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The potential of queer theorising in early childhood education

Disrupting heteronormativity and practising for inclusion

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In the early childhood setting heteronormativity plays out along related trajectories of the family, genders and sexualities (Gunn 2011). It inheres in children's play, adults' expectations about gender and sexualities development, and related policies and practices. Yet New Zealand's early childhood curriculum framework *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education 1996, hereafter MOE) establishes that heteronormativity in early childhood education is intolerable.

Heteronormativity is the effect of construing particular forms of gender, sexuality and the family as normal. In doing so, we simultaneously establish the grounds upon which different things are known as *other*-than-normal (or abnormal). Such forms of binary thought are fundamental to creating and maintaining meaning (Davies 1994) and also reflect and uphold asymmetrical power relationships in society. In a binary formation, the first term represents a standard against which the second or sub-ordinate term is measured or understood (Burr 1995); the second term is conceptualised as troubling because it represents a deviation from the norm (MacNaughton 2005).

In this chapter I draw upon several New Zealand-based studies related to sexualities and early childhood education to discuss how heteronormativity shapes experiences in this domain. I argue that small acts of resistance, through queer questioning, can lead to significant gains in disrupting the heteronormative status quo, and explore ways in which early childhood teachers might work with and against particular forms of binary thinking. My purpose is to help teachers imagine and realise early childhood education that resists heteronormative discourses – or what I refer to as practising

beyond the (hetero)norm.¹ To illustrate my arguments, I draw on data from the study ‘We’re a Family’, which explored how lesbians and gay men in Aotearoa New Zealand were creating and maintaining families within the context of then recent legislative change (Gunn & Surtees 2009; 2010).² The study involved interviews with parents from 19 families, and found continued issues of homophobia and heteronormativity in families’ encounters with New Zealand education settings. It called for recognition of parents’ work in supporting their children to navigate others’ negative responses to their family structures; it also illustrated how parents may represent themselves and their families so that others might come to understand and value their diversity. The study, while not solely focused on education or early childhood, sits alongside several others conducted in early childhood education within a New Zealand context (Gunn 2008; Jarvis 2010; Lee 2010; Surtees 2006).

Together, this body of research indicates a growing awareness of, and interest in, social justice and diversity issues where sexualities are concerned. These authors seized upon affordances offered by progressive law changes³ and inclusive education law and policy⁴ to show how, despite the existence of support for socially just teaching, the practices of some teachers and institutions remained exclusionary and problematic. The research has also sought to exemplify how educators’ teaching might change for the better. In this chapter I argue for early childhood education practices that more adequately address the challenges of practising beyond the (hetero)norm.

Supporting family competence, parental identity and social inclusion

Often the first formal institution that parents and children encounter is the early childhood setting. Professionals within these settings play an important role in supporting family competence, parental identity and social inclusion (Casper & Schultz 1999; Lee & Duncan 2008; Oates 2010).

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- 1 The bracketed (hetero) in this term denotes the fact that the so-called norm in sexualities terms is heterosexual sexuality. The bracketed (hetero) is a queer strategy that both calls to attention and questions this cultural framing.
 - 2 The study referred to here was funded by the New Zealand Families Commission as part of the Blue Skies Research Fund. Data included in this paper are reported in the study’s official report (Gunn & Surtees 2009) and a presentation about the research, not published elsewhere (Gunn & Surtees 2010).
 - 3 For example, the New Zealand Human Rights Act (1993), the Civil Union Act (2004), the Care of Children Act (2004).
 - 4 Such as the Education Act 1989, and the Ministry of Education’s (2008) licensing criteria for centre-based early childhood education and care services.

One of the ways that teachers may support families is through recognition of the uniqueness of relationships within any given family constellation. In a context where heteronormativity prevails, however, the 'heterosexual presumption' (Epstein & Johnson 1994, 198) can mean some relationships are missed. This was the case for lesbian parents in Gunn and Surtees' (2009) study, who reported that they were asked 'Who are you?' or were referred to as 'grandmother', 'aunt', 'friend', and so on. When faced with incorrect assumptions, parents are forced to decide whether or not to correct these. As may be appreciated, at the very beginning of a relationship with a new early childhood setting or school this can be difficult for parents to manage. Challenging another person's heterosexual presumptions may involve having to cope with any ensuing embarrassment or homophobia; to do this in front of children and perhaps other parents is doubly confronting. It is up to teachers, therefore, to be aware of their assumptions so that families may find recognition and feel welcomed, whatever their legal or biological connection to the child may be.

