

# Moron, Sick and Perverted - Injurious Speech: Advocacy for Gender Equity in Early Childhood

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While issues of gender violence and discrimination are debated in the political world of adults, the continued advancement of technology and social media mean that images and sounds of sexism and heterosexism<sup>1</sup> are depicted and accessible in the everyday for all to see. These forms of discrimination are part of young children's lives. Children do not live outside of the adult world in a romantic, Disney-fied wonderland (Sandlin & Garlen, 2016). There is a large body of research that demonstrates that by three and four years of age children develop stereotypical understandings of identity norms about gender and sexuality (Blaise, 2005; Lane, 2008; MacNaughton, 2000, 2005; Pacini-Ketchabaw & Taylor, 2015; Srinivasan, 2014). These intersect with other norms and stereotypes of identity including those associated with ethnicity, class, and ability amongst others (MacNaughton, 2005).

Alongside this research is a body of work exploring how diverse theories and knowledge traditions such as sociology (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998), critical theory (Kincheloe, 2002), post-structural theory (Cannella, 1997), feminist and queer theories (Robinson, 2013), post-colonial theory (Srinivasan, 2014), anti-colonial theory (Nxumalo, 2016) and new materialism (Murriss, 2016) help us understand the discourses in operation and (re)think and (re)question the development, performances, and intersections of identities in the early childhood space. The importance of gender equity work in the early years and the role of early childhood educators as activists has been widely examined (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; MacNaughton, 2005; Smith & Campbell, 2014). In early childhood education there are many forms of pedagogy that place social justice and equity at the foundation of curriculum. For example, Border pedagogy (Giroux, 1995), Anti-bias (Derman-Sparks & The A.B.C. Task Force, 1989), Deconstructive pedagogy (Taguchi, 2008), Critical pedagogy (Gore, 1993) or Critical 'race' pedagogy (MacNaughton & Davis, 2009). While each of these labels are different and the theoretical frame or knowledge traditions that inform these ideas differ, they each call for educators to promote fairness and inclusion and to challenge discrimination. However, there is little discussion of the implications for educators of undertaking activism for gender equity that targets the many material practices of sexism and heterosexism.

## **Sexism and Heterosexism in the Classroom**

Research shows that sexism and heterosexism are occurring in Australian classrooms, in overt and covert forms through the use of language, bullying on social media, exclusion, the use of materials, and differential learning outcomes (see Saltmarsh, Robinson, & Davis, 2012). One way that Australian governments, education systems, and non-government organizations have been attempting to create more respectful and safe communities has been to develop and implement early prevention programs to challenge gender stereotypes and roles, and build

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<sup>1</sup> We define heterosexism as the discrimination of any gender identity that is not heterosexual (e.g. homosexual, transsexual, or gender fluid).

respectful gendered relationships, where girls/women and boys/men are seen as equal, and their views and opinions are valued. Examples of these endeavors are respectful relationships curriculum for primary and secondary schools (e.g., Department of Education and Training [DET], 2015) and the *Safe Schools Coalition Australia* (see <http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org.au/>), which provides a network to support schools to create inclusive and respectful environments for same-sex attracted, intersex, and gender diverse students, staff, and families. This work is slowly beginning to flow into the early childhood space; for example, Early Childhood Australia has developed online training called Early Start (see <http://startearly.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/>). These programs and networks explicitly work for gender equity in their classrooms by addressing some forms of sexism and heterosexism. This highlights classrooms as political sites where educators' (inter)actions or silences have political effects that may reinforce or challenge bias. However, there is little discussion of the implications for educators of undertaking anti-bias activism for gender equity when addressing sexism(s) and heterosexism(s). The following examples frame our questions and concerns about what it means for educators who teach politically.

