

Queering Early Childhood Studies: Challenging the Discourse of Developmentally Appropriate Practice

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Abstract: This paper reviews post secondary studies in early childhood education in Ontario and sets it in a wider context of feminist post-structural bodies of knowledge production. The early childhood sector's association with principles of developmentally appropriate practice for educators has been uncritically accepted and these limitations are illuminated and challenged. This paper uncovers assumptions of universality underlying a heteronormative discourse that pervades early childhood studies, arguing that studies in early childhood must challenge the dominant discourse of developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood studies.

Background and theoretical context

Census Canada data (2006) indicates that a growing number of same-sex parents are raising young children, an increase of 33.9% since 2001. This estimate includes only those parents who self-identify as same-sex or "queer" (an inclusive term which will be used in this paper) suggesting the reported numbers would be much greater if all queer parents identified their sexual orientation and family status. Despite this significant increase in queer parents rearing children, Ambert (2005) suggests that same-sex families have been excluded from representative surveys on family life.

As a faculty member in a teacher-training program, I witness the invisibility of queer family representation in early childhood education through the absence of queer identity in course content, early childhood text or critical analyses on the impact of educators' relationships with families that represent "difference" (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2007). Early childhood educators have become increasingly comfortable and conscientious about including program materials that represent a variety of cultural backgrounds, children with special needs and changing heterosexual family structures into the curriculum based on the central focus of developmentally appropriate practice in training in Ontario. However, the absence of queer family representations in curriculum, teaching, and learning is transported into early childhood settings and impacts relationships with queer families.

Currently, early childhood educators in Ontario complete a two-year diploma offered in community colleges. The program consists of foundational courses in early childhood development with a focus on program skills and practices by educators that are considered to be "developmentally appropriate". There has been a growing debate amongst some early childhood researchers that challenge principles of developmentally appropriate practice as a single universally accepted, normalizing approach to early childhood development (Bernhard, 1995; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence 1999). Pence and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2008) suggest that a modernist and positivist perspective dominates early childhood research, reinforcing an objective, dominant and singular approach to understanding childhood development retaining a superficial definition of diversity and equity. I would argue, the research on early childhood education is theoretically situated between a positivist perspective that suggests a universal approach to early childhood practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Gestwicki, 2007) and a post-structural perspective that re-

conceptualizes childhood development by integrating diversity and difference (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; McNaughton, 2005; Robinson 2002). Understanding the critical link between the science of early childhood development and the absolute importance of interactions that in turn support children's development makes the need to rupture dominant forms of pedagogy and practice even more important.

A review of early childhood training in Ontario

The current early childhood training program in Ontario offers a pedagogical framework that is dominated by Anglo-American approaches to plurality and inclusion of all children and families. The seminal text often used in early childhood training in Ontario is *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children based in Washington D.C. The principal authors Bredekamp and Copple suggest, "The standards (of high quality) must reflect current knowledge and shared beliefs about what constitutes developmentally-appropriate early childhood education" (1997, p. 3). *Developmentally appropriate practice* has been central to the public educational aims of measuring quality and universalizing childhood, to the extent that developmentally appropriate practice is perceived as the underlying truth. Within frameworks of universality there is little consideration of how the dominant society's culture impacts upon the child's unique lived experience.

For the purposes of this paper, I have reviewed texts that are commonly used in early childhood training programs and have analyzed how dominant forms of pedagogic practice are perpetuated through the heteronormative assignment of roles for children and families. This is not to suggest that all educators are homophobic and unaware of issues related to queer families or the process of gender identification in young children. I am however suggesting that heteronormativity is implicit in early childhood studies through the texts selected for study.

Early childhood educators remain resistant to examining the dominant assumption shaping their pedagogic practice and curricular choices in the classroom. Early childhood education's propensity to normatively privilege heterosexuality is reflected in the relationships between parents and educators and the selection of children's literature in early years settings. The discouragement of non-normative expressions of gender and the ultimate silence around children's queer identifications, explorations and performances and the failure of some early childhood educators to challenge the use of heterosexist and/or homophobic language in the classroom are further examples of heteronormativity (Janmohamed & Campbell, 2009).

