car. It had red doors that could open and shut, big black tyres, and a steering wheel that turned. The back seat could fold down to make more room. She felt her cheeks flush with apprehension and uncertainty about what the others would think about her present. For a moment she thought that perhaps she'd opened the wrong present and that it really belonged to her brother. She cautiously checked the tag on the ripped paper for her name—and it was hers.*

This vignette highlights the way in which the child takes on a position of self-surveillance in terms of crossing over gender boundaries. Despite the child's excitement at receiving the car, she becomes particularly self-conscious when she is aware that other family members might consider it to be an inappropriate present for a girl. As in narrative one, the child recognises that crossing gendered boundaries in this way is potentially problematic and fears the consequences of doing her gender incorrectly. As pointed out previously, individual subjects strive to have their gendered performances considered authentic or real through the judgments of others. In this context, the child is weary that others might be disapproving about the way that she does her gender, but is reassured to some extent when she reaffirms that the present is actually hers and carries with it a sense of authenticity based on the fact

that it is given by another. The vignette also reflects the relationship between gender and desire in that girls are supposed to desire feminine objects such as dolls, a jewelry box or the like. The girl child who desires objects associated with boys, not only reveals the performativity of gender, but also the precarious relationship between gender and desire. As Butler points out the desire associated with masculinity and femininity is institutionalized through heterosexual norms that teach boys and girls, and men and women how and what to desire in order to be appropriate gendered subjects. Butler comments, 'Although being a certain gender does not imply that one will desire a certain way, there is nevertheless a desire that is constitutive of gender itself and, as a result, no quick or easy way to separate the life of gender from the life of desire' (2004 p. 1-2). The child who dares to express her desire differently and act on it risks being seen as naughty and bad because she transgresses gender norms. In seeking out the name-tag a second time to reassure herself that the car was indeed hers, the child is also seeking reassurance and authentication for her desire.

### **Sissy Girls and Tomboys**

It is difficult to capture a single moment in the life of a girl child who desires to take up femininity in order to get her gender right. Most of these stories are invisibilised so that the workings of gender appear natural because of their normative dimension. Stories about excessive femininity have most frequently been told using the male drag performer whose body and performance can make apparent the performativity of gender by disrupting the ways in which femininity and masculinity can be read across male

and female bodies (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004; Halberstam, 1998, Robinson & Davies, forthcoming). This excess may be read through the body of the male child who displays effeminacy. As McInnes argues a sissy boy becomes a sissy boy 'through processes of recognition and witness, processes that rely not only on social structures and discourses of gender but are (and must be, if they are to be effective) produced through complex social processes of what boys do, what other people say about them and do in response to them, and how others bare witness to these sayings and doings' (2008, p. 97). McInness highlights the importance of recognizing the gender performance of the Other as a deviation from the norm, and acknowledges the impact of the ways in which one might choose to respond to children who take up gender differently. Taking up McInnes's theorizing of the sissy boy, Davies points out that her "becoming girl" involved a lot of hard work and that as a conscientious child, she had worked at this process overtime, which meant that she was deemed a sissy by others—'a kind of being, it seems, that no one really wants to see in little boys or girls (2008, p.117). Davies shows that being a sissy is not just the domain of effeminate boys, but that it modifies and amplifies the category of girl, and that this process can also attract unwanted slurs and attention from other children and even adults. Unlike many tomboys who learn resilience, who experience certain freedoms and independence which often leads to increased mobility, sissy girls are often less resilient to the taunts of other children, and their more reserved behaviour, or sensitive demeanor, is not generally encouraged by peers and adults. In this way, sissy girls can be seen to be doing femininity to excess in ways

that make gender visible as performative. Like sissy boys, sissy girls are victimized for taking up femininity in ways that challenge normative gender. That is, the sissy girl represents characteristics of gender that can be viewed as extremities of femininity, which are often not viewed positively. The concept of sissy girl can be read as queer in that it is attached to the female body, rather than in the traditional way that it has been considered in relation to the male body; in both contexts it is seen as derogatory. Diane Reay in her study of primary school children in Britain points out that being a tomboy seems to guarantee male friendships and male respect. Reay also (2001, p.162) argues that 'implicit in the concept 'tomboy' is a devaluing of the traditional notions of femininity, a railing against the perceived limitations of being female'. She points out that there is a suggestion of shame and fear of femininity that is reflected in those who take-up tomboyism. This can be linked to the concept of being a sissy, which potentially carries with it a sense of shame. In his theory of affect, Silvan Tomkins places shame-interest at either end of a continuum of affective possibility, suggesting that shame operates 'only after interest or enjoyment has been activated, and inhibits one or the other, or both' (Sedgwick and Frank 1995, p.5). The shame experienced by the sissy child can be productive in relation to instigating ethical relations in the school environment as argued by McInnes (2004, 2008; McInnes & Davies, forthcoming) but the embodiment of being ashamed as a result of being perceived to be a sissy by others, also has an impact on the child's resilience in the playground and elsewhere. Unlike an interest in adventure, or freedom and independence associated with the tomboy, shame as

experienced by the sissy girl is characterized by the 'lowering of the head and eyes' so as to reduce further exploration or self-exposure (1995, p.5). Shame does not involve complete withdrawal of interest (which might be closer to disgust), but as McInnes argues about the shaming of 'sissy' boys, gender related shaming 'operates to support a fictional autonomy, coherence and competence on the part of boys' (2004, 2008). In addition, we would argue that this fictional autonomy, coherence and competence is not only associated with boys, but is also linked to some girls who taunt other girls perceived to do their gender inappropriately, such as the sissy girl, who often lacks the resilience of her tomboy counterpart.

### **Conclusion**

In this article we have argued that understanding childhood as a queer time and space provides a framework through which to read the child's gendered performances as fluid and contradictory. This process demonstrates the precarious and shifting nature of gendered identity and how the child can take up both masculinity and femininity at various points in time. As argued, masculinity and femininity are not fixed belongings of material bodies. Through our understanding of childhood as a queer space and time we have explored some ways in which the child produces counter-publics or counter discourses, allowing for new possibilities of taking up gendered subjectivities differently. This framework also provides a means through which to understand how the child's agency around gender performances can result in a confidence that extends into other realms of the child's life. There has been less panic focused on how young girls take-up performances of masculinity than

in comparison to young boys' performances of femininity. However, this changes over time as the girl child moves into adolescence, where her performance of gender becomes more highly regulated. We have also explored the characteristics often associated with tomboys and sissy girls. Through our own experiences of performing tomboy or sissy girl we have highlighted the contradictory narratives that undermine binarised understandings of gender, representing more fluid performances of masculinity and femininity in young girls. We believe that it is critical for educators and parents to consider the implications of the ways in which adults and other children take on a process of surveillance associated with the policing and fixing children's gendered performances. The ways in which we choose to regulate children's gendered subjectivities can either inhibit or encourage children's agency, not just through their play, but also in other areas of their life.

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## Research

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### **Making trouble: A conversation about departing from the straight and narrow in Early Childhood**

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#### **Introducing the Conversation**

Each of us has been 'making trouble' through working with Queer Theory for a number of years now. In 2006 we shared some of these trouble-making experiences in a session called 'Queering Early Childhood' at the Reconceptualising Early Childhood Conference in Rotorua, Aotearoa/New Zealand. Since this time we have continued discussing the various kinds of 'trouble' that queer perspectives create: by 'troubling' or 'undoing' ways of understanding gender (as Butler 1990; 2004 intended it to do); by troubling taken-for-granted conceptions of childhood; but also by blurring traditional boundaries within the field which has at times caused trouble for ourselves. Our discussions about these various kinds of troublings have been important to us, as they provide us with a home base for intellectual and emotional support in a wider environment that is not necessarily always open to 'queer' ways of thinking.

This article is structured around a conversation in which we reflect upon some of these 'troublings'. The conversational format is itself an attempt to trouble the more conventional formats of academic writing. It begins by each of us explaining how and why we began using Queer Theory as a departure from the straight and narrow ...

## Departing from the Straight and Narrow

### *Mindy:*

I started departing from the straight and narrow when I stumbled upon Queer Theory. In particular, it was a combination of Adrienne Rich's (1980) analysis of compulsory heterosexuality, combined with Judith Butler's (1990; 1993) concepts of how gender is constructed and performed through the hegemonic heterosexual matrix that first challenged my understandings of gender. When I encountered these ideas as a postgraduate student, I wasn't quite sure how they were related to young children or how I might apply them to my work as a teacher educator and researcher, but I had a strong feeling they were significant. Since then, I have been working my around Queer Theory and find it useful for troubling childhood innocence, gender, sexuality, teaching, and researching.

Similarly to when I stumbled upon Judith Butler's work, I have recently found Sara Ahmed's ideas about 'orientation' fascinating and useful for thinking about my teaching and researching. In her book, *Queer Phenomenology*, she raises broad questions about 'orientation' and offers new insights into the spatiality of sexuality, gender, and race. She discusses 'orientation', 'alignment', how sex, gender, and orientation can often get 'out of line', and the different ways that they are kept 'in line' (2006). This has provoked me to think differently about the work that I do generally within early childhood, and also specifically about my teaching and researching body. I have started wondering about the possibilities of orienting, disorienting, and reorienting

the work that I do in early childhood education. I am beginning to see the necessity for not taking the straight and narrow in early childhood, even though it can be a harder path to follow.

Therefore, by choosing to orient my work with Queer Theory I am not taking the straight and narrow and both my teaching and researching deliberately sets out to trouble teachers and children about gender and sexuality.

Reflecting on the specific work that I do with children and teachers, I am becoming more conscious of my teaching and researching body and am troubling the ways this influences teaching and researching. I am beginning to ask what difference it might make to 'what' or 'who' I am oriented toward. If orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then how does my teaching and researching reside within the field of early childhood studies or the context of an early childhood classroom? How does queer theory offer different ways for seeing the complex and taken-for-granted processes of 'becoming straight' for children and adults?

Ahmed's work (2006), these questions about 'orientation' and what it means to be oriented within the field of early childhood education, forces me to think about childhood innocence and how this can be problematic for the work that we all do. Historically, early childhood has been a relatively conservative field, driven by white, middle-class, and western values aimed at 'fixing', 'helping', or 'protecting' young children. I wonder how my orientations to gender, sexuality, children, teaching, and researching become problematic because they are challenging childhood innocence?

Although the field is attempting to be more relevant to young children's lived experiences, and the use of alternative perspectives, such as queer theory, is growing, I continue to find troubles within this field. For Sara Ahmed (2006) '... orientation is a matter of how we reside...' (p. 21) and it is my location within early childhood that I have often found to be problematic.

### ***Affrica:***

To be honest, I don't think my academic work has ever been on the straight and narrow. It is interesting you mention being influenced by Ahmed's (2006) call to dis-orient and re-orient our thinking by carefully considering our own orientation *Mindy*. I have never read her work, but my own orientation has always been on the bent side. This is probably why I immediately seized upon Queer Theory when I first encountered it during my postgraduate studies in the early 1990s. It's provided me with some of my favourite conceptual tools and I've been using it ever since. These days my tool box (to borrow Deleuze's 1988 metaphor) includes a range of analytical perspectives drawn primarily from Queer and Feminist Theories, Actor Network Theory, Postcolonial and Critical Whiteness Theories. I like to draw upon them in various combinations, because juggling ideas from these different critical perspectives keeps me on my toes and stops me from becoming too complacent or settled in my thinking. Each one of these perspectives offers a different kind of troubling which can help to de-centre hegemonic thinking about gender, sexuality or race, or in fact about what it means to be human.

My work has always been very interdisciplinary, bridging Cultural Geography, Gender and Cultural Studies, Indigenous Australian Studies, Sociology and Education. So for me bringing together Queer Theory and Early Childhood Studies is just another disciplinary convergence, albeit a very fascinating one. Across all these fields, my deconstructive orientation has meant that I'm always looking for the weak points, fissures, contradictions and

potential points of rupture within and between hegemonic discourses.

Queer Theory provides me with powerful conceptual tools to identify and prise apart the weakest points in hegemonic discourses. Like you *Mindy*, I've found Judith Butler's (1990; 1993) concepts of the 'heterosexual matrix' and 'gender performativity' to be particularly useful. These are extremely malleable and transportable tools for interrogating and destabilising many of the prescribed orderings of a wide web of interconnected social relations – including gender/sexuality relations but not limited to them. Although Butler originally used these concepts to explain the constitutive relationship between coherent gender binaries and hegemonic heterosexuality, and to recast gender as a relational and productive identity performance, I've also applied these concepts much more broadly. Performativity in particular, has helped me understand how Australian places, along with national identities, are inter-determinously gendered, sexed, racialised and constituted (Taylor 1997 & 1998; Anderson and Taylor 2005). More recently, I've been using performativity as a conceptual tool to help me consider the ways in which childhood is gendered, (hetero)sexualised, racialised, embodied and constituted in relation to adulthood and place (Taylor and Richardson 2005; Taylor 2007a & 2007c). That's quite a lot of juggling to do!

One of the key strategies to unsettle or trouble entrenched ways of thinking, and thereby re-orient it, is to blur all kinds of boundaries – the clean categorical identity boundaries that support binary thinking as well as the boundaries between academic fields. This is why I

think it is so useful to deploy a binary-busting perspective such as Queer Theory across a range of disciplinary contexts, including Early Childhood.

Even though all the poststructural approaches challenge the ways in which binaries support hegemonic discourses, I think Queer Theory shows us how gender binaries, in particular, profoundly structure the logic of modern western thinking and a fundamental sense of order in this world (see Sedgwick 1990). When we think of the birth of a child, for instance, the first comment is usually 'is it boy or a girl?' If we don't know the answer to this question, it is almost impossible to speak about or relate to the child. Not only does Queer Theory highlight the foundational nature of gender binaries in the wider system of binary orderings, but it also allows me to better comprehend the high moral stakes that are invested in maintaining the gender binary within heteronormative frameworks as the bedrock of 'naturalness' and the 'normalcy'.

I love Queer Theory because it challenges, head on, the conceit and the moral authority of any claims to be 'natural' and 'normal' (and there seem to be lots of these in the field of early childhood). It's gutsy and mischievous. So thinking back to the quote that you've offered up *Mindy* - '... orientation is a matter of how we reside...' (Ahmed 2006, p.21) - I know that for all my trans-disciplinary mobility, my mode of residing is resolutely queer. I brought my 'queer gaze' with me, as an interloper into this field, about 4 years ago. Since then I have been using it to sniff out and trouble everything that is 'natural' and 'normal' about childhood.

**Kerry:**

Like *Affrica* I don't think my academic work has ever been on the straight and narrow and certainly when I talk about childhood and sexuality in the same breath this really comes home to me! The moral panic that arises from discussions of this intersection, especially from the media, is alive and well!

However, my pathway to queer theory began when I first started working with pre-service teachers in the area of cultural difference. I wanted and needed an approach that could effectively address some of the major pedagogical and theoretical issues that kept arising for me. The most problematic pedagogical issues were the personal defensiveness that many students expressed around the inequities that we were dealing with, such as racism, sexism, classism or heterosexism; problems of categorisation and 'bitsyness' that seemed to operate around doing the identity politics approach; and the perceived irrelevance of doing diversity that was expressed by many students – for example, the perception that if there are no known queers in your class, doing sexuality issues is not relevant – doing sexuality is often perceived to equate with non-heterosexuality; or, doing Indigenous equity issues in Early Childhood Centres is not relevant if there are no known Indigenous clients or children – doing racism is often perceived to be relevant only to non-whites.

Feminist post-structuralism and Foucault's works provided a strong theoretical framework to understand the way that subjects are not fixed, but rather constituted in discourses and are

changing, contradictory and dynamic; the precariousness and partialness of 'truth' and the multiplicity and contextualisation of knowledge; and how binary relationships (e.g. male/female, white/black, heterosexual/homosexual) define members of the binary in opposition to each other, constituting a hierarchy of power in these contexts (see Davies, 1993; MacNaughton, 2005; Middleton, 1995; Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). It provided a means through which to make it all relevant to each individual in my class; to understand the privilege that goes with being white, heterosexual, middle-class, or being an adult, to name just a few. Queer theory, which takes up many of the practices and perspectives of feminist post-structuralism (Robinson 2005a), provided that critical lens through which to disrupt common sense understandings of sexuality (or other aspects of subjectivity), to deconstruct heterosexual/homosexual binaries, to begin to 'undo' gender (Butler, 2004) and to conceptualise how femininity and masculinity do not 'belong' to fixed biological bodies – that is, to understand female masculinity (Halberstam, 1998; Davies, 2007). Judith Butler's concepts of the 'heterosexual matrix', gender performativity and the process of subjection have also been critical in my Queer thinking (Robinson, 2005a). Butler's work has provided a critical theoretical framework through which to begin to 'trouble' what we take for granted – especially the relationship between sexuality and childhood, the precariousness of gender, and how gender is heteronormalised through everyday micro and macro practices. I am also finding the queering work of Judith Halberstam (1998; 2005) exciting and productive, especially for reconceptualising and queering

childhood, as well as her theorising around the denaturalisation of the discursive construction of masculinity as belonging to the male body, allowing one to see masculinity as performativity, which can be read in relation to the female body.