### Experiencing Gender Prejudice and Heterosexist Speech

In July 2004, Elizabeth Dau with Patrick Hughes, Glenda MacNaughton, and Margaret Coady, wrote an *Equity Issues Paper* called *Lesbian mothers on 'Playschool' – What's the fuss?* which was published by the Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood (Dau, Hughes, MacNaughton, & Coady, 2004). This paper was in response to media, government, and public backlash related to two mums appearing on an episode of an Australian's children's television show called, *Playschool*. Concerns for the corruption of the 'innocent' child were a prevalent theme in discussions about the 'appropriateness' of representing a lesbian couple on a national children's television program. The discourses of an a-political and innocent childhood feature strongly throughout religious, academic, and populist discourses (e.g., Robinson, 2013). This same discourse of 'innocence' emerged when just over 10 years later, in 2015, the Youth Research Centre published an *Occasional Paper* in honour of Elizabeth Dau (1942-2015) entitled *A determined advocate: Learning from Elizabeth Dau in early childhood*. Elizabeth was a leading Australian advocate in the early childhood field who introduced many educators to anti-bias curriculum within an Australian context.

In this publication, Smith (2015) wrote a piece that recognized the everyday moments in the classroom when gender equity can be discussed and challenged through everyday conversations; in the moments when taken-for-granted truths about being a girl or a boy are discussed between children and adults:

One lunch time sitting at a table with a group of six children one of the girls said to the group, "When I grow up I am going to be a boy." The other five children laughed at the child and one child said "That's silly. You're a girl, you can't be a boy" and the children laughed again. As the child hung her head in what I thought was shame, I said to the group "Actually, if Lydia wants to be a boy when she grows up she can. It might not be easy but she can and people like doctors can help her". Lydia looked at me and smiled and the rest of the group nodded their head in agreement. The conversation about the spaghetti that they were eating for lunch dominated the discussion for the rest of lunch. (p. 24)

In this example, any response to the classroom event has political implications. To ignore the conversation and allow the children to laugh and humiliate the person commenting, under the guise of children not understanding what they were saying and being 'innocent' of discrimination and homophobia, would reinforce gendered

and sexualized norms of what it means for being a boy or a girl. Power is at work in these silences, using technologies that normalize, categorize, exclude, and marginalize. Hateful speech acts circulate as a disciplinary practice of the hegemonic, heterosexist discourse. The material effects of resisting the hegemonic discourse and speaking back brings with it the risk that educators are positioned as undertaking deviant and inappropriate behavior and pedagogy. Smith chose to invest in anti-bias education as an advocate and change agent with children. In her classroom work and academic writing, she constituted the early childhood space as a place for children to (re)explore, (re)learn, and (re)constitute understandings of gender, sexism, and heterosexism. She invested in this discourse again in 2015 when writing to honour Elizabeth Dau in an occasional paper (Smith, 2015).

### **Moron, Sick and Perverted: Social Media and Hate Speech**

Smith's (2015) paper *And the princesses married and lived happily ever after: Challenging compulsory heterosexuality in the early childhood classroom* was taken up by the media in late April, 2016. This resulted in many comments being posted on the media site that enacted gender-based violence towards Smith. These comments were verbally violent with threats of physical violence, such as the call for Smith to be 'flogged.'

This hate speech also continued through unsolicited email correspondence, placing Smith as sick-minded and cited a need to protect children from her perversion:

It is extremely clear that you are a leftist and a moron who has an interest only in Social Engineering. To you I say, keep your interfering hands and sick mind away from our children. I as a parent/grandparent will fight you tooth and nail before I see any of your perverted suggestions being exposed to my children (Unsolicited email correspondence, 30 April, 2016).

The hegemonic and enduring discourse of the innocent and a-political child played out in much of the correspondence:

I'm so dismayed at the nonsense you are encouraging to children who are practically still babies. Allow children to remain that, children. To ram your beliefs into their tiny heads is absolutely stupid & nonsense. Please, you remain in uni & getting educated. Your crap isn't doing anyone any good whatsoever (Unsolicited email correspondence, 30 April, 2016).

Heterosexism was evident throughout the speech/writing of many people:

I can assure you, Dr. Smith, that if anyone attempted to teach my children that homosexuality is normal, I would consider it child abuse of the worst kind and deal with them accordingly, and I could guarantee you that they would never ever consider doing it again. How can people, who even call themselves "Queer", be considered normal in any form or fashion? You are obviously just hoping to make a name for yourself before retiring (Unsolicited email correspondence, 1 May, 2016).

