



A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF PRESERVICE TEACHERS' EFFORTS TO MAKE SENSE OF YOUNG CHILDREN'S SEXUAL ACTS TOWARDS ADULTS

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Abstract: This study explored Turkish early childhood education teacher candidates' efforts to make sense of sexual behaviors of both young girls and boys towards them or their colleagues during their field experience or in their daily experiences with young children. Semi-structured interviews with 13 female teacher candidates revealed that their perception of young children as "innocent beings," their education that emphasize teachers' responsibility to cultivate curiosity in children, and their position in the hegemonic heterosexual world make these teacher candidates to avoid naming sexual acts of young children as harassment; blame their friends who were the target of those acts; tend to find other explanations for children's sexual acts rather than seeing children as sexual beings; and see sexual harassment as something women actually can enjoy.

Key words: sexual behaviors, teachers' responsibility, early childhood education, sexual harassment, sexual behavior myths, teachers' perceptions

1. Theoretical framework and the Study context

The use of *innocence* and *asexuality* as common denominators of childhood still lingers to be widespread within child development discourse (Canella, 1997). Guidelines for parents and teachers are full of strategies to keep children's hands off their own genitals. Sexual behavior in young children is seen as a sign of sexual abuse although recent interest in child sexuality has provided evidence that children do not exactly pursue a celibate life (Davies, Glaser, & Kossoff, 2000; Renold, 2000; Renold, 2002; Thorne, 1993; Tobin, 2004). Davies, Glaser, and Kossoff's review of child sexuality research in 1990s and their interviews with preschool teachers point to the fact that engagement with a wide range of sexual behavior is a part of daily lives of young children (2000). The authors conclude that the actual prevalence of child sexual behavior is probably much higher than reported because of the privacy and secrecy that shadow the behavior. Barrie Thorne's (1993) ethnographic study with fourth and fifth graders revealed intense daily physical and sexual interactions among children. Taboos around sexuality of children were challenged by children's such behavior as kissing, matchmaking, exchange of love letters and gifts, and hyper-sexualisation of girls' bodies in their everyday interactions (Renold, 2000; Renold 2002; Thorne, 1993).

There is also variation in terms physical development among children of the same age (Thorne, 1993). Some primary school children stand out in crowd with their relatively tall and developed bodies. For girls as young as third graders fully developed breasts and hips places them into a position caught between being an innocent child and its contrast: sexy adult. Being victims of teasing and stigmatizing, and boys snapping their bras become a daily experience for these girls. "Deviant" is the word waiting for them if they choose to enjoy their sexuality. "In contrast with early-developing girls, who, especially if they have large breasts, are treated almost as if they are physically handicapped, early-developing boys reap social advantages" (Thorne, 1993, p, 139). In fact, boys who develop early become the most popular and have higher self-esteem and prestige. However, it is important to point out that to engage in sexual behavior or show signs of sexual awareness children do not necessarily have to possess fully developed bodies (Renold, 2000).

Sexual knowledge and behavior in children breaks the notion of "innocent/asexual children" and cause moral panic in adults and media and parents are often to blame for. But, in fact, schools are among the

places where compulsory heterosexuality enjoys its reign (Renold, 2000; Renold, 2002). Boys and girls who try to fit into this system of heterosexuality also engage in and become victims of sexually unwanted behavior. Even the primary grades can become an offensive environment where sexual harassment takes place but dismissed as playful behavior or responded with the phrase “boys will be boys” by their teachers (Renold, 2002). Unwanted sexual acts of children are said to be ‘harmless’ in Turkish college textbooks (Inanc, Bilgin, & Atici, 2007).