## **Troubling Research Relationships**

### ***Mindy:***

Orienting myself within early childhood through queer theory has not always been easy (Blaise and Andrew, 2005). Although I have found Butler's concept of gender performativity and the hegemonic heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990; 1999) useful for troubling modern and fixed notions of childhood and gender, it has become more problematic as I begin locating myself within the heterosexual matrix (Blaise 2007). Recently, I've been revisiting data that I generated with children across three qualitative studies, conducted in a range of early childhood settings (Blaise 2002, Blaise 2005; Blaise et al, 2007). Reviewing the data, and in particular 'critical research moments', has lead me to ask new questions about the implications of my 'orientation' as queer straight researcher working within the field of early childhood education. I have been wondering how my gender performativity influences the research relationships that I have with participants. How might re-analyzing some of my conversations and interactions with young children capture the complexities of my subjectivity and make the functionings of (hetero)sexuality visible? Is it possible? By making these straight discourses visible, how does this become problematic, for myself and others?

### ***Affrica:***

I find your references to orienting yourself within the heterosexual matrix as a 'queer straight researcher' really fascinating *Mindy*. It's an especially intriguing and ambiguous self-descriptor for an author of a book called *Playing it Straight*.

These days, when we take a feminist poststructural approach to research, it is common practice to 'locate ourselves' within the research relationships, to acknowledge our agency within this context and to acknowledge the situatedness of our thinking (Haraway 1988). So, in terms of the standard business of 'locating ourselves', this is not such an unusual statement to make. What is quite unusual and brave, I think, is that you have begun to 'orient' yourself within a queer analytic framework such as the heterosexual matrix in the field of early childhood. In this field, childhood innocence and a-sexuality is assumed to be axiomatic. This makes your 'orientation' particularly risky. It sounds as if you are beginning to question the performative effects of your own particular kind of (hetero)sexuality upon the research relationships you have established with children. I think this is taking 'locating yourself' a step further than the standard declarative practices, and I admire you for it.

### ***Mindy:***

I do think it is important to consider our performances in relationship to children. As a qualitative researcher, who was interested in exploring Queer Theory as a useful tool for analysing children's gender and sexuality, I was so focused on their interactions, that I almost forgot about my own. I think in part, this was because of my orientation as an early childhood

teacher and researcher. Although I documented the ways that young children were 'playing it straight' in the classroom, how was I 'playing it straight'? How am I playing it straight as a teacher or a researcher? How am I part of the heterosexual matrix? How am I using the classroom space with my gendered and sexualised body?

**Affrica:**

If I'm understanding it correctly, you're now making your own heterosexual performativity (as a queer/straight researcher) a part of your inquiry *Mindy*. I think this is very brave. For as *Kerry* mentioned, it feels risqué to even mention childhood and sexuality together. Moral panics are a regular media event when young children are mentioned alongside non-normative adult sexuality (see Taylor 2007b). Within a field like early childhood too, where there is so much sensitivity to the potential for adults to abuse children, the fact that you're deliberately spotlighting your own research relationship with the children within a (hetero)sexualised framework makes your new kinds of questions all the more risky and groundbreaking.

From my experience, those who are unfamiliar with Queer Theory do not necessarily appreciate that it is a conceptual strategy for deconstructing the relations between gender and sexuality and can easily image it to be something quite sinister. My childhood ethnographic research has been analysed using a range of theoretical frameworks including queer, postcolonial, critical whiteness and cultural geography. Amongst the publications from this research, an article called 'Queering Home Corner' (Taylor and Richardson 2005) attracted quite a lot

of attention. One of the outcomes of this was that the research itself was misconstrued by some as an unethical project that was setting out to inappropriately impose a sexualised context upon early childhood and sexual 'labels' upon young children. Nothing could be further from the truth, as Queer Theory is actually trying to expose the ubiquitous nature of heteronormativity (ie heterosexualised spaces are already everywhere, including in pre-schools) and to destabilise any fixed predeterminations of gendered or sexual identity. So I can image how the very nature of your reflexive inquiry could so easily be misinterpreted.

From my understanding, it's your intentions to use queer theory to critique the ways in which the research relationships between yourself and the children in your studies have unfolded within the already heteronormalised context of early childhood and in ways that are affected by your own manner of performing your heterosexuality. But for those that don't understand or accept the ubiquitous nature of heteronormativity and the pressures of the heterosexual matrix, this might be hard to understand.

Actually I wonder if any of us, equipped with the critical perspectives of Queer Theory or not, straight, queer, or queer/straight, can ever escape being positioned by the heterosexual matrix?

**Kerry:**

I don't think interactions, conversations or performances of self can ever escape being read or framed in heteronormative discourses; it is such an unconscious process most of the time that it just operates unnoticed. It is only through an



awareness of how it operates on a daily micro and macro level that it can be challenged and disrupted.

I'm actually a bit troubled by the notion of 'queer/straight' and the potential consequences of using this label. It might reinforce the heterosexual/homosexual binaries that queer theory aims to disrupt. I agree that it is critical to be reflexive around our own subjectivities and how they can impact on the work that we do in the area of sexuality, especially how others read and interact with us, how we read the research we undertake, and the limitations of the theories that we use, including queer theory. Queer theory provides a critical framework in which naming or representing one's sexual identity is not central to the work that is being done, but rather the focus is on challenging and disrupting the processes that normalise or marginalise subjects.

I appreciate what you are grappling with *Mindy* in your reflexivity around being queer/straight, but I feel hesitant in naming identity in queer frameworks, such as queer/straight, or queer/queer, or queer/bi as it potentially returns to and reinforces a normalising power hierarchy that undeniably still operates within hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality in society. To identify as queer/straight still carries with it a privilege associated with being heterosexual, and the power of the naming only exists in the context of the unnamed and unknowable other. To name one's self immediately leads to an expectation and fear that others have to name themselves, which can lead to silencing and marginalising the other, especially in public spaces.

As you point out *Mindy*, there is more risk involved when identifying as non-heterosexual. I think in the general community the term queer is still primarily associated with GLBT identities, but perhaps there is something in the label queer/straight that is about claiming a place, or raising awareness that queering heterosexuality is central to this work.

***Mindy:***

Yes, I agree with all of your concerns *Kerry* and you are raising important questions about the politics of gender and sexuality. And yet, I wonder how orienting myself in this way might disorient others? Thomas's (2000) work around critical queerness is a reminder that straights have always had the luxury of not having to think about their sexuality. I agree with Thomas and find it interesting that most early childhood research, even studies concerned with gender and sexuality, rarely disclose or address a researcher's gender and sexuality, much less problematizing it. Revisiting the field notes I have generated while conducting qualitative research allows me to locate some of the ways that I have been troubled by my straightness while engaging with young children. Re-analysing these field notes shows that I documented the uncertainty about my straightness. Although these reflections became a part of my data set, I was unsure what to do with them. I am still trying to figure out what my role should be as a feminist, queer, activist researcher.

***Affrica:***

Isn't the naming of heterosexuality as a queer kind of performance a crucial part of this troubling strategy? So hopefully this kind of re-orientation of straight-as-

queer that you are doing *Mindy*, with your own researcher subject position, is actually confusing rather than reiterating the heterosexual/homosexual binary. I don't think it's necessarily about firming up a binary with differently named poles. It can be seen as another kind of move altogether.

The tricky thing about playing with this set of words is that the notion of 'orientation' automatically evokes the question of sexual orientation. Flowing on from this, *Mindy's* naming of herself as queer straight might suggest that there be a new set of hyphenated identity sub-categories in the making. I can see why you would be concerned, *Kerry*, not to use Queer Theory as an excuse for simply proliferating identity sub-categories around the same old axis of homosexual/heterosexual. That would be antithetical to the purpose of Queer Theory. On the other hand, I don't think we live in a world in which we can completely avoid naming acts and identity performances and the binaries that frame these. The best I think we can do is to understand their functions and effects and try and mess up the neatness and normalcy of it all.

### **On the Contradictions of Performativity and Heteronormativity**

#### ***Mindy:***

Recently Judith Butler (2006) responded to the contributions of a special issue of the British Journal of Sociology of Education which highlighted how educational researchers have been using her work in school ethnographies. Butler showed an interest in the conversations that took place between children as well as the interactions that occur between

children and adults. For Butler, these conversations are important and she directs our attention to two dimensions of this speech. One dimension is about what is being said and '...the other has to do with what is being shown or signalled through what is being said' (p. 529). Butler reminds us how these speech acts are at once a way of constituting a relationship with another, including ways of both appealing and appearing to another. Butler's thoughts on these dimensions of speech acts are useful tools for locating how my subjectivity and the research relationships I have with children are significant and at times troubling. How might this be considered as part of the multiple activities through which gender is '...instituted and then, stands a chance of being de-instituted or instituted differently?' (p. 529). Is it possible to envision critical practices of a queer straight subject?

#### ***Kerry:***

I think Butler's comments on how speech becomes embodied and can simultaneously result in a different and contradictory reading of what is being said through this embodiment is very interesting and useful. My first thoughts go to the work that I have done on sexual harassment, where young women are often accused of encouraging harassers through their body language (e.g. laughing comments off), even though they are saying that they don't like what is being said to them. I think that the contradiction in this case lies in having to negotiate multiple relations of power associated with fears of retribution by harassers, popularity amongst their peers, gendered relationships and hegemonic discourses of femininity and so on.

**Affrica:**

And do you think that these same sets of contradictory and embodied speech acts are always at play within a context of heteronormativity?

**Kerry:**

As multiple, contradictory and fluid subjects we are all operating contextually to both reiterate and queer heteronormativity at certain times. As heteronormativity is institutionalised all of us negotiate and engage (knowingly and unknowingly) in practices and performances that reiterate heteronormativity; at other times and in different contexts we can take up queering positions that challenge and disrupt heteronormative processes.

**Affrica:**

I'm glad you reminded us of those kind of fluid double moves *Kerry*. I think your explanation of these complexities and contradictions go some way to clarifying how *Mindy's* queer straight researcher orientation might be simultaneously evoking and confounding heteronormative binaries and processes.

To get back to the research context *Mindy*, I wonder if you could elaborate a bit more on the reasons that you are opening up this wonderfully ambiguous space of the 'queer straight' researcher that seems to have the potential at least to cause all sorts of trouble?

**Mindy:**

I see it as a form of queer critical practice. If heterosexuality is an unstable, fluid, and

incoherent category, then how might I rework or reconstruct my heterosexuality and identity with the aim of disrupting the hegemony of heterosexuality and the heterosexual matrix that installs it as a form of dominance? Engaging in research that is a form of queer critical practice makes it possible for a radical deconstruction and reconstruction of the straight self. This might be one way for dismantling heteronormativity. It will also be necessary for me to move beyond just claiming a critical queer subjectivity towards actively subverting hegemonic heterosexuality in the classroom with others. At the same time, I wonder how this kind of queer critical practice might disorient those who rarely think critically about gender and (hetero)sexuality, and the implications this could have on practice.

**Affrica:**

Do you think it's possible for any heterosexually identified person, having critically engaged with Queer Theory, to remain heteronormatively oriented?

**Mindy:**

I think it is still possible to remain heteronormatively oriented because of the prevalence of heteronormativity. Understanding Queer Theory does not guarantee that we will successfully disrupt heteronormativity. Reflecting on my research relationships with children and how they are constructed within the heterosexual matrix shows the difficulties of challenging heteronormativity at the micro level. However, raise these issues about gender and sexuality within research relationships makes adults uncomfortable and they begin resisting these ideas. If I am interested in

encouraging teachers to engage with these ideas, I might need to re-orient my work or my identity within early childhood.

***Affrica:***

I'm not sure that your questions about engagement with teachers can be easily answered, although I do know that for me, the ethics of all forms of engagement are inextricably bound up with being open to difference. This is something I have written about elsewhere (see Taylor 2007a & 2007c). I want to explore how much all the trouble we are finding ourselves in and causing is related to the tightly upheld presumptions of childhood innocence in early childhood contexts.

**Troubling Childhood Innocence**

***Kerry:***

What I find particularly troubling around doing sexuality issues with educators is the way resistances are located within hegemonic discourses of childhood, childhood innocence, and cultural and religious values – that frame perceptions of irrelevance. These discourses, which constitute the common-sense knowledge that operate around childhood and sexuality, are very powerful in constituting the individual and institutionalised 'truth' associated with this relationship (Robinson, 2002).

As an educator in this area, these discourses are difficult to negotiate when doing sexuality issues in the context of children – the fundamentalist critical gaze is so quickly turned back on the speaker in an effort to dismiss and discredit, often through the use of discourses of moral panic associated with childhood innocence – thus it becomes 'risky

business' (Robinson, 2005c). However, Kincaid (1992, p. 4), echoing the sentiments of Foucault (1978) aptly points out that 'by insisting so loudly on the innocence, purity and asexuality of the child, we have created a subversive echo: experience, corruption, eroticism'. As I have argued before (Robinson, 2005b; Kitzinger, 1990) the construction of childhood innocence only operates to make the child more vulnerable; ironically, in the name of 'protection' we actually contribute to children's vulnerability - through keeping them 'unknowing' about certain knowledge, especially relating to sexuality.

I have found that mobilising discourses of the 'vulnerable child' and 'child protection', allow one to open up spaces for others to consider sexuality in relation to children, including dealing with queer issues. The perspective that we need to provide children with the knowledge and language to make them less 'vulnerable' is one that can disrupt many of the barriers to this work. This troubles me somewhat, as this process always starts with the potential child as 'victim' perspective – a bit like looking up 'childhood sexuality' in a library catalogue to find 'child sexual abuse' as the overwhelming categorisation of information. Still, it is the point that seems to have the most affect in shifting individuals, which is easily understood. However, I believe that we need to be starting from the view that children are agents in their own rights, with sexual subjectivities, who have the right as citizens to access knowledge in order to become competent beings. However, the myth of childhood innocence is problematic and it is often mobilised to police rigid adult/child binaries that maintain the subordination of the child

(Robinson, 2002). Queer theory is critical in providing a theoretical framework in which to navigate through this precarious relationship and to see that sexuality is not just part of adult subjectivity, or the negative and problematic experience that it is often constituted as in children's lives. Children are negotiating sexuality every day despite what many adults believe; how they effectively do this should be a collective concern.

### **Affrica:**

Not only does Queer Theory offer a new conceptual framework through which we might navigate the minefield of dominant childhood innocence discourses (for other critical commentaries on the effects of 'childhood innocence' discourses see Epstein et al 2003; Cannella and Kincheloe 2002; Renold 2006); the fetishisation and eroticisation of childhood (see Walkerdine 1997, 2001); and children's sexuality that you have mentioned *Kerry*, it also offers to lighten the tone of this sombre conundrum. I think Queer Theory is invaluable not only because it offers new ways of thinking about entrenched 'truths', but because it also lightens up dominant discourses that are unreflexively self-assured about their essential righteousness. These kinds of self-righteous discourses are nearly always bound by some kind of dominant cultural centrism. Nowhere is this more obvious than around the (very Eurocentric and middle class) presumption of childhood innocence. When I first starting working in this field I was struck by the reverence that was ascribed to the notion of the 'innocent' child. Early childhood professionals seemed to play a key gatekeeping role in maintaining and perpetuating the innocence discourse. Early childhood institutions seemed to

both spatially and discursively reinforce the physical and epistemological separations of adults (as rational, sexual, knowing and protective subjects) and children (as pre-rational, a-sexual, innocent and vulnerable subjects).

And yet when I began my ethnographic research with young children, what struck me most was the inherent queerness of the children's play, rather than their inherent innocence. This queerness was expressed through the capacity of many children to imaginatively exceed their ascribed identities - to imagine themselves otherwise, as wild ponies and boy princesses, as policemen mothers, as wilful teenagers or obedient pet dogs. The children involved in such play were not bound by the binary logic of gender (or by the human/animal binary either). They clearly desired to become 'other' (to use Deleuse's 1988 terms) and were open to difference (for accounts of these children see Taylor and Richardson 2005; Taylor 2007a). Moreover, the wild excesses of these kinds of open imaginings stood in paradoxical contrast to the straight-laced, narrow and linear classification of such play, within developmental terms, as 'pre-rational' (or 'pre-operative' to use Piaget's 1954 terminology). According to the unimaginative prescriptions of developmentalism, children's boundless imaginations of self-as-other are reduced to a lack of rationality - that most highly esteemed adult (male) characteristic.