Language such as "Queer" and "Lesbian" were taken up and used as a form of what Judith Butler (1997, 1996, 1990) calls injurious speech, "So you are an expert? LET ME GUESS YOU ARE ALSO A LESBIAN who the fuck do [you] think gives you the right preach to our children" (Unsolicited email correspondence, 30 April, 2016). This event reinforced why it is important to continue to undertake gender equity and gender-based violence prevention work inside and outside the classroom. However, it also illustrated some of the implications of doing this advocacy work and how accessible we can be through social media platforms to performing gender-based

violence and receiving it.

This event provided an impetus for us to explore theoretical ways of understanding this hateful speech, and how we engage with these performances in order to fuel political pedagogies, rather than silence them through the intimidation of hate speech. One way to reconceptualize the place of sexualities is to consider Judith Butler's (1990, 1997) performativity and injurious speech.

### **Performativity**

Performativity refers to how a person internalises or performs their identity (gender, sexuality, class, 'race', ability) in a particular way through their understanding of language (Butler, 1996, 1997). Language in this context refers to language within and through discourses – what we 'learn' as being the right or wrong or normal way to 'be.' We are particularly interested in the performances of girlhood(s) and boyhood(s), and the performances of heterosexual masculinities and hyper femininities (Connell, 2009), but also interested in gendered identities as a range of shifting and fluid discursive subject positions. In the everyday classroom the concept of performativity helps to understand or notice how children and adults talk about and 'perform' what it means to be a boy/man or girl/woman – what you wear, how you look, what games you play, what storylines you engage with, the emotions you can express, and the behaviours that are recognised as gender 'appropriate.' We suggest that the material practices of performativity may offer an entry to acts of resistance to hegemonic discriminatory discourses and to the associated power-relations embodied in practices like hateful speech.

We are drawn to the concept of performativity as it helps us to understand identity as fluid, partial, and shifting, rather than fixed, singular, and knowable as it is presented in many documents that govern the knowledge and practices of early childhood educators (e.g. National Quality Standards, Australian Early Years Learning Framework). This is seen in the Australian national learning outcomes found in the *Australian Early Years Learning Framework* (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009)- children develop a strong sense of identity. Like a script for a play or theatre production, there are material practices and possibilities for the actors/children to (re)interpret the script and perform in alternative ways, rather than to repeat the same performance over and over across seasons, marking the performance as the 'true' character presented. Butler (1988) argues that:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relationship between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style. (p. 520)

How do we think about curriculum that not just notices the repetition of acts or performances of gendered identity and gendered relationships between boys and girls that fix hegemonic heterosexual masculinities and hyper femininities (Connell, 2009), but that also notices other performances of identities that allows and celebrates diverse boyhood(s) and girlhood(s)? This question also takes us back to our concerns for educators who take the path of advocacy/change agents with children and families. In doing this we need to pay attention not only to how power operates within and through relationships between boys and girls, but also between boys and between girls, and the strategies and tactics used within performances to mark particular narratives as right/wrong or true/false. The correspondence noted above *How can people, who even call themselves "Queer", be considered normal in any form or fashion?* also reminds us of the need to attend to heterosexist discourses of womanhood and manhood and the effects for educators, families, and communities. The term hateful speech helped us to talk through the experiences of Dr. Smith, and our practices of anti-bias education as advocacy/change agents

within our reading of Butler's work. We are considering how Butler's (1996) idea of injurious speech might help us and others to explore hateful speech.

### **Hateful Speech**

In first reading the email correspondence of people commenting on the *And the princesses married and lived happily ever after: Challenging compulsory heterosexuality in the early childhood classroom* article we recognised the language as hateful speech. As we reflected on the language used, we drew further on Butler's concept of injurious speech as a way to proactively and politically engage with the comments instead of being 'just' angry or disappointed. Injurious speech refers to how language is used to injure, judge harshly, repress, or punish a person (Butler, 1990, 1996, 1997). An 'utterance' inscribes and re- inscribes power invested in discourses and how they are acted out (Butler, 1997). Butler (1996) raises questions about how power operates within and through performativity, and how the acts and naming renders possibilities for how we take up, enact, or show/perform ourselves and the effects of this on others' performances of themselves.