Sexual harassment can be defined as unwanted and intrusive sexual behavior that is not welcome and offends and threatens (Wilson & Thompson, 2001). It can take many forms ranging from physical contact to verbal, visual and written harassment. Sexual harassment is usually seen by feminists as an issue of power relations and an exercise of power over the less powerful or subordinated (Clair, 1994; Robinson, 2005; Wilson & Thompson, 2001). They point to the strong link between women’s subordinate position at work place and in society and the sexual harassment they experience in the hands of men drawing from the fact that perpetrators are disproportionately males. Yet, this interpretation should not give the idea that sexual harassment is peculiar to the workplace and started only with the women’s participation in the workforce. Variations of sexual harassment are so entrenched in people’s lives that it becomes the common reality of people’s lives everywhere and in every situation including schools (Wilson & Thompson, 2001).

Based on their review of related literature, Wilson & Thompson (2001) conclude that there is usually no established grievance procedure for sexual harassment in workplaces. When reported, few of the complaints are prosecuted and the sanctions are light. Often the complaints are against an authority figure, which makes it harder for the victims to come out with their stories. The tendency is usually to blame the victim for their victimization rather than taking an action against the perpetrator. Already experiencing self-blame and guilt, women who are left on their own to handle this pervasive problem find the solution in quitting their jobs if they have not already been fired or relocated.

However, all theoretical attempts to explain the issue circle around a scenario of adult males as perpetrators with a tendency to disregard sexually harassing acts of children. As Robinson (2005) rightly points out, it is a challenge to keep the traditional position on sexual harassment when the harassers are children. This under-researched phenomenon becomes even more complex and problematic when targets of children’s sexual behavior are adults who are considered to hold power over children. Robinson (2005) proposes that Western notion of authority is threaded with gender and power and operates closely with such issues as sexism, heterosexism, racism, and ageism. Under current gender regime, authority is seen as a male attribute and defined in masculinised terms and practices. Thus, boys’ sexual harassment of female teachers can be interpreted as a way of breaking the female authority which should belong to males. So, it can be argued that, within gender regime, sexual harassment becomes a legitimate claim to and exertion of power by boys and a sign of women’s inaptitude to generate authority in schools. As their experience is trivialized, female teachers find themselves silenced and marginalized and their actions, rather than boys’, questioned (Robinson, 2000).

For Davies (1989), it is not the resentment over female power that drives boys to engage in oppressive acts of domination, but, rather, the opposite positioning of the idea of maleness and femaleness that requires boys to prove their masculinity in their everyday interactions. Robinson’s (2005) study with secondary school students revealed that several other discourses are also at play in hiding the nature and extensiveness of sexual harassment of teachers by boys. These discourses work to define the sexually harassing acts as something childish or normal masculine behavior, sometimes as something only “deviants” who come from a different ethnic group would do, or totally deny it by using the construction of children as “innocent” and “asexual beings.”

There is an urgent need for breaking the shells of this notion of childhood and to look deeply into the workings, reasons, effects, and outcomes of child sexual behavior and harassment if we desire to create an environment where children safely enjoy their sexuality and grow into a future free from homophobia, heterosexism and sexual harassment (Renold, 2002; MacNaughton, 2000). As part of the power dynamics, teachers play a critical role in reproduction of and resistance towards dominant gender regime. By simply dismissing or interpreting sexually harassing behavior of a boy within

heterosexualist terms, teachers may perpetuate the prevailing power relations. Teachers' actions, or inactions, which are constrained or enabled by power relations, have political implications for them and others. With this understanding in mind, this study was oriented to explore an issue that has been under-researched: *How early childhood teacher candidates make sense of sexual behavior of children towards adults?*

2. Study Methodology

We developed an empirical research, based on a semi-structured interview. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the early childhood pre-service teachers (student teachers) from a major university in Turkey.

Participants

Student teachers in an Early Childhood Program were invited to participate in this study. Out of 46 students, 13 agreed to participate. They were all female. Majority of the participants, except two, had low socioeconomic backgrounds.

All the participants were enrolled in my Classroom Management class at the time of this research conducted. Therefore, assuming double agency, a term Ferguson, Yonge, and Myrick (2004) use to refer to taking the roles of both the teacher and researcher for the participants, I felt the onus to take all the necessary measures to overcome ethical issues arising from this position I found myself in. First of all, I used no incentives to encourage participation and announced it as voluntary. Those who were volunteered were fully informed of the purpose and procedures of the study and assured that they could withdraw at any time and there would be no repercussions for that; their identity would be kept confidential and nobody except me would have access to the transcripts; and I would write up the findings of the study and intended to get it published. Pseudonyms were replaced the real names and the name list was kept in a different file.

