

Original Research Paper

The Power of Discursive Practices: Queering or Heteronormalising?

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Abstract

This paper is derived from a study conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand by the first author who, together with six early childhood teachers, explored the queer theoretical concept of heteronormativity. This concept refers to the idea that society polices sexualities, which ensures heterosexuality is perceived as the only 'normal' sexuality. Language and actions, or discursive practices, in society visibilise and therefore privilege the heterosexual subject over other sexual subjectivities. This paper examines the power of discursive practices to inform teaching in ways that visibilise or invisibilise diverse sexual as well as gendered lives using a feminist methodology and a queer and feminist poststructural theoretical framework. Exemplars of queer and heteronormalising discursive practices provided offer teachers an opportunity to examine how they enable children to think and act in ways that interrupt the policing of sexualities. The authors also contribute some thoughts about the benefits as well as challenges associated with using alternative theories and tools to queer, or further queer, learning environments.

Introduction

This paper, derived from a study conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand entitled: *Exploring heteronormativity: Small acts towards queer(y)ing early childhood education* (Jarvis, 2009), emerged in response to the claim that heteronormativity is pervasive in young children's educational environments (Theilheimer & Cahill, 2001). The concept of heteronormativity explains the idea that some social practices maintain the status of heterosexuality as a 'culture' that views itself as foundational to the continued existence of society (Warner, 1993). In effect, the heterosexual subject is constructed as normal (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2008). Dunphy (2000) explains the extent to which we are all affected by heteronormativity:

We all, in a real sense, live in heterosexuality whether we are heterosexual or not. Society is heterosexual, its laws, institutions and values are imbued with the assumption of heterosexuality. We almost all grow up in families where heterosexuality is assumed...we inhale heterosexuality with the air we breathe. This is really what is meant by institutionalised heterosexuality or heterosexuality as a site of power. (p. 68)

Acts that advantage, or privilege, the heterosexual subject occur, for instance, when people avoid rather than include references to lives of people identifying as other than heterosexual with conversational partners (DePalma & Atkinson, 2008). Assumptions made by teachers that children are heterosexual (Theilheimer & Cahill, 2001) or asexual also inform approaches to teaching which may result in limiting children's accomplishments of sexual and gender subjectivities. The extent to which pleasure and desire can be understood is also potentially reduced (Tobin, 1997). Furthermore, opportunities are lost not only for children, but also for "families and teachers to appreciate complexity and diversity in their worlds" (Gunn, 2005, p.11).

This paper examines how the research participants' discursive practices may affect children's construction of "working theories" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p.44) about sexual subjectivities. We use the term working theories to refer to the repositioning in different discourses (Davies & Harré, 1990) regarding sexualities that occurs as new discourses become available for children to take up or resist. This approach acknowledges that children are already 'figuring out' matters associated with diverse sexual lives (Danish, 1999; King, 1997). Such an exploration of discursive practices offers readers the opportunity to consider how a range of diverse sexual and gendered lives are (in)visibilised within early learning settings. It is important for teachers to consider this topic as it may enable them to recognise how the discourses in which they position themselves privilege some ways of being in the world over others. As a result of this consideration, some teachers may discursively (re)position themselves in order to be better able to create learning environments that visibilise and honour differences.

In this paper we use Gee's (1996) approach to discourse:

A discourse is a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and 'artifacts', of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network', or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful 'role'. (p.131, original emphasis)

Discourses that are available for us to 'take up' organise how we think, which then informs how we act within the world (St. Pierre, 2000). Other people who 'read' our actions, such as what we say and how we dress, position us in discourses. Similarly, we position others through reading their actions. Thus, we are subjected, and subject others, to adhering to certain 'truths', for instance, about early childhood education. Discursive practices are those that both form and maintain discourses. To elaborate:

Discursive practices are not purely and simply ways of producing discourse. They are embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns for general behaviour, in forms of transmission and diffusion, and pedagogical forms which, at once, impose and maintain them. (Foucault, 1977, p. 200)

Thus, this paper provides an opportunity for those concerned with early childhood education to consider the potential effects of discursive practices that may invisibilise or visibilise diverse sexual and gendered lives.

