

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity – Queer Theory: Gender Diversity and the Notion of Childhood Sexuality

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Abstract

Social inequalities in society are being filtered down into education, limiting the possibility for inclusion, equity, and celebration of diversity for all students (Bolstad, Gilbert, McDowall, 2012). One area of inclusion that limits students getting an equitable opportunity in education is that of those who perform gender and sexuality against the heteronormative society. My literature review looks at why teachers need to be aware of the social constructs of gender and childhood sexuality. Both of these elements are socially constructed, and have implications for many students' self-identity. By understanding and implementing approaches of queer theories and other teacher practice strategies, learning environments will become more inclusive, equitable and diverse for all.

Keywords: *Gender, childhood sexuality, heteronormativity, identity, inclusive education*



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Introduction

Gender, heteronormativity and children's sexual identity are areas of our society that often have implications for our classrooms (Duke & McCarthy, 2009). However, throughout my University of Canterbury Master of Teaching and Learning qualification, which focuses on equity, diversity and inclusivity, this topic was not necessarily explicitly addressed or acknowledged within our lectures. Therefore, for my educational peers and I to teach in effective learning environments, these areas need to be informed and addressed so we can construct a curriculum around a culture of belonging that acknowledges the fixed constants of gender and sexuality (Duke & McCarthy, 2009). These three areas intertwine within Western society in education, and young primary students are modelled into acting their gender based on sexuality. Therefore, the conception of childhood innocence is produced out of heteronormativity and gender performativity societal ignorance. The Ministry of Education states that the New Zealand Curriculum applies to "all students irrespective of their gender or sexuality" and "the term students is used throughout in this inclusive sense" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 6). Thus, the need to be inclusive of all students is part of the curriculum we teach, and is an essential aspect for teachers to understand. Yet it is an area that still needs some comprehension among many teachers (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Queer theory is a concept that gender and sexuality are intertwined, and have damaging effects on students. Blaise and Taylor (2012) encourage teachers to analyse gender and sexuality through a queer theory lens to promote students' exploration of gender. By using queer theory alongside other teaching strategies, teachers can facilitate a more equitable, diverse and inclusive environment. The early childhood curriculum, *Te Whariki*, is constructed to filter into the New Zealand Curriculum as the two curricula are built to work

alongside each other to help facilitate students' learning (Ministry of Education, 2007, 2017). Therefore, some of the articles used in this literature review are based around early childhood education (ECE) as the working theories children learn in ECE centres, influence their behaviours and attitudes in a primary setting (Sylva, 2010).

Gender Limitations Implications

Gender norms, stereotyping, and expectations construct a student's self-identity (Blaise, 2010; Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Duke & McCarthy, 2009; Rands, 2009). Blaise and Taylor, 2012 analyse the debate of nature versus nurture when considering the teacher's role in gender play, and whether a student's adoption of gender is based on their biological sex or their socialisation. Many teachers believe that students naturally gravitate towards gendered resources. However, Blaise's (2010) nurtured perspective of gender, reiterates that children determine how to act like either a female or a male based on social influences. Media, teachers, parents, resources, and activities influence students to perform their gender in specific ways, or else they encounter being 'othered' and patronised (Blaise, 2010; Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Rands, 2009; Duke & McCarthy, 2009). Therefore, as a teacher, we influence students to behave in different ways based on their biological sex, by using statements like 'boys will be boys' or assuming only girls create gossip. Blaise and Taylor (2012) analyse the way these influences impact students' gender expression, forming the concept of gender performativity. Furthermore, perceiving gender as a verb, with students acting their gender, is based on making sense of what it means to be a 'boy' or a 'girl'.

Rands (2009) inquired into the impact of gender performativity on transgender students in education, who

perform as the opposite gender to their biological sex. Transgender students are often left out of the inclusive educational system, due to gender privilege and oppression. Rands (2009) explains cisgender privilege as the vocabulary we use, such as directing the students to make a 'boys' and a 'girls' line, undermines transgender students participating in the instruction, through outing the students as being 'abnormal'. The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) (2009, cited in Rands, 2009) showed that, statistically, almost all transgender students had been verbally harassed and more than half faced physical abuse by their peers, creating an unsafe environment where transgender students are inhibited in their learning if their safety is constantly being under threat. Therefore, teachers need to critically reflect on their imprint on children's gender development (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Teachers need to consider that any form of gender stereotyping reinforces students, schools, and society to act within a heteronormative environment.