Injurious speech is a material practice of discourses that produces a range of effects, which writes into existence a history of truths, a set of power-relations, and the boundaries of what can be considered normal and desirable. These utterances mark as masculine or feminine the words, actions, thoughts, and feelings as being desirable/undesirable and positive/negative – scripts that should not be performed or acts that the audience does not want to witness. How are the performances of these scripts played out in the early childhood space? Are they any different? The words might sound different but the gender-differentiated utterances and effects may be the same. Smith, Alexander and D'Souza Juma (2014) provide an example of this, describing how educators may unconsciously intervene when a child falls over:

As the boy falls over in the playground, the educator remains standing on the other side of the yard without moving, calling out "Up you get, you're fine" and in the next moment, as the girl falls over, the educator swiftly moves across the yard bending over the girl, helping her up, asking "Do you need a cuddle?" (p. 148)

These speech acts are injurious as they act to position the utterer and utterance within discourses constituted in knowledges and history of gender differences, sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, and xenophobia. In the everyday classroom you might hear this play out by children or families with statements like "Dolls are for girls," "Don't be a girl" (referring to a boy), or "Dresses are for girls."

It is important to challenge gendered performances and injurious speech that censors multiple identity performances, and the effect of these utterances on others, in an attempt to disrupt the repetition of the performance. Relations of power circulate in and through our utterances, and this challenges the points at which contradictory discourses are enacted and resisted. However, Butler (1996) argues that this is not enough and that we need to move away from just considering the individual and their performance, in order to delve into what has gone on to authorise these scripts and continues to render these performances possible. Martin and Ruble (2010) identify the effects of children as 'gender enforces' on (re)establishing the gender rules and norms of performing stereotypical heterosexual girlhood and boyhood in the classroom (p. 7). Danby (1998), in her doctoral research, reported on how young boys were apprentices to the older boys in the preschool classroom, learning how to barricade girls out of spaces, play, and equipment deemed as boys' domains. This leads us to consider how we work to authorise alternative narratives where acts of speech become citations that respect gender diversity and fluidity.

## **Education as an Ethical Practice for Freedom**

Taguchi (2008), drawing on feminist, post-structuralist thinking, argues that educators should intrinsically be politically active, as part of ethical professional practices. This involves reflecting not only on the politics that are produced and on how educators understand the theories and practices that drive their teaching, but also on how and why bigger social contexts privilege or silence some knowledges. Smith's discussion with children at the lunch table shifted the taken-for-granted discourse of a fixed and stable gender-identity and was one example of such deconstructive talk. Reflections like these support educators to explore not only the taken-for-granted gendered truths that produce sexism(s) and heterosexism(s) with children, but also their own conscious and unconscious gendered biases and beliefs. Because the politics of gendered discourses are an often unexplored part of early childhood education, and of how educators understand themselves, 'deconstructive talk' offers ways of challenging 'truths' with children about sexism(s) and heterosexism(s). Taguchi (2008) writes:

The deconstructive talk is a tool in the displacement of dominant or taken-for-granted ways of thinking and doing. It is also a tool for promoting diverse and multiple theoretical, aesthetic, and ethical understandings of everyday teaching practices... In the context of ECE practice and the present action research, deconstruction is about purposeful disruptions, destabilizations, undermining, and challenges to taken-for-granted notions, values, practices, and pedagogy-as-usual... The most challenging aspect of deconstructive talk is the requirement for self-reflection—thinking about what and why we see, hear, and value what we see, hear, and value. (p. 272)

Through this deconstructive talk, resistance plays out through 'displacement' of ideas and practices, and rather than 'replacing' what has been done, it opens up alternative ways to think and practice (Taguchi, 2008, p. 272). As Smith's second example of using deconstructive talk in the public domain shows, this work carries risks for educators.