For all these reason, I felt that early childhood was begging to be 'queered'. While not all poststructural approaches are immune from righteous earnestness, Queer Theory is renowned for its ironic and playful analysis. It is very good at disarming virtuous positions by identifying the inherently 'odd' or 'queer'

characteristics of otherwise sacrosanct subject material. To me, Queer Theory seemed to offer a simultaneously lighthearted and powerful way of troubling the prevailing 'little children are essentially pure and innocent' tropes of early childhood and this is primarily how I use it.

### **Mindy:**

It is clear that we have been 'troubling' early childhood through the various ways that we apply Queer Theory to our work as researchers and teachers. Although this work can be risky and controversial, it is also exciting and important. The conversations that we have had around research relationships, performativity, heteronormativity and childhood innocence are just some examples of how we are engaging with alternative theoretical frameworks. I hope that we can continue these conversations with each other as we persist to 'trouble' identities, gender, sexuality, childhood, teaching, and researching. I also hope that our conversations will lead to new questions and possibilities for the work that we do with children and teachers.

### **Affrica:**

And I hope that similar kinds of 'troubling conversation' will be taken up much more widely within early childhood in the future.

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## Research

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### Through their mother's eyes: the impact of heteronormative paradigms in child care on lesbian- and gay- headed families

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#### Abstract

*Social justice has long been a feature of early childhood programs, yet practice is often limited to the celebration of forms of cultural diversity related to ethnicity. In addition, gender equity practice frequently fails to consider the fixed and immutable connections between gender and heterosexuality that shape dominant understandings of gender. There are an increasing number of children growing up in gay- and lesbian -headed families who present significant challenges to practitioners who base their practice on these limited to understandings of cultural and gendered diversity. The experiences of gay- and lesbian-headed families have the potential to illuminate the limits of these approaches, for both these and many other children whose families do not 'fit' normative models.*

*In this paper, lesbian mothers from a variety of family configurations relate their own and their children's experiences of negotiating heteronormativity in child care settings. The discussion draws from two phases of open-ended interviews with lesbian mothers using child care services within an urban region perceived to be 'lesbian and gay friendly'. A number of themes emerged in these interviews – issues of disclosure, hierarchies of normality, policy and inclusion initiatives, and children's emerging understandings of gender and family structures. A consideration of these themes will support practitioners to reflect on approaches to working with lesbian- and gay-headed families, and indeed, to revision the way we might work with families generally beyond constraining 'normative' frameworks.*

## Introduction

Gay and Lesbian, queer, bisexual and transgendered people and their allies have a long fought for rights, agitated against discriminatory practices and challenged homophobic attitudes. In Australia and elsewhere, this history of activism has gained much ground, and there are now a growing number of children born into and raised in non-normative families. While children have always been a part of gay and lesbian communities, this current baby boom is accompanied by organised lesbian and gay parenting groups that provide support networks, lobby for access to fertility programs and produce knowledge about issues of conception and beyond. Many gay and lesbian people, who may previously have felt that parenting was closed to them because of their sexuality, now imagine life trajectories that include parenting. It has always been important that a range of professional services consider how homophobia and its concomitant -heteronormative thinking- may impact on service provision. The current baby boom, however, creates a growing immediacy for practitioners to consider the specific political and social circumstances of this group of families.

The focus of this paper is the issues that arise for parents and children in lesbian- and gay-headed families<sup>1</sup> when they

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<sup>1</sup> The language of identification is highly contested among communities of people who reject heteronormative imperatives. Terms such as queers, gays, lesbians, dykes, poofers, trannies, bisexuals, womyn loving wimmin, fag hags are deployed with both humour and political intent. For the purpose of this paper, I am using the phrase lesbian- and gay-headed families because 'lesbian' and 'gay' was the identificatory term used by the interview participants. 'Headed families' highlights the adult/child power relations (both productive and constraining) that exist in families and that insist the sexuality descriptor is attached to the adult members of these families, not the children. While the research participants were lesbians, their family structures were diverse and some families included active gay fathers. In keeping with

engage in the broader and typically heteronormative communities that use early childhood services. Dominant themes have been drawn from a set of interviews with lesbian mothers using early childhood services within a somewhat atypical but not entirely unique 'lesbian and gay friendly' region of Australia. Early childhood services are for many families the first point of entry they make into the diverse and public worlds of children's education. As such, families' experiences in early childhood services can establish important foundations for the way they subsequently engage educational communities. While enormous gains have been won in Australia, equal rights for gay and lesbian people have not yet been secured. Acts of symbolic erasure that deny the existence of gay and lesbian people and their children still occur regularly beyond and within early childhood sites. Erasure is symbolic violence where protagonists, holding majority positions in relation to the group they are othering, attempt to control other people's ways of being by denying the very possibility of 'difference' to the 'norm'. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 167) assert that 'of all forms of "hidden persuasion", the most implacable is the one exerted, quite simply, by the order of things'.

Over the past three years, media backlash over the inclusion of gay and lesbian perspectives in early childhood curriculum have shown that struggles for equal rights are particularly volatile within early childhood sites (Skattebol and Ferfolja, 2007). Here, politicians, religious and cultural groups (all with varying and competing interests) vie over ideas of

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a politics of recognition, I have used the term "lesbian and gay headed" families to describe these children's families when relevant in the discussion.

good education or children's minds in order to secure power and shape society. When gay and lesbian people have publicly been included in early childhood spaces, there have been outbursts of disbelief and vitriol based in the symbolic violence of heteronormativity. This backlash reveals the tenuous standing and partiality of gay and lesbian rights, and underscores the need for continued activism. A brief look at extracts from several recent media articles illustrates how heteronormative beliefs permeate the wider political context of the lives of children in lesbian- and gay-headed families, and set the conceptual ground to later consider how heteronormativity might operate in early childhood settings.

To begin with, heteronormativity is a term that describes belief systems where heterosexuality is presumed to be the only possible sexual orientation. Throughout history, people with non-heterosexual orientations have been socially and politically regulated. Disciplinary and punitive actions that regulate sexuality range from physical violence (sometimes state-sanctioned), to the psychic violence of connecting non-normative sexualities with mental illness (Foucault 1984), and forms of symbolic violence deployed through widespread beliefs systems based in ontological denial. The ontological denial related to diverse sexualities is produced by the elevation of a set of connections between constrained conceptions of biological sex, gender, and (hetero)sexuality as inevitable, fixed and immutable. This set of beliefs refuse any physiological variation in biological sex, gendered performance, and ultimately, the possibility of non-heterosexual orientations (Butler 1990; Butler 1993). When the possibility of non-heterosexual

relations is denied or erased, certain gender possibilities are also closed down. There is a matrix of ideological, philosophical and epistemological power that compels people to perform gender in certain ways in relation to 'opposite' genders. Gender performances and sexual orientations that fall outside this matrix of power are rendered abject and violently excluded from the domain of intelligibility.

A heteronormative backlash occurred in 2004 when the Australian Broadcasting Commission's children's program *Play School* aired an episode that contained a 3 minute segment of a child with two mothers. The subsequent media furore demanded the episode be taken off air for corrupting children's innocence and has been well analysed elsewhere (Taylor and Richardson 2005; Rasmussen 2006). The symbolical violence that marked these media response, however, is ongoing and can be traced through more recent media events. A press release from an early childhood provider about the gay and lesbian perspectives within their curriculum sparked a flurry of outraged responses in the media. I now turn to two of these articles to trace heteronormativity in action.

This first extract is taken from an editorial in a local paper. The writer (Sydney Daily Telegraph Editorial 2006) commented:

"If for no other reason, the people who run the gay-friendly [...] Children's Centre in Marrickville should be condemned for a lack of good business sense.

If their perverse crusade to promote the gay lifestyle to toddlers succeeds, they'll be

out of business in a generation.”

This statement reinforces the idea that it is impossible to procreate outside of the heterosexual relationships, and denies the possibility that children can grow up in lesbian- and gay-headed households. Acknowledging the reality that there are children in lesbian- and gay-headed families undermines the idea that it is impossible for two lesbian women or two gay men to have a baby; an idea that is fundamental to heteronormative thinking.

The argument omits a range of reasons why gay and lesbian perspectives might be included in early childhood curriculum and posits the inclusion of these perspectives is actually and only about the making of future homosexuals. The author frames the discussion in terms of the spread of adult homosexuality which appeals to homophobic beliefs. The notion that homosexuality is a contagion is myth that has threaded through both popular culture and psychological research about children from gay and lesbian families for many years. Researchers investigated whether children from gay and lesbian families were emasculated or defeminised and made into future sexual ‘deviants’. Yet, in spite of the heteronormative bias in the research questions, researchers found little to support the ‘contagion’ hypothesis. A review of this literature concludes:

There is now a wealth of credible data that demonstrates lesbian- and gay-headed families are ‘like’ heterosexual parents in that their children do not demonstrate any important differences in development, happiness, peer relations or adjustment ... It is family process and not family structures that are

determinative of children’s well being. The number of adults and the sex of the adults in a household has no significant bearing on children’s well being (Millbank 2003, p. 18).

The author from the Sydney Daily Telegraph interpolates her readers as homophobic, and denies, firstly, that they might recognise that there are children in gay and lesbian families, and secondly, that they might be interested to consider children’s needs and rights. This focus would potentially to open spaces of alliance between heterosexual and non-heterosexual families who have shared interests as parents in wanting learning environments and communities of their children that reflect their day-to-day lives.

This next media extract deploys heteronormative values and harnesses homophobic energies while asserting a commitment to liberalism. In spite of this author’s liberal positioning, the strategies used in these two articles are surprisingly similar. It is a homophobic version of the “I’m not racist but...” genre of comments that diminish and deny the realities of ‘othered’ people’s. Quigley (2006) states:

“As the product of the Catholic school system when sex education consisted solely of a video of a woman giving birth, I am a strong advocate for a factual and concise sex curriculum for students.

There is a time and a place for sex education but pre-school isn't it. That's when your child should be colouring-in; learning the alphabet, to count and write his or her name. A

preschool for six-month-olds to six-year-olds is not the forum to explain sex. Not heterosexual sex nor lesbian, nor gay nor bisexual and certainly not transgender.

Homophobia is a persistent and ugly prejudice which maturing social values are gradually tackling on their own.”

Again this author denies the reality of children growing up in lesbian- and gay-headed families, or that any child might know a transgendered person. In addition, she reduces non-heterosexuality to the specificity of sexual relations. Heteronormative beliefs limit her imagination about the kinds of conversations about gay and lesbian people that might be possible. She imagines that a conversation about gay and lesbian people/families could only be about sex, and fails to recognise that people talk to children about heterosexuality every day and generally never mention the specificities of heterosexual sex. This denies the complex sets of social relations that constitute family life for all those in heterosexual, gay and lesbian, and homo/hetero-allied communities.

Heteronormativity is a hegemonic discourse in our society, and its assumptions are usually taken for granted. As others have argued, social justice in early childhood requires that early childhood educators develop the skills that enable them to recognise how heteronormativity structures assumptions about children and their families (Robinson 2005).

## Methodology

The perspectives of lesbian mothers that inform the arguments in this paper were collected from 12 families through open-ended interviews through two distinct research phases. The first phase was a pilot conducted in 2004, and the second phase, currently underway, involves several follow-up interviews and a second set of participants. The study explores early experiences of childcare and then tracks participants' experiences over time as children grow older, and staff and families in centres develop on-going relationships.

Participants in this study were drawn from a geographic area where gay and lesbian communities are concentrated. This has had implications for the methodology and the discussion. This geographic concentration potentially makes participants more easily identifiable, so a range of strategies have been used to protect the identities of participants. Pseudonyms and discontinuous narratives have been used, and in some cases, identifying features of families altered. Furthermore, services located in these concentrated areas are more likely to be accommodating and aware of the issues for gay and lesbian people than in communities where gay and lesbian people and families are largely invisible. The findings of this study then are not representative of areas with significantly different cultural/queer geographies.

Participants were recruited through *snowballing* - a technique frequently applied to research considered sensitive in nature (Epstein and Johnson 1998). Snowballing utilises the social networks of participants to contact more participants and facilitates research in hidden populations. This method is particularly

appropriate in communities where behaviour and/or identity positioning is stigmatised and trust is a significant issue in research recruitment. Data has been analysed using a bricolage of conceptual frameworks from queer, cultural and childhood studies.

The methodology of this project is designed to emphasise the intersubjective relations children and their family members. In the first phase, all families interviewed had very young children (>3 years of age) attending child care. Issues involved in gay and lesbian family life are very much related to the identities of the adult members of the households, and I am interested in how parent perspectives might articulate with, influence and be influenced by children's experiences. While there is no doubt that even very young children have aspects of their lives separate to their families, there are also many points where experiences are mediated by parent's perspectives. In this, I am deliberately emphasising the importance of considering children's experiences through their mothers' eyes and vice versa.

### **Early Childhood Research on Heteronormativity**

This work is informed by and located in the small body of work that explores issues of heteronormative power in early childhood sites (Boldt 1997; Casper, Cuffaro et al. 1998; Robinson 2000; Robinson 2002; Blaise 2005; Robinson 2005; Surtees 2005; Taylor and Richardson 2005; Robinson and Jones Diaz 2006). This body of literature challenges the notion that children are innocent of sexuality and the power attached to heteronormative gender/sexuality orientations. This literature intersects with several research

studies that explore the educational experiences of children and adults in lesbian- and gay-headed families (Casper and Schultz 1999; Ray and Gregory 2001; Theilheimer and Cahill 2001; Casper 2003; Mercier and Harold 2003). Family perspectives offer an important counterpoint to the accounts of practitioners and theorists who explore how heteronormativity impacts on early childhood education. It is important that challenges to heteronormative power in early childhood are developed with regard to the experiences of families who are most likely to be marginalised by this form of power, and whose very presence disrupts and offers challenges to heteronormative ideals of family.

### **Emerging themes from this study:**

In this paper, I trace a number of issues about inclusion that emerged for families in order to contribute to the resources available for practitioners committed to social justice for this polymorphous group of families. It is very clear from the interview data that all families valued the support they had been offered by child care practitioners across many dimensions of care. Most families had little contact with child care services before becoming parents and did not know what to expect in terms of equity and inclusion practices. A number of families articulated that practitioners had shown strong empathy and offered valuable advice and support on a range of educational and parenting issues. Participants particularly valued this support where there had been family difficulties, such as, family breakup or where parents had been unsure about children's behaviour. In addition, many participants explicitly recognised that practitioners frequently had no experience in dealing with needs and concerns that

arose directly out of gay and lesbian experience.

Issues of disclosure were significant in the interviews. The metaphor of the closet is used about and by people who identify as gay, lesbian and so on. Disclosing one's sexual identification is a risky business when there is legally sanctioned discrimination. "Passing" or non-disclosure is used strategically within gay and lesbian communities to create safety in homophobic environments. In this and other studies (Golombok and Tasker 1996; Casper 2003), participants stressed that passing became problematic when they had children. Participants perceived that pretending to be "someone that one is not" would introduce shame into the child's sense of self.

These perceptions are supported by the literature on the psychological development of children from non-normative families which suggests that children's acceptance of their family constellation is linked to the openness and pride of the family in their identity and family structure (Golombok and Tasker 1996; Millbank 2003). In addition, Ryan and Martin (2000) argue that disclosure is necessary for authenticity and honesty in parent-care negotiations and when the experience is positive, it benefits the child by enabling authentic family-setting relations and educational success. Issues of disclosure were significant in participants' responses and add an important layer of understanding to the experiences of these families. The detail of participants responses about disclosure have been reported elsewhere (Skattebol & Ferfolja, 2006), and it is sufficient here to state that all participants approached the settings with a belief that clarity about their family life would benefit

their child. The second phase of interviews indicated, however, that while the need to disclose was on-going for families, any anxiety around disclosure reduced when families felt included in the social networks of their settings.

In the next section of this paper, I will look at two key themes in the interviews. These are the diversity of family structures within gay and lesbian constellations and children's thinking about families and gender, and implications for practice.

### **Hierarchies of normality**

Equal rights movements from the 60's onwards have enabled new discourses of gay and lesbian life to challenge narrow conceptualisations where sexuality is the exclusive definitive feature of what it means to be gay or lesbian.

