

## **Making the Invisible Visible: gay and lesbian issues in early childhood education**

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**ABSTRACT** This article, based on empirical qualitative data gained from a survey and interviews with a group of early childhood educators, argues for the inclusion of sexual differences, or more specifically, gay and lesbian equity issues, in approaches to anti-bias. The article examines the discourses that prevail in the field, that perpetuate the perceived irrelevance, invisibility and exclusion of lesbian and gay issues in early childhood settings and education generally. The discussion focuses on several main areas, including: the prevalence of the dominant discourses of childhood and sexuality that intersect to constitute sexuality as irrelevant to children; the pervasiveness of the discourse of compulsory heterosexuality and the assumed absence of gay and lesbian families in settings; or the assumed absence of significant gay and lesbian adults in children's lives; the presence of homophobia and heterosexism in early childhood settings; and the perceived irrelevance of broader social, political and economic issues to the 'child's world'. This article highlights some crucial issues for practice and policy development in the area of anti-bias education concerned with sexual differences.

### **Introduction**

In recent years, research has demonstrated the importance of dealing with diversity in early childhood education (Glover, 1991; Alloway, 1995; MacNaughton, 2000; Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2000). However, dealing with diversity issues is not only important in order to be inclusive of the vast cultural diversity that exists in children's lives and that of their families, but to also counteract the prejudice and discrimination that abounds in society, which begins in the early years of life (Kutner, 1985; Palmer, 1990; Glover, 1991). Such research has pointed out the need to address children's daily practices and interactions with others, especially within the context of play, that can contribute to the construction and maintenance of power relationships and inequities across difference. Children's understandings of and

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practices towards diversity are constituted within the various discourses that are available to them in their daily lives. Of crucial importance to this process is the influence that early childhood educators can have on children's perceptions of diversity and difference, through the discourses that they make available to children, and those that they silence, through their daily practices, pedagogies and curricula (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 1999). It seems that for some early childhood educators, 'cultural' diversity and its relevance to children and early childhood education is often narrowly perceived within the context of ethnic diversity and within the dominant discourse of 'multiculturalism' (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2000). In some settings the presence or absence of 'observable' ethnic diversity is upheld as the yardstick by which the relevance of dealing with diversity issues with children and their families is measured (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2000).

This article explores an area of cultural diversity that is often perceived to be irrelevant or inappropriate to address with children, that is, dealing with the social justice issues that impinge on the lives of gays and lesbians. Sexuality and sexual orientation issues are controversial areas that are fraught with many obstacles and cultural taboos that operate to silence, marginalise, and/or limit any dialogue or representation of this form of difference, especially in the context of children and, by association, early childhood education. Consequently, with few exceptions, the discrimination and inequalities experienced by lesbians and gays are generally excluded from approaches to cultural diversity in early childhood education. However, over the past decade, there has been a steady increase in research, predominantly from the USA, which highlights the importance and relevance of addressing lesbian and gay issues with children (see Corbett, 1993; Wickens, 1993; Chasnoff & Cohen, 1997; Casper et al, 1998; Cahill & Theilheimer, 1999; Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2000). The majority of this research concentrates on the importance of including gay and lesbian headed families in children's broad education of what constitutes a family.

However, the importance and relevance of dealing with gay and lesbian discrimination should not be confined to increasing children's awareness of family diversity, but has crucial implications for addressing other broader social issues, such as the harassment, violence and often fatal hate crimes perpetrated against those who identify as, or are perceived to be, gay or lesbian. Consequently, this article, which is based upon qualitative research with a group of early childhood educators (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2000), examines the discourses that prevail in the field, that perpetuate the perceived irrelevance, invisibility and exclusion of gays and lesbians in early childhood settings. The discussion focuses on several major issues, including: the prevalence of the dominant discourses of childhood and sexuality that intersect to constitute sexuality issues as irrelevant to children; the widespread belief that 'the family' is the only legitimate context in which to deal with gay and lesbian issues with children; the pervasiveness of the discourse of compulsory heterosexuality and the assumed absence of gay and lesbian families in *GAY AND LESBIAN ISSUES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION*  
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settings; or the assumed absence of significant gay or lesbian adults in children's lives; the extensiveness of homophobia and heterosexism operating in many early childhood settings; and finally, the perceived irrelevance of broader social, political and economic issues to the 'child's world'.

### **Research in Context**

Forty-nine early childhood educators from a range of sociocultural backgrounds, working in long day care settings and pre-schools in the southwest and inner west regions of Sydney, Australia, participated in this qualitative research (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2000). These geographical regions are representative of a vastly diverse range of sociocultural backgrounds. The study focused on the perceptions, policies and practices operating around issues of diversity and difference in early childhood education. Participants included both trained and untrained workers who were employed in a range of positions, such as child carers, teachers, directors and ethnic support workers. All participants completed a survey, which included a

combination of multiple-choice and open-ended questions; 16 of these participants volunteered for in-depth interviews.

