



## Editorial

### IJIEEC SPECIAL QUEER ISSUE

#### *Editors*

**Affrica Taylor (University of Canberra)  
and Mindy Blaise (Monash University)**

This Special Queer Issue contains the work of scholars from South Africa, Australia, the UK and the USA. It is the first international collection to showcase how Queer Theory is being used to understand, question, and challenge various aspects of heteronormativity in the field of early childhood education.

#### WHAT IS QUEER THEORY?

Queer Theory was first coined in the early 1990s to describe a new body of thought emerging from feminist theory. Continuing the poststructural feminist tradition of theorising gender and challenging its binary framings, queer theory then located these gender binaries within the field of sexuality. In so doing it drew attention to the mutually constitutive nature of gender and sexuality. Judith Butler's *Gender trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, both published in 1990, are generally regarded as the seminal works of queer theory, although neither of these

theorists named their own works in these terms at the time.

Within the social sciences, Butler's work in particular has had an enormous impact. However, until quite recently, education has been less influenced by her ideas. To mark the surge of interest that had occurred by 2006, the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* (Volume 27, Issue 4) was an issue dedicated to reviewing the impact that Butler's work has had upon thinking about gender within the discipline. The take up within early childhood education is also relatively recent, and a number of the contributors to this edition have been the first in the sub-discipline to do so.

For those readers who are not familiar with Queer Theory, we provide a short glossary of key terms and a brief indication of some of the ways in which authors in this collection have used them.

**Heteronormativity** is a term that refers to the processes and practices through which heterosexuality is normalised and manages to maintain an exclusive hold on what is regarded to be 'natural' sexuality. Within heteronormative contexts (such as schools and most other social institutions) heterosexuality is such a powerful universalising norm, that all regular forms of social discourse are founded upon the presumption that everyone is always and already heterosexual. In her paper,

Skattebol explains heteronormativity as a 'term that describes belief systems where heterosexuality is presumed to be the only possible sexual orientation'.

Robinson and Davies point out that children's standard heterosexualised play - such as mothers and fathers, chase and kiss, and mock weddings - are regarded as so natural and normal that they are seldom even considered to be forms of sexualised play.

Heteronormativity relies upon **normative gender binaries**. In order for heterosexuality to be seen as the only 'natural' and 'normal' sexuality and form of sexual desire, girls and women have to behave as 'normal' or 'real' girls and women, and men and boys have to behave as 'normal' or 'real' boys. Bhana's article describes many of the ways in which children use gender norms to regulate each other's behaviours within the heteronormative school playground environment. DePalma and Atkinson's paper shows how adults and young children experience and express systematic heteronormativity by conflating gender conformity and sexuality.

### **Heterosexual matrix**

When gender is viewed as a social activity and performed normatively as we know it, then gender can only be understood through what Butler (1990) calls the **heterosexual matrix**. It is through the heterosexual matrix that gender is systematically, socially, and relationally constructed. According to Butler, the concept of gender becomes meaningless in the absence of heterosexuality as an institution, which is compulsory and enforced both through rewards for appropriate gendered and heterosexual behaviours and through punishments from deviations from the

conventional or 'normal' ways of being either a girl or a boy. This understanding of gender assumes that heterosexuality functions to produce regulatory or normative notions of femininity and masculinity. Heterosexuality is thus seen as the matrix ordering gender power relations. According to Skattebol, 'any gender performances or sexual orientations that fall outside of this matrix of power are rendered abject and violently excluded from the domain of intelligibility'.

**Performativity** is one of the concepts that Butler popularised in 1990. She used it to refute the commonsense understanding that gender is just something that we already 'are'. Instead she proposed that gender is something that we are constantly performing, through language and embodied acts (1993). Moreover, gender performativity is more than a pre-scripted 'act'. As we perform ourselves, we also 'make' ourselves. In other words, gender performativity is generative or productive. We are continually making meaning about our gender as we perform ourselves, we are continually gendering and regendering ourselves.

Robinson and Davies quote from an interview with Butler (1994:33) in which she explains the generative or productive nature of performativity as 'that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names' and as 'the vehicle through which ontological effects are established'. They illustrate the ways in which gender performativity is simultaneously limited by the discourses about gender that we have available to us, and at the same time is continually shaping and changing those discourses. In other words, although performativity

often reiterates dominant meanings of gender, it can also transform them.