Reconceptualising the family 'beyond blood' is a common feature of gay and lesbian experience (Weeks, Donovan et al. 1999). Homophobia alienates many gay and lesbian people from their families and communities of origin and alternate intimacies are frequently developed. These 'friends as families' or families of choice often carry the commitments, obligations and responsibilities that are associated with biological family life. Non-traditional families are not exclusive to the gay and lesbian community (Carrington 2002; Silva and Smart 2002; Robinson and Jones Diaz 2006), nor are all gay and lesbian families non-traditional in the sense they may be nuclear or uphold a gendered bifurcation.

In this study, participants who had created non-traditional families affirmed difference as a positive value and understood heteronormative models of family as problematic. The issue of

replicating heterosexual norms was expressed by one mother as follows:

I'm not having a longing for normality personally, and I don't have the thing where I think that we have to be... the same as them. I don't have that urge and I actually think that it's highly problematic in lesbian parenting culture, this kind of notion that we are them, only we just happen to be women, cause that's not what I think. I don't think we are them.

These participants, however, suggested that non-traditional family structures and ways of meeting the demands of everyday life presented challenges - beyond those of sexual orientation - to the practitioners who worked with their children. One family, with more mums and dads than the nuclear ideal, had several experiences that led them to believe that they experienced greater exclusion from staff because their family was transgressed a nuclear model. This family was in a childcare setting where there were two or more lesbian and/or gay identified families. One of these families consisted solely of two women. The research participants felt that their family posed a stronger challenge to educators than other families. They stated that they had been marginalised in several incidents that culminated in "being called the 'radical' family by head of centre to the other lesbian couple".

The participants suggested that comment was perceived as disparaging by both sets of lesbian and gay parents and was understood as a mechanism of heteronormative regulation. 'Radicalism' challenges norms, and they felt that the comment indicated that the educator felt

their family's difference or 'radicalism' was something to be diminished through gossip rather than upheld as one of the many forms of community where children can thrive. The comment could have driven a wedge between these two gay and lesbian families, by setting up one family as a 'good' lesbian family and the other as troublemaking. The fact the comment was shared and discussed between them, however, suggests that both families perceived the values communicated in the comment to ultimately undermine the (by definition non-normative and therefore somewhat radical) standing of gay and lesbian unions as legitimate families.

Transgressions from heterosexuality are permissible in some social fields because of gains won by gay and lesbian activists. In the struggle for legitimacy, some gay and lesbian relationships and/or parenting formations have adhered to (or at least presented a public face of) the structure of traditional heterosexual unions – the two parent family. While it is useful to note that hierarchies of normativity exist inside as well as outside of gay and lesbian communities (Taylor 1998), it is equally useful to consider that families closer to the heterosexual two parent 'ideal' may foreground their similarities to the ideal as a strategic response to homophobia rather than as a political ideal or personal preference.

Family life is in this sense is performative; we present our families in various ways to different audiences. The permissible performances are constrained by the discursive possibilities. Families, however, will push the boundaries of these constraints as they struggle to assert the family configurations that support their well being and the well being



of their children. Narrow conceptions of what it is to be a family creates deficit models that undervalue the increasing variety of family configurations that are emerging in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in response to movements in global and local politics (Carrington 2002; Robinson and Jones Diaz 2006). When education practice is based on traditional or 'normative' models of family life, it falls short of the experiences of many families, heterosexual as well as gay and lesbian. Educators constrained by their thinking about families then fail to access to children's life experiences, and consequently, miss children's richest funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti et al. 1992) as a basis for education.

The issue of practices based in normative ideals of stable, fixable family life threaded through a number of the interviews. Like many aspects of work in early education, the issues are complex and not 'resolvable' through formulaic responses. Educators need to be aware of the issues and make 'situated responses' that address the complexity of their specific communities.

It was a fairly common practice for settings to ask all families to bring in a family photograph as a strategy of inclusion. While the participants who discussed this strategy understood and appreciated this as a gesture of inclusion, two underlying problems were articulated. The first was that participants felt their child was singled out as different in a potentially damaging way when their family photo was placed up against a series of normative images of mum/dad and the kids (for a more detailed discussion see Skattebol and Ferfolja 2007). This spotlighting of difference is termed hypervisibility and is often

experienced as uncomfortable. When the differences highlighted are subject to discrimination, hypervisibility is frequently experienced as risky.

The second issue was that the inclusion of an image presumed a stable rather than fluid family configuration. In one instance, a couple had recently broken up and one parent re-partnered. While the parents wanted the child's sense of the family unit to remain stable, they had not yet reached enough internal stability between themselves to conduct the negotiations necessary to make one single image of the family. In the other instance, the family was a tight but large (compared to nuclear) community; there were many aunts, biological relations and sibling relationships through a shared donor. The family simply was not bounded in the conventional sense and a single image posed logistical problems, but also the family's non-conventionality added to the mothers' sense of hypervisibility as risky. Invisibility for lesbian headed families, and indeed many non-normative families, may well be better addressed by incorporating multiple images of all children engaged in a variety of aspects of family life (Skattebol & Ferfolja 2005).

### **Heteronormativity in children's thinking**

Heteronormativity in children's interactions was experienced more strongly by some families than others. It is useful to state that the children discussed below were under three years of age, and also to note that only two of the families interviewed attended a setting where there was more than one or a history of lesbian- and gay- headed families. Several participants who were the first lesbian and gay headed families in their

settings described their early experiences of presenting as same sex families to children as repetitious and difficult. Children from heterosexual families appeared to find the concept hard to grasp. While these mothers were surprised at the length of time it took for their child's peers to accept the possibility of a same sex family, there appeared to be a strong willingness and desire on the part of family members to engage their child's peers in discussions about their families.

There was quite a lot of discussion with other kids about why Tyrone didn't have a dad. The discussion was initiated by the other children. They would ask me "Where's Tyrone's dad?" They would ask him, where's your dad. And that was actually when he was quite little and I was actually quite surprised by that. It was mostly the same kids. It was a group of four or five of them who I think couldn't quite get their heads around the idea. And maybe they talked to each other, I don't know. And it went on for quite a long time, it's actually stopped now, but probably up to 10 months, I mean not like every day, but it was a theme certainly.

These mothers' stories suggest that their children's peers typically understood parenting relationships through the oppositional expressions of masculinity and femininity. A same sex parenting relationship then seems impossible. Children's difficulty in accepting both adult and child assertions of same sex partnerships is thus a reflection of the structuring assumption that exclusively prescribes heterosexuality.

A strategy common to a few families that reinforced their status as a same sex family was appearing together wherever possible. One parent who used this strategy described an on-going discussion that resonates with the previous example. She states:

The two mums question happened every day for about 6 mths ... Evie (her partner) got "Are you Lola's mum?", "Does Lola have 2 mums?" "Has she got another mum?" ... And even from one kid "Lola can't have 2 mums!" I got "Are you Lola's mum? Are you Lola's dad?"

The repetitive nature of these children's questioning draws attention to the pervasiveness of heteronormative thinking. It was hard for children to believe in alternative family configurations even when they were developing relationships with people who lived in them. I contend that the difficulty for children does not relate to their lack of knowledge (innocence) about sexual practices but rather to their extensive knowledge of gender relations within heterosexual society. This concept about an alternate sexual union is so impossible for children because of the way sex/gender organisation is constrained in hegemonic forms of family life. Fortunately, the follow up interviews suggest that the demands of these negotiations faded with time and familiarity. Shifts in the social make-up of settings, however, meant that while these negotiations were fluctuating in intensity, they were nevertheless on-going.

## Gender roles

For some lesbians and gay men, their identities are asserted through resistance to the sex/gender norms that prescribe heterosexuality and involved disruptive non-traditional gender performances. Interestingly, gender performances from parents that disrupted traditional gender roles undercut children's understandings of the family's status as 'same sex'. In the following comment, a parent was aware that when she described her roles in the family to children, her preferences were gendered in a way that placed her family back in a heterosexual model and thus made the 'same-sexness' of their family invisible. She felt that children were not initially reading her as a woman who transgressed gender norms but actually as a man. She stated:

This little kid asked me if I do the cooking because I think she's trying to work out roles ...[I say] I'm going fishing so they get a sense I'm quite different to their mums. But they are also always reassuring themselves that I'm his mum and they ask do I mow the lawn. They always pick the daddy jobs to ask me about so I figure they are seeing me as different to their mothers and fathers. Yes well they're only 2, ... I just say "sure I'm going fishing and I do mow the lawn sometimes and my dad taught me and Tosh helps me."

Transgressive gender roles appeared to complicate children's understandings of non-normative family types. Where this was an issue for families, the adult members had to assert their gendered identities alongside their identity as a

same sex family. The same parent continued:

I try to answer them for how I feel in the world and not just what he needs them to hear.

Typically, parents endeavored to provide alternative discourses to the dominant construction of family as heteronormative. One mother who had struggled to assert the structure of her family with children, related an incident where she became aware that the symbolic violence of heteronormative discourses also played out for children who were not within gay and lesbian constellations.

[We eventually got it clear there were] two mums then they'd say whose tummy was he in. Then some other kid would pop in I don't have a mum. I tried to open it so it wasn't just about him. Then it was [other kids saying] "I'm sad cause my dad lives far away"...my mum's sick and I live with my nana." It's hard and the little kids are trying to work out their own boundaries ...they all need reassurance that anything's ok and having one mum is ok and love is important.

Furthermore, the interviews suggest that the diversity of configurations of lesbian and gay headed families means that these children faced significant differences to each other, in spite of the shared thread of their parent's public sexual orientation. It appears that for children in this very young group, there was more pressure associated with the absence of a father than with the presence of two mothers or two fathers. Families with two mothers or fathers are perhaps read by very young children as

two heterosexual couples, and subsequently, attract less attention because they can be read through a normative framework. For example, a parent from a family with an active father responded to a question about whether children questioned the family's status as a same sex family by stating:

Well... no, she just says she has a dad and they get on a play. I don't think the kids really get it, which is fine with me.

Similarly,

Felix is happy with two mums and two dads. He is very glad he has a dad, as this is part of the 'norm' ie: a mum and a dad. It doesn't matter if there are two or 1!

The absence of a father, perhaps, provokes significantly different responses for young children to deal with than the sexual orientation of their parents, and accordingly, requires different kinds of supports and interventions from educators. Indeed, one family stated that the only explicitly negative comment they received was about the absence of a father, and not directly related to their sexual orientation. Many children do not have a father figure, and it is important that educators challenge the heteronormative impulses within communities that create a deficit model out of these family configurations.

### **Passing**

The fairly intense work of asserting ones difference and legitimacy, however, did not always lead to the desired effect of establishing an environment where these differences were normalised for children over time. In some instances, children

continued to be under pressure to present an intelligible family type.

Some days I'd pick him up and he'd say no I don't have 2 mums and obviously he'd had more pressure that day and he'd take up a different storyline himself or just didn't want to be different.

The parents who noticed this accepted their children using strategies that can be framed as 'passing' (Doane 1987). A parent with an older child (7) with no known father said:

When she was younger she would tell everyone and anyone that she had two mums... Told Santa Claus one year, he had no idea what to say to it except ho, ho, ho! I know that more recently she has told people that her father lives in Adelaide which is where my family is. We do the "stand up and be proud of who you are" but you know she has to find her own way at some point.

In a similar tone that expressed some confusion and perhaps frustration at not being able to change the situation, a parent with a four year old child said:

Well his play is always really hetero... when he's fabricated a father who died or something, we get worried he's not getting enough support. The hard thing is that as his parent, the one who made the family, you can only say it's ok to have two mums so many times. He knows we think that, it's not our opinion that matters here, it's the opinions of his mates.

While 'out and proud' was one of the main strategies that parents used to create a secure sense of self for their child, many also spoke about how friendship networks could alleviate the pressure that stemmed from people's unfamiliarity with their family types.

We've worked pretty hard to make friends with people in the area who are queer-friendly. We've started a bit of a playgroup with a few other families who are starting at the same school. He'll start school which is potentially a much more hostile environment than day care, but with friends and hopefully that will buffer any homophobia he comes across.

### **The role of policy**

Without exception, mothers interviewed believed that practitioners were equipped to deal with direct discrimination, and if this occurred, would advocate effectively for their child/ren. Equal rights at a policy level enabled families to feel they had secured access to an environment for their child that was free of explicit homophobia and this formed an important foundation for this group in taking up childcare places. A policy baseline was articulated by a number of participants as something that would make them feel safe.

Policy solely focussed on rights to representation, however, did not inevitably lead to the inclusion of children in the social networks of the centre and this was considered equally important by families. The disjuncture between policy commitment and inclusion was exemplified in one family's experience. Their setting was very open to policy initiatives and the family was involved in developing specifically gay and lesbian

policy and pedagogical displays. This was appreciated by the family but did not lead to a sense of being included in the community of families, or indeed, to being welcomed in decision making structures. One of the mothers remarked:

Polly has never been invited to any parties, except from other queer parents or queer friendly group.

And later:

We have not been invited to participate on management committee, though I would have liked to. Did feel some 'shame' issues about not being included in that way, as [other people I know] were very involved in the centre.

Safety, it seems, has many layers. Policy made this family feel safe against overt discrimination, but not safe against exclusion. This family took risks by advocating strongly for inclusion of gay and lesbian perspectives in the curriculum and policy at the setting. The hypervisibility that came with a strong advocacy role, however, may have made them feel too vulnerable to initiate connections with other people, or it may have exacerbated homophobia. This account invites us to consider what role practitioners might play in facilitating social networks between families in order to alleviate marginalisation for minority families, and to make those who take an advocacy role feel safe in the broadest possible ways. Policy initiatives, then, are more effective when they move beyond rights to representation and include an emphasis on facilitating connections between families.

## **Social networks**

In one case, fostering meaningful relationships between families was a service priority and this created a sense of safety that extended to inclusion. The family stated:

We had been in one centre that was very proactive about gay and lesbians but moved our child to another centre for various reasons. The new centre was strong on cultural diversity but was located in a much more conservative community and we were unsure how the gay and lesbian thing would go with the other kids and families. I have to say it was great. The new centre involved families all the time on a whole lot of levels, so there was heaps of opportunities for us to actually sit down and talk with families informally. It's hard to be scared of lesbians when you are all talking about getting kids to eat their dinner, or speed humps in the road. It was heaps better than those 'family nights' that were actually too big to get to know anyone where we had pretty much worked out who liked lesbians and stuck with them. Jim was invited for a play date very quickly and the note was addressed to Jim's mums – clearly someone had made it clear to the family we were lesbians and the family had been sensitive enough to realise that we might angst whether the family realised J had two mums and might have made a mistake. Everything was really low key and I came to see after a while that the staff were making it happen for us. They had really strong relationships with all the families and created openings for us over and over again. You could see

this in the kids too, they always said hello to people who came in, and if you stayed any length of time, invited you to play. It wasn't just us but any visitors to the centre as well.

For this family, the focus on facilitating relationships and a deep level of family centred practice both addressed and enabled them to actively work towards breaking down the social distance that creates marginalisation. The family was aware that many pedagogical and teacher interactions also took place to ensure their child's everyday life was articulated in play and group time experiences. These representations that challenged homophobia, however, were conducted in concert with supported opportunities for meaningful and respectful relationships to develop between families. For this family, facilitated social networks contributed to their sense of safety in the setting.

## **Implications for practice**

The representation of gay and lesbian headed families is vital but complex. Heteronormative thinking makes lesbian and gay headed families hypervisible which in turn can exacerbate homophobia. One of the ways educators can support families is to represent lesbian and gay families as one of many family types within their everyday practice, regardless of whether there are lesbian and gay families using the service. This creates an educational context where lesbian and gay headed families can enter services without the unnecessary pressure of being the example of difference and all that that may entail. In addition, practices that enable families control over the way they are represented, and frequent opportunities to represent themselves and

their experiences, avoids reductionist single representations of family life.

Narrow conceptions of family life are typically linked to narrow conceptions of gender possibility and challenging gender stereotypes is central to challenging heteronormative thinking. Many young children are aware of dominant discourses of gender and heteronormativity, and all children need support to assert challenges to these regimes of truth. There is a wide body of literature in early childhood that can support educators to identify discriminatory discourses and challenge them through equity based pedagogical interactions. Some useful examples of this literature focussed on pedagogical approaches to gender and/or sexuality difference include Boldt, (1997), Campbell and Smith (2001), Mac Naughton (1998), Taylor and Richardson (2005) and the Learn to Include (2005) series.

