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# Revisiting the 'teachers' gaze': Have we changed how we 'see' gender in early childhood education?

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In 1997, Glenda MacNaughton wrote the paper 'Feminist praxis and the gaze in the early childhood curriculum'. In her final paragraph, MacNaughton challenged early childhood educators to revisit the 'gaze' after twenty years, in the hope that "it will not be as possible to find teachers who fail to 'see' gender" (p. 325). By 2014, new theoretical perspectives on gender and education encourage teachers to widen their understandings of gender, and challenge dominant discourses of heteronormativity and heterosexuality (Blaise 2005, 2013; Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Robinson, 2005; Gunn 2004, 2008). This paper explores the implications of this new research for teachers and teacher educators drawing on feminist research informed by poststructuralist theory and its continued application in the context of gender and early childhood education.

## *Introduction*

Since the second wave of Feminism in the 1970's, education has become an important site for researching gender (Francis & Skelton, 2005; Dillabough, 2012). Much of the research, mainly on school age children, has focused on the role that schools and teachers have in reinforcing gender stereotypes and unequal gender relations, with an emphasis on the reproductive functions of education in shaping relations between and within the binary of gender. Over the past twenty years, however, there has been a growing interest amongst feminist researchers in the field of early childhood (Grieshaber, 2007; Blaise, 2005, 2013; Yelland & Grieshaber, 1998; MacNaughton, 1997, 2000b). As a result, there is now a body of information concerning the wider field of feminism education. The focus in this paper is predominantly on this research in relation to practice in Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

Recent studies in early childhood education suggest that teachers often have persistent and simplistic understandings and beliefs about gender as being either biologically or socially determined (Grieshaber, 2007; Robinson & Diaz, 2006; Blaise, 2013). This has been informed by feminist poststructuralist theory and the discourse of language and power to "throw new light on children's gendered play" (Blaise, 2013, p. 90) and its implications for teachers. By working with feminist poststructuralist theory and applying it to teaching, MacNaughton (1997) sees this discourse as supporting teachers in "reconstructing their pedagogic gaze" in order to "redress the marginalization of gender equity in the early childhood curriculum" (p. 317).

### Gazing at gender through feminist poststructuralism

Despite often being difficult and strained, the partnering of feminist and poststructuralist theory, as it applies to research on gender, has generally been considered to be fertile ground, in terms of praxis. Feminist poststructuralist theory has been particularly significant in transforming how research is 'done' in education, as well as developing new perspectives on gender as a complex but central 'category of analysis'. According to Dillabough (2012), poststructuralism can be distinguished from *rational* (Dillabough's italics) forms of structuralism or other modernist feminisms by its use of "deconstruction as a conceptual tool for critiquing language, and its insistence that gender identity is not a coherent or stable narrative to be known in any ultimate sense" (p. 142). Challenges to positivist research paradigms have been central to feminist poststructuralism (Lather, 1991; Elizabeth St Pierre, 2000), and have more recently evolved into philosophical understandings of gender (and their relevance for early childhood education), as explored in the work of, for example, Lenz Taguchi (2013).

Other perspectives that have arisen from a crossover of cultural and feminist theory have provided teachers with new tools for understanding the relationship between gender and sexuality (Blaise, 2012, 2013; Gunn, 2004, 2008). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to give an historical overview (see McLeod, 2008, 2009 for a more thorough analysis of the relationship between feminism and post structuralism) this presents some significant ideas/perspectives for teaching and understanding gender in early childhood education.

Within this discourse, between feminism and post structuralism, it is clear that these terms do not form a unified or homogenous concept or theoretical perspective. In her writing on the legacies of poststructuralist feminism in education, McLeod (2008) writes:

> Of course, neither poststructuralism, nor feminism, nor any alliance between the two represents a homogenous body of theory or practice or politics. Nor has it been taken up in educational research in a single or monolithic way, even if it is sometimes characterised, or caricatured as such. There are variations in theoretical emphasis and differences in the type of practices to which it is linked – across research, teaching, history, policy, pedagogy, methodology. (p. 3)

The extent to which poststructuralist theory has been taken up by feminists, in relation to research on gender, reflects some of the wider issues concerning theoretical discussions on the place of 'identity' (Skelton & Francis, 2012). Within early childhood education, however, poststructuralist theory has been taken up with enthusiasm and has important implications for education and especially teacher education.

I will now present some of the research on gender and education research in early childhood education. These studies have been influential, in terms of my own thinking on gender and early childhood education. As a teacher educator myself, I am particularly interested in researching my own practice and research, which can inform the praxis of student teachers that I work with. With a view to MacNaughton's (1997) earlier work, I will be addressing this challenge of maintaining the teachers' gaze on gender.