Early childhood training programs focus on children's curriculum as an organized system of intentions and plans to promote children's development and learning. Meaningful and purposeful curriculum enhances children's knowledge, relationships and connections to real world experiences. In early childhood programs, a common practice involves setting up dramatic centres which encourage children to explore imaginary play that involve critical forms of cognitive development including language acquisition, role exploration and higher levels of reasoning. Children are known to explore gender roles and often imitate adults in their lives. For example, if a male child has never been exposed to a male figure being nurturing, the child will often respond to another male child playing with dolls with an emphatic "you can't be the mommy" creating confusion for the boy who has been exposed to men in nurturing roles.

Problematizing why preschool children are so attuned to gender specific roles is not central to early childhood practice ensuring silence around children's exploration of gender roles. Either the silence or the blatant gendering of children through early childhood text continue to

reinforce normative performance of gender common to children's learning experience. Gestwicki (2007, p. 53) suggests "researchers find that boys and girls play differently in most cultures, perhaps attributable to cultural influence on their play, as well as to biological and brain differences. Boys generally like rough and tumble play and girls play more quietly". The dominant and uncritical lens that universalizes children development leads to a lack of capacity in early childhood teachers to engage with children who do not fit gender norms. This is further exacerbated by a lack of education around variations in gender development and by their own anxieties about what it means to be male and female.

Why shift from universality?

My research interests are driven by a desire to raise the salience of perspectives outside the normative approaches to child development. The work of Judith Butler creates a space to challenge, shift, create discomfort and make noise about the gendering of children in early childhood programs. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1993) suggests:

Queer derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult. This is an invocation by which a social bond among homophobic communities is formed through time. To what extent, then has the performative "queer" operated alongside as the sanction that performs the heterosexualization of social bond, perhaps it also comes into play precisely as the shaming taboo which "queers" those who resist or oppose that social form as well as those who occupy it without hegemonic social sanction (p. 226).

The complex narrative of children's identities would be better understood through a critical deconstruction of Western theories of child development and normative pedagogical frameworks. Queer identification in children is reflected by their capacity to play and interpret themselves in a much more fluid way than permitted by the gender binaries established by adults. Valerie Walkerdine (1981) set an early course in challenging the normative assumption behind the notion of developmentally appropriate norms. Using the Foucauldian paradigm of the regime of truth, she questioned the validity or truth of child development. Despite this important analysis that challenges notions of appropriateness and truth in development, early childhood training programs continue to espouse a construction of childhood based on Western hegemonic assumptions. According to MacNaughton (2005, pp. 3-4):

Despite Foucault's deep and continuing influence in diverse fields of study, early childhood students (and instructors) rarely meet Foucault's work or the work of post-structuralist thinkers. It's hard to find, for example Foucault's ideas of disciplinary power, docile bodies and power/knowledge in mainstream early childhood texts.

Foucault's analysis of universities as places of normalizing knowledge has relevance to early childhood studies. He suggests, "a university's primary function is one of selection, not so much of people as of knowledges. It can play this selective role because it has sort of de-facto – and de-jure – monopoly (1993, p. 183). Universal knowledge in early childhood education needs to be deconstructed and reconstructed to reveal how heteronormative values frame queer families or children and to provide infrastructures that will support these families and children in early

learning programs.

Understanding the changing face of families that goes beyond single parents or bi-racial families raises the importance of understanding radically different and less familiar forms of family composition. In addition to the more commonly understood identities, children with queer parents may be adopted or may have been created with a known or unknown donor. Children may be born through surrogacy or may be part of a previous heterosexual relationship. These queer variations on conventional notions of “family” demand consideration by early childhood educators, again challenging the discourse of normative human development. The silence of queering identities invokes a pathologization as Butler has suggested earlier in this paper. According to Ochner (2000), the process of identifying beliefs about gender and self-reflection as educators does influence children’s learning about gender concepts. Early childhood educators need to be cognizant of how their silence on and resistance of queer identification in as unacceptable as an educator’s silence around racism.