Policy interventions are an integral part of equity approaches. They offer a baseline for practice and an accountability mechanism. Policies that address the inclusion of lesbian and gay headed families, however, need to move beyond rights to representation and include the facilitation of meaningful social networks. Educators who conceptualise their work in terms of family centred and/or community centred practice rather than child focussed are well placed to meet this challenge.

This study has not yet explored the experiences of lesbian and gay headed families with school aged children in any depth. There may well be similarities for families, particularly in respect to the experiences of entering new educational communities. More research is needed on

how family's experiences in early education settings support them in the larger communities of formal schooling. We need to know more about how these larger learning communities successfully address homophobia and heteronormative thinking.

### **Conclusion**

To date, this study suggests clear anti-discrimination principles are important for families but that a focus on rights needs to be accompanied by opportunities for social networking. The interviews point to critical periods where coming out and visibility issues are very intense for both adults and children in lesbian- and gay-headed households. Once children and their families have been included into the social networks of the early childhood settings, challenges to heteronormative thinking are not as volatile. Additionally, it seems that over time children 'get the hang' of two mums as a reality and a possibility. This study suggests, however, that for families to have a sense of safety much of the work of social inclusion for lesbian- and gay-headed families needs to be done with families as well as with children. In addition, the experiences of lesbian-and gay- headed families can assist educators think through the effects of normalising discourses of the family across a range of social justice initiatives in their practice.

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## Research

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### Exploring gender identity; queering heteronormativity

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#### Abstract

While it is important to understand that gender identity and sexual orientation are actually different aspects of human identity and experience, Butler (1990) argues that these aspects become closely entangled in a heterosexual matrix of assumptions and socially-constructed relationships. Deviations from what Butler refers to as “intelligible genders” are automatically associated with unintelligible sexualities, that is, non-heterosexuality. Data emerging from our current *No Outsiders* project investigating heteronormative processes in UK primary schools and an earlier project involving extensive interviews with primary teachers and trainees support this understanding. In this paper we will analyse how both adults and young children experience and express systematic heteronormativity by conflating gender conformity and sexuality, how the cultural resources available to children and adults reinforce this process and how Queer Theory - in both interpretation and application - can help us to understand and challenge these processes.

## Introduction

While there has been a significant body of research on the discursive and negotiated construction of gender in young children (see, for example, Blaise, 2005; Davies, 2003; Mac Naughton, 1998, 2000; Rasmussen, 2006; Renold, 2005, 2006; Thorne, 1993) much of the practical work of early childhood education appears to focus on fixing children into what are perceived to be reassuring gender categories based on their biological sex and, along with this, on assigning assumed sexualities (and present or future desires) to those gender categories. These assumptions are automatic, ingrained, conditioned and limiting: they narrow the infinite possibilities of who we are, who we are attracted to and how we behave into a few possible profiles. These few profiles become normalised as if they were natural: for example, a gay man is “naturally” effeminate. Violating these profiles in any way becomes transgressive, troubling: a mother is “naturally” more nurturing than a father, but then what about lesbians mums and gay dads? While the reality of human experience and expression is diverse, we tend to close down possibilities and castigate those who blur the lines we have drawn.

This conflation of sex, gender and sexuality ignores the fact that these are actually separate aspects of human identity and experience. One might do gender in a variety of ways in terms of dress, behaviour, movement, gesture, speech, etc. One might explicitly claim a gendered identity, or refuse to take one on at all. A person’s gendered performance may or not reflect what we take to be that person’s biological sex, so that a young girl may choose to wear a

“boy’s” school uniform, or an adult woman may have a penis. This young girl and this woman, furthermore, may consider themselves and call themselves girl or boy, man or woman. One’s gender and sex does not predict sexual orientation, so that a quiet boy who likes to read and play in the dressing up corner is not necessarily going to be attracted to other boys, and the girl who refuses to wear dresses will not necessarily come to identify as “lesbian.” It is difficult not to elide these categories, drawing upon evidence from one (wearing dresses/trousers/feather boas) as evidence for another (desiring boys/girls).

These are the kinds of assumptions we wish to explore more fully in this paper. What do these sex/gender/sexuality elisions look like in primary schools, where do they come from and what kind of thinking and action will it take to undo them?

Judith Butler argues that sex/gender/sexuality are almost inextricably entangled within an intersecting grid of assumptions she refers to as the heterosexual matrix, which she defines in the first edition of *Gender Trouble*:

I use the term heterosexual matrix ... to designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized ... a hegemonic discursive/epistemological model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (1990, p. 151).

As Butler (1999) points out, the concept of an oppositional, binary gender system “presupposes not only a causal relation among sex, gender and desire, but suggests as well that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire” (p.30). She exposes this concept as a fiction; but it is a fiction that is all too easy to perpetuate through the daily practices of early years education. Children are already well-versed in the practices of the heterosexual matrix after the first few years of schooling; and by the time they leave primary school, the notion of an oppositional, binary gender system is firmly entrenched, having been reinforced through the vigorous policing of gender boundaries by both peers and adults.

Children, even before they are aware of the mechanics of sex, know how to perform a kind of sexuality that is deeply entrenched in notions of how to perform gender, so that certain masculinities and certain femininities draw implicitly upon dominant sexualities. As Emma Renold puts it (2005, p. 8), drawing on Ingraham (1997), in “doing gender” children are already experienced in doing “heterogender.” The “sexualisation of gender and the gendering of sexuality” (Renold, 2006, p. 489) are an integral part of their daily lives, behaviours and friendship patterns. In this context, deviations from what Butler refers to as “intelligible genders” are automatically associated with unintelligible sexualities, that is, non-heterosexuality. As Britzman puts it, we must go beyond the individualistic discourse of homophobia to interrogate the production of normalcy and deviancy:

The term *homophobia* rarely enters into political critiques of how normalcy

becomes produced and sexualized as heterosexuality. That is, how sex becomes inserted into normalcy and how normalcy becomes inserted into sex is not an area accessible to the naming of homophobia because the term is centrally given over to the correction of individual attitude. The term heteronormativity begins to get at how the production of deviancy is intimately tied to the very possibility of normalcy (1998, p. 152).

Heteronormativity, then, is the process by which the heterosexual becomes constructed as the norm, and everything else becomes constructed against it, as deviant. The heteronorm is defined as much by gender performance as by sexuality, and these performances themselves are socially defined (having to do with social definitions of “boy things” and “girl things” rather than gender identity) so that a boy who carries a pink lunch box not only transgresses socially constructed gender norms but transgresses the heteronormative as well.

In this paper we will analyse how both adults and young children experience and express systematic heteronormativity by conflating gender conformity and sexuality, how the cultural resources available to children and adults reinforce this process and how the application of Queer Theory can help us to understand and challenge these processes.

### **Queering as questioning the normative: holding uncertainty**

If heteronormativity consists of socially constructed associations and categories (boy or girl, boy loves girl, girl loves boy) that become accepted as normal and natural, queering entails constantly questioning this social order. While queer (as a noun or adjective) describes that

which troubles our implicit sense of a natural organisation, queer (as a verb) is the process of consciously engaging in this troubling: transgressing normative categories or associations, recognising and critiquing the social processes behind what feels natural, or simply refusing to believe in these categories. Queering is keeping questions open when faced with the temptation of easy certainties.

In her introduction to *Thinking Queer* (2000) Susan Talburt states:

As presently constituted, queer seeks to disrupt the discrete, fixed locations of identity by understanding sexuality and its meanings not as a priori or given but as constructed, contingent, fashioned and refashioned, and relational. . . (p. 3).

She continues:

A problem becomes how to disrupt the normalization – through knowledge, social relations, pedagogical practices, and cultural mediation – of both hetero- and homosexuality. Projects that teach tolerance (to straights) and offer role models (to queers) create necessarily distorted knowledges through partial, normalized images and depend on intact identities that can be rationally seen and received (p. 8).

It is in the search for alternatives to the kinds of tolerance and role model projects that can serve to reinforce essentialist categories – and through the discovery of our own normalising practices – that we seek a way to bring queering as a mind set to schools. What would teaching queerly look like? Nearly ten years have passed since Letts and Sears challenged teachers to queer elementary education,

“Teaching queerly demands we explore taken for granted assumptions...to deconstruct these sexual and gender binaries (deployed and reified through social text and grammar) that are the linchpins of heteronormativity” (1999, pp. 5-6). But can schools themselves, places where we tend to seek answers rather than questions, be sites for this kind of interrogation?

Interrogating taken for granted assumptions requires us to adopt a stance of strategic uncertainty, a willingness to leave questions unresolved, holding questions open rather than rushing to resolve them. Constance Ellwood (2006, p. 81) draws upon Pillow to recognise the importance of holding questions in the process of conducting research for social justice:

By acknowledging that there are limits to what it is possible to “know”— not only about my research subjects but about myself too — I can come to accept “the uncomfortable task of leaving what is unfamiliar, unfamiliar” (Pillow, 2003, p. 177).

We recognise that gender and sexuality are actually different aspects of human identity and experience, and that even the use of the acronym LGBT implies an unwanted conflation of these aspects of identity. As Dittman and Meecham point out, “transgender fits uneasily at the end of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual in part because it is a gender issue rather than a question of sexuality” (2006, p. 406). When we describe our own current work as “researching approaches to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) equality in UK primary schools” we do worry that the presence of the transgender “T” might be seen as empty exclusivity, since we do not specifically address the experiences

of people who identify as transgender (Monsen & Bayley, 2007). Nevertheless, the conflation of sex/gender implicit in the heterosexual matrix assures that gender and sexualities transgressions signify each other, intermingling and blurring these important distinctions.

**Children, society and popular culture: conflating sex/gender sexuality**

Popular notions of childhood tend to construct children to be somehow “innocent” of assumptions about sexuality (Renold, 2005 - see chapter 2 for a critical analysis of these assumptions), but others argue that children are actually constantly bombarded with a popular media that propagates the heterosexual matrix. Linné’s reading of the popular Disney film *The Lion King* (Walt Disney Feature Animation, 1994) highlights the ways in which sex and gender norms (and the threat of their transgressions) underpin the basic narrative:

The “circle of life” is threatened when the *Lion King*’s effete, purple eye-shadow-wearing brother Scar usurps the crown through conniving and murder. In the hands of this childless, queer loner the kingdom sinks into a dark age of decadence and evil. Only when the patriarchy is restored via the young male prince and his helpmate bride does moral order and prosperity return to the savannah (Linné, 2003, p. 673).

Scar’s gender-queer demeanour provides an entertaining and believable backdrop to his challenge to the patriarchal order, drawing upon our implicit association of gender and sexual transgression to create a familiarly evil and threatening character. Disney did not create sex/gender conflation, but draws upon it artistically, playing upon existing

associations and, in so doing, reinforcing and quietly perpetuating them.

This sex/gender conflation is reflected not only in popular media, but in society’s reactions to it. Consider the public response to Tinky Winky, the universally recognised (and either vilified or adored) “gay” Teletubby. Recently officials in Poland have accused Tinky Winky of promoting a homosexual lifestyle by carrying a “woman’s” red handbag (Easton, 2007). Journalist Michael Colton, whose article in the style section of the *Washington Post* helped to create the Teletubby’s status as a gay icon, later reflected on his reasons for playfully “outing” Tinky Winky:

Tinky Winky is obviously not homosexual<sup>1</sup>, by any stretch of the imagination, but he possesses a few effeminate characteristics (he also likes to wear a tutu on occasion) (1999).

Nevertheless, Tinky Winky had only to flout gender norms by wearing “women’s” accessories to earn a worldwide reputation as sexually transgressive (and therefore threatening to children, according to US televangelist Jerry Falwell).

The children’s book *The Sissy Duckling* (Fierstein, 2002) has come under similar fire in both the US and the UK for depicting a “gay” duckling, despite the fact that there are no clues to the duckling’s sexuality aside from his tendency to dance around the forest home wearing a pink apron and carrying a feather duster. Whether or not Fierstein, an openly gay artist and gay activist, imagined gay romance to be in Elmer’s future, he has provided readers with only Elmer’s gender transgressions as

evidence<sup>ii</sup>. This seems to have even further enraged religious conservatives, who read the lack of an explicitly gay theme to be an act of subterfuge:

The *Sissy Duckling* should be a wake-up call for evangelicals. Conservative Christians were outraged a few years ago by books such as *Daddy's Roommate* and *Heather Has Two Mommies*. But, those volumes were upfront about their homosexual agenda. Books such as *The Sissy Duckling* are subtler, and thus even more dangerous for vulnerable and confused kids (Moore, 2007).

In the UK, the Christian Institute has published a document criticising the government's "recommended resources on homosexuality for schools,"<sup>iii</sup> which includes *The Sissy Duckling*. The other four resources targeted in this critique feature homosexual relationships. While the Christian Institute does not explicitly attack Elmer for being a "gay" duckling, the inclusion of this book as a "recommended resource on homosexuality" suggests an unconscious and automatic conflation of sexuality/gender.

We do not mean to imply that this conflation is an affliction suffered by the homophobic, or even the heterosexual; one lesbian reviewer positively describes Elmer as "your stereotypical gay boy duckling: helpful around the house, he likes to paint pictures, put on puppet shows and decorate cookies" (Beckett, 2007, italics for emphasis). It may well be that Fierstein plays consciously upon the discourses available to us to construct a "gay" duckling without explicitly using sexuality cues; the question is not whether or not Elmer "is" a gay duckling, but that it is almost impossible to read him

as otherwise given the degree to which discursive cues as to gender and sexuality signify one another for most "informed" readers.

These examples demonstrate how the heteronormative matrix works to create stereotypes by conflating sex/gender/sexuality: in the absence of a physical human body, Teletubbies are assigned sex based on voice and perhaps convention (male unless clearly signalled otherwise), but a "woman's" handbag clearly marks "him" as a gay man. Elmer is identified as a "stereotypically gay" duckling because he performs girl in terms of behaviour and hobbies.

### **Conflating sex/gender/sexuality in classrooms: Heteronormativity goes to school**

From September 2005 to August 2006 we conducted in-depth interviews with 72 practising and prospective primary teachers and teacher trainees across the UK to develop a better understanding of how the heterosexual matrix works in primary schools. One aspect we wanted to explore was how the kinds of socially constructed sex/gender/sexuality confluences described above might operate in schools to define and limit even very young children's possibilities by constructing a limited number of comprehensible and co-varying categories. We were interested to explore whether sexuality was elided with gender performances. That is, were assumptions about sexuality formed on the basis of gendered performances, as in the case of the flaming Tinky Winky and Elmer as the "stereotypically gay" duckling?

Interviewees were asked to describe any gender-non-conforming children they had come in contact with and the reactions of peers and teachers. These responses formed a theme of sex/gender/sexuality conflation: transgressing any of these socially defined categories tended to trouble others. One particular instance involved a 10-year-old girl who was described as “confused” because she “wanted to be treated like a boy, and looks like a boy and wants to act like a boy. But has been very upset obviously when people have mistaken her for a boy. And have referred to her as a boy.” This girl seems to have demanded a distinction between sex (she is a girl) and gender (she wants to do boy), yet perhaps it is exactly her refusal to collude sex/gender in the usual way that results in her being described as confused. While the girl had apparently not made any claims about her sexuality, her mother’s concerns seemed to centre on sexuality, “her mum said to me quite specifically that she didn’t want her to be gay when she grew up, because she wouldn’t be able to have children and they didn’t approve of that sort of thing in their house.” The teacher’s reflection reveals her own assumptions in terms of sexuality, “I don’t know whether she wants to be a boy or she just doesn’t want to be girly... There’s a difference between, you know, being tomboyish and deciding that you’re actually gay, you know... at this age for them to know that difference is very hard.” While ostensibly insisting on separating tomboy behaviour and a lesbian identity, the suggestion that the girl is too young to know whether she is gay reveals an implicit connection: she will eventually have to decide whether she is simply a tomboy or an actual lesbian (as if the two were different places on the same spectrum).

We found more instances of gender-sexuality entanglement for boys than girls: boys as young as 5 and 6-years-old were being read as “proto-gay” for their gendered transgressions. For example, carrying a pink lunch box, playing in the home corner, refusing to play rough sports and preferring to read or play fantasy games. These instances reinforce Butler’s notion that performing unintelligible gender is connected with unintelligible sexualities. One teacher, for example, paraphrased colleagues’ comments on a reception-aged (4-5 years) boy who spent rather a lot of time playing with girls and the toys and games usually associated with them, “Oh he’s obviously gay. He’s got to be gay. He’s going to be gay when he grows up. It’s just so obvious.”