Interviews

Merriam (1998) explains that interviewing becomes necessary when the behavior cannot be observed; the focus is on feelings and interpretations of the experiences or past events; or when the purpose is to conduct intensive case studies of a few selected individuals. Therefore, because I wished to study the feelings, past experiences, and interpretations of teachers it seemed that the best method for my study was interviewing. Interviews were semi-structured and guided by a list of questions, which were developed mainly around the two cases and intended to elicit more information about what exactly happened and how participants interpret the incidents in addition to their general views on child sexuality, sexual harassment, and gender and workplace norms. However, I followed a flexible manner which enabled me to stretch the study to include new ideas and issues as they emerged with the first participants. It also allowed me to customize questions and probes according to the unique characteristics of each respondent. Interviews were not restricted with this set of questions. In fact, as the interviews and the data collection process continued, new questions were developed based on emerging themes and the participants' own interests and individual positions. For example, some participants had a chance to observe the behavior of children firsthand while others had to speculate on the cases presented in class. Some of the participants started the interview with a past experience before any questions asked.

During the interviews, the participants were asked questions around two case studies brought into the class discussion by themselves or their classmates as part of a behavior management project. In this group project, the students were asked to pick a child who showed some kind of problem behavior and develop a behavior management plan to change the problem behavior using the strategies they learned in class. The two cases were about sexual acts of a young boy and a girl toward one of the preservice teachers during their field experience.

The boy, Mert, was described by the students as a good looking kid who was a year older than his classmates, who liked taking leadership roles, and was mostly out of his seat during the activities. He was said to be hypersexual and developed a special interest in one of the preservice students who I will call Banu in this paper. His nonstop questions and comments about Banu's look and private life, his

inappropriate touches, constantly wanting to be held and hugged by her not only made the situation awkward for Banu and the other students, but also created confusion around how to explain and handle sexual behavior of young children. But, interestingly, the students chose to focus on his out of seat behavior for their assignment rather than his sexual acts.

The second case was about a girl in the same kindergarten class who also was engaged in sexual behavior towards Banu. She was not chosen for the project, but mentioned during the students' presentation. Banu was the target of her inappropriate touches. Interesting again, this kindergarten was part of a group of girls who gave the impression that they were both curious but also furious about the way my students, Banu and her friend Selma looked. Both, but especially Banu, liked wearing jewelry, tight clothes, and kept a high maintenance look.

Individual interviews with the participants were conducted. The researcher started the interviews with a brief summary of the two cases, and, then asked participants questions about how they explain and interpret the behavior of the focused children. Most interviews lasted around an hour. As will be noted in the results section, some of the participants were more talkative, forthcoming, and enthusiastic about talking about issues of gender and sexuality, so they were cited more. All of the interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed by the author.

3. Data Analysis. Empirical results

Merriam (1998) asserts that without an ongoing analysis, the data processing will be overwhelming, repetitious, and unfocused. She points out that the only criterion for doing something right in qualitative research is to analyze data simultaneously with data collection. With this understanding, I used a constant comparative method of data analysis to detect the issues as they popped up and to deal with and shape the study during the research. I constantly identified emerging themes for coding and constructed categories and subcategories as I completed each interview. Innocence and asexuality of children, and myths around sexual harassment of women emerged as the themes to focus. Critical-postmodern research comes with, what Kincheloe and McLaren (1998) call, an inescapable critical humility. It accepts the possible fallibility as well as its connection to progressive social change. Therefore, there is no guarantee of the validity of the findings. Reality is conceived as holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing (Merriam, 1998). Therefore, the focus of the qualitative research is the people's construction of reality.