The 'push-back' on social media to Smith's paper graphically illustrates how particular taken-for-granted truths about childhood innocence and gendered performances of identity circulated to constitute what is natural, normal, and desirable. Hateful speech erupted in the intersections between these discourses and competing discourses used by Dr. Smith of political childhoods and desirable gender-fluidity. How can educators sustain 'deconstructive talk' and continue their forms of activism for anti-bias gender equity in the face the challenges and risks associated with this work?

### **Considerations for Policy and Practice**

Early childhood services have a role to play in creating structures and processes that enable educators to respond to sexism(s) and heterosexism(s). Support for educators to continue activism for gender equity, particularly in the face of hateful speech, can include, among other things, changes to policy, to employment conditions, and to pedagogy. The creation of environments that support educators, children, and families to challenge inequity is at the heart of anti-bias work (Derman-Sparks & The A.B.C. Task Force, 1989).

There is a need for strong leadership by governments to support curriculum and quality assurance programs that promote social justice and respectful behaviour guidance policies. However, although there have been signs in Australia that governments are responding to the issues of gender equity in schools, our experience has shown these responses are often slow and disjointed.

Early childhood services do not have to wait for governments to respond. At an early childhood service policy level, a clear service philosophy that names gender equity as a priority within the program and provides examples of what that looks like in practice, helps families and new staff to make active choices about whether the politics of the services best fits their beliefs and ideas. Position descriptions for educators, administrators, and other staff could include a statement that requires the person to follow an anti-bias and activist approach both at the workplace and in pedagogy, particularly in responding to instances of discrimination, sexism, or heterosexism. Protective protocols should also be developed so that educators, other staff, and families know whom to contact when harassed by people within or outside (through social media for example) the service. Information on support services (for example counseling) should also be available for staff and families. Follow-up in-service and parent information sessions can also be supportive as a prevention and intervention strategy. These activities provide opportunities for dialogue with families around issues in and outside of the children's centre in relation to sexism and heterosexism, and how educators and families can work together for more equitable environments.

While there are policy and administrative processes that support anti-bias activism, networks that promote opportunities for educators to undertake 'deconstructive talk' are equally important. Educators within early childhood services need to actively create time and space for critical reflection or deconstructive talk. This can be complicated because the conditions and environments that educators work within and under in early childhood services are diverse across Australia and globally. For example, in a small sessional pre-school there may be two educators working together within the service; in a long day care service an educator might work with another 8 or 40 educators; in home-based care (also known as family day care) educators are by themselves and working in their own home. Time for critical reflection or deconstructive talk for the whole of the early childhood service is also important, and although finding time can be difficult, rethinking how to use time might help. For example, a small shift in reorganising the priorities of a service could mean allocating the first 20 minutes of a staff meeting to reflect critically together before undertaking the usual 'housekeeping' activities. For educators working alone or in small services, similar opportunities might be sought out using technology, nearby colleagues, or training organisations.

Deconstructive talk also necessarily involves engaging with pedagogy using questions that explore the effects of theory, beliefs, and practices in the everyday. This enables educators to unpack how discourses operate to promote sexist and heterosexist attitudes, actions, and language, and authorise hate speech. Educators' can start this anti-bias work by reflecting on their own biases and by asking questions like:

- How do I understand my own gendered identity and why do I understand it this way?
- What do I believe girls/women and boys/males can do?
- How do gendered beliefs influence my teaching consciously and unconsciously?

Educators can also pay attention to the classroom environment through an equity audit or by developing their own questions to reflect. Some examples might be:

- How are girls/women and boys/men represented in books, posters, puzzles, and music?
- Who are the lead characters in books?
- Do storylines that children use when engaging in non-gender stereotypical play challenge or continue dominant images of girls/women and boys/men? When children are playing in what may be seen as non-gender stereotypical play what are the storylines? For example, are the girls playing in the block corner but building fairy castles?