Children in households with parents of the same gender are often considered to be 'motherless' or 'fatherless'. This is because the normalising effects of heteronormativity lead us to assume that there will only be two parents in any child's life. But if a gay couple has a child with the support of a surrogate, that surrogate may still have an ongoing relationship with the family. Similarly, an anonymous donor parent with no continuing practical or material relationship with a child may be openly acknowledged in a child's family. This is illustrated in the response of Penny, a three-year-old child of participants in Gunn and Surtees's (2009) study, who reportedly gave an account of her (anonymous donor) father to a 'man at the library' one day, saying, 'Oh my dad's a very kind man. I don't even know him. My mum doesn't even know what he looks like. He gave us some sperm' (Gunn & Surtees 2009, 34).

It is up to educators and institutions to be open to the diversity they will encounter and to create an inclusive environment for learning. When policies and practices respond to family diversity and families are welcomed on their own terms, it can lead to empowerment, enhanced family security, and security over future events (Kelly & Surtees 2013; Surtees 2011; Terreni, Gunn, Kelly & Surtees 2010).

Heteronormativity shapes early childhood contexts

There are many ways to perpetuate heteronormativity; it may be overt, unintentional, sustained or fleeting. Even with the best policies in place, heteronormative practices – historically established in early childhood education (Gunn 2009) – can still have a negative impact on families' experiences (Cloughessy & Waniganayake 2013a; Jarvis 2010; Lee 2010; Terreni et al. 2010). Heteronormativity inheres in children's everyday play, and in adults' expectations about gender and sexuality. Mothers parenting alone may be told their children are 'missing out' on important male role models; parents of boys whose performances of gender do not conform to hegemonic forms of masculinity may be asked if they are 'worried' about their son being gay; and strict adherence to narrow interpretations of privacy laws may lead teachers to deny non-biological parents access to information about their children (Gunn 2008). Moana's reflection about her daughter's early childhood teachers' practices is illustrative: '[L]ast year she made a fathers' day card and they just gave it to me and I thought, hmmm, now should I give this to Sue or should I keep it myself?!' (Gunn & Surtees 2010).

As a pervasive discourse in early childhood education, heteronormativity relies upon dominant and traditional ideas about gender, sexuality and the family that are mutually reinforcing (Gunn 2011). The concept of the traditional nuclear family, for instance, relies upon understandings of 'normal' heterosexuality and opposite gender attraction for its coherence. The idea that there are only two 'proper' genders – male and female – plays to understandings of so-called 'normal' sexuality development, which invariably assume that 'normally' developing young children will grow up to be heterosexual (Gunn 2008). These enduring and traditional constructions of sexuality, family and gender persist in everyday language and actions. In order to expand understandings of diverse realities, early childhood educators must be attuned to their own entanglements in binary forms of thought – and catch themselves in the act of perpetuating these. It is equally important to encourage children to transcend these by supporting them in their play, for example by acknowledging that it is possible for girl best-friends to grow up, love and marry each other in New Zealand; or by accepting a boy's desire to wear high heels and a dress to kindergarten.

Teachers can play a big role in opening up understandings of family, sexuality and gender diversity. Several families in Gunn and Surtees' (2009; 2010) research talked about how teachers advocated this for them. Lesbian mother Sacha said: '[Reggie's peers] just couldn't understand it [the family],

they couldn't quite get their heads around it ... the children were, "I just can't understand how it works", they do tend to regard Kari as the nanny looking after my baby who pops down to visit quite often' (Gunn & Surtees 2010). In this case Reggie's teacher intervened, saying that Reggie did have two mums and there were 'lots of ways to have families' – a factual and neutral response that both Kari and Sacha appreciated (Gunn & Surtees 2010).

Despite recent progressive law changes in New Zealand and generational shifts in recognising and living more openly with sexual, gender and family diversity (Gunn & Surtees 2009; Kelly & Surtees 2013; Power et al. 2012), moving beyond heteronormativity remains challenging. Many teachers still feel ill equipped to resist heteronormative discourses (Cloughessy & Waniganayake 2013b; Gunn 2008; Jarvis & Sandretto 2010; Souto-Manning & Hermann-Wilmarth 2008), and some people still consider non-heterosexual sexualities, diverse family structures and post-structural understandings of gender immoral, improper and abnormal. How then might the teacher who desires to disrupt heteronormativity proceed?