The survey and interviews covered five main areas related to diversity and difference. These included gender, gay and lesbian issues, multiculturalism, bilingualism and biculturalism, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues. The survey was designed to gain an understanding of early childhood educators' perceptions and attitudes related to the following areas: the need to promote and reflect diversity and difference within the setting; individual pedagogical practices; training and access to information in the focus areas of the research; recruitment policies which reflect diversity; centre-based philosophies, policies and procedures; the level of programming and planning for diversity; and working with families and local communities. The survey was also designed to provide an understanding of whether individual educators' perceptions, attitudes, values and practices changed across a broad range of diversity and difference areas. Interviews provided a chance to discuss these same areas in more depth.

In addition to the fieldwork, this discussion is also informed by the author's experiences as a sociologist and teacher educator, working with early childhood education students, in the field of cultural diversity, at a metropolitan university in Sydney, Australia.

### **Dominant Discourses of Childhood and Sexuality**

Dominant discourses of childhood and sexuality prevailed amongst the participants in this research, generally resulting in the perception that dealing with gay and lesbian discrimination and equity issues was largely irrelevant to children. Only a quarter of the participants in this research considered that it was important for children to understand sexuality, including their own sexual

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development. Sexuality, especially gay and lesbian issues, was predominantly viewed by the majority as an 'adults only' concept, with many (almost threequarters of the respondents) considering children to be 'too young' to understand, and that to address such concerns would be developmentally inappropriate. Typical responses made by these particular respondents are reflected in the following comments: 'Children are too young to deal with such adult issues'; 'I don't think they are aware of sexuality, but rather friendships, which can be with anyone'; 'They can understand when it is brought to their attention, but it is not something that concerns them'. One director of an early childhood centre pointed out:

*Sexuality appears to be an issue that adults have difficulty talking about and very strong religious attitudes about rightness/wrongness. There also appears to be a lack of developmental knowledge in relation to children and therefore a questioning of the appropriateness. There is a concept of keeping children 'innocent'.*

This perceived irrelevance of sexuality, or lesbian and gay equity issues, to children's lives, was strengthened when combined with theories of child development and child-centred pedagogy that predominate in early childhood education. Theories of child development such as those developed by Piaget generally underpin early childhood educators' practices and understandings of

'the child' and of 'childhood'. Such theories have perpetuated the view of the 'universal child' where all children from birth are perceived to proceed through a biologically predetermined set of linear cognitive developments that correlate with chronological age. At the end of this process, children reach their destination of 'adulthood', which is identified by the ability to engage in abstract and hypothetical thinking. This dominant discourse of childhood, which perpetuates white, Western and middle-class values and fails to adequately acknowledge the importance of sociocultural factors such as gender, class and ethnicity, as well as historical contexts, defines 'the child' in opposition to what it means to be an adult (James & Prout, 1990; Cannella, 1997; Gittins, 1998; Dahlberg et al, 1999).

However, such developmentalist understandings of childhood have been challenged in recent years by theories that highlight the sociocultural construction of childhood and the diversity across children. Within this context, children are perceived to be socially constructed as the dependent, immature and the powerless 'other' in relation to the independent, mature, powerful, critically thinking adult. Thus, this culturally constructed adult/child binary relationship, perpetuated through what are generally upheld as logical and natural differences between adults and children, operates to exclude children from the 'adult's world' (Gittins, 1998). Mayall (1996, p. 1) points out that 'Children's lives are lived through childhoods constructed for them by adult understandings of childhood and what children are and should be' (and what they should know). This is echoed by Gittins (1998, p. 111), who

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comments, 'images of children are invariably constructed *by adults* to convey messages and meanings *to adults*'.

Sexuality, like childhood, has also been traditionally perceived as being fixed, biologically determined and linked to developmentalist theory.