Another teacher, a gay man, said he identified children who might grow up to be gay by looking for characteristics that he himself shared as a child, “being more of an outsider, being more of a loner. And sort of, not particularly liking sports, being more of a reader and just, just the ways that they behave, being more effeminate than their peers. That’s how they’ve kind of stood out for me.” The interesting thing for us was that we recognised what he said, both in the connections we tend to make ourselves and with the same theme that ran throughout teachers’ interviews. As we listened to the teachers’ stories and recognised our own assumptions in those they reported, we realised that any research involving queering schools would have to include an interrogation of our own heteronormative understandings. Very young children may themselves appropriate sex/gender/sexuality confluences as they struggle to define themselves in terms that adults understand. One teacher spoke of a Year



2 (6-7 year-old) boy who explicitly described himself in terms of sexuality, "He says, 'I'm gay, I like boys.'" However, she was unable to recall any indication, based on her own interactions with the boy or reports of other teachers, that he had expressed or demonstrated a particular attraction to boys (in fact, she did recall that he expressed and acted upon a particular fondness for touching women's breasts). He also described himself as a "tomgirl" and, when asked to explain, he based his description on his preference for stereotypically girl behaviours, "I don't like football, I like mermaids, I like the colour pink...." The teacher suggested that he had appropriated the term "gay" as well as "tomboy" (which he transformed into "tomgirl") to explain his own gender transgressions.

Another theme that emerged from these interviews was that while many teachers could recall instances of children comfortably transgressing gender stereotypes in the very early years (from nursery up to about 7 years), few teachers remembered these transgressions occurring in the later primary years, and when they did they began to report increasing discomfort among teachers and parents. One teacher, for example, reminisced about a Year 2 boy in her previous school who was "particularly fond of a rather flamboyant feather boa, which got in the way in playing football." She recalled a general air of acceptance for the way this boy happily blurred gender lines (playing football while wearing a boa), but predicted that she would have seen a change if she had stayed on, "At that age a child doing something like that is read perhaps differently than if he had been 9 and doing it."

One head teacher described how the taboo against gender transgressions that inhibited children's behaviours became stronger as they got older, "You know, I can walk into foundation stage [ages 3-5] classrooms and I can see the boys bathing the babies and you know, that's fantastic, but as I go up to Years 4, 5 and 6 [ages 8-11]...it's a learnt taboo." Some teachers described how peer pressures enforced this taboo and how they tended to draw upon a homophobic discourse to enforce gender norms, "Boys who cry when they get hurt might be called either 'wuss,' 'sissy,' 'girl' or 'gay.'" As one head teacher pointed out, the associations between gender and sexuality can be used strategically, "A group of 8- and 9-year old girls were calling a boy 'gay'...they were trying to position him as quite effeminate, as quite weak, all those sort of negative connotations of that." This kind of strategic conflation of sex/gender/sexuality reflects Suzanne Pharr's characterisation of homophobia as a weapon of sexism:

A lesbian is perceived as a threat to the nuclear family, to male dominance and control, to the very heart of sexism...misogyny gets transferred to gay men with a vengeance and is increased by the fear that their sexual identity and behaviour will bring down the entire system of male dominance and compulsory heterosexuality (1988, pp. 18-19).

As Pharr points out, transgressing sexual norms evokes fear and anger that gender norms have been transgressed as well, and the easy conflation of sex/gender/sexuality allows homophobia and misogyny to work hand in hand in castigating those who transgress any category defined by the heterosexual matrix.

Our teacher interviews suggest that the complementary hegemonic processes of misogyny and homophobia described by Pharr are beginning to form among very young children as they begin to recognise and support heteronormative categories. Other classroom research has revealed similar processes in practice among children in the early years. In Blaise's (2005) study of a US Kindergarten, the desirable "fashion guys" enact a physical and violent hegemonic masculinity, while popular "fashion girls" are defined by dress and behaviours likely to attract these fashion guys. Renolds' UK study found that hegemonic masculinities were enforced through the use of interchangeable gendered and sexualised insults, as evidenced by one 10-year old boy's statement that "they say I'm gay – they say I'm like a girl" (2005, p. 132). Drawing upon her own teaching experience in Australian primary schools, Jordan (1995) argues that boys come to school with a sense of what she calls a "warrior narrative" and immediately begin to apply this narrative structure to school: school authority is the enemy, those who resist it are warriors, those who do not are sissies. In this framework, girls are even farther from the warrior status, embodying what the sissies are accused of emulating, and both misogyny and homophobia are used to police this particular sort of hegemonic masculinity. Jordan's analysis suggests that far from providing a safe oasis, schools exacerbate heteronormative processes by providing a power structure within which homophobia and misogyny can be used strategically. Our own research suggests that the way schools are structurally organised reinforces the construction and conflation of sex/gender/sexuality categories and policing their transgressions. Everything from boys' and

girls' sports to the division of play centres (home corner vs. construction) provides an ideal backdrop for policing the heterosexual matrix, as children's gendered play choices seem to be especially salient in producing assumptions about sexual identity and sexuality.

### **Toward queering early childhood education: an action research project interrogating heteronormativity in primary schools**

Our own current research in UK primary schools seeks both to identify ways in which primary schools propagate the heterosexual matrix and ways to queer these heteronormative processes. In a two-year collaborative participatory action research project called *No Outsiders*, teachers and university researchers have been using feminist, poststructuralist and queer theory perspectives to explore and deconstruct what Butler defines as the heterosexual matrix. Project members are based in primary schools throughout the UK and communicate with each other through a web-based discussion forum where field notes and other data are also shared among team members. Data emerging in the first year of the project (2006-2007) has yielded some interesting insights into the nature of gender and sexuality norms and how they are conflated within early years educational settings.

Field notes written by a head teacher in the project reveals the extent to which gender roles are reinforced through family and society. She recalls the reaction of the parents of 4-year-olds to her own suggestion that not only girls, but also boys, might wish to transgress gendered clothing norms:

Our experienced, indeed veteran, reception teacher [says], "Boys can wear grey trousers, girls can wear a little grey skirt or a pinafore dress. Sometimes, because they haven't got much of a waist at this age, skirts can be difficult." The teacher moves on to another topic altogether. I interrupt, "Of course girls can also wear grey trousers, too....." and pause (and everyone takes this as a reasonable addition to the information already given), then as an after thought, "and boys can wear skirts if they wish." Everyone laughs.

Conscious that she had purposely evoked a reaction that she fully expected, she reflected on what results of her micro-experiment revealed about ingrained societal understandings:

These are the parents of 4-year olds...but already we have determined that it would be strange/odd/laughable if the boys dressed in skirts/tights. We are so stacking up trouble for ourselves in years to come, don't you think?

Another project teacher's field notes reveal a fascinating discussion inspired by reading the poem *Gender Pretender* by Benjamin Zephaniah (2002) with her 8- and 9-year old pupils. The teacher reflects on the children's strong understandings of what is and is not allowable in terms of gender and sexuality:

They said that it would be fine for a boy to dress up like a princess but then were beginning to say that actually a boy would get teased more for dressing like that than a girl would for wearing boy's clothes. One child said that everyone would think a boy was gay if they did that. So, that got us talking...The boys in the group,

especially, were saying "it's nasty," "two men or two girls kissing is gross," "it's not normal" - when I asked why they thought it's not normal, they said that "you don't see people doing it." They also said that boys have to wear girls clothes to kiss each other and that girls have to dress up as boys if they want to kiss each other and that if two gay people get married, one has to dress up as a woman so people won't find out.

This discussion also revealed how gender and sexuality are inextricably intermingled within the heterosexual matrix, to the extent that transgressing sexuality norms (boys kissing boys, men marrying men) required transgressing gender norms (boys dressing as girls).

Our *No Outsiders* research attempts to answer the question posed earlier, "What would teaching queerly look like?" We think that it begins with the kind of critical interrogation of our schools and ourselves described above. This means uncovering the implicit assumptions that make parents laugh at the prospect of 4-year-old boys wearing dresses and that suggest to children that boys should wear dresses to kiss each other. It also means uncovering our own assumptions and developing a questioning stance in an environment where answers are highly valued. Recalling Ellwood (2006) and Pillow's (2003) call for opening questions and leaving them unanswered, we see this as a crucial aspect of queering. This does not necessarily mean never having any answers, but rather a sort of strategic uncertainty that allows us to trouble hegemonic certainties, such as those sex/gender/sexuality categories and connotations that make up the heterosexual matrix. What if boys wore dresses to

school? Let us just imagine that for a moment...

Sue, the *No Outsiders* teacher who raised this particular question for parents, is a head teacher of a small village church school. A principle central to Sue's philosophy of teaching is what she describes as "holding the question." She states, "I believe holding the question is the key to learning – it's where the deep learning takes place. Some teachers and children think that it's the answers that matter, but it's not." While Sue professes to be completely baffled by the discussions some of the *No Outsiders* university researchers have about Queer Theory, we read Sue's desire to "hold the question" as a queering technique. Recently one of us wrote to her to explain why:

Because you resist the temptation to rush to certainty, find clear answers to everything. You allow for, recognise and work with uncertainties. This relates for example to the notion of queering that we use a lot, which means that it is very useful to just shake up people's notions of what is normal: challenging assumptions about what goes together . . . and what doesn't go together. . . . But it's not JUST about living with, exploring and working with uncertainties, it's about social justice in the end. There's some debate about whether uncertainty is helpful in the pursuit of justice, and I would say yes. Others would say no. So your interest in "holding the question" suggests that at least to some extent you agree with me (Renée, first author, to Sue on the project web discussion forum, 4 July, 2007).

This insistence on holding the question has allowed Sue to strategically bring

uncertainty into pedagogic contexts that are more likely to entail seeking answers. We do not, however, claim that this is an easy stance to maintain, and exploring our own struggles with tendencies to resort to the heterosexual matrix of easy categories and conflation is a crucial part of our *No Outsiders* project work.

It is perhaps the difficulty of holding the question which makes the non-normative gender performance of one 6-year-old child in Sue's school troublesome to the researcher as well as his peers. Neville has expressed a great desire to play the part of the fairy godmother in a pantomime production of *King and King*, a tale in which two princes fall in love, and his wish has been granted. The pantomime is to be performed at the village church and then later for a special inclusion ceremony off school grounds, but during preparations Neville's performance of his newly-acquired gender role causes some of the girls in his class some consternation. The following reflective observations were conducted by Elizabeth, second author of this paper, at Sue's school and are recorded by Elizabeth in the first person. Below are two extracts from her field notes:

Now we're in the hall and, without my noticing, Neville has been dressed in his white satin dress (with added bosom), blonde wig and sparkling wand. He comes over to me.

Neville: "What do you think of this? I'm the fairy godmother and I've got a bosom."

Another boy: "He's the fairy godmother and he's got boobs – he's got pretend boobies."

Elizabeth (researcher): "Well, I assumed that they were pretend!"

Same boy: "He's got a wig." (Reaches out and grabs it; Neville backs off and

straightens it, and a girl standing nearby fixes on his pink feather and diamanté tiara.)

Neville: “Are you coming up to the – um- the church? I might use a bit of a different voice – I won’t use my usual boy voice.”

A little later, I look across the floor: Neville is now bashing the wide-brimmed hat off another boy with his wand.

Later in the rehearsal, Neville flounces over to me with pursed lips, wafting his wand. He giggles and whispers, “Hmhm – this is very good, isn’t it!” I nod and smile.

At the afternoon performance in the village church, another researcher tells me that two girls have been talking to her, talking about Neville and another boy, both of whom have transgressed gender lines for this performance, “He’s got boobies – and so has Neville – and he’s got a wig, and we’ve been talking about it at lunchtime and we think he looks like a girl.”

The following Monday, Sue tells me that Neville doesn’t want to come to perform the role of the fairy godmother at an out-of-school event at which the school is being presented with an inclusion award (Elizabeth’s observational field note).

As it happened, Neville did appear and play his part at the inclusion award ceremony; but in the context of this paper, it is the effect on his female peers that is especially interesting. What is perhaps particularly disturbing for the girls is that he is taking it completely seriously. He is not once observed to laugh about his role – the giggle as he comes up to me is one of pleasure, not of parody, and the pursed lips appear more for his own pleasure

than for others’ observation. None of his actions or words suggest the sort of exaggeration that implies either embarrassment or ridicule. Nothing in his performance – whether “on stage” or “in between acts” suggests that Neville sees this as parody or subversion: he is not doing drag (with all the connotations that that brings) – he is simply being the fairy godmother. For the female onlookers, perhaps Neville’s body has become an impossible body (Youdell, 2006).

Without parody, this boy-girl is altogether too disturbing for his peers’ comfort. *He looks like a girl* has significantly different connotations from *he is acting like a girl* – and indeed, Elizabeth reflected later that had she not known that it was Neville inside the dress and the wig, she might easily have taken him for a girl all along. His repetition of the echo-chains of feminine gendered performativity is subversive only if we know that he happens to be boy; and that this costume breaks the current dress-code for boys of his age. (A century ago or more, of course, had he belonged to the wealthier classes in England, he would have been dressed in frocks throughout the years of his early childhood.) As Butler (1999) points out, by drawing on the work of Mary Douglas:

Mary Douglas’ Purity and Danger suggests that the very contours of “the body” are established through markings that seek to establish specific codes of cultural coherence. Any discourse that establishes the boundaries of the body serves the purpose of instating and naturalizing certain taboos regarding the appropriate limits, postures, and modes of exchange that define what it is that constitutes bodies (p. 166).

By omitting parody from his performance, Neville has broken the taboos surrounding his own (male) body. Butler states, “there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and . . . drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and re-idealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms,” (1993, p.125). Yet by omitting drag from his performance – by just being “a boy in a dress” – Neville is confounding his onlookers’ sense of why he is taking on the performance at all. And by not using parody in his gendered performance, perhaps Neville himself is inadvertently engaged in an act of queering.

The sex/gender/sexuality connotations invoked and challenged by Neville’s act of gender queering became apparent when Elizabeth joined Neville and his father and younger brother at the awards ceremony a few days later. In her field notes she reflected on ways in which he brought to the surface some of her own implicit assumptions about gender and sexuality:

As I sit with Neville at the round table with his father and his younger brother, Neville suddenly catches sight of my *No Outsiders* pen, with its logo: *No Outsiders: Challenging homophobia in primary schools*. Slowly but surely, he begins to sound out the words on the pen. *No Outsiders* is fine – but as he gets closer and closer to homophobia my heart starts to race . . . what if he asks what it means? What will I say? What will his father say? To my relief, he sounds it out incorrectly, doesn’t ask for an interpretation, moves on to in primary schools then turns his attention to something else (Elizabeth, observational field notes).

Later, Elizabeth reflected back on her field observations in her reflection journal and analysed the source of her discomfort at Neville’s performance and her later encounter with him and his father:

My consternation during this incident arises from two sources. Firstly, my fear is that if I have to explain to Neville what “homophobia” means, he will realise that, because he is choosing to wear a dress, I am assuming he is going to grow up gay. And secondly, and worse, I realise with a slow shock that I have caught myself in the act of making the very assumption which continually reconstitutes the heterosexual matrix: I am assuming that he will grow up gay purely because he is not “doing boy” (Renold, 2005, 2006) according to established gender norms. I recall the moment during the rehearsal when Neville used his magic wand to knock another character’s hat off his head, and I recall, too, my feeling of disturbance at this: a feeling that he was somehow betraying me – or betraying my delight in his girl-ness – by “doing boy” in his dress. Once again, perhaps, Neville is inadvertently engaged in an act of queering: without knowing it, he is reminding me that boys in dresses and girls in trousers might both poke hats off the heads of other children – and that has absolutely nothing to do with their sexual orientation! (Elizabeth, journal reflection)

These observations and reflections gave Elizabeth a chance to investigate the processes of heteronormativity and queering at work in a primary school, including her own implication in these processes. While Sue’s pantomime production of *King and King* (with a fairy godmother added, played by a boy) raised and opened questions for

Elizabeth as well as the other participants and spectators, Elizabeth's conscious participation in a queering project inspired her to interrogate her own tendency to define categories, make connections and close down these open questions.

Pedagogically speaking, the question driving *No Outsiders* is how to teach queerly, that is, how to plan for and support opportunities for questioning the heteronormative. Queering seems to be an indirect thing: rather than seek out the definitive queer curriculum, the *No Outsiders* project looks for ways that queer moments might arise in the classroom. As Sue's pantomime performance based on *King and King* illustrated, we have found creative arts, such as literature and drama, particularly fruitful. Creative arts draw upon the power of the imagination to both remind us of the already imagined (in terms of categorical sex/gender/sexuality and behaviours) and to re-imagine new possibilities. In a recent address on the current state of queer teaching, Jim Sears described an exercise in queering where children are asked to create imaginary characteristics with traits that do not fit the contours of the heterosexual matrix (2007). We have explored the power of the transgressive imaginary elsewhere (Atkinson & DePalma, in press), and the *No Outsiders* project provides a way to explore some specific approaches to what we have referred to as unbelieving the heterosexual matrix (Atkinson & DePalma, 2007).