Using *Te Whāriki* as a tool for advocating practice beyond the (hetero)norm

The curriculum framework *Te Whāriki* (MOE 1996) provides statements about the kinds of learning environments teachers in early childhood education are expected to build. Using the framework, teachers should work in collaboration with children and families to enact curriculum that is empowering, holistic, inclusive of family/whānau and community aspirations for children, and relationships based. These expectations are encapsulated in the four principles of the curriculum. *Te Whāriki* acts not as a syllabus for practice but as a guide for thinking. It is founded on the key aspiration: for children to 'grow up as competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body, and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society' (p. 9). Some aspects of the curriculum framework, including the aforementioned principles, have been prescribed since 2008 (New Zealand Government 2008).

The framework's text includes provocative questions for reflection, such as 'What aspects of the environment help children feel that this is a place where they belong?' (p. 58), and 'In what ways and how well is the curriculum genuinely connected to the children's families and cultures?' (p. 66). A

teacher with a desire to work beyond the constraints of heteronormativity could arguably use the curriculum framework to support her or his work. Two of the principles are key: that of *whānau tangata*/family and community, and that of relationships/*ngā hononga* (MOE 1996). The first of these holds that the wider worlds of family and community have an integral part to play in the early childhood curriculum; the second, that children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things.

Te Whāriki raises questions about how teachers can know that all family members who are important in children's lives are included in the early childhood community and supported within curriculum. It asks teachers to think about what is done to ensure that everyone who wishes to participate in curriculum is supported to do so. If heteronormativity prevails in the early childhood learning environment, however, some goals may be unattainable. For instance, the first curriculum strand, *mana atua*/wellbeing, contains goals for children to experience environments where 'their health is promoted [and] their emotional well-being is nurtured' (MOE 1996, 46). The strand of *mana whenua*/belonging stipulates that children and their families 'feel a sense of belonging' (p. 54); and the *mana tangata*/contribution strand describes children developing 'confidence that their family background is viewed positively within the early childhood education setting' (p. 66). If teachers are to realise these goals in practice, they must resist and disrupt heteronormativity.

I have long argued that the curriculum framework offers licence for teachers to work against heteronormative discourses (Gunn 2008), yet the extent to which it might provide impetus for such work has been questioned (Surtees 2003). Having engaged in a content analysis of *Te Whāriki*, Surtees investigated how sexuality was reflected in the framework and considered the resultant implications for children's learning about and development of sexuality. Initially her analysis challenged *Te Whāriki* and suggested that heteronormativity may have been central to its construction because of the way sexuality is rendered absent in the framework's texts.

Drawing on the work of Tobin (1997) it is possible to understand how the invisibility of sexuality is linked to the theoretical bases of Western early childhood practices. From the Western perspective, understandings of children's development regularly privilege cognition over other developmental domains; as a result, adults may question the relevance of sexuality to young children's lives. Complicating this further, dominant discourses of childhood innocence – which separate out notions of (adult)

sexuality from (childhood) asexuality and ignorance – make it easy for matters of sexualities to remain unspoken and disconnected from children (Robinson 2012b; Surtees 2005). Surtees (2003, 136) wrote:

[C]onsider the principle of 'Empowerment'. In reading about 'Empowerment', as it is described in Te Whāriki, I see the intent is to 'enable' children to develop their 'identity', 'personal dignity', 'self-worth' and 'confidence' (to list but a few of the relevant qualities described in the document). Placing this particular conception of empowerment under scrutiny, I query the potential for all children to experience empowerment and to be enabled without access to information about the full spectrum of sexual orientation.

If narrow readings of the curriculum framework are possible, albeit in my view indefensible, how else then might activist-oriented teachers work to resist heteronormativity?

Using queer theory to practise beyond the (hetero)norm

Queer theory forms one of a number of late twentieth-century post-structural theories, which brought to light the means by which people use, and are entangled within, discourses of modernity that imbue the body with power, and demarcate boundaries between society's so-called 'normal' and 'abnormal' persons. Brought to prominence in works by feminist scholars Judith Butler (1990) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), queer theory was quickly taken up by others with an interest in genders, sexualities and the like. It became a conceptual tool with which people could disrupt heteronormativity, the concept of which is central to queer theory. The displacement of heterosexual sexuality as the dominant and so-called 'normal' (moral and healthy) form of sexuality is viewed as *the* key project of queer scholars and queer research (Cameron & Kulick 2003; Jackson 2003; Sumara & Davis 1999; Warner 1991).