### Going beyond the 'binary'

Calls for an alternative discourse on gender and diversity have been made specifically in relation to teacher education. MacNaughton (1997) and others under the umbrella of the 'reconceptualists' (Cannella, 1997; 2000; Burman, 2008) have been strident in their critique of developmental psychology to explain and theorise young children and their learning. More recently, postcolonial theory has also challenged the dominance of the westernised concept of a 'universal child' (Viruru, 2001), and assumptions about young children's development as being understood purely from a scientific paradigm (Cannella, 1999).

The limitations of socialisation theory for understanding gender have been well documented for some time (MacNaughton, 1997, 2000b; Yelland & Grieshaber, 1998), and yet teachers' understanding of the processes of gender construction remains a complicating factor. The assumptions inherent in socialisation theory have led to an understanding of gender construction that reinforces simplistic notions of how children understand and perform gender. This can be reinforced by adult gender stereotyping and, thus, limits children's access to other possibilities as they explore what it means to be gendered. Feminist and poststructuralist theory opens the discussion on gender by challenging the psychological and sociological discourses on gender that are often foundational in teacher education.

Arguments made by Blaise (2005) and Robinson and Diaz (2006) have again articulated the need for teacher education to incorporate gender equity in early childhood through engagement with feminist post structuralism and other sociological, cultural theoretical perspectives on gender construction. From a review of the literature on how gender operates in different early childhood settings, Grieshaber (2007) found that many of the studies concluded by recommending "that early childhood teachers need to introduce alternative and oppositional discourses into classrooms so that children can experience and therefore expand their understandings of what it can mean to be boys and girls" (p.10). Citing MacNaughton (2000b), Grieshaber continues by stating, "such action is notoriously difficult and challenging" (p.10).

### Revisiting "Nette"

In her research with teachers in early childhood education, MacNaughton (2000a) exposed some of the notorious challenges that Nette faced as she struggled to challenge traditional gender stereotypes by 'unsettling' the environment of the classroom. After monitoring their classrooms for several months, Nette and her colleagues found that the children's play choices and interests were very traditionally gendered across all of the centres. By making some changes to the block corners, Nette proposed to 'unsettle' the normal gender patterns and create opportunities for more fluid understandings of gender. Despite some opposition to the changes, Nette persevered and decided to keep the changes – noticing how the children's relationships to each other and the environment had become "more collaborative and constructive" (MacNaughton, 2000a, p. 60).

However, MacNaughton (2000a) noted:

> A simple change in room organization based on a desire for greater gender equity in children's play choices had led to Nette being seen by several of her colleagues as a 'crazy radical feminist.' In particular, she was seen as acting in ways that went against what had been learned "at college" and went against normal practice as defined by several colleagues and parents. (2000a, p. 61)

By drawing on Foucault's 'regimes of truth', MacNaughton (2000a) demonstrates how teachers need to develop an awareness of the 'regimes' operating in the everydayness of decision making about the curriculum, for example, in early childhood education. This implies that teachers are often called upon to make decisions based on competing truths and that their decisions should be open to scrutiny from others, reminding us that "not all truths serve all interests equally" (ibid, p. 75). MacNaughton (2000a) articulates the importance of a collective approach in early childhood education, making decisions about competing truths, particularly in relation to issues of social justice and social progress. She reminds us that, unless a collective approach is adopted by staff, the burden will fall heavily on the shoulders of individual staff (like Nette) committed to change, often at a high personal and professional cost.

### *Keeping the teacher's gaze on gender and gender equity*

Lee-Thomas, Sumsion and Roberts (2005), undertook a study of four teachers' understandings and commitment to gender equity, adopting a 'triangulated investigation' into early childhood teachers' understanding, attitudes and commitment to gender equity. The research involved talking with the teachers, observing their practice and reflecting on gender-based scenarios. Consistent with other studies in early childhood education, the authors observed that: "although the participants mostly felt equipped to manage instances of gender inequity, they at times inadvertently reinforced dominant gender discourses" (p. 21), they go on to say: "we attributed this reinforcement, in part, to an over-reliance on socialisation theory to explain gender construction" (ibid, p. 21). Lee-Thomas et al. (2005) found that, while teachers in their research implemented 'indirect' gender equity strategies, there was little evidence of teachers implementing more explicit strategies, for example, challenging children's gender constructs through questioning or presenting alterative discourses and tools for deconstructing gender roles.

One of the interesting findings from the research was a sense of 'fatalism' described by the teachers, despite a strong commitment to creating 'gender-equitable' environments, they also experienced an inability to "intervene and disrupt traditional gender patterns" (ibid, p. 24). The researchers perceived this fatalism as evidence not only of the powerlessness of the children, but also their own powerlessness "as 'agents for destabilising' traditional ways of constructing gender" (ibid, p. 24).