Literature Review

A search of the research literature pertaining to heteronormativity, as well as studies regarding sexualities, in relation to early childhood education revealed that authors largely

used qualitative approaches to their research in the form of individual and/or focus group interviews (e.g. Casper, Cuffaro, Schultz, Silin & Wickens, 1998; Gunn, 2005). Some theorised their studies using queer and/or feminist poststructuralist theoretical frameworks (e.g. Surtees, 2005; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Robinson & Ferfolja, 2008). Analysis of the literature reviewed identified six frequently occurring discourses: child (un)readiness; (re)inscribing difference; at risk teacher; unprepared and un(der)resourced teacher; reciprocal and responsive teacher; and constructing the professional teacher. These discourses demonstrated the ways the participants positioned themselves, and the effects on their teaching as well as on their subjectivities. Two of the studies (Gunn, 2005; Sumara & Davis, 1999) that had professional development interventions incorporated into their research designs in order to 'queer', or trouble, situations for participants, influenced the development of this research project's intervention phase (Focus Group Two). Discourses adopted by participants in the reviewed studies (e.g. Jones Díaz & Robinson, 2000; Surtees, 2005) suggest adults normalise, or regulate, practices in early learning environments that potentially result in children constructing heterosexuality as normal.

How aware are early childhood teachers engaging with the daily complexities of teaching within Aotearoa that the discourses they draw upon enable or limit children in their theoretical constructions of sexualities? We provide examples of language, as well as actions, which illustrate how teachers contribute to forming and maintaining certain discourses that queer and heteronormalise learning environments.

In the remainder of the paper we outline the study's design, including the theoretical framework, data gathering and data analysis methods, then discuss some findings and their implications for teachers. Ideas for future research follow. Finally, a concluding thoughts section draws attention to considerations that can be made in order to create environments in which diverse sexual and gendered lives are not constructed as 'abnormal'.

Research Design

A feminist methodological approach was used for the research design of the project. Feminists are varied in the positions they take with regards to making sense of how genders are experienced, which also includes examining how sexuality is experienced (Ramazanoğlu, 2002). Decisions feminists make regarding the design of a research project also involve considering how knowledge about social categories is produced and justified (Ramazanoğlu, 2002). The first author aligned herself with this approach, believing it important to situate herself within the study to critically reflect on how knowledge was being produced (Ramazanoğlu, 2002) regarding sexualities and genders. Ethics approval to conduct the research was sought and obtained from the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee, from an educational institution through which teachers were invited to participate in the project and from Ngāi Tahu Research Consultation Committee at the University of Otago (see Jarvis 2009, for more detailed discussion on ethics and researcher reflexivity).

Six early childhood teachers each participated in one individual interview, with five of the six also taking part in all three focus group interviews. The sixth teacher participated in the second focus group interview. Within the interviews, participants explored the notion of heteronormativity as well as the role the teacher might play in informing children's working theories of sexualities. A professional development intervention in the form of a workshop that explored what is and what is not sexuality was constructed for the second focus group. Participants at the first meeting had selected this topic from several options offered. Four participants identified as female and two as male. Ages ranged from the mid-20s to the 50s.

One participant identified as New Zealand Māori, one as European/New Zealand Māori, two as Pākehā, one as New Zealander and one as European New Zealander. The length of time teaching in early childhood education settings ranged from three to twelve years. One participant identified as gay. (Note: The term gay does not necessarily denote someone who is male). A variety of educational contexts was represented by the group which included not-for-profit, for-profit, church managed, over 2-year-olds, under 2-year-olds and mixed age grouping centres. Three specific philosophically based contexts were also represented, for example, Playcentre and a centre nurturing te reo me tikanga Māori. Gender-neutral pseudonyms were used to enhance confidentiality of participants in the findings.

