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Challenging dominance in the education sector: Why is it important and how can I do it?

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Abstract

Dominance in any sector prevents minority voices from being heard. Challenging dominance can be vulnerable, especially if the challenger identifies as part of a minority group. Marginalisation and silencing of issues pertaining to the gay community have long been the accepted norm in the education sector (Lee & Duncan, 2008; Robinson 2002). Furthermore, being an openly gay person in a teaching environment has proven challenging, mainly due to the dominance and acceptance of the heterosexual construct (DeJean, 2010a; Jarvis & Sandretto, 2010; McKenzie-Bassant, 2007; Sumara, 2008). The experiences of four lesbian teachers located in urban Aotearoa New Zealand and how they challenged heteronormativity in their early childhood education (ECE) settings was the focus for this research. Heteronormativity was one barrier which prevented teachers speaking about lesbian and gay topics. As a result of this barrier, acceptance of lesbian and gay issues is still a contentious issue within Aotearoa New Zealand ECE settings. A feminist poststructuralist and queer theory paradigm was used to frame the analytical approach. Data was gathered using individual interviews and a focus group. Strategies that participants used to challenge heteronormative dominance were examined. Although the participants did disrupt and challenge the dominance of heteronormativity, this was not without challenges or discomfort. The findings indicate that a collective approach from all teachers to challenge heteronormativity would benefit both peers and children. This collective approach would enable lesbian and gay teachers to be better able to be authentically engaged teachers.

Keywords

Heteronormativity; silence; dominance; lesbian teacher

Introduction

In Aotearoa New Zealand, current legislation and policy (e.g., the Human Rights Act 1993; Ministry of Education, 1996, 1998, 2017) supports the theory of inclusion and acceptance of all families in early childhood education (ECE) settings. However, the heterosexual two-parent family is still a family formation that is taken for granted (Surtees, 2012). The Practicing Teacher Criteria state that registering teachers must "take all reasonable steps to provide and maintain a teaching and learning

environment that is physically, socially, culturally and emotionally safe" (Education Council, 2011. Part 1, criteria 2). That is, they must attempt to provide an environment that is safe for all participants, including children, their families and teachers. A safe environment is not always the case for teachers who identify as gay[i]. The intent of this research was to identify the barriers faced by participants to being visible in their workplace and what strategies were used to overcome those barriers. Heteronormativity is a discourse that works to maintain heterosexual hegemony. Heteronormativity can be described as the assumption that all people are heterosexual, that is, attracted to the opposite gender. Because of its dominance, heteronormativity fuels and compounds resistance towards and a silencing of sexuality issues in the ECE sector (Surtees, 2005, 2006, 2008). To date, lack of data regarding the view point of ECE teachers who identify as gay has meant that this group is under-represented in academic literature and is largely silenced (DeJean, 2008; Wolfe, 2006).

Early childhood teachers are required to respond to the changing notion of family and what that might mean in order to "meet their legislative inclusionary responsibilities" (Surtees, 2012, p. 40) and to challenge exclusion. Part of these inclusionary responsibilities is set out in the New Zealand Early Childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996, 2017), which requires teachers to provide an environment that views all family backgrounds in a positive light. According to the Ministry of Education (1996), the ECE curriculum is expected to "contribute towards countering ... prejudice" (p. 18). The 2017 update of *Te Whāriki* also states "expectations of inclusive and responsive practices that acknowledge diversity" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 14). Therefore, it can be argued that ignoring and leaving heteronormativity unchallenged is in direct contrast to the expectations of teachers. Despite the aforementioned legislation, the experiences of Rainbow Families (a family where the parents identify as the same gender) show that there is still discrimination (Lee, 2010; Lee & Duncan, 2008; Power, et al., 2010; Terreni, Gunn, Kelly, & Surtees, 2010). The purpose of this project was to identify the barriers faced by gay teachers to being visible in their workplace and what strategies were used to overcome those barriers.