One recent case has put the limelight on the limitless possibilities of family composition that challenge the normative family unit. The Ontario Court of Appeal recently granted three parents the legal right to parent a child in AA v. BB. This landmark ruling signals a shift from an era of the conventional family comprised of one mother and one father, to one that recognizes the multiple parent-child relationships characterizing “trans”-formative modern families (Gananathan, 2008). The child in this legal case has not yet started elementary school. It is quite possible that he is enrolled in an early childhood program. Educators have to develop an understanding and acceptance that this child has three and not two legal parents. His early childhood and elementary school teachers can certainly expect interesting parent teacher nights! These “queer” parent – child relationships rupture the heteronormative familial ideology and structures determining early childhood training and practice. This case should be of interest to early childhood studies because it disrupts existing understanding of “family” and parental responsibility. Yet when analyzing seminal texts used in early childhood education or equity and diversity course work, these types of cases are not analyzed leading early childhood educators to not being prepared to respond to queer families and the needs of their children.

Butler (1993) argues that gender formations are performative and views gender not as natural, biological attributions but a collection of repeated acts, that overtime, constitute the gender of the subject. The early childhood years are undoubtedly the most important of time of life to expose children to a variety of life options that are not limited to dominant ways of knowing. Educators can establish the capacity to challenge the dominant discourse of normative forms of child development and can develop curriculum and pedagogic practice that would provide opportunities to safely explore the fluidity of gender roles. However, this cannot be done in teacher training programs that offer child development knowledge in a vacuum. Butler suggests if we do not act out the gender norms that are expected of us, then we are not recognized as fully human subjects. Individuals who fail to enact gender norms as expected are pathologized and punished with social exclusion. Children quickly learn to fall into gender expectations for fear of exclusion and social sanction.

I didn’t learn about this in college!

To illustrate how gender conditioning operates within the family and in collusion with early childhood education, I turn to my own work. Recently, I was invited to do a presentation with on how to work with queer families in early childhood settings. Despite the focus of the discussion on parents, I typically get a question on what is the most appropriate response to a

child who is exhibiting characteristics of the opposite gender. This time the incident related to a boy who is about seven years old and continues to behave “like a girl”. The boy wants to play with dolls all the time despite the fact that his father has forbidden him to play with dolls. I suggested, his father needs to realize the boy will find a way to play with dolls if that is what he is interested in doing. However, the more significant issue is how the school has responded to the child’s behaviour, insisting the child be assessed for gender-identity issues.

Educators connected with this particular child do not know “what to make of” the child exploring gender norms. He represents how the family, society and school refuse the child who refuses his or her gender assignment, exploring instead the fluidity of gender roles without masking his desire to play with the other. Here the role of the educator is to work through the interests of all those invested in the child to do justice to the child’s wishes and desires whilst supporting the family as they learn to accept their son’s desires. The boy may want to be a girl or may want to be like a girl or be a boy who prefers to engage with his “feminine side”. Regardless of what he may become, if enough pressure is placed on him, he will be forced and expected to fit into normative gendered roles and become a sad little boy. The irrational fear of something queer creates a desire to produce “others” that forces binary identities.

Implications for early childhood studies

With an almost intrinsic drive to implement principles of developmentally appropriate practice, most early childhood educators do not have the capacity to demonstrate responsive knowledge that goes beyond the normative expectations of how gender identity is developed and how to deal with difference. The desire to “want to do something” to try and resolve the child’s identity “crisis” is typical of early childhood educators’ support of families. In the case of the boy who seems to want to be a girl, my proposal to the child’s teacher is that this little boy may indeed identify as queer. The hushed whispers in the room told me I had created noise. It suggests that introducing “queer” into early childhood discourse has the potential to lift the silence of non-normative gender formation in early childhood studies. It has the possibility of challenging the dominance of heteronormativity and think more critically about the implications of developmentally appropriate practice.

Riding the wave of developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood enables control of the subordinate and does not threaten the position of authority. It maintains that early childhood education is engaged in inclusive practice that does not perpetrate heteronormativity. However, I would argue that the dominance of developmentally appropriate practice does in fact perpetuate unitary forms of childhood construction. In the context of Canadian early childhood studies, critical thinkers are beginning to redefine the singular and universal approach to child development and a further exploration of how queer families and their children have experienced early childhood programs would deconstruct the normative emphasis in early childhood studies.

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