Transcripts from interviews were read and re-read in order to identify discourses mobilised by participants illustrating pedagogical approaches, environmental resourcing, teacher subjectivities and (un)familiarity with concepts associated with queer theory. The term 'queer' is used in various ways. In this particular case, the term is not referring to a theory that attends to examining the lives of 'queer' people, but, similarly to Kumashiro's (2004) notion of troubling, focuses on 'messing up' what is regarded as normal (Warner, 1993). In this instance, 'normal' refers to heterosexuality. The analysis of data was informed by discourses identified in the literature review and by queer and feminist poststructuralist theories. Briefly, queer theories provoke us to question the purpose of sexual subjectivities and the way in which they operate (Nelson, 2002). Feminist poststructuralist theories have emerged as feminists have used them to work on eliminating practices that are oppressive for women and men (St. Pierre, 2000). The forms of queer and feminist poststructuralist theories used within the research project this paper is drawn from not only involve interrogation, but also seek to transform educational practices as new awareness surfaces from analysis.

An important aspect of any research design is the theoretical framework (Crotty, 1998). As noted above, this project was underpinned by queer and feminist poststructuralist theories. These theories shape the kinds of questions we ask, as well as how we analyse the data. One significant premise of theories considered as queer, or feminist poststructuralist, is that peoples' identities are not fixed and static, but rather are fluid and accomplished as people engage with each other in relations of power (Davies, 2000). The individual is therefore "always an open question with a shifting answer" (Davies, 2000, p.89). Furthermore, those aligned with such theories consider that differences we perceive to exist between people, for instance between male and female, are productions created through discourse. It is through analysing speech and actions constituting relations of power that we can uncover what is produced (St. Pierre, 2000), and how it is produced within such interactions. Subjectivities is the term used within the two theoretical perspectives to explain, as noted earlier, that we are subordinated to rules and norms (Eribon, 2004) that inform how we act in and on the world (St. Pierre, 2000). We therefore accomplish 'identities', such as sexualities and genders, through (re)positioning ourselves in discourses. The term 'sexualities' used within the research project represents the notion of fluid sexual identity as well as the idea that numerous sexual identities are possible (Gunn & Surtees, 2004). There is some leeway possible for the subject to manoeuvre between discourses, that is, to choose which discourses they adopt, a concept referred to as agency (Davies, 2000). In other words, we are not "passive recipients of social structure" (Davies, 1989, p.239). Manoeuvrability, however, is limited because discourses available to take up are dependent on cultural and historical circumstances as well as subject to relations of power (Davies, 2000).

Another significant premise in our theoretical framework occurs in the way in which gender and sexuality are intertwined. This is elaborated upon in the queer theoretical notion of a

'heterosexual matrix' (Butler, 1990), or 'heterosexual hegemony' (Butler, 1993). Butler claims that a cultural framework exists which binds biological sex and socially constructed gender together in a way that produces expectations around them. In brief, it is considered natural to desire someone of the 'opposite' sex. The matrix is a useful concept to employ in order to encourage thinking about the ways in which heterosexuality is privileged in society. 'Performativity' is also an idea integral to the concepts of the heterosexual matrix and heteronormativity. Following Butler (1990), we are constrained to continually repeat, or perform, certain actions so that others are able to recognise us as a particular gender or sexual 'orientation'. Robinson (2005) stresses the importance of educators acknowledging that the relations of power involved in constructing genders simultaneously construct children's "sexualised identities" (p. 26).