To enhance validity in this study, participants were given transcripts of their interviews to complete member-checks. All of the participants were satisfied with their transcripts and did not wish to make any changes. In addition, I asked a colleague who was familiar with qualitative research and critical theory and a professor to comment on my preliminary findings as they emerged. Trustworthiness was also enhanced through triangulation with literature and similar studies.

Misplaced Blame

The myths widely accepted in public and media are that women are victimized because of their careless behavior and that nothing would happen to innocent women (Alat, 2006, Benedict 1992). Jermyn (2001) points out that violence against women is routinely legitimized by the media by concentrating on the positions of victims in terms of familial relationships, domesticity, and gender norms.

The myth appeared in the student teachers' explanations for Banu's being the target of sexual acts of young children. Both the students who worked with Banu and the others stated that it is the way she dresses which is to be blamed. Defne, Banu's field experience peer did not hesitate to make this connection right away and was quite open about it:

"Why didn't he do anything to us? As I said before, it might be because of the way she dresses. ... For example, on that particular day she was wearing a short skirt and showed a little cleavage. He touched her breasts. I asked her if she made him too much [aroused]. ... I was not wearing short skirts. That may be the reason it did not happen to me. ... Once I joked and said to her, "Banu, if you keep showing off your body it is natural that you would be touched."

Another student, Selma, who worked with Banu made a similar comment: "There were times Banu was wearing a short skirt. I think that might have played a role." Bilge's speculation pointed the finger to the same direction: "I have never experienced something like that. It might be because of the way she behaves, dresses, her manners..." The following conversation with Ebru, who wears a headscarf, was as harsh as the others in blaming Banu. Her words conveyed the traditional and Muslim view that men have no control over their sexual behavior, so it is woman's responsibility to avoid any sexually unwanted attention. And making her body invisible by covering it is the most effective way to deal with it. Ebru explains:

Ebru: "I think it is because of the way she dresses. When you dress like that it is natural that the child would want to touch you. He must have wanted to touch her upon seeing her bare skin."

Zeynep: "What would you do if you were Banu?"

Ebru: "... The first thing that would come to my mind is 'Is it because of something I have done?' I would look at myself and question. Why is he doing this? There is no such behavior towards my friends. Why me? I would tell myself that I need to change.

Zeynep: "How would you change yourself?"

Ebru: "I would not wear dresses with deep cleavage and show my breasts [laughing]. If I have to I would only wear short sleeves. ... I do not know where he touches though. Yes, the first thing I would do is to start with myself and question my look and behavior.

Dilek made the similar points:

I do not want to be offensive but I believe that if Banu had been modest and not brought her femininity in the foreground she would not have experienced such thing. Her mind is always busy with her look. "Am I beautiful? Am I sexy? How does this dress look on me? How are my shoulders?" and stuff. This is the message she wants to give: "I am a coquette." ... Nothing happened to the other three friends. If it happened only to Banu I would think it was because of her.

When asked what she would recommend Banu, Dilek replied: *If you do not show your presence there and if you do not try to catch people's attention the kid would not notice you. ... Our professors always remind us that because we do our field work in a kindergarten class we should not attract attention, wear heavy make up or too much jewelry, and should watch what we wear. There must be a reason that they say that it cannot be a low-cut dress and ask us to follow these rules: To avoid directing kids attention to things like that.*

The same argument was also present in Aylin's statements:

Aylin: "It may be because of Banu's charm. She is an eye-catching, quite beautiful girl. ... I do not know, she may not show too much skin, but there might be still something about her that catches the boy's attention."

Zeynep: "How do you think a teacher should dress?"

Aylin: "The way teachers dress has tremendous effect on children. I am not for exposing too much skin, because you attract too much attention. Especially, with very young children ... you should be very careful. And I would recommend her to watch for her behavior."

These comments put me in an awkward position since at the time of this research conducted I was still their teacher. Banu knew that the study was developed around her experience with Mert and was quite excited about being a part of the research. We developed good rapport and she looked comfortable in my classes. She would show no hesitation to occasionally drop by my office and engage in daily conversation. I did not feel it was right to inform her about the comments made about her by her classmates because it would be a violation of confidentiality.