Participants

I set out to recruit a homogeneous sample group; a group of people who have something in common (Patton, 2002). For this research I sought women ECE teachers who identified as gay. I recruited four participants; pseudonyms were used, not only to protect the identity of participants, but also their whānau (family) members. Although Burr (1995) discusses the concept of people having a fluid identity, I felt it was relevant to gain some contextual knowledge about each participant. Considering that subjectivity allows people to construct themselves, I asked each participant to share the key word/s in which they described their sexuality (at the time of their participation in this study). Participants used a range of nouns, including lesbian, gay and queer. According to queer theory, "sexual identity is never fixed—it is shifting, so [people] should approach [others] assumption-less" (Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010, p. 6).

Theoretical framework

Feminist post-structuralism, as well as queer theory was used. Both theorise that there are accepted ways that people participate in their everyday world (Burr, 1995; Marinucci, 2010; Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2000). Although identified as separate components, no theory is as simple as that; in this instance, feminist post-structuralism and queer theory work well together by broadening each other's perimeters. Queer theory takes a critical look at how systems in society work (Marinucci, 2010) and on a small scale I, too, am exploring how participants in this research challenge the systems.

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[i] Gay is used here as an inclusive term referring to people who identify as male or female, and are attracted to the same gender. In this research, all participants identified as women, and all were comfortable with the use of the word gay.

Hegemonic views about sexuality exist in ECE settings, and queer theory, with its critical analysis and desire to trouble the accepted ways of being, assists in understanding these views. Social constructionism's claim is that if you can argue that identities can be socially constructed, they can also be deconstructed and contested (Burr, 1995).

Queer and feminist post-structuralist theories are useful as researchers engage with the dominance of heteronormativity (Lee & Duncan, 2008; Nelson, 2002; Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 1999; Sumara, 2008; Surtees, 2006, 2012). The inclusion of these theories provides a specific focus on ways that social interactions socially construct individuals, as well as examining how individuals make sense of themselves (Burr, 1995). These theories focus on questioning the power structures, dominant gender, and sexuality discourses within society. They also examine how structures in society function (St Pierre, 2010) and describe the mechanisms of power and how meaning and power are organised in our society (Blaise, 2005).

Queer theory challenges deeply held assumptions about the heteronormative or so-called normal family structure and the position it holds (Marinucci, 2010; Robinson, 2005a). Discourses hold a certain level of power; once a discourse becomes 'normal' and 'natural' it is difficult to think and act outside it (St Pierre, 2010). The dominant heteronormative discourse can be so powerful that many gay teachers are reluctant to discuss their sexuality within their workplaces (Gunn & Surtees, 2004, 2011).

Review of relevant literature

The research which has been selected for this review was conducted between 2000 and 2015. It was difficult to locate relevant research prior to 2000 and the narrowness of this window is an indication that the topic is relatively new. However, there has been an increase in research internationally over the last five years that highlights the need to address gay equality issues (Beren, 2013; Cloughessy & Waniganayake, 2014; DeJean, 2010b; Robinson, 2005a).

A survey of the literature pertaining to ECE settings and the inclusion of people who are gay, and Rainbow Families identified two main themes: anti-bias curriculum and silence. An anti-bias curriculum is one that encourages teachers to introduce topics related to diversity as early as possible; however, many teachers still feel uncomfortable discussing gay related topics (Beren, 2013). Gunn's (2003) research discussed the teacher's role; not only to work within an anti-bias curriculum, but to challenge the "barriers to inclusion which existed in the first place" (p. 132). However, the reality of creating an anti-bias curriculum in practice can still be a challenge.