Hyland (2010) supports this argument of gender impacting female empowerment within schools, as society gives males hierarchy to 'perform' gender in a dominating form. Treating all forms of gender differently, creates oppression from an early age, by limiting students' ability to explore their identity development and learning effectively because of the limitations of gender performativity. The Education Council's (2015) *Graduating Teacher Standards* states that the responsibility of professionals is to have a range of knowledge around pedagogy, human development and learning. Thus, the Ministry of Education gives teachers the responsibility to acknowledge implications aligned with the social construction of gender, which has a relevant theoretical basis for shaping teacher actions and language across students' development and learning.

The Notion of Childhood Sexuality

Students' sex education, knowledge and identity is a controversial topic amongst teachers and families (Blaise, 2010; Blaise, 2013; Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Duke & McCarthy, 2009; Geasler, Dannison & Edlund, 1995). Childhood sexuality is perceived by teachers and families as an oxymoron, especially for children under the age of eleven (Geasler et al., 1995). Blaise (2013) conveys the implications for children's sexual identities, and how moral panic erupts when children are represented as sexual human beings, alarming adults to paedophilia discourses. Davies and Robinson (2010), and Surtees (2008, cited in Blaise, 2013) looked at how parents and educators shut down or avoid children's expressions of sexuality, due to the threat of distorting childhood innocence. However, by stereotyping children as being asexual, innocent, and naïve puts children in vulnerable situations, causing anxiety for when children do express sexual interests, and potentially increasing elements of negative childhood sexuality outbursts (Blaise, 2013).

When researching early childhood centres, Blaise (2010) found that sexual conversations/discussions about kissing the opposite sex were had and acted out amongst children, but this subject was considered taboo for children around adults, as kissing was only 'appropriate' for marriage. Another boy in the study impersonated Spiderman's girlfriend's walk, depicting her sexuality and his sexual desire. These examples show that

children are sexual human beings who need to be educated on what healthy sexuality looks like. However, sex education for junior students is often pushed to one side by teachers because of the uncomfortable atmosphere and lack of knowledge. Furthermore, teachers do not want to feel responsible for teaching children sex education against parental wishes. Therefore, the responsibility for sex education and openly discussing sexual discourse falls on families to do so with their children (Geasler et al., 1995). But, parents on average are only conducting one basic conversation to support years of development instead of addressing children's questions as they appear.

Geasler et al. (1995) conducted a study of twenty-eight parents' limitations when it came to teaching their children sex education. Parents feared the age of the child and appropriate content for their maturity level; discourses of childhood innocence and indirectly stereotyping children as asexual were evident throughout the study. Social factors such as the influence of the media and our sexualised society were common fears that parents felt children were overly exposed to. The gender of both the parents and children determined the comfort level of parents openly supporting children to explore their sexual identity. Furthermore, children who engaged in genital stimulation or masturbation was accepted more by mothers and supported more in boys. But, when girls participated in genital stimulation, the reactions of families were that of disgust and leaving the room. These findings show how gendered norms are placed on children from a toddler age (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). With families negating responsibility for guiding their children through sexual education, teachers need to be more supportive of parents.

Heteronormativity in Schools

Heteronormativity creates an inequitable environment based on society's assumption that all students, families, and the community are heterosexual (Blaise, 2010; DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Duke & McCarthy, 2009; Rands, 2009). Heteronormativity is a social-cultural bias that reinforces heterosexual expectations and gender roles (MacArthur, Higgins & Quinlivan, 2012). Furthermore, Edmunds (2016, cited in Astall et al., 2016), evaluated how schools have unsafe environments for students due to teachers promoting heteronormative norms. Gunn and Surtees (2011) analysed the inclusion of thirty-three same-sex parents within an early childhood centre. The emergent common themes of homophobia, exclusion, and heteronormativity were promoted because of teacher ignorance. The results of this study showed the complications of being a diverse family unit, as children faced homophobic bullying and parents were forced to be discreet due to the commonly mistaken identity of being, for example, their child's aunt or grandmother. However, this study also showed the importance of relationships, as some teachers recognised and discouraged heteronormativity by supporting diverse families.