Jody Norton proposes that we draw upon children's innate interest in fantasy play to literally perform transgressive bodies in the classroom:

Suppose one is less interested in removing "Cinderella" from children's

reading lists or in marketing a P.C. knockoff, than in offering a way of reading Perrault's version as a kaleidoscope of fantasies of transformation that might include a boy dressing up as a girl, or becoming a girl, for the duration of the story (or at least until "midnight")?...why not also encourage further flights of the gendered imagination; for example, reading Cinderella as a male-bodied character, or Robin Hood (like Peter Pan) as a female-bodied one, and explaining that some children (and adults) identify fundamentally (not just transiently) across sex/gender lines; or drawing attention to alternatively gendered beings like fairies, who are not always represented as clearly either masculine or feminine? (1999, p. 418)

Children's literature has long been recognised as a rich site for what Butler describes as transgressive reinscription, reinscribing existing (hegemonic) categorical meanings with new ones, even though the field of children's literary criticism has not necessarily used this terminology. (see, for example, Howard, McGee, & Schwartz, 2000; Rabinowitz, 2004; Stephens, 1992; Styles, 1996). While on the one hand literature has the potential for reinforcing normative categories and hierarchies (consider beautiful but oppressed Cinderella's instantiation of the ultimate heterosexual fantasy), much of the quality of polysemic (multi-layered) texts, especially picture books, is seen to lie in their potential for subversion and inversion of the norm. Norton argues that the key to troubling, rather than reinforcing, the norm lie with how literature is used: whether children are allowed to draw upon the power of their imaginations to open, rather than close, possibilities.

In our own work, we have noticed that, as Jackson and Gee point out (2005), children tend to identify with traditional hierarchies as presented in stories and resist alternative representations of these. Laura, one of our project teachers, after reading *King and King* (De Haan & Nijland, 2002), discovered that while her 8 and 9 year-old pupils were aware that Prince Bertie married one of the princesses' brothers, many children sought explanations of why he rejected the princesses which overlooked this dénouement. Nevertheless, she found that by reading the traditional Cinderella story and then allowing children to explore alternative versions by taking on the persona of various characters and producing their own alternative version (by shifting race, class, gender and sexuality) she was able to tap into the subversive potential of the imaginary (see Allan, Atkinson, Brace, DePalma, & Hemingway, in press, for further detail about Laura's methods).

While Sue and Laura have both found *King and King* provides rich ground for troubling certainties about gender and sexuality, Laura has also just discovered a way to queer science within her assigned class theme of underwater sea creatures:

Each year at [my school] the class names have a different theme and this year it is "under the sea." I'm rather excited...that my class will be the seahorse class - male seahorses get pregnant and lay the eggs. I'm pleased I managed to choose the queer underwater creature! I reckon that could be a good starting point for discussion about gender roles, mummies and daddies etc!

Laura's delight in having discovered a queer underwater sea creature goes beyond the answer. How do seahorses reproduce? Males lay eggs...but that is the beginning, not the end. The queering will happen in opening and keeping open the questions posed by this answer, by allowing them to trouble our notions of sex, gender, reproduction and parenthood.

### **Conclusion: Queering as disrupting, troubling, questioning and never resting**

Recalling Talburt's call to disrupt normalisation of both heterosexual and homosexual and Letts and Sears' call to recognise and challenge our own "categorical blinders" (1999, p. 5), we consider ourselves deeply implicated in the ongoing project of queering early childhood education. In this sense, our current queer action research project is as much about (re)thinking as it is about doing. There will be no definitive lesson plans or supremely queer books and resources because we think teaching queerly requires a constantly interrogative and self-critical habit of mind more than particular materials or procedures. We do not always even agree among ourselves about "best" practices and resources, but the queering seems to lie in the debate rather than the resolution.

The project supports ongoing tensions that will probably never be resolved but which need to be raised and interrogated. What happens when we publicly insist that the *No Outsiders* project has nothing to do with sex? Is it really necessary to so vehemently reassure the public that children are not learning about sex, and what kind of messages are we sending to propagate the myth of the asexual innocent child? Are we contributing to



heteronormativity when we barrage children with stories exclusively depicting gay and lesbian adults in monogamous loving relationships? Are we implicitly limiting sexuality to relationships and limiting these relationships to the safe ones? Are we misrepresenting transgender issues by not explicitly addressing transgender identities, or does troubling sex, gender and sexuality advance a transgender social justice project? Given that queering is based upon rejecting the conflation sex/gender/sexuality, are we further conflating them by claiming to queer sex/gender as well as sexuality categories? We are also aware that some lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender activists would prefer equalities work framed within, rather than troubling, these identity categories. We are, in a sense, even troubling and transgressing the notion of queer in our own internal debate over the potential value of strategic (or just plain) essentialism.

Perhaps most importantly, as we begin to teach queerly or observe others teaching queerly, we begin to discover our own stuck places and hastily answered questions. It is all very well for us to analyse the ways in which a pupil's queer performance reveals our own sex/gender/sexuality confluences, but this is not a cure or an intervention, not an end but a beginning. These tentative forays into queering primary education in the UK have suggested to us that this process is more about raising and holding questions than simply presenting new and better certainties. How can a male seahorse also be a mummy?! Can a boy in a dress bonk people on the head?! Why does Cinderella fall in love with the handsome prince?! Why does Prince Bertie not want to marry any of the

princesses?! It may be that queering might be as simple (and complex) as engaging children's own abilities to ask complex questions and to play with alternative realities. It also involves asking ourselves and each other irresolvable and disturbing questions rather than resting with easy answers.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Colton argues not that Tinky Winky is heterosexual, but that Teletubbies are asexual creatures.

<sup>ii</sup> The photograph of Ethel Merman hanging in Elmer's room may be interpreted by some discerning readers as suggestive, although children are not likely to have access to this cultural reference.

<sup>iii</sup> They specifically refer to the DfES document *Stand up for us*, available at <http://www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk/cat.php?catid=1101&docid=7707>.



## Research

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### “Emma and Dave sitting on a tree, K I S S I N G”

#### Boys, girls and the heterosexual matrix in a South African primary school

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#### Abstract

This paper shows how young seven and eight year old South African boys and girls invest in and pursue hegemonic heterosexual identities from friendships to play. By drawing upon an ethnographic study of gender and sexuality in the early years of primary schooling, the paper shows how children use particular resources in making meaning of their heterosexual identities. The paper highlights the fragility and ambiguity in the processes of identity construction and performance of heterosexual femininity and masculinity. Given that both boys and girls invest heavily in the heterosexual performance, the paper argues that greater understanding of these identity processes in the early years of formal schooling would appear vital to begin work with young children in the achievement of gender equality and is especially significant in developing strategies for addressing South African HIV/AIDS education.

**“Emma and Dave sitting on a tree, K I S S I N G” - Boys, girls and the ‘heterosexual matrix’ in a South African primary school**

“Emma and Dave sitting on a tree, K I S S I N G” Boys, girls and the ‘heterosexual matrix’ in a South African primary school

Emma and Dave [names are always changed]  
Sitting on a tree,  
K I S S I N G [alphabets are recited]  
First comes love then comes marriage,  
Then comes the baby in the golden carriage.  
That’s not all, that’s not all,  
Then comes the baby drinking alcohol [can be changed to playing basketball].

This paper highlights the resources that young white South African boys and girls (aged between six and eight) use in the construction of their heterosexual identities. First, it focuses on the heterosexualisation of friendships, next it argues that rhythmic clapping and games, as illustrated above are important resources in “practicing heterosexuality” (Epstein, 1993) and finally it concludes by drawing attention to the implications of young boys and girls investment in the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler, 1990). This paper is particularly interested in children’s sexual/gendered cultures and the ways in which gender is routinely spoken through a hegemonic heterosexual matrix (Blaise, 2005; Butler, 1990; 1993; Renold, 2005). Butler (1990) describes a “heterosexual matrix” in which gender is systematically spoken through heterosexuality, and that is assumed in expressions of ‘real’ forms of masculinity and femininity. Drawing on elements of an ethnography into children’s gender and

sexual identities in the first two years of primary schooling, this paper examines how dominant notions of heterosexuality in the areas identified; underscore much of children’s constructions of gender identity (Bhana, 2002).

The focus on young children’s construction of gendered and sexual identities in the African (and South African) context is uncommon (Pattman and Chege, 2003). Less examined is the way in which heterosexuality pervades the construction of young children’s identity work. Scholars working in African sexualities have tended to ignore the question of children’s sexual agency; their sexual pleasures and the heteronormative gaze (see Arnfred, 2004; Bhana, Morrell, Hearn and Moletsane, 2007; Reddy, 2004). There is a complete silence in the South African literature on young boys’ and girls’ investments as (hetero) sexual agents (see Bhana, 2002; 2005 as exceptions). It is argued in this paper that the investments in normative versions of heterosexuality essentialise and polarise gender and sexual difference which sustain gender and sexual inequalities. Understanding these identity processes within gender relations is crucial for the achievement of gender equality especially in the South African context where a policy framework in education guarantees sexual and gender justice as a fundamental principal of freedom (see Department of Education, 1996). South Africa rates as one of the most progressive democracies in the world. In 2006, for example same sex marriages were recognized in the Civil Marriages Act. The changing political and sexual landscape in South Africa is thus slowly eroding heterosexual hegemony (Isaack and Judge, 2004). However, the heteroness of early childhood has not

been challenged or even recognized as an area worthy of research attention. Part of the failure of African and other researchers to focus on childhood sexuality, is the pervasive discourse of childhood sexual innocence (see Bhana, 2007). Finding the association between childhood and sexuality problematic (Tobin, 1997), many conservative proponents of children's development proffer the logic of innocence (see Heinze, 2000; Piper, 2000; Renold, 2005 for a critique). Sexual innocence is a somewhat unyielding representation of childhood and the continued emphasis on children's sexual innocence reflects the discomfort of adult society in recognizing children's sexual agency (see Mellor and Epstein, 2006).

South African HIV/AIDS is slowly beginning to challenge the notion of childhood sexual innocence. In the province of KwaZulu-Natal, HIV prevalence rates are the highest in the country (UNAIDS, 2007) and there is considerable gender disparity in the rates of infection. Research has pointed to women and girls' vulnerability to the gendered nature of their roles within heterosexual relationships (Hunter, 2005). Girls' relative disempowerment with regard to boys and men is a critical factor in the feminization of the disease-placing gender and sexuality at the centre of the HIV prevention challenge. It is this challenge that is forcing a rethinking of early childhood as a site of sexual innocence. There is growing policy realisation that HIV/AIDS can be confronted in early childhood where children can learn and integrate appropriate risk avoidance behaviours including gendered and sexual behaviour (Bhana, Farook-Brixen, MacNaughton and Zimmerman, 2006). In South Africa,

education policy now compels teachers to address HIV/AIDS in all stages of schooling and to develop appropriate patterns of gendered and sexual behaviour to reduce infection. In early schooling sectors this requires that teachers work with young children instilling for example habits of behaviour appropriate in the context of HIV/AIDS.

The effects of colonialism and apartheid have meant that despite the changing social context in South Africa, race and class are intimately connected which position white children in more privileged social spaces and school contexts. Not only did apartheid create social dislocations and gender inequalities but it also upheld a heteronormative notion of marriage and sexuality. Coming from a history of privilege and the accumulation of social and economic capital, the children in this study construct their gendered and sexual identities in a context of material and social advantage as they talk about fashion, dressing and makeup not any different from a middle income school in the UK or US (see Blaise, 2005; Epstein, 1999; Renold, 2005). For the majority, African children in poor social contexts however, the effects of apartheid and colonialism and the persistent levels of poverty and unemployment in the country are important co-factors in the experience of childhood sexuality.

Whilst the focus in this paper is not on young African children, it is important to note that race, class and gender interact with sexuality and have effects on the ways in which it is produced. For example, a strong case has been made for the protection of children from sexual abuse particularly in African schools where poverty is endemic (Human Rights

Watch, 2001). This does not imply that poverty and high levels of economic and social distress cause child sexual abuse. However, there is a far more intricate and complex relationship between poverty, the history of apartheid/colonialism, persistent social inequalities and the high levels of sexual abuse amongst African children in South Africa. Within the context of sexual abuse, the protection of children from sexuality and sexual abuse is strong. Children are seen as structurally disadvantaged within social hierarchies and are particularly vulnerable in relation to sexual abuse; this requires that they be protected. Highlighting the growing incidents of child sex abuse in South Africa, Richter, Dawes and Higson-Smith (2004) bring attention to the shocking levels of sexual violence amongst mainly African children in contexts of poverty and social deprivation. They argue, rightfully, for improved care and protection of young children in South Africa against men who rape and subordinate children to serve their needs. In a special issue of sexuality in Africa, Reddy (2004) argues that unlike the west, where material conditions support sexuality as an aspect of pleasure and desire, the dominant image of African sexuality suggests pain, suffering and mourning (especially in the context of high rates of HIV prevalence). This backdrop is essential in understanding the importance of a more differentiated analysis and in particular the significance of social class and race to the production of gender/sexual identities and more broadly in post-apartheid South Africa.

In this particular paper the focus is on white primary schoolboys and girls who emerge from contexts of social and material privilege. Unlike Reddy (2004) who posits an African sexuality

associated with pain, the children in this study perform heterosexuality in pleasurable ways. I argue that friendships, rhymes and games are important resources in subjecting children, as they subject themselves to the pressures of an obligatory heterosexuality where to be seen as a normal six to eight year old involves the projection of a heterosexual self. Influenced by the work in feminist, poststructuralist and queer theories, there is now an emerging body of work which deconstructs the myth of early childhood/primary schooling as a sexual/gender-free arena. Specifically, the heteronormativity in the early childhood/early years of primary schooling is particularly striking in the ways in which teachers invest in hetero(familial) discourses about marriage and babies, mothers and fathers and stable heterosexual family structures (Bhana, 2002) as well as children's own gendered and sexual cultures (Blaise, 2005; Robinson, 2005; Thorne, 1993).

This paper focuses on the ways in which friendships and play are significant areas through which boys and girls actively negotiate and are coerced by the heterosexual matrix as they become boy and girl. In order to demonstrate this active negotiation of heterosexuality amongst boys and girls, I will be drawing on elements of an analysis from a year long study of children's construction of gender and sexuality in grade one and two (aged between six and eight) at a predominantly white elite primary school called Westridge. With little existing research, South African inquiries into how six to eight-year-olds construct their gendered and sexual identities, I embarked on a qualitative study using ethnographic methods, including



observations, unstructured exploratory group interviews and individual interviews to explore the process of doing sexuality and gender. I sat with boys and girls in their classrooms, outside their classroom as they ate lunch and in the playground. I observed and chatted with them and heard their voices. As in many ethnographic studies, the flexibility of the research process meant that I was with children in the process of constructing their identity as they engaged in the everyday routines of school life. Like Renold (2000), I did not deliberately set out to study children's (hetero) sexuality but the field work took off in quite unexpected directions including discussions and observations of heterosexual play and relationships. What is offered in this paper is not a comprehensive or a representative account of white affluent boys and girls in the primary schools. Rather what is reported here is the particular attempt to identify the situated construction of gender and sexual identities. This study is thus neither an attempt to generalize about middle class white boys and girls in the early years nor about young children doing gender and sexuality. The next section outlines the ways in the "heterosexual matrix" is helpful in understanding the children's gendered childhood within early childhood/junior primary settings.

### **Queering childhood: doing gender and sexuality**

In the area of childhood studies, Butler's emphasis on the dynamic nature of identity has been hugely influential (see James, Jencks and Prout, 1998). Given the dominant idea that childhood is a stage and phase of innocence, scholars

from the new sociology of childhood have explored the merit of Butler's idea of identity as a repetitive performance that constitutes the illusion of a fixed gender (Blaise, 2005; Epstein and Johnson, 1998; Renold, 2005; 2006).