This challenge was highlighted in a response from a participant in Kelly's (2012) research, who chose to discuss a family that had two mums as a blended family (a birth mother and a step-mother), rather than a lesbian-parented household. Although opportunities arose to discuss Rainbow Families, the dominance of heterosexuality remained a barrier to an anti-bias curriculum. Although teachers considered that they engaged in an anti-bias curriculum, acknowledging that gay issues were part of an anti-bias curriculum was challenging for many. Participants in studies located in Aotearoa New Zealand (Gunn, 2003; Kelly, 2012) repeatedly reverted to the heteronormative foundations of their experiences, thus demonstrating the power of the dominant discourse and the challenge to provide a truly anti-bias curriculum.

Silence was another theme that emerged from the literature. One way silence can be defined is as a message of unwelcome (Gonzalez-Mena, 2010; Lee, 2010; Lee & Duncan, 2008). Silence, therefore, is not a passive act. Silence is a tool teachers employed so as to "not upset anyone or over-step the boundaries between the teacher's role and the parent's role" (Gunn, 2003, p. 5). This renders teachers silent, and the silence results in the heteronormative status quo being maintained. Of critical importance is the influence that ECE educators can have on children's perceptions of diversity and difference. Robinson (2002b) suggests that it is "the discourses that teachers make available to children and those they silence through their daily practices" that influence children's perceptions (p.

416). It is this influence that creates and allows the silencing of gay issues (Robinson, 2002b). Surtees (2005, 2006, 2008, 2012) states that heteronormativity fuels and compounds silencing of sexuality issues in the ECE sector.

Creating specific boundaries around when gay issues can be discussed creates large spaces of silence when the topic cannot be discussed. Heteronormativity is a compounding factor in the engagement of silence and is a barrier to standing up for gay issues (Gunn, 2003). The literature identified an anti-bias curriculum and silence as areas to further explore. An anti-bias curriculum is recognised as an ideal way to include all families and teachers within the ECE setting. Silence, in contrast, can be identified as a potential barrier preventing the use/implementation of an anti-bias curriculum.

Methods of enquiry

I drew upon the published works of three highly regarded researchers (see Gunn, 2003; Jarvis, 2009; Surtees, 2005), which helped me to construct my questions: 1) What do gay teachers do to disrupt heteronormative dominance in ECE settings? 2) What barriers do gay teachers encounter when disrupting heteronormative dominance in ECE settings? 3) What strategies were used to overcome the barriers faced? Because I was looking at the engagement of gay teachers in social settings with children, parents and colleagues, the use of qualitative methodology was used. Qualitative research seeks to understand the world from the "perspectives of those living in it. It is unquestionable in this view that individuals act on the world based … on their perceptions of the realities that surround them" (Hatch, 2002, p. 7).

Participants

Snowballing, where initial participants refer others to the study, along with a social media website, secured the four participants. Three participants, Kate, Emma, and Francis, were parents of children aged between one and five, who attended the same ECE setting. Emma and Francis had partners who were frequent visitors to the ECE setting, whereas Kate worked at the same ECE setting as her partner, Fern. The fourth participant, Sophie, was single at the time this study was conducted. Participants' ages ranged between 30 to 50 years. Kate and Francis were team leaders in their ECE setting, and Emma and Sophie were teachers. At the beginning of this study, I knew three of the four participants on some level within ECE professional circles.

I sought to make my position understood within the research paradigm, to ensure that personal biases were transparent and that the data collected remained bias free. Disclosing my sexuality to participants allowed me to position myself within the purposive sample group and position as a researcher *with*, rather than *of* the chosen group. From a feminist post-structuralist viewpoint, this style also allowed me to minimise the distance between researcher and participant (Madriz, 2000).

Methods

The semi-structured interview and the focus group model were chosen because they align with the use of feminist post-structuralist theory. They also involve the participant in the research process (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). One key principle of feminist research is that research for women is conducted by women and is about women (Madriz, 2000). Patton (2002) emphasises the importance of using words that make sense to the interviewee and that reflect their worldview, suggesting that this mindfulness will enhance the quality of the data gathered.