In concluding their research, Lee-Thomas et al. (2005) show how feminist poststructuralism can offer an optimistic way forward for teachers in their work, to challenge gender stereotypes and dominant discourses that seek to

normalise and reinforce narrow definitions of gender. Recent research incorporating queer theory provides teachers with possible alternative ways for disrupting gender patterns through challenging and disrupting the notions of gender as a binary that is stable and predictable.

## Looking at gender with a 'queer eye'

There has been a growing interest in the role that early childhood education, as a gendered site, can play in perpetuating heterosexuality as normal and natural (Gunn, 2004, 2008; Surtees & Gunn, 2010; Blaise & Andrew, 2005). This research has sought to show how early childhood teachers are implicated in restricting children's access to definitions of gender beyond the confines of heterosexuality and heteronormativity as ways of performing gender. Queer theory offers a way for teachers in early childhood education to think differently about gender and find practical strategies for working with young children to challenge the assumptions about gender relations and gender roles commonly espoused in the media.

According to Blaise and Taylor (2012):

> Queer theory is a new theory about gender. It is relevant to early childhood educators who wish to find new ways of understanding and challenging persistent gender stereotypes. The theory links gender stereotypes to the norms of heterosexuality. It is definitely not a theory about gay and lesbian identity. Queer theory is 'queer' because it questions the assumption that there is any normal expression of gender. (p. 88)

In their paper, Blaise and Taylor (2012) provide examples from practice, in the context of early childhood education, to demonstrate how queer theory can be used by teachers to work with young children in challenging 'taken for granted' ideas, values and beliefs about gender. In queer theory, gender identity is always linked to heterosexual norms, which have a powerful influence on children's behaviour. Queer theory can help teachers to understand why stereotypical behaviour in young children is so persistent by seeing behaviour that is perceived as unremarkable and normal in a different way.

By building on feminist poststructuralist understandings of gender, queer theory links children's gender identities with the "powerful influence of heterosexual norms" (ibid, p. 89). According to Blaise and Taylor (2012), feminist poststructuralist theory takes the role of children in their own gender development seriously, and offers the early childhood education field the discourse, language and power, to "throw new light on the complexities of children's gendered play" (ibid, p. 90). By identifying gender discourses, such as 'dominant masculinity' and 'subordinate femininity', Blaise and Taylor (2012) suggest that teachers can support children in challenging the powerful incentives to behave and perform what are considered normal and gender appropriate behaviours for girls and boys. They argue that young children are often rewarded for acting and behaving in ways that are consistent with what society considers *acceptabl*e ways for girls and boys to behave. This, in turn, motivates children to get gender *right.*

The deconstruction of power is fundamental in feminist poststructuralist theorising, as it identifies who speaks, as well as who is silenced. Surtees and Gunn (2010) identify three examples of how discourses in early childhood education can silence knowledge and understandings of alternatives to heteronormativity. They refer to teachers investing in silence (often unwittingly) by supporting discourses of the nuclear family, sexualities as dangerous and risky, and childhood innocence and developmentalism (p. 44). Through silencing questions, often to avoid feelings of discomfort, the teacher can mask possibilities for understanding the world beyond the constraints of dominant discourse of heteronormativity and heterosexuality.

Blaise (2012) discusses power as being accessible to young children and that dominant discourses of gender are neither fixed nor settled. Young children have access to competing discourses and can negotiate for themselves (albeit in limited ways) what it means to be a boy or girl. The challenge of queer theory for teachers in early childhood education is to see children's behaviours as not only gendered but also sexual. However, the contribution of queer theory to research on gender in early childhood education is expanding the possibilities for seeing children and teachers in new ways.

### *What are the implications of queer theory for practice?*

In their research, Blaise and Taylor (2012) identify two main implications for early childhood education practice. The first implication is that their research shows that it is possible for teachers to "develop their own queer eye" (p. 96) and that this can lead to teachers practising in ways that not only acknowledges the significance of gender within the discourse of social justice, but can inspire teachers to work towards a more equitable world (p. 96). Secondly, they suggest that teachers who are able and willing to view practice from the perspective of queer theory will also be able to support children to develop their own queer eye. Several more examples of strategies for teachers to use in centres are explored and presented in the research.

In the research by Surtees and Gunn (2010), they, too, offer examples for how teachers can challenge the status quo of heteronormativity and, ultimately, heterosexuality. However, they also allude to the need for change in teacher education if teachers are going to have any impact on their practice.