Physiological sexual maturity has represented the boundary between adulthood and childhood (Gittins, 1998) and sexuality is generally considered to begin at puberty and mature in adulthood. Children's sexuality within this discourse is immature or non-existent. However, this reading of sexuality has also been challenged in recent times by theorists who have gained prominence for their arguments about reconceptualising sexuality as a socially constructed social relationship (Foucault, 1977; Weeks, 1986; Butler, 1990). Sexuality as a social construction is considered to be a fluid, non-linear, multifaceted, complex, contradictory and unstable relationship that can vary across cultures and over historical periods of time, according to the discourses available (Foucault, 1977; Weeks, 1986; Britzman, 1997). This latter understanding of sexuality informs this discussion and is defined by Weeks (1986, p. 25) in the following manner:

*Sexuality is something which society produces in complex ways. It is a result of diverse social practices that give meaning to human activities, of social definitions and self-definitions, of struggles between those who have power to define and regulate, and those who resist. Sexuality is not a given, it is a product of negotiation, struggle and human agency.*

Therefore, it is in this context of the social construction of sexuality and childhood that we can view the ways in which sexuality has been culturally and historically defined as the exclusive realm of adults, in which children are constituted as the innocent and asexual 'others'. Children are perceived to be asexual, innocent and 'too young' to be capable of understanding or dealing with such 'adult' concepts as sexuality. This perception is intimately linked with dominant religious and moral values within the social order (Gittins, 1998). However, sexuality is often narrowly defined by the physical sexual act rather than a crucial part of one's identity, which is socially constructed and constantly reviewed and renegotiated by individuals, including children, throughout their lives. Consequently, not only has childhood been defined by adults for adults, as pointed out previously, but so has children's relationship to sexuality (Silin, 1995; Gittins, 1998; Robinson, 2000a). Adults have defined what children should/should not be, or should/should not know. Children who have an understanding of sex and sexuality are often 'othered' as 'unnatural children', with 'unnatural knowledge'. This is particularly so for children who come from lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender families, or from families where parents or carers have made conscious decisions to inform their children about sex and sexuality issues.

There is often the added judgement made about the parents of these children, as being involved in 'wild' or 'unnatural sex' and who are not fulfilling their roles as 'good' parents and properly sheltering their children from sexual behaviours. The Sydney Gay

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and Lesbian Mardi Gras is a good example of how this perspective is reinforced for some within the wider public community. The 'wild' and flamboyant public display of sexuality in this event is perceived to be representative of all non-heterosexual relationships, which are linked to sexual 'deviancy'. Patton (1995) extends this point by highlighting the fear often held by adults that providing children or adolescents with sexual knowledge will directly result in 'causing' youth to have sex prematurely.

Interestingly, discourses of child development and developmentally appropriate practice were also prevalent amongst those educators who did consider children capable of understanding sexuality and gay and lesbian equity issues. They often clarified their stance, pointing out that children's understandings were largely based on the amount of information they were given, whether it was given in an age-appropriate manner and if it was part of children's experiences. As one childcare worker commented, 'unless it is part of their experience I think they are too young'. Others indicated that such issues would not be of concern to children unless they were brought to their attention by adults, or affected them directly in some way; for example, if a child was being teased for having gay or lesbian parents. Consequently, having gay or lesbian parents was often placed within a deficit context.

However, it is important to point out the contradiction that often surrounds the notion that children are 'too young' to deal with sexuality issues. The construction of heterosexuality and heterosexual desire is part of the everyday practices in early childhood settings (Cahill & Theilheimer, 1999). The incorporation of mock weddings, the encouragement of various activities in home corner, such as mothers and fathers, and young children's participation in kissing games and girlfriends/boyfriends, are all part of young

children's narratives of their experiences in early childhood education. Many of the respondents addressing issues of gender in this research acknowledged that such activities were part of children's everyday lives in their settings. These and many other activities are rarely questioned, but, rather, are part of the 'normalisation' of the construction of heterosexual desire and the inscription of gender in young children's lives. Such heterosexualised activities, for many of the respondents, were not linked to understandings of sexuality; it was just 'children being children', a natural part of growing up that was often linked to biological perceptions of child development. Epstein (1995, p. 57), based on her work with nursery age children, reminds us that:

*sexism is, by definition, heterosexist and that sexism cannot, therefore, be understood in the absence of an analysis of heterosexuality as both political and institutionalised ... that school is an important locus for the inscription of gender and of heterosexuality and that it is, therefore, also an important locus for challenging dominant discourses of (hetero)sexism.*

It seems that, for some, sexuality becomes problematic when it transgresses the boundaries of compulsory heterosexuality, with double standards often disguised and perpetuated through discursive practices that uphold children

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being 'too young' to deal with sexual differences and discrimination. Echoing the sentiments of several respondents about children's understandings of sexuality and lesbian and gay issues, one director commented:

*I think children are really too young to deal with sexuality issues. They have no understandings of it, it isn't part of their experiences ... Like they do get into playing house, mothers and fathers and getting married, that kind of thing, but that's normal everyday play that children like to get into. They see it all the time on television and in their lives. But beyond that, I don't think it's appropriate and it's not part of their experiences.*

