Public discourse, private practice and social justice. New Zealand’s civil unions and care of children debates.

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The study.
• Doctoral research project inquiring into the impact of heteronormativity on early childhood teachers practice.

• Why this project? Why at this time? Why these questions?

The study aspires to:
• Examine the way heteronormativity has shaped pedagogies and positioned heteronormative practices as desired practices in early childhood education.

• Interrupt the dominance of heteronormative knowledges to make possible broader and deeper understandings of pedagogies consistent with aspirations for social justice.

• Theorise signposts for queered pedagogies that contribute to fair teaching practices in early childhood education.
Methodological inspirations:

- This is poststructural work.
- This is queer work.
- Is this feminist work?
- This work is dangerous. It is disruptive, it is problematic, it is professional and it is personal. Overall however, this work is hopeful, it is based on the notion of inclusion and on the premise that teachers matter in helping to make fair the places young children and their families live their lives.

Procedures:

Three groups of teachers (14 participants) in 3 groups: Queer teachers / queer allies / teacher educators.

Dilemmas of practice based around heteronormativity and homophobia.

Focus group discussions: unique groups x2 / combined final focus group plus continual feedback from across the groups (provided by me).

Today: data from the final combined focus group meeting where participants were working conceptually with particular discourses in order to think about fair practice.

In this session I plan for us to canvass the following questions:

How are these teachers viewing and responding to provocative public discourse?

Are their abilities to practise queerly being supported or are they being undermined in our present climate? Or, is something else altogether different happening?

What do the teachers say?

And how does any of this help me shed light on how teachers might attempt to shift away from pedagogy that privileges heteronormativity to a place where they/we might begin practising fairly?
Context: Focus group 3

We’d had 2 parallel group meetings of each group. Written documentation from me in-between FG meetings. This FG was the opportunity for us all to come together to think about change.

Politically, we were all living in a country where debate was raging about the civil unions bill. This came close on the heels of the 2003 care of children bill first reading. I was hearing a relentless barrage of conservative and morally / religiously inspired sound bites and corresponding newspaper headlines were coming to the fore each day as the time for the proposed bill’s first reading in the house approached. It was an opportunity not to be missed.


2004: The civil unions debate.
What was being said: in the house?

The NZ Govt. is promoting an agenda of social reform that is attempting to reconstitute this thing called family and its associated members - i.e., parents. (*this legislation is radical and unnecessary)

The current legislative programme poses many risks. (*the risk monologues)

There are two basic arguments being posited:
1) The social fabric of NZ society is being torn apart by a liberal coalition government who is imposing their agenda on the NZ people.
2) Legislation that institutionalises discrimination has no place in a progressive democratic NZ society. *(you either with us or against us)

Risky business: the care of children and civil unions debates.

Children are at risk: Family disintegration

The traditional nuclear family is at risk: Coalition’s liberal agenda “shameless the environment, children are to be taught up on”

The economy is at risk: Potential guardians (legal aide costs)

Dads are at risk: Lesbians

Parents are at risk: Mothers

Professionals

Feminists

New category of parent: the social parent

Marriage is at risk: Status is being reduced to that of legal union

NZ’s moral standards are at risk: The coalition’s radical liberal agenda

What knowing about discourses did I take into the focus group meeting?

• Sets of words, actions, meanings etc. that in some way come together to produce particular versions of events.

• Conceptual backcloth

• Two-way relationship: discourse-language & action (mutually constitutive)

• People have choices to make in relation to discourses.
What did I think might happen in the focus group meeting?

I thought the teachers would identify discourses that problematised queer families and reasserted heteronormativity and that they would say these were such prevalent discourses that they felt powerless to disrupt them, but, that they had a desire to stand in the way of such arguments...

The teachers said… (V1)

The political and public debates give us something positive to work with - something to agitate for change with.

278: Ruby: I think they’re um they’re taken on board as kind of signposts for how we ought to be being teachers...

285: Sandy: I see it as quite supportive and um but then I’m looking at the part that I think it’s, the shifts in attitude that I think are happening and so, if it’s easier to then step out and not keep the peace any more because you’re not stepping out there on your own, … you feel the need to get in behind it to keep the momentum going as well...

301: Ruby. T: in my worksite we’ve talked about the civil unions bill and that I think people have used it as an opportunity to ask questions of me, or to bring up things you know...