### *Feminist pedagogy, gender and teacher education*

Feminist pedagogy is not easily defined in the literature, or in practice, but there are identifiable aspects that can be characterised as feminist pedagogy. For example, a concern with relational teaching, exposing and challenging power relationships in the classroom and a general commitment to a democratic vision of education. Lenz Taguchi, in her writing, defines herself "as a feminist teacher educator, my visionary approach is avoiding as far as possible the subjecting of students to self-regulatory practices in relation to dominant discourses of gender, ethnicity, social position, and sexuality" (Lenz Taguchi, 2005, p. 246).

Whether one is explicitly feminist in their teaching or teaches from a feminist perspective indirectly, there are certain shared approaches that 'feminist'

teachers take in relation to teaching. Experience is a central feature of feminist pedagogy and feminist teachers use a range of strategies for creating an environment where students and teachers can share experiences in a 'safe' place. Webber (2006) discusses the rationale for the primacy of experience in feminist pedagogy as situated in a belief that "the ability to change societal relations is thought to be grounded in people's understanding of their lived experiences" (p. 454). She goes onto highlight some of the dangers inherent in treating a student's writing about their experiences as unproblematic and warns against a simplistic approach that views students' experience in the classroom as a way to transform women into active agents of social change. Lenz Taguchi (2005), while acknowledging there are dangers, sees much to be gained from the idea of working with writings towards a collective biography with students: "an important aspect of this work is identifying the shifting and often contradictory subjectivities of being both a student and a teacher" (p. 247).

Webber (2006) examines aspects "of the myriad social relations which make it difficult to enact the 'dream' of feminist pedagogy in undergraduate settings" (p. 454). Webber's study, based in Canada, has findings that are transferable across borders and have relevance for teachers in New Zealand. In particular, her findings are consistent with recent research that I have carried out with a colleague in a School of Education in New Zealand.

Factors that Webber (2006) has identified as being problematic for feminist teachers include the physical environments that are commonly found in teaching institutions. For example, staff having to teach in large lecture theatres to large groups of students. This scenario is increasingly common and reflects the findings of a recent study carried out in New Zealand (Hogan & Daniell, 2012). Other institutional barriers to feminist pedagogy highlighted by Webber are the inherent authority of the teacher that is a given in any classroom context. She questions the strategies of sharing power that some participants in the study expressed, seeing this as crucial to their feminist teaching. For Webber these strategies can lead to other normalising discourses, such as a mothering approach that creates a different but equally problematic set of power relations.

While acknowledging the many institutional barriers that feminist teachers can face in their teaching, other research has identified new possibilities created by combining feminist and poststructuralist theory in teaching. In her work with teacher educators in the United States, Ropers-Huilman (1997) explored some of the rich teaching and learning experiences made possible through "the synergistic relationship between construction of identities and teaching practices of those using feminist teaching in higher education classrooms" (p. 327).

Ropers-Huilman (1997) understands the complexity of identity and how it is troubled by feminist and poststructuralist theory and philosophy. However, she sees that this can be a strength by moving away from simplistic and essentialist views of teacher/student identity and subjectivity, and towards seeing identity as multi-layered and "integrated in a complex series of negotiations and struggles" (p. 327). Ropers-Huilman, along with other feminist researchers (Dillabough, 2012), view feminist poststructuralism as making a significant contribution to our understanding of the gendered nature of education by revealing dominant discourses in everyday classroom life.

Teacher identity can be and has been studied from many different theoretical perspectives. Feminist teacher identity in Ropers-Huilman's study was viewed as a teaching tool. In my own experience, I have also tried to use my feminist teacher identity to engage with students in a relationship that encourages questioning, in order to reveal and make explicit some of the assumptions about masculinity and femininity. By drawing on my own experience of doing feminism in the 70's, I attempted to locate my feminist teacher identity both historically and culturally, in relation to my experience of being working class and living in London at a time of great political change. This is consistent with feminist teachers using "their own identities and experiences to demonstrate political options and choices" (Ropers-Huilman, 1997, p. 342).

## *Conclusion*

In this paper I have used the metaphor of the gaze as originally implied by MacNaughton in 1997 to highlight the often subtle and subversive discourses of gender in early childhood education perpetuated by simplistic understandings of gender as being socially and culturally determined. The challenges for student teachers and teacher educators of 'seeing' gender have been discussed as they engage in teaching and learning from feminist poststructuralist perspectives. By viewing gender from these perspectives Blaise and others suggest that teachers in early childhood education are given the tools and language to move beyond preoccupations of binary notions of children's developing 'gender identity' and sexuality to more complex understandings of multiple gender identities and sexualities. Interest in education as a site for feminist understandings and troubling of gender has shifted ground as feminism itself has shifted and evolved across time and space. While the focus of this paper has been on research inspired by both feminist and poststructuralist thinking (and the often uneasy relationship between the two) it is also evident that the topic of gender and education will continue to be a site for further debate and exploration.

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