### **Homophobia and Heterosexism in Early Childhood Settings**

Discourses of homophobia and heterosexism that prevail in society define all sexualities other than heterosexuality as abnormal and deviant, thus relegating those who identify as other than heterosexual to the margins while simultaneously silencing their experiences of discrimination and inequality. Homophobia is the prejudice, discrimination, harassment, or acts of violence against sexual minorities, such as gays and lesbians (Sears, 1997). However, homophobia is more complex than this and also includes the ways in which these behaviours are directed towards individuals who are *perceived* by others to be lesbian or gay, based on the nonconformist ways they act as boys and girls, men and women. Heterosexism is defined as a 'belief in the superiority of heterosexuals or heterosexuality evidenced in the exclusion, by omission or design, of non-heterosexual persons in policies, events or activities' (Sears, 1997, p. 16). It is these definitions of homophobia and heterosexism that are used throughout this article.

In early childhood settings, as in other educational contexts, dealing with gay and lesbian social justice issues often finds resistance from educators and parents who are located in homophobic and heterosexist discourses, which can be strongly linked to religious, moral and cultural beliefs about same-sex relationships. It is interesting to point out that of the five areas of diversity dealt with in this study, sexuality, or gay and lesbian issues more specifically, was considered to be the least relevant or important to the majority of early childhood educators participating in the research and was by far the issue that

elicited the strongest opinions and opposition from some educators. In fact, several participants chose not to complete the sexuality section of the survey, with one teacher writing on the survey, 'This is it not relevant to my work with children' and another teacher commenting, 'I believe it is unnatural and an abomination to god. The Bible Romans 1v 26-28'. Approximately a quarter of the respondents alluded to their religious values and that of children's parents as an important factor in their not dealing with gay and lesbian issues with children. The intersection between religious discourse and sexuality difference was an area that many found irreconcilable. The following comments by respondents were typical:

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*I don't feel comfortable with these issues at all and wouldn't discuss them with children. It is against my religious and moral values. (Teacher)*

*We have never had children from a family with two parents of the same sex, probably because of our Christian focus. It is not relevant to our setting. (Director)*

*Due to religious backgrounds of the majority of families in my centre, I do not believe families would feel it appropriate to teach children to accept gay and lesbian lifestyles. This is something early childhood educators need to accept and recognise, as well as respect, as religion is also another area of diversity we need to respect. (Teacher)*

*There is much resistance from families at the setting to deal with such issues ... most often due to religious and moral values (Teacher)*

*Children should not have to accept this lifestyle, particularly where it conflicts with the religion taught at home (as in my centre). However, children need to be taught to accept people. Staff and families need to be aware of this. (Teacher)*

Further, sexuality was also largely considered to be a private matter that should remain within the privacy of the family, or within adults' private lives, and not the responsibility of early childhood educators. As one childcare worker articulated, 'Their private issues are their private issues'. Britzman (1997, p. 191) points out that the perception that sexual identities are separate from each other and private is a myth contributing to 'heteronormativity', which she defines as the 'obsession with normalizing sexuality through discourses that render as deviant "queerness"'. This myth perpetuates the notion that heterosexuality has nothing to do with homosexuality and that sexual identity is a 'private' affair, which has little to do with public lives. However, as Britzman (1997, p. 192) argues, 'The fact is that schools mediate the discourses of private and public work to leave intact the view that (homo)sexualities must be hidden'. As such, heterosexuality becomes the 'public' voice, definition and representation of 'normal' and natural sexuality. Early childhood education is very much part of this normalisation process of the construction of heterosexual public/homosexual private hierarchy. This is reinforced in early childhood education through the process in which lesbian and gay identities are legitimised largely and solely within the privatised context of the family. This point is discussed further at a later stage in this article.

Not surprisingly then, homophobic harassment and violence experienced by some gay or lesbian early childhood educators in their workplace was raised by several participants in the research. This harassment was experienced from other staff and/or from parents of children attending their settings. One teacher pointed out that 'We have some gay staff and some positive images but some heterosexual staff still have a problem with it and there is some

tension there'. Research in other areas of the workforce, including various educational contexts, highlights that homophobic harassment, discrimination

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and violence is widespread and has crucial implications for the well-being of individuals who experience these behaviours (Ferfolja, 1998; Irwin, 1999). Such harassment is also in breach of anti-discrimination legislation throughout Australia, which raises concerns about employers in the field of early childhood education in the public sector adhering to their responsibilities in providing 'safe' workplaces free from discrimination. Homophobia amongst staff and children's parents sends strong messages to children about difference. The problems and concerns faced by lesbian and gay early childhood educators is an area that requires much greater research, as, to date, it has been given little attention, if any, in Australia or internationally.