I drew upon a feminist perspective which emphasises the importance of the relationship with the interviewee as I spent time interviewing participants. Feminist research makes use of the semi-structured interview, allowing the "active involvement of the respondents in the construction of data"

(Punch, 2005, p. 172). I met each participant in a location that was chosen by them, and each interview took between one and a half to two hours.

One focus group was conducted at the conclusion of individual interviews. Focus groups allow researchers to collect data in context and to "create a situation of interaction that comes closer to everyday life" (Flick, 2009, p. 195). This format is well aligned to the chosen theories because the nature of a focus group is fluid and driven by participants rather than the researcher. I had guiding questions, but encouraged a general dialogue between participants, and a conversation style format as opposed to an interview style emerged.

Findings and discussion

In this section of the article I discuss the ways in which participants identified heteronormativity as a dominant barrier and provide evidence of how participants challenged and overcame that dominance. Following on, a discussion about one strategy that participants called upon to overcome the heteronormative barrier, namely their own families, is provided.

The first theme identified is challenging perceptions and raising awareness of diversity or, in other words, working towards an anti-biased curriculum. This was acknowledged as being difficult at times. Sophie, for instance, spoke about how it "takes a certain amount of pushing because change is difficult for people". When children used discriminatory language such as "you can't have two mums/dads" all participants used an awareness-raising discourse:

> Francis: I would definitely step in there and really explicitly advocate for that stuff (acceptance of Rainbow Families), but also any time that children are talking about their families I think it's important to just relate.

> Emma: If [a child said] 'you can't have two mummies or daddies or something like that then I would probably sit down and say, well actually…

> Sophie: There have been plenty of times when I have kind of joined those discussions and put those sorts of seeds out there.

> Kate: You know when you see children engaged in socio-dramatic play, it is an important thing to make sure … [to say] 'well you could both be the mums if you want'.

All participants in this research identified and challenged heteronormativity in the examples above. The limiting theory that the children had previously constructed about family structures may therefore be interrupted.

Despite heteronormativity being a dominant barrier, participants used a mix of spontaneous and planned activities to challenge children's thinking about family composition. One planned activity was when Emma worked with the children in her ECE setting regarding family composition:

> I did family trees with four-year-olds and it was quite eye opening. I got them all to write down their families and they've all got very diverse families and we went on to several pages for most of these kids. They go through their big folder and they look through their family trees and I put my family tree in there as well.

The children and Emma discovered that the family compositions within the centre were diverse and noteworthy. An anti-bias curriculum is evident when teachers discuss topics with children that are confrontational, such as non-dominant family formations (Robinson, 2005a). Emma demonstrates how a discussion about the complexity of family compositions was opened up with the children in a non-confrontational manner. Emma dealt with the complexity of diverse family structures using a common ECE activity, the family tree. Putting her family into a booklet, which was available for children, staff and parents to look through, could be seen as another way in which Emma challenged heteronormativity as a barrier to inclusion of Rainbow Family visibility.

Emma spoke about how she provides opportunities for children to experience an anti-bias curriculum though understanding and acceptance of a wider range of family structures:

> When you are talking about families, there are so many diverse families out there, so talking about gay families is just part of a whole really. We need to advocate for everybody. We need to be not preaching but teaching and encouraging and learning about fairness and equality in all respects.

Teaching with a queer pedagogy means being alert to ways to reduce homophobia and this was taken up by Emma when she added her family into the booklet about families. In this instance, Emma challenged heterosexual privilege and advocated for inclusion (Zacko-Smith & Smith 2010).

Francis also spoke about advocating for everyone and highlighted being explicit when discussing different families with children. She talks directly to children about a range of family structures:

> I tend to talk to them about how families might be different … this family they've got a mum and a dad, but at our house we have two mums, and at your house you have one mum, and no dad. Just explicitly identifying family themes to children. I think with the whole heteronormative undercurrent … you know these days not a lot of families necessarily are a mum and a dad … so I think it is really important to normalise children's at-home experience for them.