In her effort to understand "how various customs and practices in a workplace constitute a specific form of organizational sexuality" (p. 4), Dellinger (2002) focused her attention on the dress norms in different organizations. According to her, dress and appearance norms point to the role of sexuality and gender in the creation of occupational and organizational culture. First of all, dress norms are

learned through interaction with coworkers. Secondly, the ways individuals dress have strong links with their gender identities. Finally, organizations' norms regarding gender and sexuality are reflected in dress norms.

Dellinger's analysis of dress norms in occupational and organizational cultures led her to conclude that dress represents a separation of private from the public in the work sphere where it is assumed that workers are to be stripped of their sexuality in order to become rational individuals. However, this asexual imperative does not apply to heterosexuals who are considered sexually neutral, but, in fact, enjoy and impose a heterosexuality norm at work through various customs and practices. Yet, even if this fact is apparent it is usually ignored or denied. Within this gender discourse, the assumption is that sexuality is brought into the workplace through the aberrant actions of women or homosexuals. In other words, there is constant scrutiny of the way such individuals dress or behave. They are expected to hide their sexuality and act like normal heterosexual or asexual beings. Trying to survive in this dominant culture, women, since they are stereotypically considered more sexual than men except in their interactions with children, struggle to meet the demands that they should neither mark their sexuality in order to be seen as rational individuals, nor look like a man so that they stay in their assigned territories and do not break gender norms. This is an impossible task because, as Gilman (2002) argues, the dress practices of women is all about gendering the individual and signifying its opposition to the other sex; women are required to be feminine.

The Myth of Innocence

A leading de-constructivist voice in early childhood education academic circles, Cannella (1997) challenges the core ideas of the discourse: existence of childhood, focusing on individual, and existence of absolute truth about child development. Exemplifying from other cultures and different periods of history she claims that construction of childhood that is influenced by the power relationship and childhood concept is a production of culture and context. She believes that through a dichotomous distinction between child and adult, children are seen as "innocent" and need to be controlled and protected by adults. In this perspective, adults determine what children need and how to meet those needs.

The participants' efforts to interpret the sexual behavior of the child revealed a combination of confusion, expressions of discomfort they felt during the incidence, and also strong influence of an understanding of children as asexual innocent beings. When asked about the little girl who touched them inappropriately, Defne described the girl's actions and talked about the discomfort she felt.

Well, she is always in someone's arms. We asked the teacher about her. She also grabbed them [Banu and Selma], touched their breasts. I do not know why it always happens to the other girls [Banu and Selma]. She usually hugged us, sat on our laps. Especially her putting her arms behind our back was quite discomforting.

Banu who was the main target in all these cases explained the child's behavior as an innocent act that meant nothing but innocent love. Banu went on:

I do not think his touching me meant anything. It is just love. He is a kid. He is innocent. I think the reason he touches my cheeks is his love for me."

The following conversation between Melahat and me also reveals the same perception of children.

Zeynep: What can you tell me when you compare the sexually inappropriate behavior of children to those carried out by adults?

Melahat: Are we talking about acts by adults towards children?

Zeynep: No, as in the cases we talked about, sexually acts of children towards adults.

Melahat: They are children. Being children makes the nature of their acts different. Adults do it for a purpose. Adults try to get sexual satisfaction in a pervert way. Meaning, by using something, by denying something. But, there is no such thing in children, because they are pure, naïve creatures. They know nothing but themselves. They may ask for a candy and after eating it they get happy. They also get satisfaction from pinching their friends. It is like that. I see no bad intention in that.