Heterosexism and homophobic stereotypes and myths can be perpetuated through daily pedagogical practices and everyday interactions between educators and children (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 1999). One highly influential homophobic myth that has been prevalent in early childhood educational settings (and within the broader society) is the perception of 'homosexuals' as paedophiles and sexual predators (Silin, 1997; Cossins, 1999). Though there is limited research on male early childhood educators' experiences of working in this traditionally female-dominated area, anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that this myth has been partially responsible for keeping men in Western nations, regardless of their sexuality, out of the field of early childhood education (King, 1997). Male early childhood educators are located in a range of complex and contradictory discourses. They can be viewed as positive role models for children, through their challenging of hegemonic constructions of masculinity, but, on the other hand, can be seen as potential child molesters and paedophiles. These men are often perceived to be sexually suspicious, as their very employment challenges hegemonic constructions of masculinity and gender roles, which are intimately linked to constructions of heterosexuality. As Kimmel (1994, p. 126) points out, 'masculinity has been defined as the flight from women'. Childcare and working with children is considered traditionally to be a 'woman's role' and those men who challenge gender traditions and participate in 'women's work' are often scrutinised by others, particularly by other men, who take up hegemonic masculine, heterosexual identities. Not only is their gender questioned but so too is their sexuality, by association. This process, combined with homophobic myths that associate paedophilia with homosexuals, results in the perception that male early childhood educators are potential child abusers, who need to be watched carefully. This surveillance can be intensified if male early childhood educators openly identify as gay.

Although the respondents participating in the research underlying this article did not specifically identify the constructed link between homosexuals and paedophilia, or acknowledge this link as influencing their inclusion of gay and lesbian issues within the early childhood curriculum, it may be a potentially influencing factor for some educators, given the historical and social moment in which the research was conducted. It is certainly an issue that has been identified by some early childhood educators on several

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occasions since the completion of this project, and is an area that warrants a greater research focus. The research on which this article is based was undertaken in the period following the Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service (1997). The myth that links homosexuals with paedophilia emerged with renewed vigour in Australia as a result of this investigation. The Royal Commission (1994-97) was initiated to investigate alleged police involvement in the cover-up of paedophile activity amongst prominent members of the community and government sectors in New South Wales (New South Wales Government, 1997). Media coverage of the investigation was extensive, often fuelling the myth that paedophilia is primarily linked to male 'homosexuals'. Recommendations from the investigation have resulted in much stricter legal regulations in occupations that are involved with children, such as compulsory criminal checks and mandatory reporting of *any* allegations made against an employee. These new child protection regulations are crucial in filling serious gaps that previously existed within the child protection system. However, the community 'moral panic' that tended to exist around the Royal Commission, accompanied by myths that homosexuals are child sexual predators, has the very real potential to increase the surveillance of men and women who identify as gay or lesbian, or who are perceived to be by others, in early childhood education (Foucault, 1977). During child protection workshops undertaken with early childhood educators run by the author during the Commission's investigation and shortly after its completion, some pointed out the increased anxiousness that has emerged amongst some parents who have children in settings that have male staff, and amongst staff, about the potential for abuse of these new regulations, especially if one identifies as gay or is perceived to be by others. However, a very important point that seems to have been glossed over in the Commission's *Final Report* (1997) is that research overwhelmingly indicates that children are far more likely to be sexually abused from within the home by close male family members or family friends, who identify as heterosexual, rather than outside the family home (Breckenridge & Carmody, 1992; Calvert et al, 1992; Easteal, 1994).

### **Hierarchies of Differences and Shifting Subjects**

It was obvious throughout this research that, for most of the participants, there existed a 'hierarchy of differences' concerned with areas of diversity, related to the degree of comfort or discomfort individuals felt about specific issues. That is, there tended to be a hierarchy in relation to what is considered comfortable and appropriate to address with children and their families in dealing with difference. Lesbian and gay issues were located most frequently at the bottom of this hierarchy, and they caused a great deal of discomfort amongst some educators. Multicultural issues were considered most important and significant to early childhood education and to participants' settings. This was followed by special needs, gender, and bilingual/bicultural

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issues in descending order of perceived relevance and importance. Singleparent and socio-economic, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concerns were less significant than all these areas. Gay and lesbian issues were perceived to be of least relevance and importance. Cultural diversity is frequently perceived to be synonymous with multiculturalism, which is understood as 'ethnic diversity' (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001). There seems to be greater