The term 'queer' itself, however, brings with it a history of multiple emergent and contemporary meanings. It represents an historically derogatory nomenclature for gay men, which has subsequently been reclaimed and used positively as an identity category to name those who claim non-heterosexual sexualities (Alexander 1999; Halberstam 1996; Phelan 1997; Pinar 1998; Slagle 1995). Queer refers to an approach to research that questions normativity (Britzman 1995; 1998; Morris 1998;

Spargo 1999; Taylor & Richardson 2005; Valocchi 2005). It can become an analytic strategy that helps to determine relationships between sexuality, gender, power and notions of normal and deviant (Blaise & Taylor 2012; Cooper 2002; Dilley 1999; Jarvis & Sandretto 2010; Robinson 2012a; Valocchi 2005). Because heteronormativity binds us all to particular social patterns where inequitable power relations reside, I believe teachers do not have to name themselves 'queer' to engage with queer theory.

Surtees (2003) used queer theory to read *Te Whāriki* for ways in which it could support teachers to work against heteronormativity. She found options for 'queering the whāriki' (p. 148)⁵ as she reports:

I see that while the principles and strands used to weave the metaphor are not overtly queer this invisibility does not necessarily equate with either the presence of heteronormativity or the absence of queerness ... perhaps queer possibilities (and indeed a multitude of other meanings) can be read into the text. The whāriki may provide a space for alternative threads to be woven (Surtees 2003, 150).

In the following and final section of the chapter, I take up Surtees' argument and, using queer theory, describe two strategies for how teachers may proceed. I also share examples of practices parents have found useful for disrupting the heteronormative status quo.

Realising the full potential of *Te Whāriki* and practising beyond the (hetero)norm

At the start of the chapter I described how heteronormativity draws upon binary forms of thought for its power and coherence: in particular the heterosexual/homosexual binary. Comprehending binary thinking as cultural means we must accept that assumptions and understandings associated with binaries might change. Armed with this concept we can work to disrupt binary thinking; doing so would be considered a classic queer theory-inspired move (Cooper 2002). Working queerly, a teacher

5 In this instance Surtees uses the word 'whāriki' on its own and not as part of the title of the early childhood curriculum framework. Whāriki means 'woven mat' in te reo Māori (the Māori language). The whāriki metaphor in the early childhood curriculum refers to the act of a collective weaving of a mat upon which all members of an early childhood community can stand. Each early childhood service's whāriki will be unique to that service's social-historical-cultural context and relevant to that community and its aspirations for itself and its children.

might consider what the world would look, sound and feel like if concepts in a given binary were positioned in reverse. For example, if we imagined that it was normal to raise children in same-gender rather than opposite-gender parented families, how might we reflect those opposite-gender parented families' experiences and realities in the learning environment? In considering *Te Whāriki's* question 'In what ways and how well is the curriculum genuinely connected to the children's families and cultures?' (MOE 1996, 66), how might we respond if we were to view it from the perspective of a woman who had given birth to a child and was raising that child together with a gay couple?

The possibilities for thinking queerly are vast, especially if one takes seriously queer theory's call to question normativity (Britzman 1995, 1998; Morris 1998; Spargo 1999; Taylor & Richardson 2005; Valocchi 2005). Early childhood education is replete with normative thinking: teachers work with particular notions of normal childhood, normal development, of play as the normal site of learning – to name a few instances. Blaise and Taylor (2012) use the strategy of questioning normativity in their consideration of gender development and early childhood education. Through queer theory they ask: Are there any normal expressions of gender? And furthermore, how are understandings of so-called 'natural' and 'normal' gender connected to those of so-called 'normal' sexuality? I asked similar questions in my doctoral study when mapping trajectories of knowledge about young children's gender and sexuality in early childhood (Gunn 2008), and showed how these played out in early childhood policy and practice in New Zealand (Gunn 2009). Jarvis and Sandretto (2010) also engaged this strategy when they wrote concerning how teachers might query children's working theories about sexual subjectivities: for instance, a teacher in that study asks a two-year-old why he or she chooses the mummy and daddy finger-puppets. Jarvis and Sandretto argue that teachers who engage with such queer strategies are actively working towards social justice and a positive response to social diversity.

In another example of querying normativity, Hernamm-Wilmarth and Souto-Manning (2007) queried children's stereotypical thinking about good, evil and notions of desire. By deliberately reading stories to children that provided counter-narratives to well-known tales, such as *The Three Little Pigs*, they helped children identify and resist their normative thinking; in doing so, they queried and queered the enacted curriculum through their work. I believe that teachers who become attuned to their normative

thinking and trouble their investments in normative discourses will find ways to challenge normative discourses and work towards early childhood education beyond the (hetero)norm.