We are aware that the theories being used will not offer a 'one way forward' that ensures early childhood environments become less heteronormative, but they will help to generate different reflections and dialogues. As Davies (2000) points out:

a poststructuralist approach does not *guarantee* good action and good outcomes. But neither does it block them...what poststructuralist theorizing does is open up discourses and practices to questioning and provide strategies for questioning, that run against the grain of common sense and of dominant (and dominating) discourses and practices. (p.169, original emphasis)

And that is what we intend to do here. Rather than point the finger at 'bad' teachers, that is, to "locate and change the 'bad' or heterosexist [teacher]" (Letts IV, 1999, p.99), we wish to provide examples of the power of discursive practices as a means to support teachers to interrogate their language and actions. As a result, they may then consider how these enable, as well as how these constrain, the theories about sexualities and genders that children are constructing.

Findings

1. Considering Discourses to Queer Early Learning

The stance taken "is not dependent upon one's sexual orientation or predilections but rather upon one's ability to utilise the (dis)advantages of such a position" (Dilley, 1999, p.469). One approach focuses on identifying how subjectivities are produced and on inquiring "into the conditions that make learning possible or prevent learning" (Luhmann, 1998, p.153). Another stance, referred to by Sears (1999) as "teaching queerly" (p.4), includes inviting adults to challenge thinking that is categorical. For instance, teachers can enable children to examine how they ensure categories of gender are upheld in specific and constraining ways (Davies, 1993). We reiterate here the claim that as genders are constructed so are sexualities (Butler, 1990; Robinson, 2005). The example that follows illustrates how a male participant in the study interrupts children's ideas about 'correct' enactments of gender, through adopting a *gender category interruption pedagogy* discourse in his teaching:

A couple of children [aged around 3 or 4] brought up and said that I was a girl and I said 'no, I'm a boy. They said, the children said 'no, you're a girl because [you're wearing jewellery that girls wear]' and I said 'but I'm a boy because I [wear jewellery] and I also have [facial hair]...Every time they said I had [this jewellery] I says 'well, boys are able to wear [jewellery] if they choose to and that I am one of those boys who choose

to', but also saying that some boys don't [wear jewellery] and some girls don't [wear jewellery]. (Individual Interview (II), pp. 8-9)

This example illustrates ways in which very young children already know how to designate certain appearances and clothing to different genders (Meyer, 2007). This participant also mobilised a *gender transgressive awareness-raising pedagogy* discourse when children attempted to police how he performs a male gender. In other words, he enabled them to expand their thinking about practising gender in multiple ways.

With regards to resources, we use 'queer' to represent ways in which early childhood settings visibilise, or could visibilise, lives of those identifying as other than heterosexual or as trans(gender). The setting in which Drew taught provided finger puppet resources with which teachers can interrupt fixed notions of parenting arrangements that children may have. Such an 'interruption' is demonstrated in the following example:

I remember seeing, the day I saw the [under 2-year-old] child take the father from one of the [dad and dad finger puppet families] and the mother from the other family. The teacher asked – now obviously our children don't really verbalise back, but we, we still give the question, you know, to help the child start to think about it - and I heard the teacher say 'aw, why did you take that daddy and that mummy?' and, I mean, the child just responded by saying 'mummy, daddy', which confirmed that that's the way they think it should be, because, because there is a mummy and daddy and that's the way that things are and then I saw [the teacher] get down the other puppets and say 'but this daddy was with this daddy, look there's their children there' and they started talking. (II, p.21)

One 'reading' of this event is that the child randomly chose a male and a female puppet from the whānau/family groups and labelled them as a father and a mother. Another reading, however, is that the child took up a position in a 'real' whānau/family discourse, indicating a non-awareness that other than heterosexual-parented whānau/families raise children. In other words, the child assumed that a mother with a father, constitute, 'real' parents and that two men or two women raising children do not belong together as parents. It could be interpreted that Drew's colleague 'read' the event in this way, which helps shed light on how that teacher responded to the child's action. The limiting theory that the child had possibly constructed about parenting arrangements may therefore have been disrupted. In effect, drawing the child's attention to their actions in this way potentially 'messed up', that is, queered an assumption held about men and women associated with raising children. As such, Drew's teaching colleague mobilised a *gender category interruption pedagogy* discourse and a *diverse parenting awareness-raising pedagogy* discourse that demonstrated a queer approach to teaching.