comfort in dealing with multicultural education, which comes largely from the public legitimacy and support for 'multiculturalism' in Australia and in all sectors of education. Early childhood educators generally consider it relevant to the obviously visible ethnic diversity that exists within their classrooms and in the broader society. However, this comfort with 'doing' multiculturalism may also be linked to the way that it is often depoliticised within liberal humanist perspectives of tolerance and intercultural understandings (Rizvi, 1991), unlike anti-racist or anti-homophobic discourse, which aims to disrupt dominant power relationships in society (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001). The variation in comfort concerning diversity issues may also be related to a number of other factors, including an individual's own identity, their experiences or lack of experiences with difference, their knowledge about difference, their religious and cultural values, their positioning in sexist, heterosexist, homophobic and racist discourses, and so on. The discomfort with dealing with gay and lesbian issues seemed also to be related to a lack of knowledge in this area amongst the majority of the participants, which resulted in a loss of confidence, in some, in how best to deal with these issues with children, 'if it became necessary to do so'; for example, if educators could no longer ignore or sidestep a situation where children or a child was being teased for having gay or lesbian parents. Very few of the participants had received any formal training in the area of sexuality or in gay and lesbian equity issues, or had any involvement in anti-homophobic education. Many participants often confused the terms gender, gender roles and gender identity with sexuality and sexual orientation, often using gender and sexuality interchangeably.

Ironically, what became obvious within the research was that some of the participants who demonstrated strong commitments to social justice practices and philosophies in other areas of diversity dealt with in the research, for example, multiculturalism, bilingualism/biculturalism, or gender, shifted dramatically in the context of lesbian and gay issues. This is not surprising when individuals are viewed as shifting subjects. Within the post-structural context, subjects are viewed as irrational, contradictory and complex beings who change and shift discursively according to different contexts across periods of time (Weedon, 1987; Robinson & Jones Diaz, 1999). Viewing individuals as contradictory and shifting subjects has important implications for policies and practices in early childhood education, as in other contexts of education, which need to be acknowledged and addressed (Robinson, 2000b). Many of the participants pointed out that conflicts and hostilities often arose amongst staff when gay and lesbian issues were raised for discussion. One

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director commented, 'I have discussed it but have often been met with very hostile responses'. Such resistances tended to result in the issues being either marginalised, silenced and/or removed from staff meeting agendas, with many believing that it was 'too difficult' to pursue. It is crucial to keep in mind that individuals may have very different perspectives of what they consider to be worthy or appropriate social justice issues (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001). It is in this light that it is crucial to reiterate that under anti-discrimination legislation, directors of settings and early childhood educators have a responsibility to provide a 'safe' environment for staff, children and families, free from discrimination, including that based on sexual orientation.

Consequently, there is an obvious need to review current equity policies and practices in working with early childhood education personnel, children and families in this area of diversity.

**'Compulsory Heterosexuality': the invisibility of sexual 'others'**

Although there were participants in this research who upheld that it was important to deal with gay and lesbian discrimination in early childhood education, the majority indicated that the issues were irrelevant to their respective settings and therefore were not addressed. Perceived relevance was primarily based on participants' awareness of gay and lesbian families in their settings, as indicated in the following comments:

*We haven't dealt with these issues because we haven't had gay and lesbian families in our setting. It isn't really a concern to us. (Childcare worker)*

*At the moment I would only address these issues if I had children from homosexual families, if the children were curious. (Teacher)*

*I would consider these issues important when/if gay and lesbian parents use my setting. (Childcare worker)*

The above comments reflect a widely held myth that definitions and understandings of homosexuality are only relevant to a 'minority' of people who identify as non-heterosexual and not to those who are heterosexual. However, as pointed out previously, sexuality is a socially constructed social relationship (Weeks, 1986; Britzman, 1997). The homosexual/heterosexual dualism represents a hierarchical power relationship in which definitions and understandings of homosexual are defined in opposition to what it means to be heterosexual, and vice versa. Sedgwick (1990) makes the point in her 'universalizing' orientation approach to the constructed division between homosexual and heterosexual that this relationship is crucial in the way that all people's lives are determined across the spectrum of sexualities. Consequently, the homosexual/heterosexual dualism, homophobia and heterosexism are not just relevant to a minority of people, who are either gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, but are significant in the way that all people's lives, including

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heterosexuals, are regulated, controlled and limited. It is fundamental to the development of social justice for all adults and children.

For some, the relevance of dealing with gay and lesbian issues was further linked to whether the presence of gay and lesbian parents was causing 'problems' for the setting or for the children from these families. It was also perceived as a potential problem if other children were becoming 'too curious' about other children's same-sex parents. Consequently, it seems that for many, dealing with gay and lesbian issues was only done as a last resort and if educators could no longer afford to ignore issues, or divert children's curiosity. Such responses relinquish educators' responsibilities to provide nondiscriminatory educational environments for all children. It also sends a strong message to children that such issues are not to be openly discussed, reinforcing the taboo that already silences discussions in this area. Further, failure to positively intervene in children's discriminatory practices in regard to these issues prolongs the problem, as well as 'blames the victim'. It can also send the message that educators may condone the discriminatory behaviour of other children, which may result in the child or children believing that they are somehow responsible for the teasing or marginalisation that they are experiencing.