Great strides have been made in the area of understanding gender identity as a performance (see Davies, 1993). Butler (1990, p. 33) argues that gender is a cultural fiction, a performative effect of reiterative acts, as "[...] the repeated stylization 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". Gender is not a state of being. Instead, Butler argues, it is a process of doing. Following Butler, gender identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (1990, p. 25). The idea that gender is an illusion, a performance is valuable in understanding the struggles reflected by children's ongoing attempt to present a coherent gendered self. Whilst Butler's account of gender is well featured in discussions of children's identity performances (Davies, 1993; Thorne, 1993), much less attention has been given to Butler's ideas of sexuality and specifically heterosexuality in childhood studies (Blaise, 2005; Renold, 2006; Tobin, 1997). Heterosexuality has been rarely scrutinized as a dominating and dominant discourse. Rather it has been naturalized as a taken-for-granted norm. Mellor and Epstein (2006) argue that the matrix of gendered practices render unnoticed the heterosexual framework by which people have to live. Gender cannot be collapsed into a normalized expression of sexuality, but the dominance of heterosexuality makes it appear so. Butler (1990) argues that the real expressions of

masculinity and femininity are embedded within a presupposed heterosexuality. In other words to be seen as a real boy or girl would involve projecting and desiring the opposite sex. This is the power of the heterosexual imaginary. In this study, the projection of desire as demonstrated in boy-girl friendships and games suggests the power of heterosexuality in coercing children as they themselves insert into the dominant heterosexual norm.

In primary/early childhood studies, romantic love, boyfriends and girlfriends, fashion, makeup are now being investigated for its complicity in the heterosexual matrix (see Blaise, 2005; Renold 2005). Butler's (1990) work has been pivotal in unhinging the assumed association of sexuality with heteronormativity. There is now a growing body of work in childhood studies examining the interaction and intersection of heterosexuality and gender particularly by theorists associated with queer theory (Blaise, 2005; Butler, 1990; 1993; Epstein, Kehily, Mac an Ghaill and Redman, 2001; Sedgwick, 1990; Thorne, 1993).

There is widespread debate about what constitutes queer theory but for the purposes of this study it is meant to include theorists who have radically problematised and rendered visible the ways in which heterosexuality is socially constructed within specific social, cultural and material conditions. What is interesting about queer theory for this paper is that it involves the constant questioning about the dominance of the heterosexual identity of children in the struggle to get gender right. Queer theorising questions the normal ways of getting gender right including the heterosexual compulsion and the norms

attached to the category boy and girl best summed up in the following way:

Queer theory is linked to a form of politics which deliberately seek to break down the fixed boundaries between hetero/homo, gender and other binaries, to multiply sexual categories and ultimately to dissolve them, insisting that 'queer' itself is not some bounded community, or not only so, but is everywhere (Steinberg, Epstein and Johnson, p. 9).

The rest of the paper focuses on the ways in which boys and girls actively participate in the heterosexual matrix.

### **Boys, girls and heterofriendships**

From the first days in the field, I became increasingly aware of the ways in which boys and girls invested in heterosexual masculinity and femininity. This involved investing in heterosexual teasing, girlfriends-boyfriends, kissing, love letters and daily rituals which included playing heterosexual games. These heterosexualised practices were central in doing boy and girl. It was impossible to talk of boy and girl friendships without being complicit in the heterosexual matrix, although it was boys who feared and felt anxious about the assumed sexual association with girls:

Researcher	Do you play with girls, Warren?
Warren	Nope.
Amy	Yes he does. We chase them all the time.
Researcher	Do you play with Amy?
Warren (smiling)	Yes, I play with Amy but she's not my friend...

Eight year old Warren's "nope," and later "yes" indicates the struggles, the fears and the contradictions of being

associated with Amy. It was only after Amy intervened to confirm, rather than deny his association with girls during play that Warren was willing to change his “nope” to “yes”. To be associated with girls was not considered proper for an eight year old. This short cameo also demonstrates how young boys are invested contradictorily in rejecting (and playing) with girls as part of masculinity making. Amy on the other hand had no fear in intervening and asserting the association. It is argued that boys in the primary school are far more invested in dissociating (and contradictorily associating) with/from girls as they learn about being and becoming boy (Renold, 2000; 2005). Once the gender boundary was broken, Warren is quick to invoke the heterosexual matrix by denying being Amy’s friend. Warren’s validation of girls occurs through the (heterosexual) constraint: he plays with Amy, but he won’t (can’t) make her his friend. Cross-gender friendships do exist, but they can’t be named, or at least they can only be named in particular contexts and ways. “Gender separation is far from total.” (Thorne, 1993, p.47) but the heterosexual idiom is enough to drive boys (and girls) away. This suggests the pressure at age eight which boys like Warren have come to bear in trying to get their gender, sexuality and their age right. Renold (2005) argues that boys are made subject to the pressures of hegemonic masculinity by claiming sexual immaturity and these are tied up with gender inequalities. The heterosexual ambiguity of boy-girl friendships is highlighted in the following transcript:

Luke	I don’t like girls.
Researcher	Why?
Bryce	They’re too fancy.
Researcher	What’s fancy about girls?

Storm I know. They wear fancy things and they go to stores and buy lots of things and carry handbags.  
 Researcher Are boys fancy?  
 Megan Yes they are. Bryce wore a mask to my party with all this gold stuff. That was fancy too (*mocking*). Bryce gets mad at girls if they do something wrong. When I bit his koki [fibre tipped pen] he ...  
*Bryce blocks his ears*  
 Storm (*interrupts*) Shut up Megan!  
 Megan ...he tried to kiss me.

Davies (1993) notes that almost all mixed gender relations in children’s everyday schooling interactions are always heterosexualised. Like Davies, the conversation with Megan, Storm, Luke and Bryce position their interactions with each other in terms of gendered heterosexual relations and as such make the possibility of friendships, free from the heterosexual hegemony almost impossible. Here is evident Butler’s (1993) assertion of the power of heterosexuality as children insert into the dominant heterosexual norm. Significantly, the social and material context of Westridge Primary School provides the repertoire within and through which gender and sexual identity is constituted. This contextual specificity allows Storm to make the connection with shopping, fancy clothes, handbags and gender identity. Identity is thus produced as Storm actively constructs gender in relation to his material and social condition. The repertoire of social discourses associates subjectivities with specific commodities (Hughes and MacNaughton, 2001). Shopping, fancy clothes and handbags is the association that Storm makes with girls (re)producing gendered and sexual identities.

Again, like Amy before, it was Megan who felt comfortable in “coming out” and

disclosing “he tried to kiss me.” Storm’s defence of Bryce and then Bryce’s blocking of his ears are part of an intricate masculinity-making process where to be seen as an eight year old boy disallows association with girls and heterosexual practices like kissing. But Megan breaks the canon that children do perform heterosexuality even at an age not considered appropriate. However, in this case they do so in ways that reinforce gendered and sexual hierarchies. As girls like Megan insert into the dominant heterosexual norm, they do so in ways that reconstruct gender inequalities. As Thorne (1993, p.53) suggests, “heterosexual idioms might seem to unite the genders but when used in teasing contexts, these idioms create risks that drive girls and boys apart.” What is important here is the role the girls play in constructing and reinforcing masculinity. For example, Megan disrupts the coherence of meaning as Bryce is exposed and his identity is brought under threat: going to a girl’s party with a mask and with “gold stuff” and the attempted kiss. Hegemonic masculinity is reinforced and Bryce’s masculinity is brought under question as he is humiliated/teased about the gold stuff and the kiss. As eight-year old boys, proximity to girls, even within the discourse of heterosexuality, is a fragile and ambiguous experience. To kiss a girl is heterosexually acceptable but not at age eight. Megan says: “When I bit his koki [fibre-tipped pen] he ...he tried to kiss me.” Megan laughs as she successfully humiliates, mocks and teases Bryce, and as Storm tries to come to his defence. Megan enjoys the pleasure of breaking the canon and reveals Bryce to be effeminate. Moreover, she has publicly humiliated him by revealing his attempt to kiss her. But Megan’s power is quickly made tenuous

with the knowledge that power games are also risky. Megan knows her limits when she says, “Bryce gets mad with girls if they do something wrong.” Gender relations are constructed in ways that are unequal and reinforce boys’ power over girls. As the analysis shows, asymmetrical relations of power are reinforced through a naturalisation of boy’s behaviour and Megan’s heterosexual pleasure.

### **Playing (Heterosexual) games**

#### *Rhymes and clapping*

Children’s play is complexly gendered and sexualised (Epstein and Johnson, 1998; Thorne, 1993; Tobin, 1997). The paper began with one of the rhymes sung mainly by girls. Other rhymes included

Double double,  
love love,  
double double,  
boys boys,  
double love  
double boys, double double,  
love boys.

Thorne (1993), suggests that children learn to become gendered (and heterosexual) through play. This is consistent with the girls in this study. As they play at kissing, love, marriage and babies, children show themselves and others what they think about boys (and men) and what girls (and women) can and should do. The social domain of young “girls’ play” is an unofficial resource through which they learn and resist their own becoming as young heterosexual girls. “Girls’ play” at Westridge Primary School often involves small-scale turn-taking kinds of play (Thorne and Luria, 1996). Play is an exciting activity and yields a great deal of fun and pleasure but within the pleasure lays important

heterosexualised and gendered messages about girls' (and women's) lives. "Girls' play" often involves singing, and clapping to the sounds of rhythmic tunes about girls, boys, kissing, love and a cosy life. Whilst such play can be seen as a public display of sexuality and girls' agency in contesting the idea of childhood innocence, the games also insert girls into a hegemonic heterosexual and gendered future. Confronted with the discourses of gender and their related implications for femininity, the girls can be seen to be reproducing a love and marriage discourse without consciously thinking of it as such. In clapping and singing to rhythmic tunes, the girls can be seen as preparing for the heterosexual courtship and its associated activities which include marriage. They are also preparing for the kitchen sinks, babies and buckets to come (Rhedding-Jones, 1996). Epstein (1999, p.31) suggests that the rhymes "certainly produce part of a culture of heterosexuality in which girls grow up to be women who marry men, go on honeymoon, have babies and otherwise perform their gendered, heterosexual female parts." In other words, through the rhymes they are not simply clapping and singing they are also exploring their positionings in gendered society. They do this by the narrative constructions of femininity. The rhymes that they sing can be seen as their own but also of other girls' past and present. They sing the rhymes with the support of the other girls. What amazed me was how the girls got the rhymes right so quickly as they entered grade one and became part of the schoolgirl culture. That they sing with the support of friends means that one girl gives another the point of access to a gendered discourse. Thus, the rhymes were heterosexually desirable through the validation of other girls. They enjoy it,

they do it for their own enjoyment and for other girls. The girls took delight and pleasure in the fantasies that were projected through these rhymes. In this way, the insertion into the rhyming culture becomes a part of girl's early childhood experience through which particular forms of femininity were fashioned.

### Kiss-Kiss Chase

Kiss-kiss chase was not something I saw during playground activity, but it was talked about in the classroom:

- (1) Researcher Which pre-school did you go to?  
 Mariella Westville Pre-primary.  
 Researcher And you, Keith?  
 Keith Westville Pre-primary  
 Researcher So you two should be friends?  
 Mariella No.  
 Keith Yuck.  
 Researcher Why?  
 Mariella Yes, but just in class I talk to him, but I don't have any boy who is my friend. No.. my friends are girls.  
 Angelique No, Miss Bhana, Mariella does play with boys. We play kiss-kiss catches. Mariella runs after them.  
 Researcher Do you Mariella?  
 Mariella er ..Ja sometimes.  
 Researcher What's this kiss-kiss catches?  
 Angelique It's a kiss-kiss catching game. Mariella kissed Alex (laughing).  
 Mariella Angelique you're rotten.  
 Researcher So what is this game?  
 Mariella It's when girls are on, and boys are on.  
 Researcher Do you enjoy it?  
 Mariella Yes I do...

(2) Researcher Do any of you play kissing catches?  
 Ian Yes we do.  
 Sarah But, Mrs. B doesn't know 'cos she said that it's not allowed.  
 Ian All the boys say, "can I play? Can I play?" and I say, "yes" because it's a fun game.  
 Researcher So what's this game?  
 Angelique The girls run and catch the boys and they catch the boy for me if I'm the queen and then we swap. The boys catch us.  
 Nicholas Oh and then we kiss them on the lips.  
 Angelique But Leo is the roughest. He is like a rugby player...

In both vignettes kiss-kiss chase is described as pleasurable moments in children's lives. A major contradiction surrounding the production of children is the ambivalence regarding sexual knowledge and sexual innocence. Kiss-kiss chase and other games are part of the school discourse, although not officially allowed. The school rule did not prevent children from talking about it or playing the game. As in the other (hetero) sexual games, gender difference in kiss-kiss chase was marked as a heterosexual binary. Kiss-kiss chase produced heterosexual desirability and was part of the complex network of heterosexual activities: Mariella kissed Alex, and Nicholas claims that boys kiss the girls on the lips, though sometimes the girls told me that the boys kissed their hands. For both boys and girls, kissing and kissing on the lips was an ordinary experience, but it happened within a discourse which tried to bring it under siege, "...cos she [Mrs. B] said it was not allowed..." Perhaps this is another strategy for not dealing with sexuality and children.

For the girls kiss-kiss chase provided the opportunity to perform heterosexuality. Within this matrix one girl was to be queen while the other girls were worker bees who had to do the hard work and catch the prey (boy) whom the queen had chosen. Engaging in kiss-kiss catches did empower girls but it did so within the boundaries through which girls' heterosexuality was regulated. For example, kissing a boy meant facing the danger of being identified as less than innocent. This is clearly evident as Angelique lets the secret out and mocks Mariella for kissing Alex. Thus the girls operated in contradictory discourses: constructing heterosexual femininities while guarding against overt heterosexuality especially important for girls aged eight. This web of double standards illustrates the contradictory discourses through which sexual identity is forged. The girls took pleasure in playing kiss-kiss chase which positioned them at one moment as desirable and at another as less than innocent in the regulation of their identities. Kiss-kiss chase is invested with power relations. Angelique is wary of Zo who she constructs as a wild and rough rugby player. Sexualised running occurs with knowledge of the "more general relation of gendered power" (Epstein, 1999, p. 33). While learning that kiss-kiss catches is an enjoyable and pleasurable moment entwined with power positions, the girls are also learning that its enjoyment happens within unequal relations of power.

## Conclusion

This paper has shown that young white South African children aged between six and eight regulate and work on their gendered and heterosexual identities.

Such work, rarely featuring in South African children's account of schooling, problematises the heterosexual dominance in children's account of doing and becoming boy and girl. Drawing from an analysis that makes visible the dominance of heterosexuality, the paper demonstrates that subjecting a queer perspective to the sexualisation of gender in children's construction of friendship and play can radically alter the taken-for-granted assumptions of children's school based cultures. The dominant constructions offered boys and girls in this study limited gender/sexual identities and constrained forms of gender/sexual relations. This has profound implications for the effort towards gender and sexual equality as well as the efforts to contain the heterosexual spread of HIV/AIDS in South Africa.

Given that both boys and girls invest heavily in the heterosexual performance, there is need within junior primary school contexts to better understand these identity processes. This is vital for working with young children in the achievement of gender equality. It is especially significant in developing strategies for addressing sexuality and HIV/AIDS education. Both for social justice and health reasons, it would appear evident that finding ways to explicitly address issues of gender/sexual equality in early childhood could offer a way forward. The difficulties of deconstructing normative heterosexuality, however, should not be underestimated as many boys and girls have considerable investments in continuing the heterosexual privilege. In South Africa, the heterosexual privilege and the dominance of a rampant heterosexual masculinity are important factors in the spread of the disease which sees women and girls most infected and vulnerable to

infection (UNAIDS, 2007). Whilst there remains massive policy support in education to nurture a culture of sexual responsibility and to reduce HIV infection, there is recognition that policy implementation is not easy particularly as both teachers and children have difficulty in communicating about sex (Department of Education, 1999; Pattman and Chege, 2003).

In the early years of schooling the discourse of childhood innocence is strong (Bhana, 2003). Nevertheless, newer understanding of children's agentic capacity and their insertions into heterosexuality make it important for teachers to recognize the gendering and heterosexual processes which regulate children's lives. This requires that teachers intervene and create possibilities in the classroom to talk about sexual issues and to focus on the ways in which boys and girls do gender which reproduce asymmetrical relations of power. However, before teachers can change their pedagogies they need to understand these alternative understandings of children, gender and sexuality. Whilst retraining of teachers remains a top priority in South Africa, there still remains much work to be done in early childhood education particularly to reframe dominant conceptualisations of the child. In the South African context of HIV/AIDS this remains a matter of urgency. There needs to be a political will to ensure that children in the junior primary sectors are not made invisible to the serious social and health problems in the country- all of which are connected to the gendering and sexual processes of identity. The focus on children's heterosexual performances, the gendering processes related to this and the intricate relationship of these performances with inequalities requires

attention if South African education is to fulfil its promise of social equality and justice.

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