Discourses of *queering resources* and *additionally resourced queer environment* were utilised by Ash, in response to being asked what could be done to queer settings in relation to resources:

We could use the resources we've got a bit more though...we could be more open and read those resources and say 'not all families have mummies and daddies, sometimes families have mummies and mummies and we can use the resources we've got...I think we should be able to read those resources that we've got and just say 'this is one story and we could have another story'. (FG1 (Focus Group 1), pp. 25-26)

Ash also suggested that to queer the learning setting adding some different dolls into the basket of families currently provided at the learning environment in which Ash taught may be a worthwhile action to take.

The abovementioned discourses adopted by participants can be considered “small acts of resistance” (St. Pierre, 2007, p.8) towards hindering heteronormative discursive practices in early learning settings. Whereas making changes to ‘(en)gendering’ verbal and written language contributes to queering learning environments, other approaches may more fully enable teachers to appreciate how relations of power inform discourses they mobilise. For instance, it would be worthwhile for teachers to examine their discursive positionings in order to bring to light how they contribute to the production of sexual subjectivities. They may then be better able to consider who benefits and who is disadvantaged, as well as who is authorised to speak, in discourses of childhood and sexuality circulating in learning environments. The opportunity is then also provided to consider how to (re)position themselves in more enabling ways within discursive practices (Davies, 2003, p. xii). Davies (2003) goes on to suggest that:

If we see society as being constantly created through discursive practices then it is possible to see the power of those practices, not only to create and sustain the social world, but also to see how we can change that world through a refusal of certain discourses and the generation of new ones. (p. xiii)

2. The Realm of Heteronormalising Discursive Practices

Heteronormalising discourses circulating in an early learning environment have the effect of constructing children as heterosexual subjects (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2008) and potentially limit the theories about sexualities that children are constructing. The ‘work’ of such discourses is to ensure that other than heterosexual subjectivities are invisibilised.

Those taking up positions in the *teacher as powerless educational partner* discourse absolve themselves from attending to matters that arise regarding diverse sexual and gendered lives. They therefore contribute to heteronormalising learning environments by maintaining heterosexuality in a privileged position relative to other sexualities and transgressive genders. In the comment that follows, Drew illustrates that some teachers position themselves in the abovementioned heteronormative discourse in the presence of whānau/family members:

Our children wouldn’t blink an eyelid if one of the boys put on one of the ballet dresses, it’s not even, not even an issue...until a parent comes in and says something [gender-limiting to the child]... [the teachers are] contributing [to children’s working theories of sexualities] by not then saying anything and that’s where I think the problem is. I think teachers don’t feel comfortable in speaking out about those sort of things. They’d rather remain silent. (II, p.6)

Teachers being referred to in this comment signal through their silence that whānau/family members are the legitimate decision makers with regards to what is possible for children regarding transgressions of gender. As Andrew et al. (2001) claim, employing silence to respond to comments or ideas that others make can be equated with condoning what others utter. Silin (1995) also states that “silence is itself a performative speech act and becomes essential pedagogy, a way to remain not implicated, to teach non-responsibility” (p.171). Remaining silent on an issue may also signal an “incapacity – or the unwillingness – to

acknowledge one's own implication in [what and how one teaches]...a resistance to knowledge" (Luhmann, 1998, p.150). Thus, a silent reaction to whānau/families by some teachers has the effect of invisibilising diverse lives and illustrates how children's working theories about such lives can potentially be constrained.