Early childhood educators often assume that lesbians and gays are not a

part of their clientele, community or members of their own staff. Unlike more visible identity differences, sexuality is often not readily recognised and is often assumed to be heterosexual, if not openly stated otherwise. Such assumptions, constituted within the discourse of 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Rich, 1980) or 'heterosexual assumption' (Weeks et al, 2001) and reinforced through the pervasiveness of heterosexism, are prevalent throughout early childhood education (as elsewhere in society). This results in an assumed absence of gay and lesbian parents or significant adult carers, or even early childhood educators, unless they are publicly 'out' to their children and settings. However, the 'invisibility' and silence of gay and lesbian families is often enforced due the extensiveness and effectiveness of homophobia within educational settings and in society more broadly. This makes it extremely difficult and potentially risky for gay and lesbian families to 'come out' to their children's educators and/or openly discuss their concerns. Further, this silence implicitly confirms the appropriateness of homophobic actions taken by others.

Some gay and lesbian families actively seek out early childhood settings that demonstrate a commitment, through policies and practices, to diversity and difference (hopefully including sexuality) in order to feel more confident that they will be respected and that their children will not be discriminated against. It is important to point out here that several early childhood educators in this research indicated that there were or had been children from gay and lesbian families in their settings who experienced discrimination from other children and from staff. It needs to be reiterated that silence, or perceived invisibility, should not be mistaken as a sign of absence. There are many gay

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and lesbian families who send their children to daily care and pre-school who are not open to their children's educators. A failure to acknowledge this possibility can result in the denial of many children's experiences within alternative family structures and reinforces the illegitimacy of gay and lesbian identities.

There is a further assumption made by many early childhood educators: children, regardless of their family structure, are often perceived as not knowing or interacting with adults who openly identify as gay or lesbian. Many educators, often unfamiliar with children's social lives beyond the setting, generally read children's lives from the context of their own experiences of diversity, which may be limited. In addition, the dominant discourse of childhood, as discussed earlier in this article, leads to a misconception that all children are naive and innocent and suitably 'sheltered' from what adults generally consider to be 'inappropriate' issues, such as sexual orientation.

### **The Inclusion of Sexual 'Others': the legitimation of difference within 'the family'**

For many participants in this research, the only legitimate and relevant context in which to deal with gay and lesbian issues in early childhood education was within the discourse of family diversity and parenting. As one teacher indicated, 'I think all this comes under family life and shouldn't be separated from that'. In early childhood classrooms, dealing with family diversity is generally considered an important part of the philosophies of anti-bias practice and in the incorporation of an inclusive curriculum, as well as underpinning

approaches to multicultural education. Understanding the nature and meaning of family and the cultural diversity that exists within families is viewed as being developmentally appropriate and relevant to children's experiences of the world. However, the extent to which educators deal with the diversity of family types, particularly the representation of gay and lesbian families, varies greatly. As discussed previously, the inclusion of gay and lesbian families in the early childhood education curriculum tends to rely on the educator's perception of what they consider relevant and appropriate to the children in their settings, as well as their own personal comfort levels in addressing such issues.

The legitimization of lesbian and gays within the context of 'the family' can be viewed as part of a normalisation process, where sexuality and sexual differences can be eclipsed, albeit temporarily, by more familiar, acceptable and comfortable discourses of family diversity and mothering and fathering. This rigidly confined legitimization of lesbian and gay identities within the family further relegates non-heterosexual identities to the private sector, where power and status are diminished. This process is reflected not just in the responses of the participants in this research, but is also demonstrated through experiences of early childhood education trainees. For example, a student

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wanted to produce a pictorial booklet for children on family diversity and wanted to include gay and lesbian parenting. The early childhood centre was enthusiastic about the booklet generally, but was somewhat concerned about the inclusion of gay and lesbian parents. Finally, a compromise was met in that the student was directed not to use the terms 'lesbian' or 'gay', but to use the phrase, 'some children have two mummies or two daddies'. Such stories are not unusual and are heard from many pre-service early childhood teachers who are keen to be inclusive of sexual identity in their practices concerned with diversity issues during their practicum experiences in the field.

This example raises some important issues that need to be addressed. It highlights that 'the family' context, for some early childhood educators, is considered both a developmentally appropriate and a comfortable approach to introducing gay and lesbian issues into early childhood education. If this is the case, then it is one way to begin to break down the homophobia and heterosexism that is operating in early childhood education and to develop more inclusive practices concerned with diversity. However, from participants' responses, it seems that when gay and lesbian families are raised in discussions with children, the focus tends to be limited to how children might experience living in such a family, such as the potential for being teased by other children. Broader social, political and economic experiences of discrimination encountered by these families were considered far less important or relevant. Consequently, the example above indicates that dealing with gay and lesbian equity issues is generally more likely to be depoliticised and desexualised in order to make such issues less controversial and more 'sanitised' for children.