Aries (1998) traces back the origins of this understanding of children as innocent beings to the seventeenth century. Before that, there were no reservations around using obscene words or gestures in the presence of children. Adults even saw no harm in jokingly touching genitals of children. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed different types of power operations take place (Foucault, 1990). Rather than simple exertion of prohibition, these operations worked in subtle ways to restrict human sexuality. For Foucault, the medical examination, psychiatric evaluation, the pedagogical reports and schooling, and family control all functioned to create spirals of power which was intended to give no way to unproductive sex. Within this gender regime, sexuality was defined as something that should be a part of adult heterosexual monogamous couples with a purpose of procreation in mind. Consequently, any display of behavior that would signal sexuality in children was combated by educators and doctors and was to be eliminated.

The idea of innocence of children was carried into the twentieth century and immersed itself in public mind. Contemporary conceptualization of childhood associates it with primitivism, irrationalism, and prelogicism (Prout & James, 1990). Developmental psychologists define childhood as a temporal passage where children acquire necessary skills that would be necessary when they become adults. Within this stage, children are to be protected from any negative influence of adult's world. So, it is no surprise to hear the traces of this notion of childhood in early childhood education teacher candidates' voices considering the fact that their education is bombarded with child development theories which construct childhood as fundamentally different from adulthood and emphasize its naturalness and universality (Cannella, 1997).

It is Banu's exaggeration

In the case of sex crimes, women are even accused of lying about consensual sex and calling it rape for revenge (Alat, 2006). Despite the fact that only 1 or 2 percent of reports of rape are false, victims of sex crimes find themselves harshly questioned for their motives by defense lawyers, media, and public. Witnessing the ferocious treatment of those who report the crime, a majority of women prefer to keep it a secret. Women who complain about sexual harassment are often called "oversensitive" (McKinnon, 1987, p.108). Rather than questioning the actions of perpetrators, attention is directed to the question of whether the acts are really harmful. Consequently, victims' reactions are taken as beyond reason comparing to the degree the harassment could do. This perception of sexual harassment reiterates itself in Ebru's words:

When we listen to our other friends they say they have not experienced such thing. The child harassed neither Defne nor others. So, I do not know if it is because of Banu. I do not think it is appropriate to label the kid just by looking at his behavior towards Banu. I cannot stigmatize the kid as "pervert," or "perpetrator." Given the others' accounts, I do not think something like that would be possible.

Dilek: To me it can be explained as the natural instinct coming out. It is not a big deal. If my child did something like that I would not see it as an important issue. It is as normal as a kid saying he is hungry. Or as normal as a crying kid asking "why don't you buy me that toy?" I think it is the social norms that make it a problem. ... I do not think a kid grabbing a teacher's buttocks is a big issue. It might be his way of showing his humor. We can talk about sexual instinct there, but not perversity.

Two participants, Selma and Dilek suspected that Banu might be taking pleasure from Mert's attention. Selma gave her account of the way Banu described her experience as followed:

Banu is surprised. She tells me and the teacher what Mert has done to or told her and stuff. I do not know... I feel like she likes hearing those things. The way she shares her experience gives me that impression. She smiles when she says "he did this and that."

When asked how Banu must have felt during what happened to her, Dilek replied:

I do not know. I have not talked to her about the incident. But I know that she really enjoys compliments. Her enjoyment is more than anyone else could get. But I do not know how much hearing all that from a six year-old-boy could make her happy. But she likes such compliments as "How beautiful you are!" or "You look so nice today!"

When Ayse was asked to speculate on how Banu must have felt regarding the experience she went on to explain: *Banu must have been scared. I would be scared... of the child... Something is definitely going wrong. I would get chills. Then, I would get upset, am upset already. ... I would not like it and would definitely get mad.*

4. Responsibility to Cultivate Curiosity in Children, But How?

Also apparent in the participants' accounts was the influence of progressive ideology that requires teachers to put children at the center of their practice following the guidelines provided by developmental theories that gives a rigid definition of how and when children learn. Within that notion, young children are described as concrete learners who need experiences that would give them opportunities to use their senses. Teachers' role within this framework is to be a facilitator who fosters natural curiosity in children and provide meaningful experiences. Molded under this ideology during their teacher training, the participants expressed the responsibility they felt as teachers to help the children learn and develop even though the experience meant discomfort or confusion for them. When Defne talked to the teacher of young girl about her behavior, she just shrugged and explained her behavior with the concepts from theories of developmental psychology. Defne remembered:

Once we asked the teacher, "She did this and that to our friends. Why? Have you ever observed such behavior? Does she do that to you?" Her answer was interesting: "She is a tactile person. She touches everything including us. She always has that impulse to touch. She is a tactile learner and learns better that way." I do not know what she learns though. The teacher told us that it is just normal behavior."