Some teachers excuse themselves from visibilising multiple representations of sexuality and gender because they teach in learning settings that lack relevant resources. All but one participant reported that they were un-resourced with regards to the provision of targeted resources to queer their learning environments. The following example of an *unresourced queer environment* discourse was provided by Terry in Focus Group One (FG1):

Some of those things we just wouldn't have...a lot of the things we acquire come from second-hand sources...they're buying new books and new resources at times but I just feel that that would be down the list sort of style. (FG1, p.25)

Terry's comment highlighted that in some early learning settings, such as those with limited funds, adults would give greater priority to acquiring resources that they considered appealing or meaningful for children, rather than to resources that visibilise and affirm lives of people identifying as lesbian, gay and transgender. This aligns with Skattebol and Ferfolja's (2007) claim that the curriculum is an aspect of early childhood programmes through which the predominant representation of heterosexual social practices and relations occurs. As an effect of paying less consideration to procuring certain curriculum resources, teachers and other adults continue to be oblivious to the ways in which they teach children heterosexuality (Wallis & VanEvery, 2000) and invisibilise a range of other sexual subjectivities.

In summary, heteronormalising language and actions may limit the extent to which children can imagine, accomplish and appreciate pleasure, desire, as well as "loving relationships" (Wallis & VanEvery, 2000, p.417) in their own and other people's lives. Furthermore, these discursive practices (re)inscribe the notion that differences between boys and girls are natural, rather than produced through discourse. By default, the child is constructed as a heterosexual being. This child will be considered as performing outside gender and sexual 'norms' if they go beyond taking up "temporary membership" (Brown & Jones, 2001, p.148) in a gender category they were not assigned to at birth or in utero. We argue that the approaches reported were not necessarily evidence of purposeful adoption of heteronormalising discourses. The participants and their colleagues may have been unaware of the meanings that can be construed from using or withholding certain language and acting in specific ways. Without poststructuralist and queer tools to analyse language it is likely teachers will continue to travel down the slippery slope of positioning themselves in heteronormative discourses.

The difficulty in identifying and understanding what constitutes heteronormalising discursive practices is made clearer when we are alerted to the point that every person might unknowingly be engaging in the maintenance and perpetuation of heteronormativity (Letts IV, 1999), manifested through positioning themselves and others in particular discourses. We, the authors, acknowledge that we are not (always) aware of the ways we may also subtly or non-subtly enact heteronormalising practices. This 'unknowing' is reflected in Davies' (2000) comment:

[We] may catch [ourselves] being carried along by the force of a discourse that [we] do not, at that point in time, have the skill or resources to

question. [We are] swept up, along with others, in ways of seeing and being that escape [our] reflexive gaze. (p.168)

In other words, even with some awareness of the notion of heteronormativity, we too can be lured into talking and writing in ways that signify our compliance with its maintenance because discourses associated with heteronormativity are so powerful in society. It is important to highlight at this point that gazing at the way in which heterosexuality is privileged in society is not a stance against a heterosexual 'subjectivity', but rather is an attempt to locate what contributes to heterosexuality's legitimisation and dominance over other sexualities (Letts IV, 1999).

Further Research

There are several ideas that emerged from this research project that would be worthwhile exploring in more depth. It became apparent that disrupting heteronormative practices could be positioned as a Western, individualistic ideal. It would be interesting, therefore, to undertake research that explored how teachers from a collective culture who transgress that culture's expectations of gender 'mess up' the production of subjectivities in their teaching. Another research possibility concerns teaching practices involving infants and toddlers. Participants talked about how children who were possibly only a year older than other children engaged with constructions of gender quite differently. For instance, one participant was curious as to why younger girls, who used to engage in quite boisterous gender-non-stereotypical play in the under 2-year olds setting, by age 3 were practising a narrower range of femininities with groups of girls. It would therefore be interesting to explore how teachers interact with whānau/families and colleagues to enable under 2-year-old children to perform and appreciate multiple notions of gender as they transition to a 'room' of differently aged children.

With regard to conducting research, DePalma and Atkinson (2009) draw attention to the affordance of leaving the structure of a project up to a local community. In that way, they believe people are more motivated to remain in projects. Some suggestions that might be worthwhile considering include inviting teachers and others to take part in an action research type project, an ongoing professional development project or in a longitudinal study that involves critical thinking opportunities.