### **Deploying Queer Theory across A Variety Of Contexts**

The six articles in this collection give us a sense of the wide range of contexts in which queer theory can be deployed.

#### **Queering early childhood curriculum**

In 'Queering early childhood practices: Opening up possibilities with common children's literature', Hermann-Wilmarth and Souto-Manning use Queer Theory to interrupt traditional approaches to early childhood curriculum choices and pedagogical methods. Through queering the traditional narrative of the Three Little Pigs, they expand the repertoire of the texts themselves as well as the ways in which they can be read. They provide practical examples for early childhood teachers who might be interested in queering their own curriculum and teaching methods.

#### **Queering childhood**

Robinson and Davies explore some of the more unstable gender categories that operate in childhood in 'Tom Boys and Sissy Girls'. They suggest that childhood itself is a queer kind of time and queer kind of space in which gender can be quite fluid. They argue that there are opportunities here for masculinity and femininity to be unbounded from male and female bodies respectively. Tomboys and sissy girls provide examples of these queer kinds of fluid moments and performative spaces within childhood. Within the conversation about 'Making Trouble' between Taylor, Blaise and Robinson, Taylor also makes similar claims about the 'inherent queerness of childhood' by referring to children's imaginative transformative play as an

example of their desires to exceed their prescribed identities and to become other.

#### **Queering the family and early childhood services**

Skattebol reports on the range of experiences that gay and lesbian families have had in dealing with the heteronormativity of early childhood services in her article 'Through their mother's eyes'. She describes some of the issues that arise within these contexts in relation to same sex families being perceived within 'hierarchies of normality'; and some of the strategies that families use when interfacing with services, such as 'disclosure', 'passing' (as straight), or staying 'in the closet'. She also discusses the ways in which heteronormativity, already present in young children's thinking, made it hard for them to make sense of and accept the existence of same sex families.

#### **Queering early childhood research relationships**

By reflecting on previous qualitative studies she has done with children, in the Taylor, Blaise and Robinson conversation piece 'Making Trouble', Blaise raises provocative questions about her role as an active participant observer. She wonders how her subjectivity constitutes research relationships with children and how it is performed within and through the hegemonic heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990). Blaise also raises our awareness of gender politics as she troubles her identity as a queer straight researcher and how this might influence the work she does with children and teachers.

#### **Queering classrooms**

In their queer analysis of classroom practices, entitled 'Exploring gender

identity: queering heteronormativity', DePalma and Atkinson examine how children and teachers experience and express heteronormativity within school activities. They also look at how the cultural resources available to children and adults reinforce heteronormative belief systems. Drawing from their government funded project, *No Outsiders*, they show how teachers are applying queer theory in their everyday work with children.

### **Queering childhood innocence**

In the 'Making trouble' conversation between Taylor, Blaise and Robinson, Taylor and Robinson discuss how they have found Queer Theory useful for troubling the dominant image of the innocent and vulnerable child. Robinson argues that one of the more ironic effects of the childhood innocence discourse, is that it can render children even more powerless and hence vulnerable.

### **Queering friendship in school playgrounds**

Bhana's study, 'Emma and Dave sitting on a tree, K I S S I N G: Boys, girls and the 'heterosexual matrix' shows how (hetero)sexuality influences friendships in school playgrounds. Her paper documents the gender and sexual cultures of children in South African school playgrounds. Observations of the playground show how children's rhymes and clapping games are both gendered and sexualised. Also, children's discussions about 'kiss-kiss chase' games reveal how they provide opportunities for girls and boys to perform heterosexuality. The games that children take part in on the playground show how they are actively constructing (hetero)sexual relationships and 'doing' femininity and masculinity.

Collectively these papers demonstrate that Queer Theory can be taken up in a variety of ways and across a diverse range of gender/sexuality related contexts in early childhood. They showcase the flexibility and mobility of Queer Theory. Most importantly, they provide examples to early childhood education professionals that there are many ways of doing teaching and researching 'otherwise'.

### **References**

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