

Heteronormative discourse and early childhood education

Presentation to NZEI: Te Riu Roa,
Rainbow Network Hui, 19 April, 2008
Alex Gunn, Educational Studies and Human
Development, University of Canterbury, Christchurch

The study

- An investigation of heteronormative discourse and early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- The discursive construction of heteronormativity in early childhood education through the 20th century
- The shaping of practices in early childhood education through heteronormative discourses in the present day.

Orientation and purpose(s).

- Foucaultian discourse analysis
- Genealogical investigation of heterosexual privilege and of how particular forms of family, genders and sexualities were/are upheld as normal.
- Ethnographic component to see if, and if so how, heteronormative discourses shape practices in the present day.

? Discourse

- Foucaultian discourse analysis looks for the relations between people, institutions and power. This kind of discourse work seeks to explore the fragility of the practices we invent in order to discover the truth about ourselves.
- Who is speaking? From where does he/she draw his/her authority? Why do we take what he/she says as true? What limits and opportunities are afforded him/her by virtue of his/her place in discourse? What relations are established about him/her and others in the social field?

? heteronormativity

- The coming together of ideas/images/representations that maintain heterosexuality as dominant and normative.
- In my study I write about the hetero(norm) and its orientation in relation to: family, genders, sexualities.
- Producing the world as 'straight'.

Genealogical component

- A close reading of early childhood policy and documents for evidence of heteronormative discourse
- An attempt to show how early childhood policy concerts with broader social policy in 20th century NZ
- An illustration of how the related categories of family, gender and sexuality conflate to help produce the hetero(norm).

Ethnographic component (v.1)

- The production and analysis of texts where teachers came together to talk about instances where family, sexualities or genders were troubled in some way.
- An attempt to show how teachers local practices are coordinated with 'the relations that rule them'
- An illustration of the complex ways in which heteronormative discourse can impact on teachers, children and families

Ethnographic component (v.2)

- The production and analysis of texts where teachers came together to talk about instances where family, sexualities or genders were troubled in some way.
- A queer turn where an examination of how 'we' were producing and resisting heteronormative discourses in the context of the research took place
- An attempt at a pedagogical strategy for resisting the hetero(norm).

Methods / procedures

- Genealogical analysis of documents.
- Focus group work with queer teachers, queer allies, teacher educators.
- Formative research design - three 'rounds' of focus group interviews with each of the groups.
- Provocative texts: production of texts: analysis of texts.

Who is being produced? What is legitimate for them to say/know/do/be? How is heterosexuality being maintained as dominant and normative?

Some text from the genealogy

Who is a parent? Devt discourse: "parents who enrol their child... can be expected to be involved in a number of ways: in pre-entry clubs, in parent... as mother helpers." Parents are mothers. (Committee) (The Hill Report)

Caregivers as well as parents need to know about the Oedipal period and the sometimes surprising expectations that preschoolers have as they grow through this period toward emotional resolution of their desire to rival the same-sex parent. Soon enough, children who indeed do love the parent of the same sex learn to want to grow up to be like the parent of the same sex rather than a "competitor".

Psychoanalytic and scientific discourse: The heterosexual parent in the nuclear family. SS rivalry for OS attraction.

How come these parents can be so involved?

A piece of text from the ethnography

Risk discourse: The heterosexual adult

Heterosexual presumption

Sexual diversity d. / resisting HND

200: Andy: "... and my boss and I were giving a chat, because I've just started a relationship not long ago with some... And Donna was saying, "so how's it all going?", chat, chat, chat. And Karl overheard and turned around/leaned across the table and said, "oh, oh my god Andy, have you got yourself a boyfriend?!" And I thought, oh shit, here we go... well, that's a really good thing to say. And I just leant across the table and said "actually no I haven't, it's a girlfriend", (laughs)... And she, her face just dropped. And I thought, oh maybe I was just a bit too... there, but (laughs) I thought, oh no stuff it.

Confession

FW/MM (00-217)

Sexual diversity d.

The discourses identified

- Nuclear family discourse
- Developmental discourse
- Heterosexual presumption
- Psychoanalytic and scientific discourses
- Risk discourse
- Discourse of feminine women and masculine men
- Sexual diversity discourse

Preserve the position of heterosexuality as dominant and normative

Introduce the possibility that heterosexuality is just one form of sexuality amongst many others

So what?

- Begin to document and unpack the repeated constitution of heterosexuality as normal.
- Learn to recognise the constitutive force of language
- Learn to recognise and articulate the multiple and contradictory ways in which we are positioned and position ourselves and to analyse the personal and social implications of these positionings

So what? (2)

- Learn to recognise the constitutive force of the images and metaphors through which sexuality is taken up as one's own
- Gain the capacity to make choices about refusing the discursive practices and structures that disempower us or constitute us in ways we do not want and to take up and advance those we do

Conclusion

- If we can name the discourses we are caught up in we can stop torturing ourselves about the fact that we can't find an essential moral position from which to act.
- Shift the problem to the external
- Work from many different positions