### **Dealing with Discrimination beyond the 'Child's World'**

Only a quarter of the respondents surveyed considered addressing gay and lesbian issues important in developing children's critical thinking and awareness of the broader social, political and economic discrimination that sexual minorities face in their daily lives. However, it is crucial to point out

here that this perspective was not only associated with sexuality issues, but was generally found across all the areas dealt with in the research. Developing children's *critical* understandings of broader social, political and economic issues, or how sexuality and gender intersect to define what is generally considered to be 'appropriate' gender or sexual behaviour, were not considered significant areas to address with children, their families, or with other staff, by the majority of participants in this research. These issues tended to be viewed as irrelevant and inappropriate to children in terms of their experiences in the world, and to their early education. This perspective may be primarily linked to the beliefs raised previously, that for many, the only legitimate discussion of sexuality difference was in the context of 'the family' and children's experiences and that dealing with these issues was developmentally inappropriate to young children. The importance of

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addressing sexual orientation issues with children was considered by half the respondents to be primarily linked to the need to break down the myths and discrimination that children have towards gay and lesbian families. However, ironically, the process was not critically linked to broader social and political power relations and discrimination experienced by gays and lesbians more generally. The view that these broader social and political issues are irrelevant and inappropriate to address with children stem from the dominant discourse of childhood, which perpetuates childhood innocence and the perceived need to 'protect' this innocence as long as possible from the burdens of the 'adult world'. It is also linked to discourses of child development and the perception that young children are incapable of understanding critical abstract issues that are not directly part of their everyday world. The fact that few of the participants had had any training in the area of sexuality or in gay and lesbian equity issues, as previously pointed out, may also influence their perspectives about dealing with broader social equity issues. Many participants lack knowledge concerning the broader social, political and economic factors affecting the lives of gays and lesbians. It seems that many participants' awareness of gays and lesbians stemmed from media representations, especially those from the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras and through television dramas, which often promote stereotypes that do little to increase people's understandings of the diversity that exists in lesbian and gay communities.

The need to address the factors that contribute to homophobia and heterosexism in all their manifestations is crucial in developing children's critical awareness of the social construction of power relations, discrimination and inequality that exists in society. The development of this understanding and awareness is also equally important in order to encourage children to think critically about their own discriminatory behaviours and of those around them. Homophobia and heterosexism are rife in schooling contexts. If educators are to effectively deal with this extensive problem, it becomes crucial to understand how homophobia and heterosexism are constituted and perpetuated within the daily micro-practices operating in early childhood contexts, amongst children and adults. It is essential to keep in mind that broader social inequalities experienced by gays and lesbians affect all children's lives and those of their families, directly or indirectly.

## **Conclusion**

Homophobia and heterosexism are issues that warrant much greater attention, discussion and investigation in early childhood education. As discussed throughout this article, the prevalence of hegemonic discourses of childhood and sexuality in early childhood education intersect to construct lesbian and gay social justice issues as largely irrelevant and/or inappropriate to address with children, especially when considered in broader social, political and economic 'public' contexts. However, this marginalisation and silencing of

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sexual identity issues is intensified when the above discourses intersect with cultural, religious and moral values, which exacerbate homophobia and heterosexism. It is believed that homophobic and heterosexist discourses and discursive practices frequently operate unchecked and unchallenged in many early childhood settings, including those that espouse strong social justice values. Consequently, children are often given contradictory messages about inequality and social justice, in which some aspects of diversity or 'difference' are considered more worthy of attention and respect than others. The fact that individuals are contradictory and shifting subjects has important implications for policies and practices in early childhood education, as in other contexts of education, which need to be acknowledged and addressed.

Further, it is crucial that early childhood educators do not fall into the trap of assuming that invisibility means absence, and that absence means irrelevancy. There are many lesbian and gay families utilising early childhood educational settings who are forced to remain silent and invisible as a result of the institutionalised homophobia that operates through all levels of education, as in other societal contexts. The problems and concerns faced by lesbian and gay early childhood educators is also an area that requires much greater research, as, to date, it has been given little attention, if any, in Australia or internationally. It is imperative that the field begins to deal more effectively with sexual identity issues that have for so long been forced back into the early childhood 'closet'. However, of utmost importance is to begin to break down the myth that issues affecting the lives of sexual minorities have no bearing or relevance to the lives of heterosexuals.

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