Deniz tried to explain her past experience with a young boy by an educator's desire to help the little boy enact on his instinct that could have, otherwise, directed towards those who are vulnerable. Deniz explained:

If I had overreacted in the beginning, I do not know whether I did the right thing, I would have suppressed the kid. He would live it covertly. Or he would try to live it with his peers or friends. Or maybe with his male friends, because girls are overprotected, so boys are more available. The result would be the boy being stigmatized, people calling him pervert. So, I wanted him to satisfy his curiosity, let him get satisfaction. Now we are friends with this boy.

5. Conclusions

This study was initiated upon the class discussions around behavior problems in children in a college level early childhood teacher education course. Real case stories from their field experience were brought in to the discussion. The pool of their target problem behaviors included such ordinary problem behaviors as being out of seat, hitting, or lying, as well as display of overt sexual behavior. Although there were members of this class of juniors who stated in the beginning of the semester that masturbation is a deviant behavior, they still showed an interest in children's sexuality and avoided using any stigmatizing words. However, it was quite apparent that they were appalled by the behavior although their narration was blended in humor. Therefore, I embarked on this research to explore these early childhood education teacher candidates' efforts to make sense of sexual behaviors of both young girls and boys towards them or their colleagues during their field experience or in their daily experiences with young children. Semi-structured interviews with the participants revealed that their perception of young children as "innocent beings," their education that emphasize teachers' responsibility to cultivate curiosity in children, and their position in the hegemonic heterosexual world make these teacher candidates avoid naming sexual acts of young children as harassment, blame their friends who were the target of those acts, and tend to find other explanations for children's sexual acts rather than seeing children as sexual beings. This study was a pioneer with its attempt to unravel the link between how current conceptualization of children as innocent and asexual beings, no matter how naïve it appears, might create a discourse that perpetuates oppression of women in Turkey. The study also signaled the possibility of mutual desire between children and adults, which constitutes a taboo subject that is dangerous to speak about.

Mottier (1998) believes that a discursive closure will never occur in debates on sexuality. Therefore, she argues that it is the destiny of any constructed identity to be scrutinized by individuals who have a reflexive position in relation to discourses in what she calls the late modern world. She further argues

that scholars must free themselves from depending on intrinsic meanings. She claims that it is not passive bodies that embody sexual identities imposed by the society, rather, agents actively and continuously construct sexuality discourses and sexual identities.

Drawing from the psychoanalytic theory, Angelides (2003) defines the discourse around pedophilia as “neurosis” and finds in its roots the psychological defense mechanisms to repress the very existence and trauma of childhood sexuality. As opposed to the common assumptions, Angelides argues, childhood is not free from traumas and conflicts, especially in the case of sexuality. In fact, the prohibition of incestuous and pedophilic desire brings in many conflicts and traumatic experiences to deal with for children. Angelides sees a rise in the cultural prohibition of childhood sexuality in the last decades and calls attention to be paid to the psychological damages this prohibition creates on children. Children often are conceptualized as asexual beings in modern societies (Angelides, 2003). Therefore, their sexual behavior is usually explained by childish curiosity or meaningless acts.

Early childhood education guidelines emphasize the importance of educating the “whole child” which takes into account all of the developmental areas except sexual development of children. In an era in which how to name genitals may cause hot debates among both teachers and parents, it is important to break these taboos and open a debate on children and sexuality. My hope with this study was to spark a discussion with the participants around this taboo subject and to disseminate the understanding that quality of life of individuals would not be guaranteed unless all dimensions of their lives are cultivated in educational practices.

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