Duke and McCarthy (2009) looked at thirty-one relevant articles that analyse the reinforcement and reproduction of heteronormativity within early childhood centres and schools. Their study found that in forty-five percent of the articles, teachers did not feel comfortable acknowledging diverse lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) learners; five articles found the schooling environment showed no positive

LGBT whanau representation; four articles found that students who contested the foundations of heteronormativity, often experience verbal and physical abuse. These findings show how the biased opinions of professional teachers negatively impact the identity of LGBT students in a heteronormative schooling system.

DePalmer and Atkinson (2010) support the complications of institutional heteronormativity that filters into primary school education. Sexuality within primary schools is a controversial topic because teachers fear including LGBT individuals – in person or in character – as this might signal being supportive of teaching particular sexual discourses to students at a young age (DePalmer & Atkinson, 2010). Thus, the popular belief that children do not feel sexual desires, or do not have the ability to comprehend diverse relationships, creates a society where only being heterosexual is encouraged. Heterosexual couples are depicted across the curriculum, without the exposure to LGBT individuals, families, and communities, creating the stigma that LGBT people are ‘abnormal’, whilst the heterosexual matrix, depicting masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality are promoted as the only representation of ‘normal’ development in society (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Hyland (2010) acknowledges that reinforcing the dominant heteronormative culture gives power to the privileged cisgender and heterosexual groups of students, families, and communities while undermining the groups that are affected. Whether directly or indirectly using language and actions that reinforce heteronormativity, it results in undermining students’ ability to express their diverse identities.

Unpacking Queer Theory

Queer theory awareness needs to be facilitated towards teachers when considering gender and sexuality (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004). Blaise and Taylor (2012) define queer theory as the ‘marriage’ of gender and sexuality discourses. Butler (1999, cited in Blaise & Taylor, 2012), analyses the association between ‘natural’, ‘normal’, and heterosexual sexuality, and how they influence gender performativity thereby impacting children’s identity development. Although the assumption can be made that queer theory is only for LGBT teachers, families, or communities, queer theory is not the promotion of a queer sexualisation, but instead critically analyses the foundation of oppression in the form of gender and sexuality discourses (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Queer theory, similar to the notion of childhood sexuality, makes teachers often feel unconformable with classifying students as understanding sexuality as discussed above. Thus, in order to normalise childhood sexuality, teachers need to nurture a healthy sense of self amongst their students, and analyse children’s gender construction through a queer theory lens, instead of holding the viewpoint that there is a ‘normal’ characteristic that is considered appropriate for biological male or female students. For example, Blaise (2005, cited in Blaise & Taylor, 2012) examined the impacts of gender, heteronormativity, and sexuality, and how girls formulated their identity around looking beautiful, showing the heterosexual matrix as regulating girls to focus on their gender performativity by always looking ‘presentable’ with the use of makeup, which imposes an expectation on females.

Loutzenheiser and MacIntosh (2004) present gender performativity as fluid, therefore, implying it can be altered through the teacher’s actions, language and indirect messages, which in turn means students’ working theories and ideas about queer citizenship can be questioned. Boldt (1996, cited in Blaise & Taylor, 2012) emphasises the need for educators to firstly teach with a reflective queer theory viewpoint in mind. In other words, for teachers to critically analyse their imprint on students, a queer theory perspective is needed, with reflection about how our stances on gender and sexuality influence the different ways we treat boys and girls. For instance, when reflecting on our teaching pedagogy, we can determine the implication for our ako and change our practices to be more inclusive. DePalma and Atkinson (2008, cited in DePalma & Atkinson, 2010) reiterate the importance of reflection through their *No Outsiders project* of teachers using queer theory in practice. Gender oppression for the biological sexes, heteronormativity, and complications around children’s sexual identities arose, when teachers reflected on their prejudices and the effect this had on their students. Through using a queer theory perspective and questioning children about their gender performativity, teachers found they gained confidence in creating a classroom environment where heteronormativity played less of a role (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Therefore, by taking action and reflecting on your stance as a teacher, a knowledge and application of queer theory promotes a more diverse, equitable and inclusive learning environment.