Concluding Thoughts

In this paper, we set out to illustrate the power of discursive practices to inform teaching approaches in a way that can enable and limit children's working theories of sexualities. Furthermore, we wished to provide some queer and heteronormalising discursive practice exemplars for the purpose of enabling teachers to reflect critically on their teaching practices. In keeping with participants' comments and with relevant literature, we believe children are "already social actors, not beings in the process of becoming such" (James & Prout, 1997, p. ix), who actively take up and resist discourses available to them in early learning settings. For this reason, we argue it is important for teachers to consider the part they have to play in informing working theories children construct in relation to sexualities and genders.

The research participants varied in their understandings of the theories and concepts that informed the study. In general, however, they initially appeared to be unaware that they enact discursive practices that interrupt or (re)inforce discourses children mobilise regarding sexualities. That is, they did not have the language to name some of their practices. As

previously stated, heteronormativity pervades educational settings and examples of ways in which participants possibly unknowingly heteronormalised settings with attendant effects have been provided in this paper. We believe it is important, however, to indicate that language and actions used by participants in other exemplars provided potentially contributed to the interruption of heteronormativity (Sumara & Davis, 1999) in early learning settings. Examples illustrate that even with minimal knowledge of queer and poststructuralist theories with which to analyse language and actions, some teachers use approaches that queer more than heteronormalise environments. These 'resistances' may be small and fragmented, but nonetheless they potentially disrupt heteronormativity.

Yet there are further ways in which teachers can 'catch themselves in the act' of invisibilising diverse sexual and gendered lives, that is, of heteronormalising environments. Teachers who become more aware of and apply queer and poststructuralist theoretical tools to their teaching practices may more consistently interrupt heteronormativity, which may in turn enable more than limit children's working theories of sexualities. Employing discourse analysis, for instance, will enable teachers to identify and examine the function of certain discourses (Cameron, 2002). When teachers come to recognise that discourses in which they position themselves privilege certain ways of living over others, they may be better able to recognise how children are likely to benefit from hearing different language and noticing different actions. Alloway (1997) states that as theories such as poststructuralism are encountered within early childhood educational settings:

We must become more aware of how language [and actions] shapes what we see, feel and believe. We must begin to critically interrogate knowledge that seductively poses as self-evident truth about child development and appropriate practice. We must insist on alternative voices being heard and accommodated. (p.65)

Perhaps in early childhood education we are yet to reach a point where we reflect regularly on how language and actions "sanction only a narrow range of [sexual and gendered] identities" (Cannella & Grieshaber, 2001, p.177). To elaborate, teachers may not be able to 'see' how they enact power that perpetuates heteronormativity until their attention is drawn to the effects of certain practices on others. We acknowledge that some learning can be challenging. Teachers who implement critical pedagogical approaches in order to respond to power relations that are oppressive in educational institutions are likely to encounter resistance (Keesing-Styles, 2002). We are also aware, however, that as professionals, teachers are expected to keep current with and be open to learning about new theories and knowledges pertaining to children's worlds (Clarke, 2001). Furthermore, there are expectations that teachers involve learners in critical discussion of significant issues in society (New Zealand Teachers Council, 2004). Resistance to and discomfort arising from being invited to consider other approaches to teaching possibly occurs because 'comfortable,' taken-for-granted approaches become disrupted. As Kumashiro (2002) points out, however, disruption and then "opening up to further learning" (p.43) is what learning is all about.

As we conclude this paper, we also acknowledge that because heteronormalising discourses are so pervasive in society there will continue to be slippage in what we speak and do, as well as resistance to what we speak about and do in relation to visibilising diverse sexual and gendered lives in the foreseeable future. We realise that the risk of an increased vigilance towards adopting discourses to queer learning environments and accomplishing a better understanding of the potential effects of discursive positionings could lead to a

paralysis of practice. Nonetheless, we wish to promote increased attention to how language and actions are used so that they may enable rather than diminish possibilities for all.

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