Beyond these two queer theory-inspired strategies, Gunn and Surtees' (2009) study revealed a number of teaching practices that participants considered important for disrupting heteronormativity. First, parents talked about teachers who created a welcoming climate, what we might call practising with an 'overt philosophy of whānau.' Since the term 'whānau' enables a broader view of who might 'belong' in any family constellation and care for children, this approach has the potential to broaden teachers' conceptualisations of family beyond the (hetero)norm. Metge (1995, 134) states: 'When a whānau functions as a unity, adult members describe each other's children as "ā mātou tamariki" (the children of us many), as distinct from "ā māua tamariki" (the children of us two).' When teachers recognise that all children may be the children of many, growing up 'in the midst of a "surrounding world of kinsfolk"' (Metge 1995, 138) they are more likely to recognise and respond to diverse family forms.

This overt philosophy of whānau is evident in the language teachers use, in the policies and forms they develop, and in the curriculum they enact. For example:

- Terms such as 'partner', rather than 'wife' or 'husband' are used, and questions such as 'Who is part of your family group?' and 'Who is important in the lives of your children?' are asked.
- Documents provide space to accurately record those in a parenting role and those with caregiving responsibilities for a child. They are inclusive of same-gender parented families and families where the care of children occurs across more than a single household.
- The curriculum positively reflects the diversity of family formations, including same-gender parented families.

A second practice for working beyond the (hetero)norm focuses on the development of a pedagogy of relationships for early childhood education. The study demonstrated that teachers who made it a priority to get to know children and their families well supported family wellbeing and participation in early childhood education. This does not mean, however, that the onus should remain on same-gender parented families to have to 'out' themselves and their family. Teachers must consider how best they might create conditions to support a family's openness. Celia, a parent, reflected: 'The

kids were in settings [where] we had really strong relationships with the teachers so, that was all very affirming and ... affirming of who we were as a family' (Gunn & Surtees 2010).

Those teachers who made children's families visible in ways that contributed positively to parents' and children's sense of belonging were also considered to practise inclusively. This is because their practices recognised and reflected a diversity of family forms and celebrated these in a positive light. This made Heather and Penny, a lesbian couple with children, feel more willing to be involved in the curriculum, extra-curricular activities and the management of their child's early childhood services (Gunn & Surtees 2009). They recalled, 'It was coming up to Mother's Day ... and she came home with two big Mothers' Day cards. And Hana [the teacher] had obviously asked her what she calls her parents because one of them has "Mummy" and one of them has "Mum"' (Gunn & Surtees 2010). This was quite a different experience to that of Moana, reported earlier in the chapter,, whose receipt of a Fathers' Day card brought a mixture of amusement and despair.

Early childhood policies and practices that name homophobia, heterosexism and heteronormativity as intolerable are likely to support teachers to work beyond the (hetero)norm. As mentioned earlier, it is easy in early childhood education to ignore matters of sexualities and gloss over instances where, whether by design or by ignorance, someone has been injured by the effects of heteronormative discourses and practices. To lessen the likelihood of such prejudice, teachers can work systematically with centre managers and owners to bring issues of heteronormativity to the fore. Inclusive education, employment and anti-discrimination policies should name sexuality as one of the grounds upon which discrimination will not be tolerated. By taking a stand, the early childhood setting can meet its current and future communities from a position of strength and inclusion.

Conclusion

Early childhood teachers must practise beyond the prejudices of heteronormativity in order to realise inclusive and socially just early childhood education. Several New Zealand-based studies concerning sexualities in the early twenty-first century have responded to progressive law and policy and illustrate how early childhood teachers can both perpetuate and resist the (hetero)norm. Building on this work, this chapter brings a

queer theory perspective to the debate, urging teachers to think and practise 'at odds' with heteronormativity. By using the tools of queer theory it is possible to recognise and respond differently to cultural forms of thinking that bind us to power relations in which normative thinking resides. The New Zealand studies of sexualities and early childhood education have provided evidence of effective teaching strategies for social justice and inclusion. Concepts of whānau, a pedagogy of relationships and practices designed to increase belonging have been important markers of inclusive practice. The curriculum policy provides impetus for change. Teachers must now combine forms of thinking and forms of practice if they are to rise to the challenge of practising beyond the (hetero)norm.

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