Francis uses an active thinker discourse and challenges children to also be active thinkers. Burr (1995) describes the active thinker as someone "capable of exercising choice and making decisions about the strengths and weaknesses of her or his society's values" (p. 85). The tension about family structure and visibility is evident in Francis's concern about her daughter feeling comfortable in society:

> I feel it's a responsibility as a lesbian mum to advocate for my family and to make sure that my daughter knows that our family is normal. So the flip side of that for me as a teacher is that I need to make sure that children in my kindergarten see gay and lesbian families as normal … that's the world that I want her to live in, then that's the world I need to help create.

Participants using their personal family construct as an example of a non-dominant family in a positive light challenged heteronormative dominance in a non-confrontational manner was the second theme to come from this research. I found that participants' ability to bring up the topic of Rainbow Families was made easier by having their own child at the centre. This finding was consistent with all three participants who had children and allowed a natural flow with conversations, particularly focused around family structure. Engaging in conversations with children as a tool for disrupting the heteronorm was evident when Francis said, "You can't always wait for that community stuff to change, like someone has to be the person who says 'our family's got two mums and we're okay'." In this example, heteronormativity was challenged by Francis through being visible and willing to present herself and her family as examples of alternative ways that families can be formed.

One strategy used by Kate to break down barriers was "being able to articulate who you are in a way that is easily digestible to all". Three of the participants had partners who visited the centre. This meant the children attending the ECE setting were able to see the family 'in action'. The findings from this research indicated that real life examples were useful for understanding realities. This research highlighted that talking about families is a strategy used to break down heteronormative environments and is consistent with the earlier findings of Robinson and Jones-Diaz (2006).

Kate, who is a team leader in a suburban ECE setting, also used her own family construct to break down the barriers created by the influence of heteronormativity:

> Well I think luckily for me I do happen to be someone who is fairly confident and assertive and also obviously because Fern was working at [centre name] as well. So the children know of my family, they know Fern, they know me. They're really a big part of Fern being pregnant and having Milo. I've been lucky … all the parents know

> as well, then also that's because it's the kind of environment that we've tried to foster [here].

Kate disrupted the dominant discourse within the centre environment by her presence and her family's visibility. She uses her confidence and assertiveness as a tool to break down the barriers of heteronormative dominance. Heteronormativity privileges heterosexual relationships to such an extent that Rainbow Families are often made invisible. In order to be recognised as a Rainbow Family it is critical to directly state the family composition (Lee & Duncan, 2008). Kate does this in her everyday actions at the ECE setting: her comment, "they know my family" indicates that she directly states the composition of her family. It is suggested that this may not have been as easily accomplished if Kate was not the team leader of her ECE setting. In other words, Kate's power in this space affords her a certain level of privilege and confidence in her actions (Burr, 1995). As the team leader, there is less chance she will be directly confronted by team members and parents within the centre environment.

Participants demonstrated a willingness to disrupt the heteronorm to benefit both their own children and the children in their ECE settings. When reflecting upon the importance of disruption, Francis identified a lack of role models as she was growing up, and flagged that as one possible reason for being vocal and visible:

> It was important to me that children were aware of my family structure. Maybe it was growing up in small town New Zealand and not having any gay people that were out and visible, that it's become really important to me… [the children] are aware of good people that they can look back on and go, you know actually I think that teacher was gay or a lesbian and that wasn't so bad.

There is a level of vulnerability here too, in using one's self as the example. It was the intention of Francis to provide some 'future proofing' to ensure her daughter's life is a positive one. For the three participants who are parents, it was deemed vital to pursue visibility for the sake of their children and the future they desired for their families.