One of the challenges for educators is finding resources that represent diverse gender identities. For many services, the cost of buying new or alternative equipment and resources is limited. However, rather than the expense of replacing existing resources, these can become an opportunity for educators to start conversations that challenge established stereotypes. We argue that changing current resources is not practical for most services; however, encouraging educators to think about how these resources can be used to start conversations that promote anti-bias pedagogy can be useful. For example, when reading a storybook that represents a family where the dad is mowing the lawn and the mum is in the kitchen, ask questions that start conversations with children about gender stereotypes and norms like: “Why is the dad outside doing the gardening?”, “Why is the mum in the kitchen?”, “What else might happen?”, “What can mums do?”, “What can dads do?”, and “What do families look like (2 dads, 2 mums, single parent)?”

In undertaking activism for gender equity in an early childhood service, it is also important to consider ways to create an environment and culture that supports an ethics of care (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). This means checking in on the well-being of ourselves as well as others, including calling out people (children and adults) when they consciously or unconsciously use hateful speech that re-enforces bias and discrimination. Activism requires educators to be politically aware inside and outside of the classroom. Sexism(s), heterosexism(s), and other forms of discrimination continue to play out in language and behaviours portrayed by people in our communities using social media and popular culture. We argue that deconstructive talk has a role to play in challenging and resisting discrimination not only in the early childhood classroom or service, but in wider Australia and across the globe.

### **Conclusion**

Our journey this time has used concepts of performativity, injurious speech, and deconstructive talk to re-write and push back at the operation of disciplinary power circulating in dominant discourses of gender-identity and childhood innocence. In this journey, Butler’s (1996) and Taguchi’s (2008) writing has reminded us that activism for gender equity is not just simply a matter of looking at the individual and implementing a program to ‘fix’ the behavior. Instead, there is a never-ending demand that we also look at how the operation of power through discourses authorizes particular performances of gendered identities and consider how anti-bias pedagogy might support this work. The call for young children to develop a strong sense of identity through the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009) raises questions about which gendered identities are possible or authorized, and how these should continue to be debated. Attention needs to be paid to how educators are supported to explore anti-bias pedagogy and encourage children to explore and respect diverse and fluid gendered identities. This is an imperative, as across Australia, educators working in early childhood services, primary, and secondary schools are being required to implement programs such as respectful relationships education programs that challenge gender norms and encourage respectful relationships. This work is risky work for educators as students, families, co-educators, and/or members of the community speak and act in violent ways; however, silence risks continued discrimination and violence. This anti-bias work is also empowering. Power threads itself through speech acts within institutions like early childhood education services, training organizations, religious organizations, policy and curriculum documents, funding, and in material ways, for example, through the media, resources, assessment processes, and at a personal level.

As a starting point, we recommend the work of people like Elizabeth Dau and Louise Derman-Spark, who provide examples of how educators can engage with their own bias and beliefs through anti-bias pedagogy. This offers a starting point for educators to form alliances that enable them to collectively engage (within and without)



injurious speech acts. For us, the experience of debriefing and talking through the violence of the homophobic hate speech to which Dr. Smith was subjected, provided inspiration and encouragement to push back, reposition, and reconceptualize how we talk, write, speak, and perform advocacy work that combats sexism(s), heterosexism(s), and gender-based violence in its many forms.

However, it is important to note that this was only possible because of the support of critical advocate colleagues in and outside of Australia and the early childhood space, and the support of our families. We know that not everyone has this support and so building critical friends is vital as a way for us to support each other. Talking about this event opens up space for others to speak of their experiences, and creates critical friends or communities that can act for social justice as a collective. Co-educators, policy-makers, families, and advocacy groups such as the *Early Childhood Social Justice* group (see <https://www.sjiec.org/>) and the *Reconceptualising Early Childhood* group (see <http://receinternational.org/>) are just a few sources of support. The intention in writing this article was not to question whether anti-bias activism for gender equity should be undertaken in response to sexism(s) and heterosexism(s) in the early childhood spaces. Rather, we want to encourage this work, acknowledging that hateful speech may be directed towards the people who do this work. We advocate for building critical communities that support and mentor those who are on the receiving end of harassment verbally and physically, directly or indirectly.

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