Teaching Strategies

In order to facilitate a more inclusive learning environment, teachers need to be made aware of strategies that contest widely held views or stereotypes about gender, heterosexuality, and the oppression of childhood sexuality (Blaise, 2010; Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Duke & McCarthy, 2009; Rands, 2009). Three approaches can be adopted. Firstly, to create a culture of belonging within the classroom, one needs to analyse the heteronormativity within the learning environment (Blaise, 2010). By critically examining the students’ behaviours, actions, and language they use, one can acknowledge the everyday heteronormativity and gender performativity that influences the students. Documenting the students’ knowledge helps to understand where students are at and what one needs to work on as a class together. By recognising the significance of gender and heteronormativity in the classroom, one can engage in healthy conversations about these issues. Secondly, relationships are a significant factor in helping promote gender and healthy sexual development, while challenging heteronormativity (Duke & McCarthy, 2009). Geasler et al. (1995) found that parents want guidance in educating their children about sex and sexuality, thus, the need for teachers to create trustworthy, reciprocal and honest relationships with parents so that they can have conversations openly. Blaise and Taylor (2012) examined how discussions with students about their families, and how their aunt might be queer or their father might be a nurse, breaks down stereotypes. When students can relate to someone in their lives who does not live within the stereotypes of gender or heterosexuality, students can better comprehend their actions or language to be offensive, thus, the need to have a meaningful relationship with students. Reciprocal relationships allow teachers to openly challenge students’ gender performativity and heteronormative actions, and

answer their sexual questions while educating families' and co-workers' fixed theories of oppression (Duke & McCarthy, 2009). Thirdly, having literature that debunks sexist stereotypes as having strong male and female roles while challenging homophobia is essential (Duke & McCarthy, 2009). When teaching healthy sexual development, teachers need to use the correct terminology for male and female sexual organs as well as letting the children have access to human anatomy books. Duke and McCarthy (2009) also recommend answering students' questions about sexuality and sex without embarrassment or discretion, but rather being open and honest. Furthermore, teachers should not be alarmed when students show interest in masturbation or genital stimulation, as they are just expressing an interest in sexuality. Duke and McCarthy (2009) emphasise the importance of gender privilege being taught alongside other advantages (e.g., white privilege), so too heteronormative oppression should be acknowledged with as much authenticity in order to create a respectful environment for all.

Conclusion

It is important to consider gender, heteronormativity, and childhood sexuality as areas to acknowledge within the teaching environment. The New Zealand Curriculum reiterates the responsibility of teachers to deliver an inclusive curriculum to all students, despite gender and sexuality. However, this is a challenging implication due to the power of gender performance and heteronormativity (Ministry of Education, 2007). Although Blaise and Taylor's (2012) account of queer theory is located within an ECE context, their findings are still relevant to a primary setting because children's experiences with heteronormativity influence the way they perform their gender, being active participants in their own gender development. Therefore, there is a need to challenge students' working theories of what it means to be a 'boy', 'girl', or gender diverse at all ages. Gender is mostly nurtured and socially constructed because teachers and other social forces influence students' identity development (Blaise, 2010). For example, living out of gender norms such as being transgender, puts a student at risk of bullying through verbal and physical abuse (Rands, 2009). Heteronormativity is based around a social-cultural bias that reinforces heterosexuality in influencing gender roles (MacArthur et al., 2012). Gunn and Surtees (2011) found that diverse LGBT families had to be discreet about their lives due to homophobia, bullying and exclusion. Duke and McCarthy (2009) and DePalma and Atkinson (2010) showed that teachers felt uncomfortable acknowledging LGBT individuals, families, and communities for a range of reasons, but ignorance creates implications for diverse students showing the real effects of heteronormativity. Childhood sexuality is perceived as negative due to adults seeing children as asexual, innocent and naïve. However, shutting down children's sexual expressions creates anxiety and potentially increases the incidence of negative sexuality outbursts, meaning the need for teachers to address children's sexual working theories (Blaise, 2013). Geasler et al. (1995) show that teachers need to support parents to discuss and support their children's sex and sexuality education. Queer theory helps teachers to reflect on their perspectives of gender and sexuality, and the impacts their teaching identity has on their students' development, as well as teachers using a queer theoretical lens to examine their students' behaviours, actions, and language towards gender and sexuality. Lastly, teachers

need to implement strategies to create an equitable and inclusive classroom for a diverse range of students. These strategies include engaging in conversations with students that relate to their lives, establishing relationships with families and communities, and providing literature that debunks stereotypes and teaches positive sexual health education.

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