Participants used planned events, such as the family tree activity, as well as spontaneous conversations with children to challenge the barrier of heteronormativity. However, it must be acknowledged that participants moved between two desires; one, to be honest about themselves, and two, to be safe. Being honest about oneself means facing risks, either real or perceived, whereas being safe means, at times, hiding aspects of oneself to maintain personal safety. Participants judged the risk factors within their environment, and decided to act, or not, based on the amount of risk involved.

Limitations

There are three limitations to this study. The small number of participants from one location does not allow for a wider set of viewpoints to be heard. Secondly, the methodologies were interpretive, and therefore vulnerable to my personal biases and beliefs (Patton, 2002). Lastly, this research itself can be seen as an action which disrupts heteronormativity. Participants who are already aware of the benefits of disruption may be more likely to take up the invitation to participate. Gay teachers who have not disclosed their sexuality within their workplace might find accepting an invitation to participate in research regarding gay issues creates a level of vulnerability.

Implications for ECE teachers

The findings from this research showed that the participants want to be visible within their workplace. To put themselves into situations where they *are* visible, however, means they are using their own family structures as an exemplar. This potentially places the family in a vulnerable position. Additional resources would eliminate the need to call upon oneself as an example when challenging heteronormative dominance.

One suggestion for action for all teachers would be to critique and reflect upon the discourses in which they act or ground themselves. Dominant discourses can limit and shape people's way of thinking without people being fully aware. When teachers understand that they operate within a particular discourse, they can start to question their teaching and challenge the dominant discourse. This is difficult to achieve unless you are able to 'see' the dominance. It is the awareness of those discourses that would allow all teachers to actively engage in breaking down the barriers to inclusion. A culture where all teachers were alert to the value of fore-fronting gay issues with children would reduce the barriers encountered by participants in this research. It is of benefit to children if all teachers are interested in seeking equal rights for gay people by interrupting heteronormativity. This would potentially benefit children with consistent pedagogical teaching within the team.

A second suggestion for the education sector is to ensure that the topic of Rainbow Families is incorporated in the planned curriculum. There would be a cohesive plan by all teachers to regularly create or find moments where the topic of Rainbow Families and gay issues could be raised. The burden of disrupting heteronormativity would become lighter as other teachers shared the role and responsibility of advocating for the visibility of gay issues within their community. With many people challenging the heteronorm, the dominance would then potentially shift and challenging heteronormativity would then become the dominant pedagogy.

A final recommendation would be to provide a range of resources within the ECE setting which portray a variety of family formations. This would allow teachers to access tools and props to better equip themselves to bring Rainbow Families to the forefront. Participants in this research noted that resources would further support teachers' abilities to disrupt heteronormative practices. This finding is consistent with Robinson's (2002) Australian based and Gunn's (2003) Aotearoa New Zealand based research. Props such as books and posters are common teaching tools and the lack of Rainbow Family resources is yet another example of silence and dominance.

Conclusion

All the participants referred to family structures to start conversations about accepting Rainbow Families and to highlight discussions about gay issues. Identity is influenced by a range of factors; some factors are internal, such as self-talk, and how one dresses, and some factors are external, like other people's perceptions of how you dress or carry yourself. Race, class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity all form people's identity (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2006). For children in ECE settings, seeing different ways people form identities is one way children can be alerted to new ways to express their own identities.

With regard to this project and the research questions, the participants worked in a range of ways that helped others to see them for who they are, thus regularly disrupting the discourses in their workspaces. Subsequently, the analysis of the research data identified a more complex situation for gay teachers disrupting heteronormativity than previously considered.

Challenging heteronormative actions meant that generalised heteronormativity is brought into question and gay issues were fore-fronted. However, more teachers willing to challenge heteronormative dominance would mean that there is less risk for gay teachers to self-advocate. It is hoped that through this article all teachers will be encouraged to challenge heteronormative dominance in ECE settings. The results from this research also suggest that, regardless of the risks involved, challenging heteronormativity was still a priority for participants. Continued dialogue and further research would build upon the findings in this study.

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