…and they also said… (V1 cont)

Yet the political and public debates can cause us concern: depending on who you are and what’s being said.

291: Ruby: but it could also be very negative depending on Alex: who you are Abi-L: what’s being said Ruby: what's being said yeah, which particular tone is being set Mickey: yeah Ruby: yeah Mickey: what's being said can be used to open up debate and discussion or it can be just accepted as what what it is and left there to be a barrier to move along that continuum Ruby: it. it can be used to shut it down! (FG3 Large group 291-298)
What immediate sense I made of this:

I'm surprised that the teachers only have accounts of using the debate positively. It's here as something that 'gets in the way'. No-one's talked in any specific terms about its potential negative impacts although it's been hinted at. I wonder what these teachers experiences of any negativity from the debates are? If there are any, why are they not coming out now?

…I'll just check to see if I missed anything…

…there was a long pause…

311: (pause)
312: Alex: ok so does anyone um think about how it can impact to shut you down and work to silence, to silence you as a teacher so you just, so you don't, so it is stopping?
313: (pause)
314: Alex: What do you, what's your sense of the impact of that kind of um public debate on practice in terms of shutting people down?
315: (pause)
316: Alex: you can only speak for yourselves I guess, but
317: (pause)

…and the teachers said... (V.2)...

318: Ruby: well I can think of it in terms of the human rights act, I've found that that enabled me to be less shut down than previously
319: Alex: yeah
320: Ruby: so I / there’s not a specific piece of um legislation that’s shutting me down at the moment but I can look back to something that I think is freeing, and so when students say to me "why are we talking about this stuff it's not relevant to early childhood"; you know, "what do you want to talk about children’s sexuality for children aren't sexual beings" or you know, "when I work in centres there won't be lesbian mothers and if there are I won't acknowledge it" I mean I can talk about the human rights act and of course um Te Whaariki and DOPS
321: Sandy: yeah
322: Ruby: and the difference between your personal philosophy and beliefs and your moral obligation and the teaching philosophy that needs to be guarded by our legislative arrangements.
323: (pause)
How were the teachers viewing the public debates and what impact was this having on their ability to teach queerly?

The teachers acknowledged that there was the possibility for ‘shutting you down’ but they by and large wanted to talk about how they were able to agitate for change by ridiculing, challenging and questioning conservative arguments. In this way, members of the teacher educator group were able to transform the discourse, one lesbian teacher was able to employ political tactics to reject the conservative view and talk about her lesbian perspective of the civil unions bill.

What sense can I make out of these tactics?

People have choices to make in relation to discourses? People’s responses to discourses may be constituted in each unique iteration of the discourse: the context and climate matters.

We might employ many kinds of tactics in order to engage with discourses: political tactics; complementary tactics; rejection tactics; accommodation tactics; transformation tactics (Hayes, 2004) - I think these are all hopeful responses and in my reading of the data some teachers in this research were employing some to help destabilise the conservative view.

Could this be an example of the transformative potential of discourse work within teacher populations?

The anti-conservative view was unexpected: by paying attention to discourse conceptually, the teachers introduced an idea previously unstated which allowed me to glimpse a pedagogical practice that was anti-heteronormative (or queer) (but I can look back to something that I think is freeing, and so when students say to me ...) ... not sure - possibly...
The context and climate:

In this group, we desired the speaking of particular discourses; we desired that queer worldviews would take centre stage; we desired alliances so that as individuals we could check out our ideas with others.

We desired to be talking about fairness and working as teachers towards practices that could be considered fair for diverse families, children and teachers.

Small, local, strategic.

What am I left with right now?

Potential in particular ways of thinking: thinking collectively about discourses (e.g., heteronormativity) helps create spaces between people across which new understandings can form - maybe…

Potential in particular ways of listening: laying bare particular combinations of words and actions and examining these, can help us hear how particular truths come to be, further, we can use this process to hear how we ourselves pick them up and use them in our work - maybe…

Attentiveness & fine tuning

I think we need to expect ourselves to get clear about what it is we desire of our potential selves as teachers, because what we desire, we will persist with.

I hope we can expect ourselves to be teachers who want to practice teaching in ways that are fair, inclusive and generative of communities for learning.

I desire to not accept the status quo as a teacher, because I am acutely aware that when we think we’re settled with pedagogy that looks like it’s meeting everyone’s needs, the next time we come together, that’s likely to change.